

TWICE AGAINST THE DRAGON

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For Melissa, as always.

*Many thanks to
Bill Howard, Eric Edstrom and Wendy Lo
for helping more than even they know.*

Prologue

TEN YEARS AGO

The great wyrm rose up on its back legs, wings spread wider than the cattle pen beside it. Its scales glistened black even under the threatening rain clouds, without so much as a seam Larek could see. Nothing for Taran to sink an arrow into. Foreclaws so long and sharp. Made Inga's sword look like a dagger.

The dragon reeked of sulfur, ash and death. Larek's breakfast of cold, rushed mutton stew threatened to taste even worse if it came back up.

Dragons only strike where you're weak.

A single line, from a single history text in the vast library of Larek's master, but it stood out in the chaos of the young wizard's mind. Death looming above him. Spells chasing their way around his brain. But Larek did not dream of glory or wet himself with fear.

Instead that single line dominated his thoughts.

Perhaps because the dragon's presence here confirmed it.

Three weeks ago the dragon first struck. Rumor had named it Blackflame, the dragon whose fire burned as dark as its scales.

One week ago, royal scouts reported that they had successfully traced the wyrm to its lair, in a cavern to the east.

Two days ago the king had gathered a company of thirty knights, plus the royal wizard and two ducal wizards.

Yesterday that company set out to slay this Blackflame once and for all.

And yet here, this morning, among dozens of farms better known for their grains and peas than for their cattle — well west of the capitol, much less the dragon's reputed lair — the beast came to feed.

No knights here. Not even a militia. Only three willing to take up arms. Taran, the tall, handsome archer who made his living by shooting through the eyes of his prey, then selling their hides and furs as well as their meat. Inga, the strong and stocky farmer who gained a reputation as a swordswoman when she slew a pack of six bandits.

And Larek, red of hair and red of eye, a wizard in his first official robe, pale blue with gold trim. Too young to grow a beard and thin enough to hide behind his staff.

Larek only meant to pass through on his way to seek a court position. If he could find a court small enough to match his inexperience. But at dawn the dragon had been sighted, and Larek's ablutions had been interrupted by Inga, kicking open his door at the inn.

Taran, smiling, stood behind her, leaning on his longbow. Inga insisted that the three of them could slay the beast.

That was the stuff of songs. And Inga had such charisma and enthusiasm that Larek had been proud to set out beside her. Taran even sounded confident of their victory.

Together they rode wide circles through the wheat fields, following the route the dragon flew above them.

But now the beast had landed, here beside a pen of a dozen cattle.

Inga screamed a charge, great sword held high in both hands, knees guiding the roan that had served her better against bandits than it ever had with a plow.

Taran pulled up short and loosed an arrow. Not for any of the seams Larek had sought, but for the eye of the beast.

Larek halted his borrowed piebald gelding and raised his staff, desperately incanting a spell that might protect them from dragonfire.

Should protect them from dragonfire.

Larek knew the spell. Had practiced it often, in secret. He had to practice such spells in secret because his master would have disapproved. "A wizard provides support. Guidance. Counsel a king, don't slay his enemies. Enchant a sword, don't strike the blow. Heroes die young, but a smart wizard can live forever."

Yet those were not the words Larek heard over and over in his head as he chanted his spell. His thoughts fixated on that single line from that one old history. *Dragons only strike where you're weak.*

In particular, it was the last two words that resounded through his mind. Over and over.

You're weak.

The arrow flew.

Inga charged.

Larek cast his spell.

And the dragon set them all aflame.

Chapter One

LAREK PACED A WIDE, dusty circle, as close to the boundaries of the tourney ground as he could, without the risk of anyone interfering with the small, polished stones he set down every two paces. Stones that would mark the edges of the spell he would work.

Not one onlooker, not even the youngest of children, would have been foolish enough to interfere with the spells of a wizard. But in Larek's case, well, the whispered comments he heard as he passed gave him the measure of the crowd's respect.

"He's a wizard? He looks like a merchant, and a fat one at that."

"Do you think he really got all those burn scars from a dragon?"

"More likely he drank too much and fell into some tavern's hearth."

Worse were the comments from other wizards, their voices full of derision.

“No robe? No staff? Shameful. And those *red eyes*. Obviously yet another failed spell.”

“I hear he gets by selling spells to peasants.”

“Gives us all a bad name.”

The too-loud mutterings continued, but Larek did not dispute them. He had earned their scorn and he knew it. No doubt the stories and songs had been circling again, since the rumors of Blackflame’s return in the north.

Claims of the dragon’s black fire had reached the capitol, but the king had learned something from his previous effort. King Harlan III and his advisers had concluded that last time he had called together too large a company. The dragon had seen and heard them coming, and simply chose not to be there when they came for it.

Cowardly, many called it. A dragon willing to slaughter the defenseless but avoiding any serious threat.

But that behavior suited the old tales, the ones believed to be true histories and not the inventions of skalds. The dragons in those stories always had to be hunted down before they were inevitably slain by a handful of knights with a single wizard after a wonderful battle.

Larek could have been that single wizard, but he failed. And no one – least of all the kingdom’s wizards – would allow him to forget that.

As though he could.

And so this time the king called for volunteers to form a party of six, the number of the largest party in any of the old histories. His Majesty would let the hopefuls prove their worth in a tournament that would also help distract the peasants.

That part, at least, had worked so far. It seemed that the tournament had called together half the kingdom of Aeralfast. Peasants had come from days away to share in the spectacle, to

buy and sell at the great market, to witness the competition, or even simply to see the royal castle for the first time.

High the palace stood, on a hill above the tourney ground, with three rings of high, gray stone walls and eighteen towers. So grand and glorious that it was rumored that the king who built it, Tordale V, had married three queens who had all lived and ruled with him for thirty years — each without ever knowing about the others.

“Larek!”

Larek paused in his stone placement at the sharpness of the tone, but needed a moment to realize someone actually addressed him, instead of simply talking as though he could not hear. He turned his head and saw a wizard apparently about his own age, though her dusky skin was smooth and her eyes their natural deep brown color. Her robe was pine green, and flattered her. Her staff was almond brown, and twisted near the top.

Suspicion kept Larek’s mouth shut. He had no time for mockery. He had to prepare the tourney ground for the contest of magic. The finest job he’d been given in half a year — by the king’s seneschal no less, even if only to save the crown costs during the week-long tournament — and he would have a hard enough time chanting the right spells with his tongue and teeth covered in grit and the hot spring sun beating down on him.

Larek had loathed heat ever since the dragon incident.

So he turned and stared at the green-clad wizard until she spoke again, her words less certain this time.

“Will you be joining us in the tournament?”

Larek waited for the punchline. A crowd of peasants surrounding the green-clad wizard, smiles hiding just behind their eyes, waited with him.

“You *are* the only one of us to have faced a dragon.” Her voice grew more certain, and was that mirth flashing in her eye? “And you lived to tell of it.”

“So did the dragon.” Larek’s voice was quiet, but silence hung on the air as conversations died so that others could hear his bitter words.

“But Inga is dead. And Taran is dead. And the farmers. The ones who owned the cattle Blackflame consumed. They’re dead. And their farmhands are dead. And their neighbors are dead. Everyone for near a mile around the dragon that day is dead.”

Larek met her eye, but where he expected mirth he saw something else. Something that might have been sympathy, had Larek been open to seeing it.

“And yet I survived. I managed one spell to ward off dragonfire, and I could scarcely save my own life with it. So what good could I possibly do the party going after Blackflame this time?”

Larek turned away.

“I’ve faced enough dragons for a lifetime.”

Larek placed another stone, uttered the right word to tie it to the others, and continued on his way before the jeering could reach him. Before any of them could see the tears forming in his eyes, starting to trace their way down the dust on his face. The guilt was bad enough to live with. The shame. The failure.

He did not need to hear their taunts.

Soon enough the crowd would have real wizards to gawk over. They would see spells the like of which they would never see again.

And the wizards themselves would worry over triumph and defeat, and the task they will gloriously face or narrowly avoid.

And as they did, Larek would get to slip back into the obscurity he so devoutly craved.

LAREK STOOD UNDER THE HOT SUN, trying not to think about the sweat in his eyes or the dust on his skin and in his mouth. He wore his finest shirt for this moment, blue, with toggles up the front, and his finest pants, also blue, with an actual leather belt instead of a cord of rope to hold them up.

The working he was about to perform might not be difficult, but a wizard who looked impressive could charge a better rate. And a royal commission — even a small one — might remove some of the stain on his name.

However much he deserved it.

Perhaps Larek should have worn a robe for this. He might not have held a formal post, or a position in any order of magic, but he *had* completed his apprenticeship. He *had* the right to the robe, and the staff.

Except for the expectations that would follow.

Other wizards might jeer him now for dressing in a fashion that brought shame on the profession, but if Larek truly dressed the part, their treatment would be far worse. He would forever have to prove that he deserved the formal garb to any wizard who had doubts.

He had already heard new rumors that he had failed his apprenticeship. And Larek's old master had not come forward to dispute the rumormongers.

Even old Grendis was ashamed of him.

Larek took a deep breath to stop the flow of such thoughts. Leaving a good impression here might remind people that he had failed, but he had failed against a dragon. A dragon that no one had slain since.

Perhaps he could earn some measure of respect. Perhaps he could even begin to forgive himself.

And it all started with this.

The spells to establish boundaries for the contest of magic were simple enough. Larek had prepared the stones in advance, polishing them all together and connecting them

magically as he did. Then he had arranged them in a wide circle, with so large a diameter enough that even the most flamboyant of the contestants would have more than enough room for fancy spells. And in placing each stone, Larek whispered the word that would remind the stones of their connection.

And now the final stone had been placed, and Larek stood at the beginning and the end of the circle, right under the judges' platform. And not coincidentally the point furthest from the crowd. This was not the time to have jibes undercutting his confidence.

Larek swept his hands wide, and sang the song in ancient Aarkadian that called down the power of the sun itself, bright and hot, to beam onto each stone of the circle that connected to the keystone in his left hand. A stomp, a clap and a twirl of the keystone high in the air, and the beams flared wider until they touched each other. A chant in a singsong lilt tied them together, solidified their connection.

Larek now stood alone in a cone of bright, hot sunlight. Just about the least comfortable place he could imagine, but comfort was the last thing on his mind just then.

Larek stretched his hand high above him, the keystone held between two fingers until it blotted the sun from his vision. Another chant then, this one harsh and demanding, and Larek pulled the stone back down toward him.

Slowly he brought it down, as though the sun itself hesitated to relinquish the stone.

As Larek chanted and pulled, the tip of the cone bowed and bent down toward him, until the bright, hot sunlight formed a dome, anchored at six dozen spots by the stones Larek had prepared in advance.

He now formed a fist around the keystone, and snapped orders at it, still in ancient Aarkadian. *Locked and bound*, Larek demanded. *Sealed within, sealed without*.

As Larek finished his orders, the dome turned bright

pine green, as though in tribute to the green-clad wizard Larek had met earlier, though he could not have said himself why it had turned that color. The books had been unclear on the point. The dome's color had something to do with the wizard's focus.

Finally, he slammed his rock-holding fist into the dirt, barking out the final word of the spell as he struck.

Pain jolted up his arm, and the dome faded from sight. But its visibility did not matter. No wizard could cast a spell while within the circle of stones — save for Larek himself — without first touching the keystone and submitting to its magic.

The grounds had been set. Any spells cast within the circle that might pass beyond the stones would be anchored by Larek's enchantment and reinforce the barrier. Wizards could now cast as recklessly as they desired in their attempt to win the contest, without harming so much as a hair on the head of a bystander.

Even better, the stones themselves were now rooted to the spot for seven days. No drunk who doubted Larek's skill could sneak off with one of the stones as a joke.

The work was well done. Larek could sense the spell buzzing about him. He could feel almost proud of the accomplishment. Two dozen wizards had come to the capitol to participate in this tournament, and how many could have cast a containment circle as wide and strong as Larek's?

Probably all of them, Larek told himself.

Still, he knew he had done a good job. Larek felt a smile begin to stretch his lips as he looked up to where the seneschal waited for the keystone.

But the seneschal was not watching. He was staring off to Larek's right.

Larek turned, and saw that four wizards had begun to entertain the crowd with illusions, drawing gasps and applause.

And every eye for hundreds of paces.

Just Larek's luck. Not a single person had watched him work.

Well, a single person. He could see the green-clad wizard from earlier, still standing where she had been when they had their "conversation." She raised her hand, and opened her mouth to say something, but Larek turned before she could offer an opinion about how he could better cast it next time.

Larek turned to the seneschal and said, "Here is the keystone. Remember. Each entrant must touch the stone and offer the oath of submission."

"Yes," said the seneschal, reluctantly turning away from the show. "Does it have to be precise?"

"Yes, but you don't need to memorize it. If any of them get it wrong, their competitor will correct them. No one wants to give their foe an advantage."

"Advantage?" That almost drew the seneschal's attention back from the illusions.

"There are ways to exploit every spell. Suffice to say they'll keep each other in line."

But the seneschal did not meet Larek's eye as he listened. In truth, he might not have even heard the words. He offered no acknowledgment, save an astonished syllable at the sight of an illusory griffin flying low and pretending to snatch at audience members.

But the seneschal did at least hold up the small pouch containing Larek's payment. So Larek handed him the stone, took the pouch, and wandered off.

No one had watched him work. No one had cared that he had worn his best clothes.

This commission would not lead to others.

BY THE TIME LAREK made his way out of the tourney grounds the sun had mercifully moved behind a great white cloud, cooling the early afternoon and easing the tension among the burn scars on Larek's face, neck and hands. He had even had a chance to wash the dirt from his face and hands at a horse trough, and splash a little water on his carrot red hair.

The best part about skipping the contest of magic was that Larek would not have to wait for a crowd to thin in order to buy his lunch. The bad part was that almost all the stalls were closed because everybody — *everybody* — wanted to go watch the wizards.

Blacksmiths and woodcarvers, jewelers and coopers and chandlers and weavers and tailors and more, all had locked away their wares, leaving nothing but closed tents and empty wooden displays arranged in rows outside the tourney grounds beyond the outer castle wall.

Not that Larek walked utterly alone. The closed-up tents and stalls were watched over by the occasional strolling or lolling guard carrying a club and wearing boiled leathers notched at the right shoulder with the v-shaped insignia of the tourney.

Larek knew to give these guards plenty of room as he passed. The notched insignia meant that they were not part of the capitol's true city watch, but additional guards hired on for the tourney. Such men were mercenaries at best, thugs at worst, and while they would not dare to rob the stalls they guarded — not when the merchants spoke with such a strong voice in the capitol — a passing disgraced wizard with a pouch of fresh coins in his pocket might prove too tempting a target.

So Larek plodded down the center of the wide lane of dirt and hay and stamped-down yellow grass, which at least gave him an easy time stepping around the leavings of passing horses, mules and dogs. He only wished he could smell something more tempting than those leavings. He had not dined since breaking his fast before dawn, and now the sun was past its apex.

Lane after lane he walked, his stomach's complaints growing steadily louder in his own ears, and the eyes of guards began to linger suspiciously on him. Not as though Larek were a potential victim, but a possible robber.

But Larek could understand that. At a tournament like this one anyone not watching the events, and yet not working, was likely either a nobleman or a thief.

And no one would mistake Larek for a nobleman.

Finally, tucked away among pens of blackfeather chickens and black-and-white saddleback pigs, Larek spotted a stall that was not only open, but sold food and had customers.

Unfortunately, those customers were all tourney guards, either preparing to come on duty or relaxing after finishing their day's shift. Some two dozen such guards, drinking and eating and laughing, at the benches surrounding three broad oak tables in the open air.

Larek considered making his way home on an empty stomach.

Larek's stomach insisted that this was impossible. It had caught a change in the slight breeze that now carried over the smell of roasting chickens with carrots and potatoes, and threatened open rebellion if not filled in the immediate future.

Larek slipped an iron stall out of his pouch — a thin coin, the rectangular shape of a horse's stall — then tucked the pouch away into the seams of his pants alongside the payment for his tournament spell.

The guards noticed Larek as he approached. Stared openly at his burns. Tried to catch his red eyes. He gave them a smile and nod and, thanks to years of practice, avoided eye contact with any one of them.

Instead he shifted his attention to the stall itself. Worked by a family of three, the parents cooking and their daughter — who looked old enough to be running her own stall — handling cleanup and sales.

Guard conversations died and smirks appeared as Larek placed his order for a meal, refusing a flagon of beer in favor of a cup of wine. Despite rumors to the contrary, Larek had not gotten drunk since the early days of his apprenticeship.

And the yellow wines of this region, supplied by the duchy of Terhold, were weak enough to generate the obvious comparison among less discriminating diners.

In fact, Larek could hear a burble of chuckles from the tables behind him that told him the obvious comparison had already been made. Just as well. If they laughed at his drink, they weren't laughing at his magic or his scars.

The guards must have provided steady custom, because Larek did not have to wait for his food. No sooner had he placed his order than the serving woman handed it to him in a wicker basket, obviously trying not to stare at his scars or eyes.

The wine took a little longer while she dug out a small, untapped cask. Tapping the cask took long enough that she forewent finding Larek a wooden cup and filled a flagon instead.

That meant more wine for the money, though Larek knew his wine was likely to be "flavored" by hints of ale.

But on the scale of Larek's problems, he considered that one beneath his notice.

He paid much less than he expected for the food and, lacking any trees to sit under, began carrying his food to the nearest tent that looked unspoiled on the outside.

"Here," called a tourney guard from the last of the tables. "There's room for one more."

More mutters and chuckles from the tables, but for once Larek suspected they were not at his expense. Or at least, not directly. The guard who had called him over was a woman.

Even sitting, she looked at least a head taller than Larek, with strength in the set of her shoulders. She had long, woolly black hair tied behind her into a near-whip with a long leather

thong that ended in a small blade. Her nut brown skin and gray eyes told of the deserts of far western Karwale.

She also had a ghost-white scar that carved its way from her right cheekbone, down across her chin and neck, and disappeared into her leathers past her left collarbone.

Something about the woman struck a memory in Larek. A song he had heard in a tavern about an exceptionally tall woman warrior...

But the words failed him just then. Not that they mattered.

Larek stifled a sigh. The last thing he wanted to do was share a meal with a pack of tourney guards. But refusing the offer would have been rude, and being rude to those who had a license to harass him seemed like a poor option.

Larek smiled the way he smiled at a customer who wanted him to brew a potion that would lead to unguarded treasure. If such potions existed outside the tales of skalds, why would Larek sell his spells?

He took the offered seat, ignoring the mumbles and sniggers from further up the bench. Mumbles and sniggers that died the moment the woman spoke.

"I'm Dyrra," she said as though it were a challenge, and not just to Larek. Her words still carried the lift and drop of a Karwalish accent, but their peaks and valleys had been flattened by time or effort. And she met his eyes without staring or flinching. "Yes, that Dyrra. And if hearing my name gives you anything to say, best to say it now and take the consequences."

Dyrra. Now the song fell into place. "The Ballad of Dyrra the Tall and the Merchant of Fent."

*The Merchant of Fent
Wherever he went
Left his wife and children behind.
For guarding his hall
Stood Dyrra the Tall
And danger far from his mind.*

*Tall Dryrra they said
Could cleave a man's head
So fast, his mouth would yet talk.
And her nerve was so sore
She could face down a score
Of bandits and never balk.
But then the day came
When testing her fame
Were two, with swords in the dark.
Desperate men
Banished from Mem
And bearing the deserter's mark.
Tall Dyrre struck true
But between me and you
Her blows were less than she thought.
They left her for dead
And raided the stead.
All the Merchant's gold was for naught.*

There were more verses, and a great deal made about the scar he could now see for himself, but Larek had always considered the first verses to contain the crux of the story, and probably the closest to the truth.

That was certainly the case with songs about him.

He held the steady face he used to ignore jibes directed at him and looked Dyrre in the eye. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Suspicion drew down the arch of her eyebrows, but the truth was that Larek meant what he said. How often did he get to meet another person who lived under the yoke of failure?

"Come on, boys," said one of the other tourney guards, "we should give these two privacy. They're made for each other."

No longer attempting subtlety, the whole crowd of them barked with vicious laughter as they cleared out, some congratulating others for one disparaging comment or another.

And then Larek the Burned found himself sitting alone
with Dyrre Slow Sword.

And he had no idea what to say.

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