

A series of brutal attacks put the humans and race of batlike Talomay on the brink of war. As the new king of Levnar struggles for a resolution, a small band searches for the true reason behind the attacks. The truth they discover may be more dire than the fates of two kingdoms and may offer clues to the origin of their world.

THRONE INTO FLAME:

A Legend of Levnar Novel

By Kenneth Collins

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A Legend of Leonar Novel

THRONE INTO FLAME

KENNETH COLLINS

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CHAPTER ONE

32 A.F.

“Did you feed the horses like I asked?”

His father towered over the chair in the corner of the den in which Lyonell sat, his eyes peering down over the top of the book.

“Not yet, Father. I was going to do it after this chapter.”

“Get over to the barn and do it now. If I’m going to have to remind you like a little boy, then you will get the switch like a little boy. Is that what you want?”

Lyonell rarely deserved the switch, and his father rarely employed it. But it was often threatened and that was enough.

“No, sir.”

The surly elder walked out of the room and his voice bellowed from the kitchen along with the smell of burnt venison, “You are trying my patience, boy.”

“Yes, Father.” Lyonell slid out of the chair, leaving the book spread on the cushion. Lyonell was a round-faced boy with wild, shoulder-length brown hair. He was strong for his age but a year or two away from picking up adult muscle. As he stepped out of cabin, Lyonell could hear his mother.

“You don’t have to be so hard on him. He is a good kid.”

“Do not lecture me,” his father responded. “We do not have the luxury of immaturity and procrastination. There’re crops to tend, animals to feed, and responsibilities. The sooner he gets that through his thick skull, the better he’ll be.”

Lyonell's parents' voices faded as he approached the barn. Three other cabins sat beside his father's, two owned by uncles and one was occupied by a family that had been helping them out on the farm. They originally planned to stay for just the one season; that was five years prior. Together they had formed a close-knit but tiny farm on the eastern edge of the kingdom.

The hinges groaned as the barn door swung open, the sudden sunlight stirring the ten horses within. Lyonell strode past the horse stalls toward the bucket of oats at the far end of the barn. Straw crunched, and wood squeaked under his shoes. A hungry horse whinnied and huffed.

"Calm down, Dorna. You are sounding more and more like my father every day."

Lyonell grabbed the handle on the bucket of oats and then the barn darkened. The thin rays of sunlight that usually shone between the roof's planks were obstructed. Lyonell let go of the bucket, hurried to the barn door, and looked to the sky.

Black, brown, and grey winged beasts flew high above the settlement. As they swooped down over the treetops and rooftops, the horses in the stables began to kick and snort wildly. Lyonell was frozen, petrified as more than two dozen creatures glided to the ground. They were massive, seven feet tall and larger, wearing leather and pelt kilts. Their fur varied in colors and patterns. Like bats, pointy ears protruded from their heads and sharp talons sat at the end of their clawed feet. Unlike bats, their arms were not attached to their wings. Their appendages were bony, covered in little skin, muscle, or fat, and their wings were mostly translucent and veiny.

"Talomay!" A woman shrieked from one of the other cabins. "No! Run!"

Lyonell darted toward his parents' cabin when he saw a trio of Talomay kicking in their door. They were armed with their signature weapons, one in each hand; a jagged, frightening

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blade that curved around the beasts' knuckles, its handle squeezed in their fist. Lyonell stopped in his tracks as the sounds of panic and violence swirled around him from each of the cabins.

"Mom!"

It was all he could yell before scurrying back into the barn, his feet kicking up dirt behind him as they sought friction. He grabbed the barn door and yanked it shut. The wooden door could not keep out the screams and sounds of blades cutting through flesh. Tears of fear formed in Lyonell's eyes as he barred the door using a heavy plank. His parents were probably dead, or would be, as were his cousins and the other family in the far cabin.

The screams came less frequently and finally ceased, but the horses continued to buck violently against their stalls. Lyonell ducked into an empty stall and sat in the corner. Partially buried in hay and the musk of manure, Lyonell covered his ears, closed his eyes, and sobbed.

For a minute, everything was still. The horses stopped moving and it was silent outside the barn. Lyonell opened his eyes and strained his ears but dared not move. He could hear footsteps; someone was approaching the barn door. The door jostled, gently at first, and then angrily.

"It is locked from within," A Talomay hissed.

"Burn it down," Answered another.

Lyonell heard the ignition of a torch, and then saw the smoke as it rose from the bottom of the wall. The fire snaked along the wall, up to the rafters, and then along the hay on the floor. The horses again began their commotion. Lyonell could feel the heat of the flames as they burned around him.

He coughed as he picked himself off the floor and opened the first two horse stalls. The smoke became thicker and

thicker. Lyonell moved to the next set of stalls, pulling them open.

A stampeding horse blew by him, knocking him to the floor of the barn. Narrowly avoiding the horse's hooves, Lyonell rolled to his feet. Once off the floor, Lyonell could no longer breathe, could no longer see the barn door. The smoke darkened and filled the barn. Leaving the remaining horses, Lyonell stumbled toward where he believed the barn door should be. His hand touched the wooden plank. The flames licked his calves as he lifted the plank away from the barn door and pushed it open.

Twigs snapped under his boot. Thick branches and towering trees shielded the forest around him from the bright sky. All was serene and silent except for a flock of birds chirping high overhead in the treetop canopies. His hand gripped tight on his bow. The arrows in his quiver wobbled slightly as he crept down the slope. Leaves swiped across his face as he moved, rubbing against his poor specimen of a beard; dark black hair, short, inconsistent, and coarse.

From within the green, hooded cloak, Lamorak's eyes focused fifteen yards in front of him. The great elk was grazing between two trees. He was plump and strong with perfect, clean hide; a fine creature indeed. Lamorak had tracked it from the edge of the forest, up the river, and then left his horse to pursue on foot. All afternoon he had been on its trail. Reaching back Lamorak grabbed an arrow and loaded it in his bow.

The elk perked up its ears and turned toward him, unknowing but suspicious. Lamorak drew a deep breath, filling his lungs, and took aim. He released the arrow just as a voice boomed from behind him.

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“My Prince,” The arrow flew harmlessly over the elk’s head. “I have been looking for you.”

Lamorak watched as the elk darted off until it was safely shrouded by fauna. He turned to the source of the voice while pulling off his hood, revealing his wavy, black hair.

“Sir Serovens, your timing is impeccable.”

“My apologies, my prince, but it is important you come at once. It is your father.”

The prince paused before starting up the hill. In full armor and helmet under his arm, Serovens sat on horseback at the crest of the wooded slope, and beside him stood Lamorak’s horse. Serovens handed off the reigns to the prince, who mounted the steed, and scanned Serovens’ face for signs of emotion.

“Is my father dead?”

Prince Lamorak spurred the horse toward the stream, and Serovens followed. Serovens was a tall, muscular, clean-shaven man. His shoulders were wide and his posture perfect. He was an example of genetic perfection, raised from birth to be the future of Levnar’s army. Even his armor was flawless, so shiny it was almost white.

“Your father is alive, but not for much longer, I fear. Queen Gwynora requested your immediate presence. Your wife and son are already by his side, my prince.”

“Oh, I assumed it must be important news for my mother to send the champion of Levnar as a messenger.”

“I would say this news is important enough, my prince, and it is always an honor to serve my queen. Everyone is eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

“Then, let us make haste. I will continue my hunt another day. Next time, that elk will not be so fortunate.”

“The Talomay are a scourge! An abomination! They are a plague on our great kingdom! How long must we suffer their murderous raids? How long shall we listen to the lies that roll off their forked tongues?”

The old man preached just outside the main gate of Levnar Castle. A small group stood and listened, while most ignored him on their way in or out of the fortress. Bran shook his head as he strolled across the drawbridge. Ten feet below their feet sat the moat; a half-fathom deep sewage and drainage ditch that encircled the capital of the kingdom.

“I wonder why the king allows him to keep spreading his hate. Last time I checked, the Talomay were our allies.”

“Tell that to the families of the people they’ve killed, brother.”

“Andulf, you are not actually falling for his fearmongering, are you? Everyone with any knowledge of the attacks knows they are random acts of violence. We cannot judge an entire race based on the actions of a few.”

Andulf was taller and more muscular than his brother Bran, but both were fit. They could have been mistaken for twins if not for Andulf’s scruffy orange beard and unkempt hair; a stark comparison to Bran’s brown shoulder-length locks and shaven face.

The preacher’s continued, his voice faded away as they moved from the drawbridge, through the portcullis, and into the courtyard, “We cannot stand idly by as our countrymen are killed and our villages burned to the ground. When the Talomay have been eradicated, only then we will have a peaceful continent. It is our destiny to bring peace to this land. the Great One brought us here for a reason...”

“And what do you believe, Bran; the official explanation from the king’s investigators and Ambassador Gortan? You do

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not even consider the possibility that there is more going on than they admit?"

"Are you questioning the integrity of our ruler? You are starting to sound paranoid, brother."

"The attacks are coming more frequently, as are the excuses. At first it was the quarry tariffs, then it was land disputes, now it is random acts of violence. I am skeptical. You cannot deny that it is time for action against the Talomay. Too many innocent people have been killed."

Bran was silent. The random attacks were increasing in frequency and brutality. Perhaps they weren't so random after all. The conversation made Bran feel uneasy and he shook it off.

"I hope King Melias is doing well."

The courtyard of Levnar Castle was bustling with activity, most of which took place in the bazaar. The bazaar was opened each morning between the castle keep that sat in the center of the courtyard and the main gate. There were narrow aisles with dozens of merchants selling everything from animals to trinkets. People from all walks of life congregated to sample the bazaar's wares. There were knights followed by squires, local peasants, and travelers from the farthest reaches of the kingdom. Andulf's eyes were drawn to the massive keep that rose to the sky, overlooking those inside the courtyard and the lands surrounding the castle walls.

"From what I have been told, the king's days are numbered. Long live King Melias."

"Long live King Melias." Bran echoed. It sounded ingrained, conditioned even, yet was meant with sincerity. The brothers squeezed through the bazaar, brushing up against and bumping into clumsy or uncaring peasants. A goat scoffed as they walked past it and its owner.

“Need a goat?” Andulf chuckled and pointed. Bran smirked. “I hear they are useful on those long, cold winter nights.”

“Nay. Not all of us can be lucky in love.”

Bran stopped at a fruit vendor, testing some apples with his thumb and fingertips.

“It is not luck, brother,” he snatched the apple from Bran and took a bite, “and who said anything about love?”

“If you spent half as much time tending to the farm as you spend jumping to and fro lasses’ cots, you would be quite the success.”

“Perhaps, but not having nearly as much fun.”

Bran stuffed a few apples into a burlap sack, handed the seller a krone, and hurried behind his brother.

“In my mind,” Andulf continued, “King Melias has never had a misstep, besides his treatment of the Talomay.”

“Oh, and you are the one to judge our king? You would prefer war?”

Andulf spun around and Bran nearly walked straight into him. Andulf jabbed his brother in the sternum, apple still in hand.

“There is a special kind of peace that can only be achieved after bloodshed.”

“Lamorak, you have arrived!”

Queen Gwynora opened her arms, her purple dress flowing along the stone floor. Lamorak ran into her embrace. Tears rolled down her right cheek. Serovens stood steadfast behind the prince, emotionless.

“Mom! Father?”

She released him as he searched her face for any indication of his father’s condition.

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“He is resting in the next room with Cador, Jailynn, and your son. I fear this is his last day.”

Lamorak lowered his eyes to the chamber floor; his shadow made long by the sunlight from a lone open window to his left. Gwynora looked to Serovens.

“Sir Serovens, I thank you for bringing me my son in time.” The last two words barely choked out from her throat. The meaning of those words, of that sentence, was too much to bear.

“It is my duty, my queen; my pleasure and duty.”

Gwynora smiled and nodded. His sense of duty had been drilled and instilled in him since birth. He would never fully understand her appreciation, but he would have it none the less.

“Let us go and see your father, Lamorak. We should not waste another moment.”

He said nothing as his mother led him toward the king’s chamber; the dying king’s chamber. With quick strides, Sir Serovens was in front of them and pulled open the strong, wooden door.

Lamorak and his mother stepped into the chamber and Serovens closed the door behind them. In the wide, canopied bed lay King Melias in a white robe. From the door he appeared smiling, healthy, and youthful. By his bedside was the frail and lumbering sage, Cador, and Lamorak’s wife, Jailynn. Sitting on the side of the bed was their nine-year-old son, Amven. He was lean like his father but got his blonde hair and blue eyes from his mother.

With each step they took closer to the bed, the king’s condition became more visible. He was bony and weak, and looked at least twenty years older than his age. However, his eyes lit up and his smile widened at the sight of his queen and son.

"Lamorak, my son!" The king beamed. Gwynora and Cador each released a happy tear, the first since the king's disease had become known.

"Father." Lamorak moved to Melias' bed, rubbing Amven's hair and giving his wife a quick hug as he passed.

"Grandpa was telling me that you will be the king, Daddy." Amven slid off the bed and grabbed Lamorak's hand.

"Perhaps, but I do not want to be, not at this cost." His face reddened, and he began to cry. "Jailynn, please take our son and leave us for a moment."

"Come with me, dear." She grabbed her son's hand and gently pried him away from his father. She kissed her husband's forehead before leaving the room. Lamorak dropped to one knee as the door closed.

"Father, I do not want to be king. I am not ready. You cannot die."

King Melias laughed a hearty laugh; the best he'd enjoyed in weeks.

"You sound like someone I knew once." His eyes drifted to Cador, who smiled. "Remind you of anyone, Cador?"

"Why, actually it does. A young man came to me once and feared he would not make a good leader, a good king. He went on to become a great king, a man who unified men. Do you know who that man was, Lamorak?"

"I know that story, Cador. I know, father, but I do not know if I can lead as well as you. I do not know if I am ready."

"Humility," Cador began, "must run in your family, my king."

"It appears so. Hopefully I have left more traits that befit a leader and a man. That is yet to be seen." The king smiled at his son. "If anything, that is the one thing I will regret. Not getting to see my son become the man and ruler I know he will become."

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“Father...”

“Cadon will be your guide as he was mine. Through the thick and thin, feast and famine Cadon was my rock, as was your mother. May Princess Jailynn one day be the queen your mother was, or is, I should say.” The king’s eyes darted to his wife beside Lamorak. They shared a smile. “I was not an extraordinary man. I was an ordinary man surrounded by extraordinary people and opportunities. I wish the best and the same for you.”

“I will do my best, father. I will make you proud.”

“I know you will. You always have from the first moment I held you. It is fitting that you, the first born in this new land, become its ruler.”

“I love you,” Lamorak gripped his father’s pale hand, “As a father, a king, and a friend.”

“I love you, my son.” The blood drained from Melias’ face, the emotion clearly sapping his remaining vigor. “Now, go. Take Cadon and he will assist you. I want to speak to your mother.”

Lamorak rose, not letting go of his father’s hand.”

“Good bye, my king.”

“Good bye.” The old king’s eyes began to water.

Cadon extended one of his long hands. The king’s hand was released by his son and replaced with the seer’s hand.

“If we do not speak again, it has been a pleasure serving you, King Melias. You were a better king than even I had foreseen.”

“Cadon, I would never have made it this far without your help, nor would Levnar exist without your wisdom. I trust you will continue to help my son, and you will always have a home in Levnar.”

Cador laid the king's hand back on the bed and gave King Melias one last nod before putting a huge, gaunt hand on Lamorak's shoulder.

"Come with me, Prince Lamorak."

The air was heavy as the tall seer and the prince solemnly left the chamber, neither looking back. Once the door was shut, it left Melias and Queen Gwynora in the room alone.

"Nora," Melias grinned.

She grabbed a wooden chair from a nearby desk and placed it at his bedside. It was quiet for a moment as they stared into each other's eyes.

"It has been a crazy, improbable road, Nora."

"That it has, Melias. When you pulled me off the streets of Corallora, you always made me feel like a queen. I never imagined you would actually make me one."

They laughed, and then stopped abruptly.

"And I would not have wanted to take that crazy road with anyone but you."

The queen's skin was no longer the porcelain from her youth. Wrinkles had appeared many moons before, crevices forming from years of worry and stress that comes with helping run a kingdom. Yet, her features were the same. The bright eyes and soft lips remained. Her long brunette hair had dulled and grayed, but her sass and wit had only sharpened with age. As tears dripped out of those bright eyes, they reaffirmed to Melias that he had spent his life with the right person.

"Stop it," she choked up again. "I do not want to cry anymore. A queen needs to be strong for her people."

"Sometimes the perception of strength is as valuable, or more so, than actual strength. Any strength in this family has come from you, Nora. I need you to be strong one more time."

He feebly moved his once-powerful hand toward hers and she took it in her grasp; kissing it.

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“Please do not go, Melias.” Gwynora started to break down. “I love you. I will miss you.”

“It is my time, my love. I have done enough here. More than I had ever imagined. It is a young man’s time. I have always loved you from the first time I set eyes on you. You and Lamorak will always be my greatest achievements. I would do it all the same way again if I had a choice.”

“As would I, Melias,” she leaned in and kissed him for what would end up being the last time. “As would I.”

The horns sounded from the castle parapets; two descending tones. Over and over they blew as somber crowds lined the stone roadway from Levnar Castle to the royal cemetery. Two white horses pulled the chariot containing the royal family and King Melias’ casket. That chariot was just one of many in a caravan that snaked its way across the field away from the castle, then up a steep hill. The chariot bounced and rocked noisily on the uneven road.

Prince Lamorak was silent. Princess Jailyynn wept beside him dressed in a long black dress. Across from them sat their young son and Lamorak’s mother. Gwynora maintained a sense of elegance and resilience, her emotions in check. Lamorak brushed his wife’s hair with one hand, cradling her head on his shoulder as he turned and looked out the window. Behind the row of mourners sat shoddy wooden headstones and occasional stone monuments. They were in the commoners’ burial grounds. Within minutes they would be in the smaller, but more secure and more exclusive royal cemetery beyond the commoners’ plots.

The crowds that had gathered along the route held candles and dressed in black, gray, or other drab colors. Even in the

daylight, the line of candles was impressive. Prince Lamorak's eyes were transfixed on them as they rolled by.

"Your father was well-loved," his mother said, as if reading his mind, "and deservedly so."

"Yes, I know, mother."

"They shall mourn him. It is our duty to be strong for them in these dark times, and to reassure them that they are safe and Levnar will continue to prosper."

Princess Jailyynn latched onto her husband's arm and clenched tight. He turned to her, and with red, puffy eyes she gave him a sad smile.

"And they will prosper. We all have faith in you, my love."

"Thank you, Jay."

Within moments the chariot was stopped, and they were being led off the chariot and toward the mausoleum. It sat in the farthest corner of the cemetery with tall, black-metal fences at the front and craggy, near-vertical rock wall behind it. A few graves were scattered in front of it, mostly of nobles who'd died from natural causes. King Melias would be the first of the royal family to pass on, and the first permanent resident of the royal crypt.

As the casket was carried into the mausoleum by a crew of lords from the families of highest standing, the passengers from the funeral convoy gathered in front. Two men approached the royal family, extending their hands in greetings toward Prince Lamorak.

"It has been too long, my Prince." Lamorak took his hand and shook it. "Perhaps you do not recall my face."

"I certainly do," Queen Gwynora interjected. "Good to see you, General Braskill. And it has been too long."

Braskill bowed to the queen, taking her hand and kissing it, "Retired general. My queen, you are just as ravishing as the day your husband introduced us back in Corallora."

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"And you are just as blind or insincere. How are you faring?"

"I am well. It has been lonely since my wife passed. Otherwise I cannot complain. I have my health and my villa, and a lot of good memories."

"Yes, we had heard about Lady Palonia. I pray you received our sincerest condolences?"

"I did, thank you, my queen. You and Melias have always been too good to me."

"Nonsense. Your service to Levnar and support of my husband has always been vital and appreciated."

With a break in the conversation, the second man stepped up and introduced himself to Prince Lamorak.

"I am Darrius. I am here to pay respects to your father. Without him, I would have died long ago. None of us would be here today."

"Thank you, Darrius," Lamorak began. "I do remember both of you from visits in my youth as well as the stories my father told. My father thought highly of both of you. General Braskill, your leadership in the army, and Darrius, your organization of the men-at-arms has contributed greatly to the success and safety of Levnar."

"Thank you, my prince. Your words flatter and embarrass me."

"How are you Darrius? And how is Frieda?" Gwynora asked.

"We have gotten old, my queen. And what a blessing it is. I wake up every day giving thanks to the Great One, and to your husband of course."

"Your farm is treating you well?"

"The harvests have been plentiful, and we have peace, quiet, and privacy. We are far from the hustle and bustle. Frieda and I enjoy it immensely. Melias gave us the perfect tract of land, more than we deserve."

General Braskill knelt to Amven.

"Is this the future prince of Levnar?"

"I am not a prince. My daddy is the prince."

"You shall be soon enough."

The aging former general stood, knee cracking, "I do not believe I have seen Amven since he was a baby. He looks as though he's received the best traits of his mother and his father. I think I speak for everyone when I say you will have the same support your grandfather commanded, and your father will receive, young prince."

Amven was silent and looked to his mother, who answered.

"On behalf of my son, we thank you, Braskill."

"Well, the service should be starting soon." Braskill grimaced as he rose gingerly, his aging body resisting, "It was a pleasure to see you both, though I wish the circumstances were better."

Gwynora and Lamorak nodded. General Braskill turned and extended his hand to Darrius.

"My old student, Darrius."

"My old mentor and my former nemesis, it is good to see you."

"You look well."

"What happened to us? We are two old men, one a tad older than the other."

Braskill chuckled, "Time is undefeated, Darrius, and one day you will be this old if you are lucky. We should catch up over a drink soon, but I must find my seat."

"I should do the same," Darrius started, raising his eyebrow. "I will talk to you both later I am certain, perhaps at the coronation?"

"That sounds good. Any friend of my father is a friend of mine. And if invited, I may join you for that drink."

"Of course, my prince. Your company is always welcome."

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The mourners found their spots as the ceremony began, some seated near the pulpit, while others stood to the sides and the rear of the congregation. The royal family and their retainers sat at the front with their security detachment as did some of the aging or ill. Cadon, flanked by two knights stepped to the pulpit. The murmurs ceased.

“Every sunrise has a sunset. Every tree, no matter how great or strong, eventually falls. This is the way of life. Our great and sovereign ruler, King Melias has left this world and has joined the Great One in spirit. He may be gone in body but his accomplishments in this world remain; a beautiful love and wife, a son and heir, a grandson, a legion of friends, and a kingdom of loyal subjects willing to live and die for his legacy. We should all be so lucky as to have a life such as King Melias. Some of us knew him only as our ruler. Some of us knew him as a father, grandfather, or husband. I knew him not just as my liege, but as my friend. By knowing him, by serving him, by loving him, part of him will live on in all of us.

“Today, we say good-bye to him, and place his body in this hallowed tomb. But let us not forget that this resting place is not the end of his actions in this world. Later today we will have a new king, a direct heir raised in the image of his father. Every ending is a new beginning. So, just as every sunrise leads to a sunset, each sunset allows for the next sunrise. As we mourn this sunset, let us rejoice in the next sunrise.”

Cadon finished and stepped away from the pulpit. The crowd lowered their heads, sniffing and weeping. It was quiet for a moment before the horns bellowed again; two descending notes over and over.

The sky was orange. The sun slipped soundlessly behind the mountains on the horizon to the west. Levnar castle sat in the valley, the sounds of the festivities barely audible across the flat lands. Huge banners waved from all corners of the fortress, yet they seemed miniscule at that distance. Gortan could see it all from his palatial home. Wearing his newest and most comfortable outfit, he stood on the balcony overlooking the vale, sipping a glass of mead. His pants and tunic hung loose, even on his plump body. A gentle breeze blew across his balding head and making the torches waiver.

"Ambassador," his steward said, "your guest has arrived."

"Send him in, Nodram."

Gortan didn't turn away from the vista. The sun sank below the horizon though its rays illuminated the undersides of the dark but benign clouds above. The sound of Nodram's footsteps were replaced by the shuffling of shoeless, animal-like feet. Each step was concluded with the clinking of a curved talon on the stone.

"General Hedron, I am glad you could join me tonight."

The Talomay general stepped beside the ambassador and following Gortan's example, General Hedron gazed out over the valley. Gortan did not look at his visitor but could feel his massive presence to his left. Days-old stench drifted from the bat creature's fur. The ambassador lifted the sweet mead to his nose and took a sniff to mask the scent.

"I am flattered, Ambassador. I am overcome with gratitude that you chose to spend this evening with me and forgo the celebration," Hedron hissed, his dark lips curled in a smirk.

"Your sarcasm and confidence are impressive considering the fate of your people is my hands."

Gortan turned to the bat-like general that stood a good foot taller than him. Hedron's fur was dark, almost black around his head and shoulders, gradually lightening up down his body into

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a pale gray. His translucent wings were closed behind him, perpendicular to his body; their web-like veins and tendons visible with the torchlight behind them. Like most members of the Talomay military, General Hedron wore a belt. On it were the Talomay's trademark weapons; a pair of blades. Gripped in the middle with a sharp blade curved around the user's knuckles, it was a deadly creation used for slashing, especially when swooping down from the clouds. How many innocent settlers had those particular weapons on the general's belt slaughtered? Gortan shook off the question and held out a glass of mead.

"A drink, General?"

"The wine of your people sickens me."

"Suit yourself."

Gortan put down the glass and turned back toward the valley. The sky faded into indigo. The fires from Levnar castle the only specks of light coming from below.

"Ambassador," the word dripped with disdain, "I have held up my end of the bargain. When do I get my satisfaction?"

"Have patience, General. Things like this take time. We cannot rush it. Anyway, your end of the bargain is hardly over. Continue to do as I say, and we will both get what we desire."

General Hedron grunted, "That is what worries me, Ambassador Gortan. You are allowing your own people to be killed. I believe your people are getting the worst of this arrangement. Normally I wouldn't care, but a deal so one-sided fuels my suspicion."

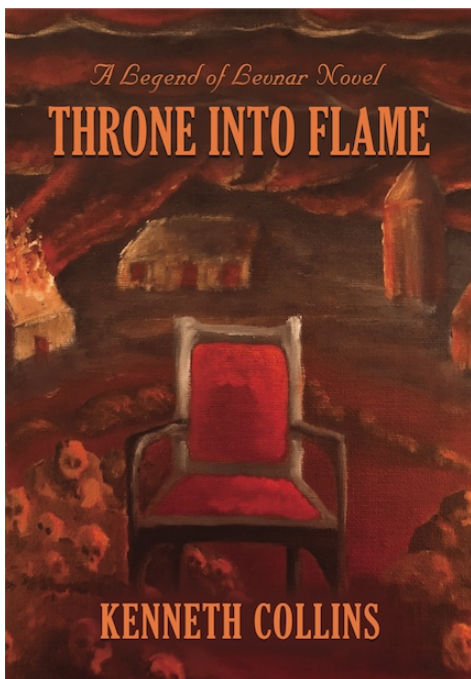
"Do not concern yourself with my motives. I assure you our arrangement will benefit us all. Those villagers are a small price to pay for the greatness I will achieve. Earlier today, the old king was laid to rest. As we speak, a new king is being crowned. He is weaker, unsure, and less wise than his father. He will be guided into our way of thinking whether he realizes it or not."

“King Melias was a competent and skillful king, Gortan. He maintained peace between the Talomay and humans. I have my doubts his son will be much less so.”

“General, I assure you, the pressure is mounting. His people grow restless. A few more deaths, a little more blood on the hands of the ‘heathens’ and war is inevitable.”

The general and ambassador were silent as the last hints of light disappeared, plunging the landscape from indigo into darkness. The torches from the balcony shone into the night air as if reaching out to the tiny, flickering light of Levnar castle.

Hedron sneered, “When do we strike next?”



A series of brutal attacks put the humans and race of batlike Talomay on the brink of war. As the new king of Levnar struggles for a resolution, a small band searches for the true reason behind the attacks. The truth they discover may be more dire than the fates of two kingdoms and may offer clues to the origin of their world.

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