

After powerful religious artifacts are discovered during the Talomay War, the wise Cadon is tasked with creating a Great Order to unlock their potential. But when four flawed people get a taste of godlike powers, will they change the world for the better or will they be changed for the worse?

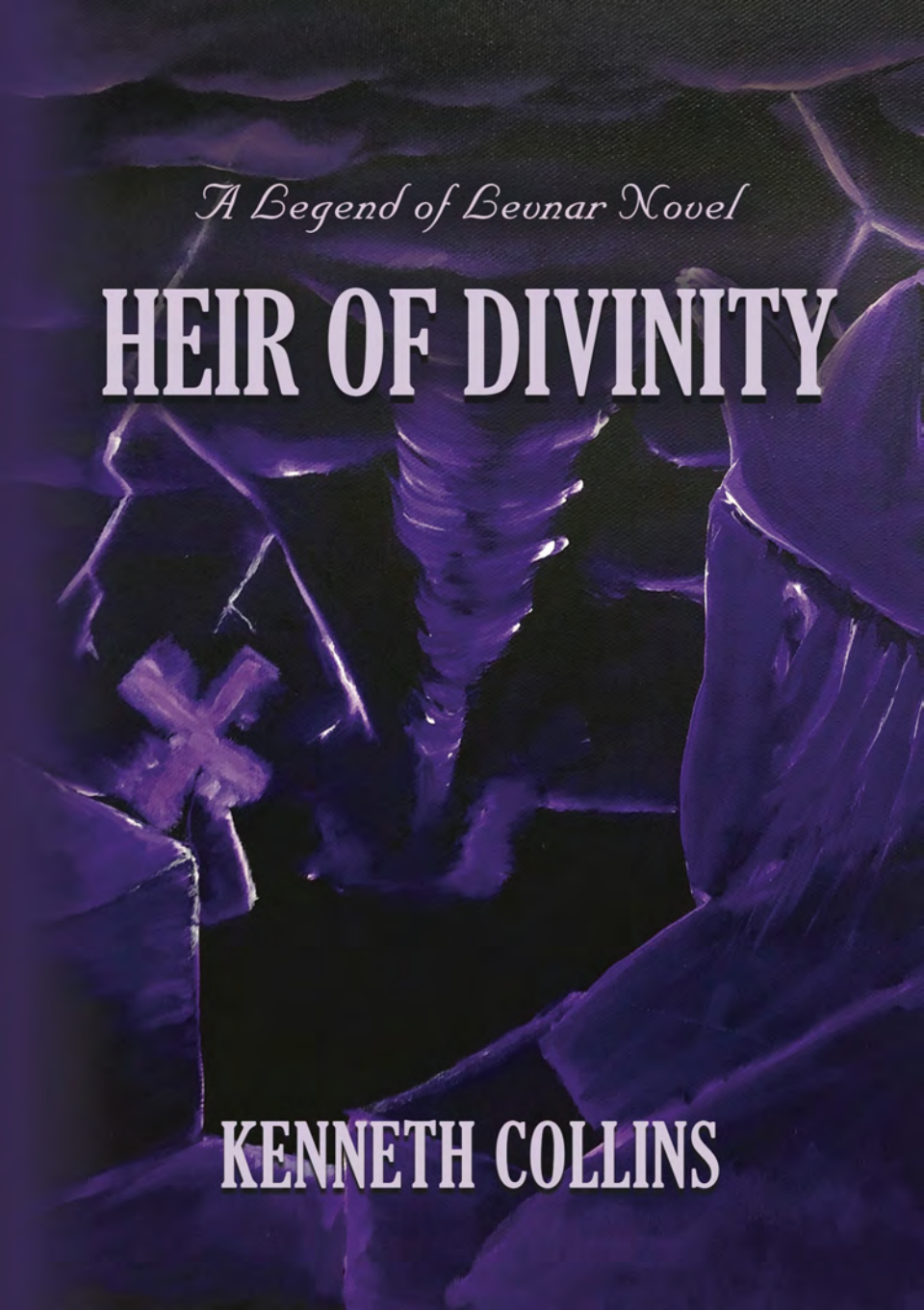
HEIR OF DIVINITY: A Legend of Levnar Novel

By Kenneth Collins

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A Legend of Levnar Novel

HEIR OF DIVINITY

KENNETH COLLINS

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CHAPTER ONE

Early Autumn, 33 A.F.

The First Great Tenet: Meaning

There is purpose for every event; each beginning leads to an end, just as each ending ushers in a new beginning.

Black smoke had been rising from the top of Mount Zanuscus for weeks. The S'lynarhi had been warned, but few heeded the peak's caution. Even as Dar-Wrak's scaly, three-toed feet struck the pier, guiding him toward the few ships that remained, he couldn't believe what was happening. The ground shook again, and more screams and gasps erupted from inland. Their voices carried across the water and beaches sounding only feet behind him. His tail flailed wildly.

Dar-Wrak looked back. The tip of the soaring mountain was engulfed in smoke and flame. Smoldering rock and ash were propelled into the sky. The once-blue sky was grey and getting darker. The cloud of dust was already blocking half the sunlight, plunging most of their world into shadow. Glowing lava flowed down each side of the mountain toward the villages at its base; it was slow, but its advance was as terrifying as it was unstoppable. Dar-Wrak instinctively roared as he turned and fled. He caught a glimpse of himself in the water beside the pier. His long, green face and tunic were covered in soot.

He silently cursed the Allegiance of Eleven. They ruled Dassura with the utmost inactivity and procrastination. They sprang into their usual inaction at the earliest warning signs. Committees were formed, and then subcommittees. Witness accounts were taken in the finest detail. Village leaders were brought before the Allegiance of Eleven to give their opinions and suggestions, each proposal gone over with the finest scrutiny. Pros and cons were weighed. Despite all the effort and movement, there was no action. Nothing was done to prepare the people of Dassura for the potential threat that loomed over their continent. Sure, there were a few declarations to begin storing supplies and prepare evacuation sites, but no real action was taken to protect them; bureaucracy performing at its optimal.

All the while, Mount Zanascus yelled out to the S'lynarathi. Go! Hurry! Now! Please!

"Hey," Dar-Wrak yelled, "wait! Do not pull up anchor yet! By order of the Allegiance!"

He lied, but the desperation in his voice was genuine. When their yellow eyes met, the vessel's captain could sense the lizard's panic. The captain scoffed and raised his anchor, using an oar to push off away from the pier. It was a small craft, but it could have saved ten, maybe twenty lives. Instead it set sail with only the captain aboard.

Dar-Wrak dove at the end of the oar, his claws missing by hairs. He fell hard on the wooden dock and could only watch as the vessel floated away, its sails powered by extraordinary gusts. There was no time to waste as a larger trireme further down the pier was readying to sail as well. Dar-Wrak picked himself up off the pier and hurried as fast as his legs would carry him.

Others had caught up with him. There were lizard men, women, and children; families clinging to each other, holding

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hands. The parents pushed him aside, and he did not want to separate the children from their families, so Dar-Wrak allowed it. But as soon as they passed him, he was on their heels.

The world quaked again, and the pier split in front of Dar-Wrak. The wooden planks twisted and lifted into the air. The entire pier behind him all but collapsed into the ocean. Dar-Wrak went prone and clung on for dear life as the wood bowed and dipped, until it finally settled. The families ahead of Dar-Wrak were mostly unaffected, leaping onto the larger vessel as it departed. Dar-Wrak could do nothing but watch another means of survival drift away.

Behind him, the land was covered in lava. Rooftops and uprooted trees smoldered on the surface of the liquid rock. Steam sizzled and bellowed into the air as the magma finally reached the ocean. Between the darkness spreading in the sky and the rising steam below, Dar-Wrak could see little, and wished to see less. Through the smoke, he could only make out the outline of the last vessel, itself quickly disappearing. The cries of countrymen had ceased. His homeland was engulfed in lava and smoke. Everyone he'd ever known was either buried under tons of glowing magma or one of the handful fortunate enough to get to sea. As far as he could tell, he was the last of the S'lynarthi in Dassura.

Mount Zanascus had one more deed to execute, perhaps attempting to finalize his peoples' collective destruction. What remained of Mount Zanascus' peak exploded with tremendous might. The world shook, and fiery boulders rained down on the landscape. Rocks ranging in size from pebbles to cottages were flung miles from the epicenter of the blast.

Dar-Wrak was certain he was about to die. He closed his eyes and lowered his face to the wood planks of the pier, covering his head. He could hear the pellets cracking against the pier and splashing into the water around him. Huge

splashes followed as thousands of gallons of water were displaced by the boulders busting into the surface of the ocean. One after one they fell. With each impact, Dar-Wrak knew death inched closer. He could do nothing but wait for his consciousness to be seized; his existence extinguished like a candle.

A chunk of the mountain was hurled overhead. He could not see it, but he could feel its presence, its size immense. Even with his head buried and eyes closed, his vision darkened further as the object blotted out the sun as it passed above. Then there was a horrible crash out in the sea. Timbers splintered, and the sea rocked. Dar-Wrak looked up. Through the smoke and steam, he could make out the beams and barrels that once belonged to the ship he'd hurried toward, the ship the families had leapt aboard. It was snapped like a twig, its debris thrown about the horizon.

Go!

It was a voice in his head, a ghost, or maybe his own sense of self-preservation. Dar-Wrak had been paralyzed and stagnant for too long. It was time to move. Struggling to maintain balance on the remnants of the swaying pier, he rose to his feet. Taking a deep breath of air, he dove into the water just as a flaming boulder struck behind him. Tiny embers and fragments of the magma were sprayed across his tunic. Even under the water, they burned his scaly, green skin. Writhing, Dar-Wrak thrashed to and fro, finally working his way out of his clothes. They floated away as the naked Dar-Wrak dove further into the depths of the sea.

A dozen leagues under the ocean, it was soundless and serene, a far cry from the nightmarish hellscape above. Occasional chunks of rock penetrated the tranquility, but even their arrival did not ruin the ambiance of safety Dar-Wrak found beneath the waves. He held his breath for as long as he

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could, staring up at the remaining sunlight through the ripples. As a S'lynarthi, Dar-Wrak could stay underwater for an extended time, but eventually his lungs would need air.

When he felt light-headed and his chest burned, Dar-Wrak swam to the surface. Gasping, his head rose above the waves. The undercurrents had pushed him out to sea. His legs treaded water as he was lifted high and then dipped low for what seemed like hours. He watched his homeland until the volcano that had been their object of worship, Mount Zanascus, quieted. Smoke continued to bellow from the top until the midday sky was darker than night.

A barrel, half-floating on the choppy surf bumped him, and he leaned over it. Adrenaline was wearing off and his muscles stiffened. He rested on the barrel. As the last of the sun was blocked by the volcanic gases and the land was plunged into darkness, Dar-Wrak bobbed on the waves and drifted further.

The key turned in the door and the lock clicked. Ibrik pulled open the two thick, oak doors, leaving them wide and inviting. It was quiet in the vestibule other than the echoes of his footsteps against the stone walls. The aisle was flanked by rows of pews, all were empty, and would be for hours. Ibrik preferred getting to the temple first, long before anyone else, to make sure everything was pristine. The ceiling was rounded and erected higher than most. Long stained-glass windows lined the side walls; each a representation of the Great One personifying one of the eleven Great Tenets.

The aisle ended, and he made the right turn to the stairs on the side of the stage. Three steps later and he was at the pulpit. Looking out over his phantom flock, Ibrik sorted the pages of his sermon yet again. They were already in order and had been

since he wrote it the night before, but it didn't hurt to make sure. He slammed the bottom edges onto the lectern. The edges straightened and fell into place.

There was tapping against the closest stained-glass window representing the final tenet, sacrifice. It showed the body of the Great One surrounded by mourning disciples. Ibrik paused and listened. There was nothing. He gently laid the words to his sermon on the pulpit as if they were holy objects. Ibrik felt out of place standing on the stage wearing his casual tunic and pants, feeling like a commoner, undeserving of a podium. He turned away and started toward the doorway to his study on the left side of the stage.

Again, there was a tapping and from the same location. Ibrik faced the window and strained his ears. Perhaps it was a bird, or the wind blowing leaves into the window, he thought to himself. Like the first time, the sound ended as abruptly as it began, and Ibrik continued into the study.

His desk was as he left it the night before, barren. The room was tight, large enough only for him to sit and think between sermons. The ink in the well had long since dried trapping the quill that extended from it. The leaning quill was frozen in a constant state of freefall, the sticky ink keeping it from ever reaching the lip of the well. That was fine and good with Ibrik as he made all his revisions and corrections in the privacy of his home.

He reached for his white robe which hung from a peg on the wall. As soon as Ibrik had changed, glass shattered in the vestibule. Ibrik shuffled out of the study and saw the damage. The stained-glass visage of the Great One, the same one that emitted the tapping sound earlier, was broken. The top third of the window was missing, only jagged edges remained; the Great One's head and shoulder in colorful fragments sprayed

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across the temple floor. Sitting amongst the debris was a fist-sized rock.

“Oh, my!” Ibrik cried out and hurried down the aisle, past the pews, and into the castle courtyard. The sun had risen above the horizon but not above the eastern rampart. The sky was bright red, the clouds appearing blue and purple. Normally, Ibrik would have stopped and praised the Great One for such a sight. Instead, he ran around to the side of the temple, his robe flowing behind him in the strong morning breeze. The culprit was nowhere to be seen.

Ibrik huffed and puffed, the sudden exertion a shock to his underworked body. His hands on his hip, he surveyed the damaged window, shaking his head while regaining his breath. A scuffle in the grass between the back of the temple at the northern wall, an area only two feet wide, caught Ibrik’s attention.

“Eggart, is that you?”

There was a chuckle, then whispering. Ibrik waited. Finally, two teen boys stepped around the corner. They stood side by side, eyes to the ground, awaiting their admonishment. Both were thin and the same age, but the shorter boy had brown hair while the taller one had long, straight, black hair that covered one side of his face. The other side of his head was shaven. The strands of dark hair jostled as the boy tried to hold in a laugh.

“Is something funny, Paan?”

He couldn’t hold it in any longer and Paan covered his mouth as he snickered. Eggart looked at his friend and nudged him with his elbow.

“Paan!”

Ibrik pointed toward the glass, “Look what you did! Who threw the rock?” Neither boy offered a response. “Hmm? I heard a few taps against the glass. More than one. Was it both of you?”

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"Master Ibrik, it was I who throw the stone that broke the glass," Eggart began. "We were tossing pebbles at the window, trying to hit the eyes. We never intended to break the glass; I swear."

"The stone that broke the windows was much larger than a pebble. How did that come about?"

Again, Eggart replied, "We ran out of pebbles. Paan dared me to throw the larger rock since that was all we could find."

"And you listened to Paan?" Ibrik shot the taller teen a glare. Paan smirked.

"He dared me."

"You two should be on your way to class. Why are you even over this way? Do you know how hard those windows are to make, and how difficult they are to replace?"

"Do you have to tell my parents? My father is still mad at me from last time."

"Oh, he will find out! And how many times will it take for you to realize you are responsible for these acts, and these punishments. If you want the punishments to end, stop doing the acts! Eggart, you know better than this."

Ibrik turned his attention to the smirking Paan, "And you know better, but do not care, do you? If you do not grow up and gain some maturity it is going to be a hard life ahead of you, son. Get out of here, Paan. Hurry to class."

"What are you going to do?" Paan asked.

"If I were you, I would get out of here before I decide to have your father brought down here!"

Paan darted away leaving Eggart with Ibrik. It was silent for a moment as Ibrik shook his head. Eggart bit his lip.

"Why, Eggart? Why? You are smarter than this. Walk with me."

"Yes, sir."

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Ibrik strolled the length of the temple toward the open doors. Eggart walked beside him.

“Paan is a bad influence on you and he is going down a difficult path. You do not need to follow.”

“He is my friend.”

“A friend, you say, but he is going to ruin your life and you will miss many opportunities if you continue breaking windows, tipping cows, and drinking mead in the woods before school.” Eggart eyed his elder who nodded. “Yes, I can smell it. Schoolwork and chores may seem difficult now, but they will lead to a better tomorrow. Paan is a bad apple, and I fear he will never learn better, but you have potential. You are bright, just stop being so gullible. Paan dared you to throw the rock because he did not have the courage to do it himself. You have the courage but lack the sense. Wise up, young man.”

“I am sorry, Master Ibrik. It was stupid, I know. I assure you I will do better. I promise.”

They stopped in front of the door. Ibrik put his hand on the boy's shoulder and peered into his eyes.

“I hope so, Eggart,” Ibrik sighed. “Perhaps a strong wind or a foolish bird is to blame for my shattered glass. Perhaps you want to volunteer your evenings after school to helping out around the temple and repairing the damage.”

“Yes, thank you, sir. I would gladly do that to avoid facing the wrath of my parents again.”

“I can imagine. Do not disappoint me. Now, get to class.”

Eggart thanked Ibrik again and took off, beaming.

Ibrik yelled after him, “I expect you here no later than hour after class is dismissed. Do not forget!”

He watched as the boy dashed across the courtyard, and then Ibrik stepped into the temple looking for a broom.

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The scaffolding rose fifty feet from the ground as it had for weeks, but the wall was complete. The last stone had been chiseled to size and mortared into place the day before. Tools and materials lay in the grass at the base of the wall. King Lamorak smiled; another project completed. Yet his mind raced to find the next endeavor. His retainers, a hodgepodge of a dozen bodyguards, advisors, and squires sat atop their horses far behind him talking amongst themselves. Most were new to his service; their names he hadn't memorized. Their opinions mattered little to him. Those who truly mattered stood to his right, his mother, his wife, his son, and Flintar, the commander of the men-at-arms.

"Is it everything you hoped it would be?" Queen Gwynora asked.

"I wish you could see it, mother."

"I can imagine it."

"What say you, Flintar?"

The stocky but strong Flintar stood an inch shorter than Lamorak in full chainmail, his helmet under his left arm. His hair was trimmed and black, but his waxed moustache stretched to the left and right away from his face, each end culminating in a curl. A sword was sheathed on his waist, but the shaft of his weapon of choice, the halberd, was gripped in his right hand.

"A second massive wall around Levnar will certainly provide more than adequate protection, my liege, especially with the current lack of a legitimate threat."

"There are always threats," Lamorak spat. "They may be unseen or unknown, but they exist. I intend to prepare for the worst. We did not believe the Talomay were a threat and look what happened. For all we know, King Rahm is still out there in the mountains, licking his wounds and raising a new army."

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There was an awkward silence and he felt the gaze of Jailynn and the disapproval of his mother. He chose to ignore their reaction.

“How fare the village walls?”

Flintar cleared his throat and then spoke, “Great, my liege. The walls around Esling and Similia have been completed as well as most of the easternmost settlements. The stone gained from the Talomay quarries has been a gift from the Great One. We have enough stone to build a hundred walls if we desire. The villages are growing since the defeat of the Talomay. People are no longer afraid to travel, except for the occasional bandits.”

“Speaking of bandits, how goes the search for Ruglan and his ilk?”

“Unfortunately, he is a slippery fellow. I believe they are somewhere to the northwest. My sources say Ruglan shares his spoils with locals to secure safe passage throughout the kingdom. If they knew how cruel he can be, I wonder if they would continue to assist him. It is unnerving how far a handsome face and smile get one these days; and how much malice it can mask. Do not worry, my liege, we will hunt them, and we will find them.”

Lamorak turned and nodded, “I know you will, Flintar. I have the utmost confidence in you and your men. Your nomination came straight from Darrius himself, and if you have his blessing then you have mine. I appreciate the use of the men-at-arms for the charge of bringing Ruglan to justice. Since the death of Sir Serovens we have yet to anoint a new champion. Frankly, no one has been able to fill his shoes.”

“It is not easy to replace a man like Sir Serovens, but until you do, you can count on my men-at-arms.”

“Thank you. Now that the outer wall is complete, we can begin preparations for a grand tournament in the outer bailey

to select a champion. Once the winter snow thaws, we can hold the tourney the following spring.”

They turned their eyes back to the wall, and young Amven pointed.

“Why is it so messy, Father?”

Gwynora and Jailynn laughed and Lamorak chuckled.

“That is not a mess, my dear boy,” Lamorak rubbed the ten-year old’s head and pulled him close. “That is the mark of a hundred days’ honest work. Never look down on a man who must work with his hands. Your grandfather worked on magnificent ships before he was king. It is a skill, a craft, and surely a more virtuous trade than politics.”

Jailynn’s eyes locked with his, and Lamorak’s smile disappeared.

“It is early yet. I am sure the carpenters and masons will be back soon to gather their gear. Run along with your mother, Amven. I have one more piece of business to attend.”

“Come on, Amven,” Jailynn said as she grabbed his hand and locked opposite arms with Gwynora. “My Queen, would you come with us?”

“Lead the way.”

Lamorak watched as Jailynn, Gwynora, and Amven walked back to their horses. Jailynn and Gwynora’s green dresses were almost matching with only minor differences in design that Lamorak could not distinguish. As they moved away, Lamorak wished his wife would look back over her shoulder at him and smile; not just the type of smile that king’s and queen’s flash to their supporters, but the type of smile that comes from the heart and makes the eyes shine. It had been so long since she’d smiled at him in earnest, only in front of others for show. He wanted, no, needed to know that something remained in her heart for him; that he was her man, not only her husband and father to their only child.

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The smile never came and Lamorak turned his attention back to the wall, burying his feelings in his work as he had done for the past year. Flintar saw a pained look shoot across his king's face.

"It is quite a wall, my liege."

The king hesitated to reply, searching the man's face for any hint of subtext. He found none.

"That is quite a mustache."

"The envy of the barracks."

"I bet it is," Lamorak grinned. "Can you fetch me the man named Nodram? I believe he is the lanky man gratuitously laughing at my advisors' insufferable jokes."

"Yes, my liege."

Flintar hurried away and into the group of retainers. Words were exchanged, and the lanky man slid off his horse and nervously approached the king. He moved with long strides, but his eyes rarely left the ground. Once he was within earshot, Lamorak waved him closer.

"Nodram?"

"Yes, my liege."

"Walk with me."

The two were side by side, strolling toward the newly erected wall. Lamorak said nothing more until they were in its shadow and far away from the others. Nodram twitched, wrung his hands, and avoided eye contact, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the silence.

"I suppose you are wondering why I have requested your presence. It is my understanding that you served Ambassador Gortan and served him well."

"Y-Yes. I did the best I could," Nodram stammered.

"And that you knew about his dealings with the Talomay."

The blood drained from Nodram's face. His eyes were wide and mouth agape.

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“I-I did not know the extent...”

Lamorak interrupted, “It is fine, Nodram. I am not here to punish you. What you knew or did not know about the extent of his dealings with General Hedron does not interest me. What does interest me is the dedication with which you served the late ambassador. As you know, most of the events leading up to the war with the Talomay have not been made public knowledge. You are one of the few who know the truth and I appreciate that you have kept this information to yourself.”

“Why, of course, my liege. I would not want to contradict the formal decree. I prefer to keep a low profile and I believe that would bring me much unwanted attention.”

They began to walk again.

“Your loyalty to your master in difficult times even if misplaced is commendable. It has certainly caught my attention. How have you been adjusting to life since Gortan’s death?”

“To be honest,” Nodram began, “it has been difficult. As you may have noticed, I am not a very assertive or strong man. I have been a servant to the wealthy most of my life. I am not a greedy man or selfish, but I really do not know how to make a living on my own. For a man with no skills and fewer friends, it is hard to find opportunities.”

“This may be your lucky day, Nodram. I have an opportunity that suits a man of your talents and experience. My mother is blind, blinded by those beasts. But she is also getting older. She has difficulty getting around sometimes and needs a lot of attention from my wife and myself. Even with our servants, she is too damn independent and stubborn to acknowledge sometimes that she needs help. I want you to be her full-time servant. I need to know that she is safe and will never have to struggle day-to-day. It would be a great burden off my mind and the mind of Princess Jailynn.”

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“My liege,” Nodram exclaimed, dropping to his knees, “I would be honored! Thank you! Thank you!”

“Please, Nodram, rise! It is I who should be thanking you. It is not lightly that I offer you this position, but your reputation precedes you.”

Nodram grabbed Lamorak’s hand and kissed it before standing.

“Thank you, I will serve your mother and my queen more so than I would serve even my own mother.”

“I have no doubts. Be warned, if I know my mother, she will not embrace this change, but please do as I have asked regardless of her reluctance to accept it.”

Shadows blanketed the courtyard as Cador walked toward the temple. Imposing clouds filled the evening sky and blocked the sun; night had come early. A drizzle began. Cador flipped up the hood on his robe covering his white hair. Only his beard, which had been trimmed to little more than a goatee, protruded from the edges of the hood. The parchment in his hand was rolled up and tucked into his long sleeve. There was plenty of room thanks to his bony arms. The custom garment was made with enough material for two men accounting for Cador’s unnatural height but left the width and depth sagging.

The temple door was open, the repeated sound of banging echoing out toward him. Cador ducked through the doorway as the drizzle turned to a drenching downpour. Across the vestibule, Ibrik was perched atop a ladder nailing wooden planks across a broken window. He looked more like a carpenter than clergy. Brown work pants and sleeveless tunic replaced his robes from earlier, and the short gray hair that encircled his bald spot was matted and awry. Ibrik wiped sweat

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from his receding hairline with the back of his arm, oblivious to Cador in the doorway.

Wetness surrounded Cador's moccasins. He pushed back his hood and looked down, stepping away from the water. Tiny rivers of rainwater were forming puddles within the temple entryway. Reaching out, Cador pulled the thick doors closed with a boom.

"Cador," Ibrik shuddered, "you scared me! I did not hear you enter."

"Sorry. You had quite a trickle coming in from the rain, so I closed the doors. Hope you do not mind."

Ibrik started down the ladder as Cador approached, "No, thank you. Every time there is a storm that happens. Grading the dirt is on my list of things to do, the ever-growing list. There is so much to do here and never enough time or kronas to catch up."

"Donations not what they should be?"

"I could say the opposite, donations have been plentiful, but I am only one man and costs continue to increase as fast as the contributions."

Cador shook Ibrik's hand and eyed the window, "What happened? A little delinquent vandalism?"

"You could say that," Ibrik sighed. "I was covering the missing areas before the storm hit. Did not quite make it in time, but those boards should hold until a new window is commissioned. Eggart was supposed to stop by after his classes and help me, but I suppose he forgot as usual."

"They are young men, our future, but could use some correction and guidance; Paan especially. I fear he will amount to little more than a vagrant or beggar at best, and drunkard or bandit at worst."

"I fear the same, but you and I both know the Great One works in mysterious ways. I will hold out hope for each and

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every one of the Great One's creations. You know, Cadon, it is never too late for you to join the temple. You of all people know the power and influence of the Great One."

"We have had this discussion before, Ibrik, and I know your offer comes from a place of sincerity and benevolence, but I must refuse. The Great One has blessed me throughout my life, but the temple was not a part of my life before and should not be now."

Ibrik wiped his hands as he watched the boards he'd secured above the remaining section of stained glass. The rain beat against the glass and wood; not a drop penetrated the barrier.

"I will continue to make the offer. You could do a lot of good here. But since you did not come here to offer your patronage, may I ask what brings you to the temple at this hour?"

Cadon removed the rolled-up parchment from his sleeve. There were droplets of rain on the surface, but nothing that would run the ink or seep through the page. Ibrik saw its wax seal and his eyes widened.

"The seal of King Lamorak?"

Cadon handed the priest the scroll, "Read it."

Ibrik's fingers visibly shook and his heart raced as he snatched the parchment and pulled apart the seal. His eyes darted about the page. The letter was handwritten in the finest lettering straight from the king's desk. Cadon's pleasant disposition hinted that the scroll wasn't bad news, but its credence was not lost on Ibrik.

"What is this? I mean, I have read it, but I do not know what this is offering? A place in the Great Order?"

"King Lamorak has put me in charge of finding the greatest minds in Levnar and offering them seats on a special council, the Great Order. The Great Order will be responsible for

unlocking the secrets of the relics we obtained from the Talomay after their defeat in the Red Mountains.”

“So, the stories are true? There have been rumors about gauntlets that breathe fire; that they brought about the death of the mighty Sir Serovens.”

“Your allegiance to the Great One and to Levnar is unwavering and unquestioned, matched by few. While I am personally selecting the members of the Order, I knew I could not in good conscience leave you out of the endeavor. If you choose to take on this new responsibility on top of your already arduous tasks, I can give you the rest of the details.”

Ibrik slid into the nearest pew and looked up at the towering Cador, “This is a lot to comprehend. It is an honor, there is no doubt about that, but certainly a lot to consider.”

“If you decide not to accept, it is fine. We know you have many duties, most of which you handle alone, running the temple. However, I vouched for you to King Lamorak and he strongly agreed it would be in everyone’s best interest if you were involved. The knowledge we could ascertain from these relics is immense, and not just the legendary powers the army witnessed that day, but perhaps information regarding the Great One himself. I know you would want to be part of any discovery relating to the Great One.”

“You know me well, Cador.” Ibrik threw up his hands. “Of course, I want to be involved. How could I turn down such an opportunity?”

Cador smiled as wrinkles formed on his face, “Excellent, my friend. I will inform you when and where we shall meet once the rest of the Order is formed.”

Ibrik stood and they shook hands before Cador turned and started toward the door. The priest stared down at the parchment in his hand, his thumb following along the broken bottom half of the king’s wax seal. Cador pushed the temple

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door open. The sound of rain bounced throughout the stones. Cador raised his hood and gave a slight wave before stepping out into the storm.

Lightning snaked its way down from the sky, illuminating the horizon, but for only an instant. The thunder followed. With no difference in color between the night and the sea, Dar-Wrak had no concept of his bearings. Even with the occasional bolt of lightning, the rise and fall of the waves blocked his line of sight in all directions. He hadn't seen anything but water, clouds, and stars for days; how many days, he'd lost track. Counting the sunsets was easy in the beginning. Once fatigue and hunger increased, his weakness increased. Drifting in and out of consciousness combined with dizzying seasickness from the constant rocking made measuring the passing time impossible.

Dar-Wrak tightened his grip on the makeshift raft. He'd pieced it together from planks and busted barrels in the aftermath of Dassura's volcanic cataclysm. It was only enough to support his torso and head, his arms and legs sinking into the ocean. It allowed him to sleep safely. When the blazing sun was high, Dar-Wrak would cling to the underside of the raft sparing his scaly skin from its wrath. He could breathe through the slight space between the planks.

Being S'lynarathi, his body could process seawater for drinking, but nutrition was trickier. In his waking and stronger moments, Dar-Wrak would dive below the surface and catch small fish in his long jaws. His rows of razor-sharp fangs savagely tore through them. Catching the fish was often difficult as he rarely dared to venture far from the raft. If his prey managed to elude him for more than a few feet, Dar-Wrak

went hungry. The few he caught provided little relief. It was only enough to keep him alive; to continue his torturous journey.

His mind dwelled on those who did not survive the volcano. He had no choice but to presume everyone was dead with Dar-Wrak being the sole survivor, his own survival being through luck. By day three, he had no more tears to cry. Anyone he'd ever known or seen was dead. Ghosts populated every memory. As lightning sizzled in the darkness, Dar-Wrak closed his eyes, hoping an errant thunderbolt would end his misfortune. That was the last inkling of hope he could muster.

When his feet first touched mud, he discounted it. Surely it was a curious fish or bundle of seaweed sliding between his toes. Then it was gone. The raft lifted and dropped on the tide. As it dipped, his knee struck a clamshell buried in the dirt. The water was suddenly shallow. The raft continued but Dar-Wrak was stopped and sank to the bottom. His legs were too weak and too tired to stand but he clawed and crawled out of the mud. His head popped up out of the water and his hands grasped at sand.

Dar-Wrak pulled himself onto the beach while waves licked his feet. The wooden raft that carried him across the ocean beat against the sand to his right. The sky lit up in a flash and his surroundings were visible for the first time. The beach stretched for yards and then became a steep, grassy incline.

He steadily rose to his haunches, giving his muscles time to adjust. He groaned. Naked and alone in a land he hadn't had the optimism to believe existed, Dar-Wrak stood and moved across the beach. Guided by mere flickers of visibility separated by seconds of blackness, he made his way into the grass and ascended the slope.

There were trees and bushes ahead of him; a thick forest filled with brush and berries. Dar-Wrak dove into the bush,

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shoving every berry he could feel out into his mouth. Their nourishment was welcome, but his taste buds almost rejected their tartness. He forced them down, swallowing hard. Grabbing a nearby vine and some foliage, he wrapped them around his waist and tied it above his tail. The grass kilt barely covered his mid-torso but was better than nothing. He ripped away chunks of the berry bushes, twigs, leaves, and all, and then hurried forward as fast as his sore body would permit.

It was darker in the forest, the flashes of lightning not penetrating the canopy of treetops. Using the few visible stars, Dar-Wrak concluded he was heading north and continued in that direction. He walked for hours and the storm died down. The lightning moved away, and the thunder became a quiet rumble. Part of him wanted to sleep and wait until dawn. The rest of him reveled in this new turn of events. He was almost afraid that it was all a dream or hallucination and that by closing his eyes for more than a second might cause this new land to vanish.

Without the light, navigating between the trees became harder. Dar-Wrak had trouble finding clear footing and judging the terrain. Where he expected there to be ground, there was none. He tumbled forward, rolling through the grass and out of the forest. He came to a stop, face down. His hand touched stone. He was lying in a road; civilization was near. Dar-Wrak rubbed the cut on his forehead, wiping away droplets of blood. The berries in his hands were crushed and he tossed their remnants aside, and then licked their juices off his fingers.

Dar-Wrak stood and followed the road to what he believed was the northeast. If there was civilization, there were people. Maybe they would not be like him, but if they were civilized, he would find clothes, food, and shelter. He would live. A tear of relief formed in his eye.

“Water,” her words ricocheting off the stone and carrying down into the valley, “is the key of life. Where there is water, life thrives. For decades we have lived on this continent with streams and rivers feeding us. Today I present to you a modern marvel.”

The grass was coated in droplets of rain from the previous night’s storm. The valley was hazy as the afternoon sun heated the moist landscape. She took a breath and wiped a drip off her forehead; sweat or condensation, she couldn’t tell. Her back was to the aqueduct. Thousands of white blocks stacked in a series of funnels, filters, and ramps starting at the icy peaks of the westernmost mountains. It stretched all the way down the mountainside, sometimes steep, sometimes gradual, and sometimes underground, but always channeling downward. The group of serfs, laborers, and aristocracy waited for her to continue. Their expressions showed a lack of comprehension or lack appreciation. She shrugged to herself and continued speaking.

“The first and only aqueduct in Levnar. It will take melting water from the frozen mountaintops and bring them down to us. It is quite a feat of construction I can assure you.”

“Omero, let me interrupt.” The man was dressed in the finest mustard and brown linens. A feather protruded from his cap. “Where does all this water go?”

“Currently, it is being routed to Castle Levnar. King Lamorak’s chamber will have running water. Our infirmary will have the fresh, clean water it needs. We will not be solely at the mercy of rain, constantly under the threat of drought.”

Omero paced as she spoke. Her coal-black hair flowed down from her head, onto her shoulders, and straight down her back, finally coming to an end at her waist. It was a stark contrast to

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her pale skin. She wore no makeup and made no visible attempt to make herself attractive. Even still there was a hint of natural beauty in her colorless face, hair, and sunken eyes.

“Has it been tested?”

“That is why I have called you all here; to witness the future. A victory of engineering over environment, of the human mind over nature. Do you not believe it will work?”

“I do not call into question your intelligence, Omero. You are undoubtedly the greatest female thinker in the land and have been for almost three decades. But I will believe this massive contraption works when I see it, and that it was not a huge waste of time and resources.”

“Greatest female thinker?” She echoed his words. “I would not want to waste any more of your precious time, sir, so let us pull the lever and find if my aqueduct delivers on the promises I have laid out.”

Omero turned and approached the aqueduct. Flanked by two armored knights was an alcove carved into its side. A thick, wooden lever stood at attention. Omero put both lily-white hands on the lever and pulled it. A series of unseen pulleys and gears began to crank. The hillside rumbled. The crowd gasped and Omero grinned. Greatest *female* thinker...

Rushing water could be heard splashing along the top of the structure. It was out of their view, but it was evident the design was working. As the water passed along the top of the duct and flowed down into the valley, they could see it running below them. Castle Levnar with its two fortress walls encircling it looked like a child's toy from their altitude, and the line of water moved toward it. Most of the crowd began to clap.

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Assuming it continues to work as expected, we hope to expand the aqueduct to supply fresh water to other parts of the castle as well as nearby towns. One day, every home in Levnar will have clean

water running to and through them. This is the ushering in of a new age! Thank you for coming. Have a safe trip back."

The crowd dispersed heading back to their horses and wagons. Omero saw the man in the mustard linens duck into the crowd, avoiding eye contact with her, only nodding to her as he turned away. She wanted an apology, an acknowledgment of her intellect as a great thinker, not a great female thinker. But his nod and sheepish behavior would have to suffice.

"Congratulations on your success, my lady. Are you ready?" One of the knights asked.

"Yes, I am done here."

"I will fetch your horse."

Omero waved him off, "That is not necessary."

"We are under direct orders to escort you safely back to the castle and cannot leave your side until we do, my lady."

"Fine. We must make one stop first at the cistern. I want to confirm that all is well along the channel."

"Yes, my lady. As you wish."

The knight darted off while the second knight stood silent beside her. Greatest *female* thinker...

Her thoughts were interrupted as the knight returned, and she took the reins to her steed. She began to climb atop the brown and white mare and the knights hurried to her side. Their hands touched her hip to steady her. Omero lashed out at them.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to help, my lady."

"Stop trying to help me. I am quite capable."

"Yes, my lady. I am sorry."

Perhaps I overreacted, she thought to herself, but not by much. The chivalry that protected women and raised them on pedestals was the very same thing that held them down. In the eyes of many, they could not do all that a man could do; a

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notion Omero scoffed at and shattered many times. Yet, there were always people like the man in the mustard linens, doubting and condescending.

She spurred her horse and they began the journey along the aqueduct. She quietly eyed it as she rode. No signs of cracks or imperfections. This would be the creation that should remove her labels and her perceived limitations. She couldn't wait until word got to King Lamorak and Cador...

The letter! Her left hand dipped into her saddlebag and retrieved the rolled-up parchment. Cador had delivered it to her home that morning but being in such a hurry for her display she hadn't opened it yet. The king's wax seal was intact. She broke it.

It was an invitation to join a new council; the Great Order. A place where her brain would be utilized and respected. She smiled as she rolled the parchment up and shoved it back into the saddlebag. Finally, some recognition. Perhaps Cador's mystique and instincts were not completely unfounded after all. To select Omero, he must be a man of great insight and understanding.

The village of Horann was far from bustling but the sunshine brought out most of the peasants. Husbands and wives strolled toward the town square and laughing kids chased one another with sticks. They were all poor and shabbily dressed in drab and homemade clothes yet seemed happy; oblivious or ignorant to the thriving castle and neighboring villages to the south. The roads were dirt and mud, not stone. The homes were clay, straw, and wood. Compared to Esling, Nome or Similia, Horann was a shantytown.

Kenneth Collins

"Thank you for the boar, Master Ruglan," an old man with white hair, a hunch, and missing teeth grinned. "I am used to the hunger, but I hate to hear the rumblings of the children's bellies."

Ruglan's blue eyes widened, his thin mustache curled up, and his handsome features beamed. He placed a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"You are welcome, sir, but there is no need to thank me. I consider Horann my home and will always do what is in my people's best interest."

"May the Great One bless you, young man."

The old man moved along, and with each step Ruglan's smile faded. Ruglan kicked the mud off his boots.

"These are expensive. I wish they would take the wealth I allow them and put it toward something constructive. A road perhaps?"

"I believe roads are a luxury these people shan't be able to afford for quite some time, boss."

"Infrastructure, Unkh, is as important as anything else and is often overlooked, discredited. After all, it takes foresight and patience to see its advantage, and that takes brains. Look around, Unkh. Does this town strike you as a bastion for intelligence? These people are poor for a reason."

Unkh nodded, "It has worked in our favor, and they idolize you."

"Yes, yes, they do," Ruglan beamed again.

Unkh and Ruglan sidestepped a brown puddle and sauntered between rows of huts. Their swords clanged at their sides. Even covered in smudges of blood and dirt and with hints of corrosion, their chainmail shone brighter than anything in Horann. The town square ahead was visible with dozens of people selling wares and trinkets, but Ruglan's eyes found the tavern.

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“The haze of last night’s debauchery has already waned, my friend. Let us begin anew.”

They crossed the street. Two passing teenage girls held their dresses knee-high to avoid the sludge around their naked feet. They looked at Ruglan and blushed. He returned their gaze, his head following them as they walked by. They giggled once they thought they were out of earshot.

The tavern door was propped open with a grey rock and they stepped inside, tracking the mud from the road. As soon as they entered, the bartender rushed to the furthest cabinet and hurried back with two mugs. Unkh snickered. Ruglan grabbed the mug handle as the bartender filled each to the brim.

“This is my very best alcohol, Master Ruglan. It takes years to ferment using the ripest bindlefruit. A carafe of the stuff is usually obtainable only by royalty, and it is through a stroke of good fortune I should come across this batch. For you, no charge.”

Ruglan brought the mug to his lips and tasted it. He waited for Unkh to do the same. Unkh nodded. The bartender turned to go back to the other end of the bar, when Ruglan grabbed his elbow.

“Leave the bottle.” Ruglan winked.

The bartender only hesitated for a moment before placing the bottle in front of Ruglan. His elbow was released, and he scurried away, head lowered. Over the rims of their mugs, Unkh and Ruglan surveyed the other patrons. Being the middle of the day there were only a handful. Unkh recognized all but two as members of their group.

“Where do you want to go next, boss? Flintar’s men should be close. I expect they will ride into town by the end of the week; sooner if they are motivated.”

Ruglan swirled his mug, “We can pick up stakes in the morn. Let the men enjoy one more night, and tomorrow we can

ride west. I am guessing Flintar's men are still coming from the east?"

"According to our eyes in the vicinity. If they were approaching, we would be forewarned."

They sat in silence, sipping the strongest, tangiest liquor they'd had in years. A snore arose from someone at a small, round table in the back of the bar. There were no candles or torches, the only light coming from the noon sun through the open door, two windows, and through spaces between the wall boards. The craftsmanship was adequate at best, yet likely the sturdiest building in Horann.

Rapid footsteps sloshing through mud drew near. They were too heavy to belong to children. Ruglan and Unkh instinctively went for their swords. Silhouettes filled the doorway, their shadows stretching over the room.

"Ruglan, Unkh, we have a problem!" One of the men shouted. His voice was familiar, one of their comrades. They eased their hands away from their scabbards, standing to face him.

"What is it? The king's army?" Ruglan asked.

"Worse. We have a traitor. Gancor was trying to give away our location."

Unkh stomped, "Where is he now?"

"We have him, managed to tackle him. Have him tied up. I figured you would want him, Ruglan."

"Lead the way."

Within minutes, Ruglan and Unkh were standing over Gancor. He was a bald, slight man sitting on the floor of the barn with ropes tying his arms to his torso. His back to the wall and his ankles tied tight, he wasn't going anywhere. Most of Ruglan's men were present, the barn had been their barracks during their stay in Horann. Even those who had been out on

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the town returned to witness Gancor's fate. They filled the barn, faces grim.

"Ruglan, please have mercy on me!" Gancor pled, his eyes desperate.

"Why, Gancor, why? After all I have done for, after all we have done for you. You were one of us, one of our brothers. What were you wishing to achieve?"

"I am tired. I am tired of running, of ransacking and hiding. I have not slept in a real cot in months. I have pains in my knees and back from the fights and the marching and riding. I just want to be a serf again. I want to go home."

Ruglan lowered to a crouch in front of Gancor, resting a hand on the front of his shoe. He grinned.

"What did you think was going to happen, Gancor? You were going to leave breadcrumbs for Lamorak's dogs to follow us, and that we would be hanging by our necks while you were playing farmer with your own acre? Let me assure you of something, friend, you would be hanging right beside us."

"I am sorry," Gancor began to cry as Ruglan produced a dagger. "That is not necessary, I swear. I will go away, far away. I will never say anything to anyone. I promise."

Ruglan brought the blade of the dagger down at his captive's feet. Gancor winced as the blade cut through the ropes binding his ankles. The dagger was placed back into Ruglan's belt. Gancor eyed the bandit with cautious optimism.

"Sir?"

"We all make mistakes, and we are only human after all. Right, men?"

His followers grumbled low in agreement, their expressions reflecting emotions from confusion to amusement. Ruglan stood and extended his hand to Gancor. The ropes kept him from returning the gesture. Ruglan laughed.

"Oh, yeah. How could I forget?"

The men around them chuckled nervously as Ruglan grabbed the binds around the captive's torso and lifted him to his feet. The streak of a tear sat suspended on Gancor's cheek.

"Aw, I am sorry," Ruglan wiped away the tear with the back of his hand, his compassion exaggerated. "Did I scare you? The important thing is that we stopped you before you could signal Flintar's men. We did stop you in time, correct?"

Ruglan's abrupt, somber gaze made Gancor nod feverishly.

"Yes, Master Ruglan, they do not know our whereabouts."

"Good," Ruglan's façade shifted again as he grinned and lowered his head uncomfortably close to Gancor. "So, how were you going to do it? Smoke signals? Hidden notes? Or were you going to run off and tattle in person?"

Gancor tugged at the ropes, trying to find comfort for his bound arms, "Notes; I was going to leave a box with a note for them to find. But I am glad I was stopped. Truly."

"I figured you would not dare face them in person, nor would you come to me with your concerns like a man. Huh, with your arms pinned at your side, you hardly look like a man, but more like a chicken."

The bandits laughed, and Ruglan raised his arms inviting a response.

"Does he not look like a chicken? Go on, Gancor, cluck for us, like the chicken you are."

Gancor knew better than to defy Ruglan, and caving to his demands, he did as he was requested. He clucked and moved his head to and fro. The barn bellowed with laughter.

"Flap your wings, little chickee!" Someone shouted from the rear. Unkh watched as Ruglan reveled in the smaller man's humiliation. Gancor continued despite the degradation, hoping for leniency and that it would be the extent of his punishment. Ruglan moved behind Gancor as he clacked.

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“Have you ever seen a chicken,” Ruglan began, “before it is prepared for cooking, what they do to it?”

Ruglan brought his dagger across Gancor’s throat. Blood sprayed out into the audience. They stepped away, wiping their faces as Gancor gasped for air and struggled toward the barn door. Ruglan let him go.

“That’s it, Gancor. They break its neck or cut its throat and then it scurries about until it finally dies. Go on!”

Wide-eyed, Gancor shot blood into the air as he pushed his body against the nearest wall. He slumped some before desperately forcing himself up and back toward Ruglan. It was an act of instinct, not retribution, as if Ruglan could somehow undo the gash in his neck. Ruglan sidestepped him and let Gancor collide with the opposite wall. The straw that covered the ground was soaked in dark blood. They all watched as Gancor turned pale. His eyes fluttered. He stood one final time before crumbling into a heap.

“If you follow me, you can either be a man or a chicken. This is what happens to chickens. Unkh, we should leave our own message for Flintar. Impale him along the road approaching from the east. Let them know, King Lamorak may rule to the south, but out here in the frontier, I rule.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Second Great Tenet: Compassion

Accept the flaws in others, but also accept them in yourself.

The city wall was a welcome sight. It was the first manmade object Dar-Wrak had seen other than the roads and a broken-down wagon, abandoned in a thicket. He travelled through the night and all morning. The bottoms of his green feet were bruised and swollen. He'd only stopped a few times to gather more berries and once to chase a rabbit. It got away. He stepped off the road and into the dirt, pressing his palms against the stone. There were voices and sounds of life coming from the other side. He could not make out their words, but their language seemed familiar, sounding the same as his own.

He scanned to the left and right, but the city gate was not visible. For a moment he considered climbing the closest tree and jumping over the wall. He decided against it. Not only were his legs too exhausted to make such a leap, but that was not the ideal first impression. Dar-Wrak followed the road further as it ran alongside the wall. It led around the corner and to the town gate, its gate raised.

Wrapping his vine and leaf kilt tighter, he hurried forward. His excited tail flapped high behind him. Not only was the gate raised but the entryway was unguarded. Dar-Wrak grasped the inside of the archway and peered inside. Rows of modest homes and shops were laid out, each of differing designs but all had thatch roofs. A combination of roads and dirt alleys

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separated the homes. Further to his left, there was a sizeable garden and a building that Dar-Wrak assumed was a temple with a towering steeple. The architecture was unfamiliar, different than the Dassuran marble columns and winding stairways, yet the town had a warm, comfortable feel. Small groups of living beings moved through the town, oblivious to his presence. Unlike his green, scaly skin and protruding mouth, these beings were pale, tan, and brown with small heads and no tails.

Dar-Wrak stepped through the gateway in plain sight of everyone, making a course for the closest home. It took longer than he expected for anyone to see him, almost a full minute. The people stopped in their tracks, and stared, mouths agape. He shambled toward them. He raised his hand, waving meekly, and spoke.

“Hello, I am Dar-Wrak...”

The shouting and pointing began. The females of the species shrieked, and the men scowled and approached. They held shovels or pitchforks, and those who didn’t grabbed the closest tools or instruments that could inflict pain. Dar-Wrak stopped and tried to reason with them, appease them, to convince them of his plight and that he meant no harm.

“What is that?” A woman screamed.

“Kill it!” Another yelled.

The first blow was the most painful. A shovel strike to the side of the head brought Dar-Wrak to the ground. A trio of men surrounded him; boots kicked at him. He cowered and protected his face and head. The flat side of the shovel connected with his shoulder. Sticks and handles of various tools prodded him all over. His tail wrapped around one of the attacker’s legs and pulled. The man fell backward and the other two paused, watching him hit the road.

Dar-Wrak rolled onto his belly and pushed off. He rose and hurried toward the archway back out of town. Chains rattled, and the portcullis slammed shut inches away from Dar-Wrak's face. His fingers tugged at the metal bars, but only for a second. Then, he darted beyond the trio of men, taking off down the road.

"It hurt him," one of the attackers shouted. "Do not let it get away!"

Another group of men was forming in front of Dar-Wrak, cutting off his escape. His foot slipped as he tried to stop. He twisted his neck behind him and saw he was surrounded. The circle of men closed in.

"Please, stop," Dar-Wrak pled. "I am tired, hungry..."

A flung rock grazed his nose. Blood dripped from his snout. He winced, eyes watering and blurry from the shot. He didn't see the ax handle as it landed on the back of his head. The world went black, but he was still conscious though hardly able to move. Another rock struck him, followed by a dozen more. Dar-Wrak went limp and closed his eyes. The crowd formed around his flaccid body. Barely conscious, he awaited the fatal blow.

"What is going on here?" A stranger spoke.

Dar-Wrak dared not attempt to move, look, or speak, but could hear the clicking of hooves near his head. The beating stopped, and one of the attacker's responded to the stranger.

"This thing wandered into town. It came at us. Look at those teeth, that tail. It is an abomination, like the Talomay were."

"It is wearing something? This is not an animal," the stranger replied, "Did it speak?"

The crowd hesitated, but their reluctance was all the answer he needed.

"It did speak."

"We are not taking any chances, not after the Talomay!"

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Dar-Wrak kept his eyes closed, but his other senses were returning, and he could feel the blood from the back of his head forming a puddle around him. Spurs jingled as the stranger slid off his horse, stepping between Dar-Wrak and the mob.

"You have done enough. Let the men-at-arms handle this. Go home! This is over!"

"He needs to die!"

"No! It is over! Clear the roads or you will be in defiance of royal law."

Dar-Wrak opened his eyes and his vision blurred, then returned. There was a man standing over him, extending his hand. Dar-Wrak lifted his hand and was pulled to his feet.

"My name is Bran. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Dar-Wrak muttered. "I am Dar-Wrak."

"What is it?" A pregnant woman called out from a nearby doorway. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine, Katta. Go back inside."

"What are you?" Dar-Wrak asked.

"We are humans, and this is Esling, a village in the kingdom of Levnar."

The mob had reluctantly scattered, talking amongst themselves in smaller groups. They eyed Bran and Dar-Wrak, scowling. Blood was wiped from sticks and shovels.

Armed men, not like the others, but men on horseback with metal armor approached. Dar-Wrak shied away, his pupils dilating into his yellow eyes. Bran locked a metal manacle on the lizard's forearm.

"You are safe with us, Dar-Wrak. We are peasant-soldiers; men-at-arms. We are taking you to Castle Levnar. You will be safer there than here."

Omero pushed open the door to Cador's chamber. A massive canopied bed sat against the far wall, and the largest wolf skin rug she'd ever seen sprawled out in front of her, yet the rest of the room was hardly remarkable. It was quite modest for a man of Cador's prominence with a few chests, cupboards, and a wide writing desk. Three cushioned chairs were placed near the fireplace; two of which were occupied. Cador was facing her and the other guest was facing Cador with his back to the door. Omero's two armored escorts attempted to squeeze through the doorway behind her as she stepped inside.

"Excuse me," Omero glared. "You have done your job, now go away."

Cador's head nearly touched the ceiling as he stood and approached the door smiling, "Yes, it is okay. You can go. Thank you."

The knights nodded and backed out of the room, bumping into one another as they closed the door. Cador shook Omero's hand and bowed, his head still a foot above hers.

"We have been expecting, you. It is a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I have heard many great things."

"Thank you, Cador. Likewise, I received your letter and came as soon as I could. I must say my curiosity has been roused."

"Ah, yes, the aqueduct. I wanted to attend the demonstration, but I had a meeting scheduled." Cador motioned to the man by the fireplace. "I assume all worked as expected?"

Omero glanced toward the seated man. His legs were outstretched, and he lounged casually with one hand on the arm of the chair, his other brought a goblet to his lips.

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"Yes, it performed admirably. I look forward to King Lamorak's approval to expand the current water system. You of all people understand the importance of water."

"I prefer wine," the man in the chair interjected without turning around. "But water has its place, I guess."

Cador rolled his eyes, "Omero, do you know Ywayne?"

"I have heard the name. It would be nice to finally put a face to it."

"And a wonderful face it is," Ywayne said as he stood and turned toward them.

He was a short, clean-shaven man in his mid-twenties with scraggly blond hair. Handsome and stylish, yet small. He reminded Omero of a child playing dress-up. Black fabric covered him, black vest over a black long-sleeve tunic, and black tight pants. Behind his boyish features and blue eyes, Omero could sense his cunning.

"You are a boastful one."

"Boastful? Nay, just repeating the words of my many admirers. It is good to finally make your acquaintance, Lady Omero."

"His ego is only surpassed by his intellect." Cador chuckled. Omero smirked.

"Then we have something in common."

"I was only beginning to tell Ywayne why I have contacted you both, and others, so please have a seat and I will start my pitch over."

Omero moved to Cador's seat nearest the fire and sat down. The raging fire was unnecessary with the haze and moisture in the air outside, but its warmth was relaxing to Omero's pasty legs. Ywayne sat in his original chair across from her. They shared a suspicious but courteous gaze. Cador plopped down in the middle seat, his knees cracking.

“Last year after the defeat of the Talomay, the realm was able to take possession of certain artifacts. Witnesses claim these artifacts have abilities, such as expelling flames and fireballs. These powers in the wrong hands could be disastrous which is why we have kept their existence as discreet as possible. Whispers and rumors abound regarding the artifacts, luckily most write them off as myths or exaggerations. However, it is the king himself who in private has guaranteed their capabilities. I believe him.”

“Can you imagine that,” Omero opened her palms toward the fireplace, “being able to control fire?”

Ywayne pantomimed throwing a fireball at Omero, complete with crackling sound effects.

Cador continued, “This is where you both come in. The king wants to understand these powers and harness them for the good of Levnar. He has instructed me to create a team to explore the potential of the relics. There are four relics, so I conceived there should be a committee of four, the four greatest minds in the land. Ywayne, your work in astronomy and mathematics is unprecedented, and Omero, you are no stranger to mathematics yourself; a trailblazer in the field of engineering. I knew any collection of intellect would be incomplete without your input.”

Ywayne grinned, content to have his ego stroked. Omero spoke up.

“Who, may I ask, are the other two invitees?”

“Priest Ibrik and Professor Tarquin.”

“No.” The younger man shook his head, blond hair flailed. “A priest? I have the utmost respect for Ibrik, but religion often impedes science and progress. His dedication to the so-called Great One will surely interfere. As for Professor Tarquin, he is an old and bitter man, humorless to say the least. I cannot imagine a situation where the four of us could possibly be

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productive. Now, Omero and I; that could be a very fruitful relationship.”

Ywayne raised an eyebrow, looking directly at Omero.

“You must have me confused with one of your many admirers. Besides I am old enough to be your mother. I am here only for conquests of the mind, not the flesh.”

“Why have one when you can have both?”

Cador cleared his throat, “Ywayne, Priest Ibrik is a great man and a man of integrity. Having a background in the temple could be an irreplaceable asset if these relics truly are the tools of the one who created us all and everything we see. Professor Tarquin is certainly an eccentric and often unapproachable character, but his thirst for knowledge is unwavering and unquestioned. I did not pick the four of you on a whim. There was much debate and consideration, however, I am comfortable with my choices.”

“And, let me guess,” Ywayne replied, “you would be the overseer of this new Order?”

“Naturally,” Cador stammered. “King Lamorak wanted me to preside over the Order of the Great One, but I assure you the lot of you will have the freedom to experiment and test the relics in whatever way you desire. I am not there to limit you in any way, just oversee. Discovering the ways, uses, and possibilities these relics may hold could be the single most important finding in history. I know you both want to be a part of it. What do you say?”

Ywayne and Omero looked at Cador, and then at each other. She saw Ywayne’s impending confirmation in his eyes and his lip twitched. Omero jumped at the opportunity before Ywayne could speak.

“Count me in.” The words shot out of her mouth; her urgency given away. Ywayne raised his goblet to her and smiled.

“Excellent,” Cador rubbed his hands together, “and you, Ywaine?”

“This ought to be fun. Yes, I accept.”

“What is this you bring before me, Bran?”

Lamorak’s voice boomed in the throne room. The king moved to the edge of his gold seat, his eyes straining as his fingertips dug into the arms of the throne. The queen’s seat beside him was identical, yet empty. A pair of knights stood at attention by the door. Lamorak waved them off and they did not stop Bran from entering the chamber. Bran’s guest was not as welcome.

Bran led Dar-Wrak down the purple carpet that stretched toward the king. The lizard’s forearms were shackled in chains, and they rattled as he approached. Bran knelt at the base of the royal stage and nodded to Dar-Wrak to follow his example. The S’lynarathi lowered to one knee, his eyes never leaving King Lamorak.

“Good day, my liege. This is Dar-Wrak. He washed ashore during last night’s storm.”

Lamorak grimaced, studying the scaly beast before him, “Rise.”

Bran stood and Dar-Wrak started to do the same when Lamorak shook his head.

“No. Not you. What is it wearing?”

“His clothes were lost in the storm. I lent him a long tunic, belt, and boots until he can get his own, my liege. The townspeople in Esling were less than courteous, hence the wound on his head.”

“Understandable. It is quite disgusting.”

Dar-Wrak growled, “I am a man, not an *it*.”

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"You are not a man. You are a beast, an animal."

"With all due respect, my liege," Bran began, "let us show our visitor some level of decorum."

"Bran, thank you for bringing him to me, but you can go."

He hesitated.

"You can go," Lamorak repeated. It was an order, not a suggestion. Bran looked down at Dar-Wrak before turning and charging out of the chamber. King Lamorak stood from his throne and descended the steps from the stage. He circled Dar-Wrak, touching the scales on his head. Dar-Wrak winced at the pressure to the inflamed tissue.

"You speak and wear clothing. You have two legs and arms, but you are not a person. You have a tail and your skin is that of a fish or reptile. Why did you come here?"

"My homeland, Dassura, was destroyed by a volcano. I have been drifting at sea for days. I had been thankful to find this place, your kingdom." He rattled his shackles. "I do not feel as fortunate in this moment."

"What do you call yourself?"

"I am Dar-Wrak. My people are the S'lynarathi, but I fear I may be the last of my kind."

"Or perhaps you are a scout from a larger force looking to invade Levnar? Tell me the truth, Dar-Wrak!"

"I am telling you the truth! I had hoped to find civilized beings on this land. But other than the one called Bran, I have yet to find civility. Please release me from these bonds. I promise I mean no ill will. I only want to live my life."

King Lamorak stopped walking in circles and stood behind him. There was silence for a moment as Dar-Wrak could feel the king's gaze on the top of his head. His tail which had been limp up to that point began to wiggle near the king's boot. Lamorak jumped back.

"First there were bats, now lizards?" Lamorak spat. "The Great One must have a sick sense of humor to create such beings."

Lamorak moved back up the steps and returned to his throne. Snapping his fingers, the knights by the door sprung to life. With long strides, they hurried down the carpet and each grabbed one of Dar-Wrak's shoulders.

"Take him to the dungeons. Perhaps some time down there persuade him to reveal his true motives."

"King Lamorak," Dar-Wrak exclaimed as he was lifted to his feet, "Please reconsider! I am weak, tired, and hungry. I am no threat to you or your people. Please have some compassion."

"In the dungeon you will be able to rest and will be fed while I figure out what should be done with you."

The knights pulled Dar-Wrak by his arms along the purple carpet toward the doorway. He dug his heels into it, feebly trying to slow his forced exit.

"What do you mean? I am not your enemy..."

Dar-Wrak continued to plead, but Lamorak replied not to Dar-Wrak, but instead to the knights, "Also, remove those human clothes and have a courier take them back to Bran in Esling once they have been properly washed."

Dar-Wrak curled up against the cold, stone wall. His tail wrapped up tight under him. Naked, he shivered, not from the cold as he welcomed its scant condensation on his drying scales, but from fear. He wanted to be thankful he was no longer floating atop the ocean waves, clinging to his raft and his hope. Huddled in a tiny prison cell alone in a strange land, Dar-Wrak had lost both.

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Sore and malnourished muscles tensed despite his efforts to relax them. He willed his eyes to close, to attempt sleep, but they would not stay shut. He focused on the metal bars ahead of him. The dungeon beyond his cell was a vast room, wide, long, and tall. A stairway built against the far wall stretched up to a metal door, the only exit. There were other cells like his that lined each of the four walls, but Dar-Wrak hadn't seen or heard any other prisoners. Dust coated the cell and thick cobwebs filled all its corners on the ceiling and floor. The cell had been unoccupied for quite a long time before Dar-Wrak was tossed inside.

Spiders and centipedes occasionally ventured across the floor. Dar-Wrak's presence hardly dissuaded them. His stomach growled, and he considered snatching them up as they scurried by. His tongue could quickly extend, and his prey would be helplessly stuck to its saliva. The stomach pangs might have been appeased for another hour. Dar-Wrak refused. The humans considered him an animal, but he would not confirm their suspicions, no matter how hungry.

Buried beneath the keep of Castle Levnar, there was no sound or hint of an outside world. There were no windows, but his body told him it was night. In the precious few moments when he could close his eyes, Dar-Wrak relived the eruption of Mount Zanasus. He could feel the shaking of the ground and the beating of the waves against the pier. The screams replayed in his mind. He could see the boats as they raised anchor and pushed off into the ocean, only to be destroyed by an inferno of ejecta; vessels cracking like eggs. At times he could feel the motion of the sea as if he were still floating; his equilibrium thwarted by the days or weeks on the current. Dar-Wrak's eyes shot open.

A flame from a torch caught his attention and he forced his mind to focus on it. It was perched on the wall at the bottom of

the stairs across from his cell. It was many yards away, but he could make out its subtle dance. He allowed himself to be mesmerized by it. Trancelike, Dar-Wrak's mind was slowly eased. If he stared into the distant fire, he found peace.

The metal door above the torch flung open. Two men, one in chainmail and another without, stomped down the steps. The man in the tunic carried a plate, and Dar-Wrak's stomach howled at the thought of food. He watched them as they descended the stairs and then toward his cell. As they strode closer, he could make out more details. The man in chainmail had a sword at his side and a shield strapped to his back but wore no helmet. The knight chuckled as they approached.

"See?" The knight asked. "I told you it was repulsive."

The men stopped at his cell, their eyes moving about him.

"By the Great One, what is it?"

Dar-Wrak wanted to cry and scream his name and race, prove he was an equal living being. He said nothing, remained motionless.

"It is some kind of talking lizard. Thinks it is human."

The man in the tunic lowered the plate of food to the stone floor, just under the end of the cell bars and out of reach. Dar-Wrak followed it with his gaze. A slab of uncooked meat and unfamiliar vegetables sat beside a roll of bread.

"Say something, lizard man?" The man in the tunic goaded. "You want this? You had better say something."

The guard shook the tray, the roll moved to the edge of the plate. The two men grinned, awaiting Dar-Wrak's response. Dar-Wrak's tail unfurled slowly and he sat up in the cell.

"It is going to do it," the knight began. "It must be famished."

"Is that true? Are you starving? It would be a shame if we took this away, would it not? Oh, are you not going to talk for me? Okay, then."

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The guard grabbed the plate with both hands, lifting it.

“Wait!” Dar-Wrak yelled. The guard stopped.

“You can speak!”

Dar-Wrak swallowed his pride, “Please, do not leave. I am very hungry. Water, I need water as well. Please.”

“Such a vile creature.” The guard picked up the roll and brought it to his mouth. “Is this what you want?”

Dar-Wrak could only watch as the guard took a hefty bite from the end of the bread. He chewed slow, deliberate, making sure to savor it. The knight chuckled as a drop of saliva dripped from Dar-Wrak’s open mouth.

“Mm. That is good. No wonder you want it. Here, you can have it.”

The plate was handed to the knight, and the remaining bread was ripped into pieces and balled up. One by one, the balls were thrown at Dar-Wrak through the cell bars. Dar-Wrak shielded himself at first, but by the third toss, he found himself scuttling along the floor inhaling the chunks. The two men laughed at his desperation.

“Willing to eat off the floor? I knew you were nothing more than a beast.”

Once all the bread was flung, the guard took the plate and slid it under the bars. Dar-Wrak paused, seeing the man’s fingers and hand enter the cell pushing the plate. He wanted to lunge, grab the guard’s wrist, pull, and bite it. Breaking each finger, he would make the man suffered as he satiated his own appetite. The satisfaction of seeing the guard pull back a bloody stump could never be overshadowed by whatever punishment they were able to concoct for him.

Instead he reached for the plate. The guard turned the plate over and pulled it back, dumping its contents on the cell floor. Dar-Wrak didn’t hesitate, clawing at the raw meat and picking at the vegetables.

“And we cannot forget the water.”

Jaws full of food, Dar-Wrak looked up and saw a pail in the guard's hands. Before he could react, the pail of water was poured through the bars and onto his head. Drenched, he retreated to the back of the cell. The few vegetables that remained drifted along a stream of water toward a sewer grate. He hated to admit it, but despite the humiliation the water felt good on his scales, and he extended his tongue to collect as much as possible from his face and arms.

The guard and knight turned their backs to him, laughing. They continued mocking him as they went back across the dungeon, up the stairway, and out the metal door. He sat with his back against the wall, glad that his S'lynarthi countrymen were not alive to see him in that condition. His thoughts drifted back to Dassura and the Allegiance of Eleven; their ineptitude and bureaucracy a stark contrast to King Lamorak's unquestioned authority. If a being like King Lamorak with total control had overseen Dassura perhaps something would have been done and Mount Zanascus wouldn't have doomed them all.

His eyes found the torch at the far end of the dungeon.

“Sorry, I am late,” Ibrik hurried into the library carrying pages of parchment and an inkwell in his folded arms. “I was not sure what I would need. I figured it was better to be over prepared.”

The library was a new addition to the keep, another luxury afforded by the Talomay quarries to the northeast. High ceilings and a long, corridor-like architecture housed two stories of books. Bookshelves were built against all the walls. Bindings of red, green, and blue were organized in dozens of

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rows, many with gold or silver trims. Amongst the amassed collection of Levnar's literary works and knowledge, the group met for the first time.

Seated around a table with Omero and Ywaine was Professor Tarquin, tall and fit for a man of his salt-and-pepper age. Cador leaned over something that laid on the table, covered in a white blanket. They were motionless, watching Ibrik as he scrambled toward them. He stumbled and Ywaine chuckled. Tarquin shot a glare at the blonde genius.

Cador replied, "Take a seat, Ibrik. We are just getting started."

"Yes, thank you. I hope I did not miss anything."

Ibrik slid into his seat, spilling his parchment and inkwell onto the table. Some of the ink moved across the tabletop and soaked into the white blanket before he could turn it back upright.

"Cador was about to reveal some great antiquity," Ywaine sneered. "Can we finally get to it?"

"Since we are all here, I can begin in earnest. I have given each of you the same dissertation of our purpose, vague as it may have been. Yet, I hope to clear up most of the uncertainty today."

Cador pulled the blanket away exposing a pair of boots on their side, a breastplate, and a dented helmet. A suit of chainmail connected them all. Shards of metal sat in a pile beside the breastplate. Each piece of armor radiated a peculiar, dark glow.

"What is this?" Tarquin asked. "This armor is obviously very old. It has been cleaned, sure, but the metalwork is ancient."

Omero poked at the pile of shards with her index finger, "Why is this piece shattered? And this aura it emits, what is it?"

"That, my dear," Cador began, "is one of the many questions I have as well. You have all heard the stories of Sir Serovens,

and of the great fireballs the king's army faced while taking the Talomay palace. Many of the rumors are true or at least based on truth. These are the Hands of Creation as the Order of Turlock called them. Allegedly, they were used by the Great One to create our world and everything in it."

"And you have had these for a year and discovered nothing?" Ywayne raised his eyebrows.

Cador exhaled and then responded softly, "You assume too much. While I have not had the time to dedicate to only this task, it was recommended to me that I get many opinions, hence the creation of this, of us. I did, however, read many of the tomes retrieved from the Order of Turlock's monastery. They left notes, many in number but ambiguous in nature. Most were written in code designed to keep others from uncovering their findings I presume. Despite their attempts to conceal, I was able deduce some information. For instance, each piece appears to relate to a different aspect of our world. The gauntlets, for example, could conjure and control fire. I believe the breastplate may do the same for water, the boots for soil or stone, and the helmet for air. I have not had the opportunity to delve into this theory."

"But you want us to delve into it?" Tarquin rocked in his chair.

"Amongst other theories. Also, I would like you all to develop and test your own. Find out what these artifacts are capable of, and how they can benefit the kingdom. Ibrik, you have been awfully quiet. Any input?"

Ibrik shrugged and cleared his throat, "Well, if this is all true, then it proves the existence of the Great One, not that I needed any extra evidence. It would definitely be good for the temple as I am hopeful this would bring an influx of attention and tithes."

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"I was more concerned with your opinion on whether our experimenting with the Hands of Creation would be considered sacrilegious."

Ywayne laughed, "Sacrilegious? Perhaps the Great One put them here for us to find, if he is all powerful. There are no mistakes in his great plan, right, Ibrik?"

Before Ibrik could respond, Tarquin interjected, "Ywayne has a good point despite his sarcasm. We should not allow religion to stand in the way of intellect, even if the two are related in this case."

Cador stared at the priest, "Ibrik?"

Ibrik looked at Ywayne, Tarquin, and Omero, as if awaiting their approval before answering, "At this time, I do not see any problem as long as our intent stays for the greater good. I am interested in finding why the Great One may have left these tools with the Talomay and not humans, especially if they are as powerful as they seem."

Cador nodded, "I have already gone over what I believe the artifacts control, and I am assigning the most appropriate to each of you along with the pages I believe are related. Ywayne, with your knowledge of the sky and stars, I am offering you the helm. Omero, the aqueduct you completed recently is a perfect example of why I am assigning you the breastplate. The boots, Ibrik, are for you. And, Tarquin, the gauntlets are yours."

"Oh, great," Tarquin groaned. "You give me the broken ones."

"Broken, perhaps, but the only ones we have truly seen in action, and the only ones we know have taken many lives. From what we can tell, their being shattered does not affect their usefulness, or their threat. Do not take this responsibility lightly."

Cador stepped away from the table and surveyed the four of them, "None of you should take this responsibility lightly."

The fireplace crackled, and the logs popped. The room was warmer than usual, cozier. Amven laid near the fire with wooden toys spread out in front of him. Swordsmen, knights on horseback, archers, and monsters in various positions and angles stood and fell over in no discernable configuration; two small armies lazily mingling.

The boy's bed was much larger and more lavish than necessary for a ten-year-old, taking up almost half of the room, but it was an expected amenity afforded to the son of the king and heir to the throne. A toy chest sat in the corner and a standing wardrobe was placed beside it. One rectangular window had been built into the wall above Amven's bed. It was designed to allow some air to flow but was too thin to allow the boy to fall out by accident or during horseplay. With a squeak, the only door to the room opened and Amven cocked his head back toward the noise.

"Daddy!" Amven grinned from ear to ear.

"Amven, it is good to see you as well."

Lamorak sat on the edge of the bed as Amven sprung up and rotated toward him. In each hand, he held a wooden figure.

"You have not played with me in a long time, Daddy."

"I am sorry, son, I have been so busy. It is hard work being a king. Hopefully one day you will understand and have an easier time of it."

In his peripheral vision, Lamorak recognized Jailynn standing silently in the doorway. He could imagine her judging his every movement and word.

"Everything I do," Lamorak continued, "is for your sake, and for your mother, and the people of Levnar. I am trying to protect you and keep the bad men away."

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Amven looked at the toys in his hand, "I know. But I miss you. Here, take one."

The boy extended his hand and Lamorak took a figure. Turning the toy around, the king noticed it was a rendition of a Talomay warrior with his wings spread and a spear in his hand.

Amven's eyes widened, "You have the monster! I have to kill you."

A knight on horseback was grabbed and thrust against Lamorak's figure. Amven made horse and slashing sounds. Half-heartedly, Lamorak moved the Talomay backward and shook him. The painted face of the toy stared back at Lamorak demanding his attention.

"I killed you," Amven frowned. "You have to lay down and die."

"Amven," Jailyynn spoke, "go help Nodram with your grandmother's lunch. I want to talk to your father."

"Aw, now? I was playing with Daddy."

"Now!"

Amven took the bat toy from his father and put it with the rest on the floor. Shoulders hunched, he moped toward the door.

"Wait, he does not need to leave." Lamorak gently held his son's arm. "When is the last time we were all in the same room? I miss it."

Jailyynn bit her lip, "And why is that, Lamorak? You are always building a new wall, meeting with your commanders, or planning your next pet project. And look at the example you are setting for our son?"

She motioned to the toys on the floor.

"I did not make them! You blame me for that?"

"No, I blame you for him associating everything that does not look like us with being a bad person that needs to die! Or needs to be stripped and locked in the dungeon."

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Lamorak hung his head, "You heard about the lizard?"

"There is a lizard in the dungeon? Can I see?" Amven bounced up and down.

"Amven, listen to your mother. Go help Nodram in the kitchen."

The boy did as his father requested, squeezing between the doorway and his mother. She patted him on the head as he passed. Jailynn closed the door behind her and took a seat beside her husband, her king, on their child's oversized bed.

"This has to stop," Jailynn said, putting her hand on his knee. "I need you back; the father, the man, all of you. Even the king needs to take a rest sometime."

"The king is what puts food on the table, livestock in the fields, and lookouts along the walls. The king keeps the roads safe from bandits and the towns safe from invaders. That is what I need to do. You do not believe I would rather be spending time with you, or with my son? That I would not enjoy a relaxing hunt in the forest?"

"You can do those things! The war is over, Lamorak! You won! The people are safe. There are no invaders. This should be the Golden Age of Levnar, instead you are allowing our people to be filled with fear and hatred."

Lamorak stood up, leaned against the fireplace mantle, and stared into the flame, "I squelch the fear of my people by building walls and expanding our armies. There is nothing to fear behind this much stone."

"It is doing the opposite. The message you are sending is that without walls there is fear, and outside of them is danger. Take a week, or two weeks even, and the three of us can go away to hunt, fish, or whatever we desire. Do you even remember what it is like to have time for leisure? Do you not miss it, or me?"

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Lamorak glared at her, "Damn you, Jay! You knew what this charge would bear, what burden I would have to carry. Your family did not mind while endorsing your qualities to my father and me, nor did you. Marrying a future king, becoming a future queen, it sounded great at the time, did it not? It definitely raised the standing of your family."

"What are you saying?" Her eyes bulged, face bloodshot. "What does my family have to do with this?"

"It is easy to reap the rewards of seeds you do not have to sow."

She winced.

"I am sorry, Jay. I have been wrapped tight, too tight for a long time. Sometimes I forget the pain my words can bring. There is no one in this world I want hurting less than you and Amven. Everything I do is for the protection of you both, first and foremost. I cannot leave any potential threats unanswered."

"Lamorak, the only threat you have right now is losing your family."

The king stood firm, "I would rather you be angry at me and alive than love me and dead. What can I do to make this better? Tell me, Jay? What can I do?"

"You are going to release that man from the dungeon."

"That man?"

"Yes," Jailyynn snapped back, "he is a living being and he was looking for help. You threw him in a cell like a common thief. Has your experience with the Talomay taught you anything?"

"It has, but not the lesson you seem to have taken."

"Release him and show the people of Levnar they have nothing to fear, that just because he looks different, he deserves the same respect and opportunities as the rest of us."

"What if I do not truly believe that?"

“If you want to lead men to prosperity and not hatred, you must learn to believe it.”

Nodram looked more like a monk than a chef as he stood at the table chopping onions and carrots. His dark brown robes were a stark contrast from the purple and red ones he'd worn while working under Ambassador Gortan. The knife blade struck hard with each chop. Gwynora was washing plates with a rag using the water that flowed through the new pipe and into a sink. A custom, black veil fitted to the back of her dress covered her head and damaged eyes. The eyelids had scabbed over long ago and healed. She preferred them stitched closed, and they had been, but thought it best to cover them anyway. Nodram looked at her as she fumbled with the plates.

“My queen,” Nodram shook his head, “you do not need to do that. Leave it for the servants. That is their job. Please sit down.”

“I have been cleaning plates since before you were born. Between you and my son, it is as if you want me to lie down and die.” The knife snapped through a stubborn carrot. “And I can still cut my own vegetables.”

“We have discussed this, my queen. It is safer if I handle the sharp objects.”

Gwynora felt for the wheel atop the water pipe, found it, and turned it closed. The water ceased. She extended her hand and touched the back of a wooden chair beside Nodram. Gingerly, she lowered herself into the chair, facing the wall.

“I know how to use a knife, I assure you, Nodram.”

Back when you had two eyes, Nodram thought, but didn't dare say. He finished slicing the vegetables and scraped them

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into a small cauldron of water. As he carried it and perched it atop the fire, Amven scampered into the room.

"Is that Amven?" Gwynora asked.

"How did you know?" Amven smiled and pointed to her ears. "Can you hear me?"

"Oh, no, dear. I can smell you!"

She squeezed and tickled him, Amven laughed, "You cannot smell me!"

"Is it best to have the child around the flames and knives?" Nodram grumbled.

"He had better get used to flames and knives if he is our future king. Your concern is unnecessary. What brings you in here, Amven?"

She released Amven from her playful grasp and his demeanor sank, "Mommy and Daddy are fighting again. They told me to help in the kitchen."

"Well, I am sure Nodram could use an extra set of hands, or pair of eyes."

"Not funny," Nodram frowned.

"You are taking my independence, but you cannot take my good humor." She smiled at Amven, and he returned the gesture. "Let Nodram show you how to make a stew. We may be royalty, but that does not mean we have to be reliant on others."

Amven darted beside Nodram, and they stared at the cauldron as it began to boil. Gwynora could hear the water bubbling. The smell of the vegetables and spices flooded the room. She inhaled a long sniff, the peppers lingering in her nose. There was a time when onions and peppers would make her eyes water. Since the attack, it happened no more, nor could she shed a tear. In her scarce moments alone, often at night when her servants and others had retired, she thought of Melias. She wept often, but no tears came. Sometimes she

forced herself to cry, wanting to feel the damp streaks on her cheeks or even just a drop in the corner to regain one of the abilities she'd lost. No matter how much she willed it, it never came. Melias was never coming back, nor was her ability to shed tears. Life continued.

"Amven," Nodram began, "we take a pot like this one and fill it halfway with water. I already cut the onions and carrots and put them in. We add some seasonings and bring it to a boil. Next, we will put the meat in. Do you want to see the meat and how we will season it?"

"Yes, Sir Nodram."

Nodram chuckled, "No, I am not a sir. Please, just call me Nodram."

They continued to talk and each step of the process for making the stew was explained in great detail. Gwynora listened but wished she could see them. Amven's growing excitement and curiosity was evident in his voice, but she wanted to see his eyes light up. She could hear his jittery feet and his nervous hands touching spoons and knives, only to be scolded by Nodram. She could picture what it might look like in her mind but wanted to know how it looked. For the first time since the attack, she admitted to herself that she missed her sight. The sunsets, the views from the ramparts, her son, and her grandson were all unseen and missed.

She could imagine Melias trying to comfort her, smiling. She remembered the day of his coronation out in the middle of the sea on the deck of the ship. He was so nervous and unsure of himself. The memory was vivid, clearly showing Cador and Braskill and Darrius. She remembered the words Cador had spoken to her husband many years ago, that the very reasons Melias did not want the crown were the same traits that would make him succeed as king.

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Lamorak was not like his father in that way. If only he had more time to learn from his father, and Gwynora could no longer reach him. Every time he saw his mother, he could not get beyond the veil that covered her wounds. She would always be a reminder to be the exact opposite person he needed to be; forgiving, loving, and logical.

Gwynora wanted to cry, not for Melias or herself, but for her son.

No tears formed.

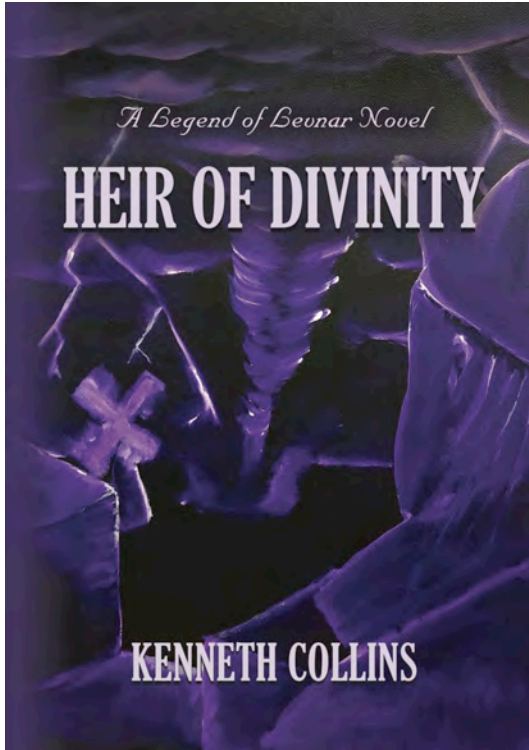
About the Author

Kenneth Collins is from Baltimore, Maryland and enjoys being a father, as well as writing short stories, novels, and screenplays. An avid fan of the Baltimore Ravens and *The Walking Dead*, Kenneth also plays bass guitar when not working on his next writing project.

Also written by Kenneth Collins:

FALLING REIGN: A LEGEND OF LEVNAR NOVEL

THRONE INTO FLAME: A LEGEND OF LEVNAR NOVEL



After powerful religious artifacts are discovered during the Talomay War, the wise Cadon is tasked with creating a Great Order to unlock their potential. But when four flawed people get a taste of godlike powers, will they change the world for the better or will they be changed for the worse?

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