

DEVASTATION

◀ *Quest of Fire* ▶

BRETT ARMSTRONG



Copyright © 2024 by Brett Armstrong

Published by Expanse Books,
an imprint of Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ExpanseBooks.pub>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, or recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-420-8

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-421-5

Editors: Erin R. Howard and Linda Fulkerson

Map by Eric Dotseth.

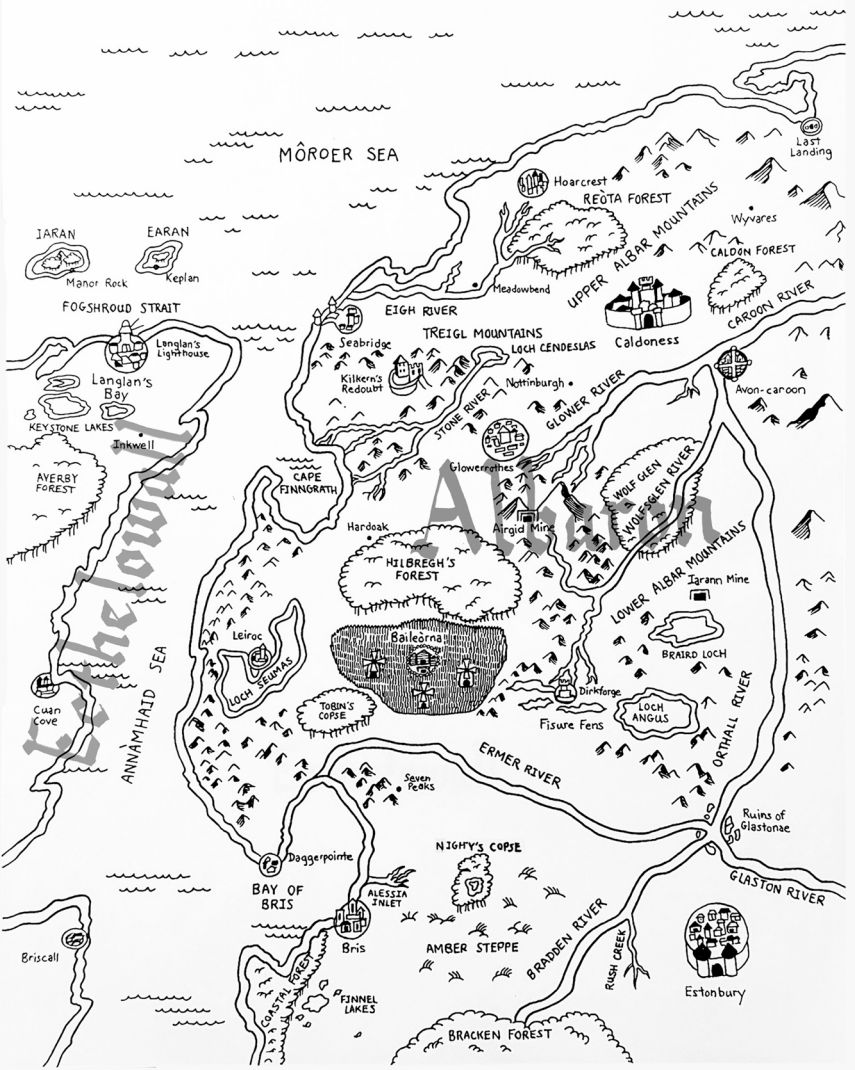
Cover by Linda Fulkerson, bookmarketinggraphics.com

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

NO AI TRAINING: Without in any way limiting the author's [and publisher's] exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

*This book is dedicated the glory of God, without Whom there are
no words worthy of writing.*



AN EXCERPT FROM THE LEGENDARIUM OF DRAGONS

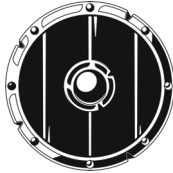
BY FRANCIS DUBOIS, PHD

“More than one culture of the Lowlands bears tales of exotic, ferocious reptiles known colloquially as wyverns and dragons. An equal number of cultures also claim descendency from the lost and fable-shrouded land of Tislatna. Piecing together an accurate portrayal of what did and did not occur in that Ancient Era society may be impossible due to temperaments incurred by such groups as the Palatini Lucis Aeternae, or Knights of Light, less formally. I have, nonetheless, endeavored to piece together what might be seen as an accurate portrayal of the final days of Tislatna and its involvement with mysterious dragonkind.

“By all accounts, the Lost Realm of Tislatna was magnificent. A civilization so great that its wisdom and achievements are as yet unparalleled to this day, though we are thousands of years from its tragic destruction. Artifacts from cultures claiming descent piece together a picture of a people that captured the terrible and savage lizards, known as wyverns, and tamed them. Using arts now lost to history, they were able to transform them into thinking, reasoning, creatures

capable of great things. These sentient creatures of might and mind were known as dragons. Though larger and more imposing in their brightly feathered forms, dragons still obeyed the whims of their masters. As seen over the Eras, petty rivalries, and competitions led to factions within Tislatna's highest echelons, eventually culminating in a destructive war that destroyed the island and its beloved beasts.

“As forementioned, the Knights of Light carry a far different accounting of Tislatna's fall. Attributing the creation of dragons to dark sorceries that fused the vicious and terrifying mystical creatures termed ‘goblins’ with wyvern beasts to create dragons. They contend that these dragons were more than sentient, more than sapient; they were malevolent, and the evil they infused into the men who created them spurred the purported High King of All Realms to destroy the island, its dragonkind, and all traces of the heretical magics which conjured dragons. It bears without saying but shall be repeated that this historian finds the fanciful myths of the Knights of Light interesting to read but of little value for real scholarship. However, as discoveries of lost material culture from Tislatna continue to surface and the continued mention of wyverns and dragons perpetuated into the Middle Era, including Ecthelowall's War for Restoration, the reader may apply a discerning eye to the evidence and derive his or her own informed conclusions.”



27 Blomsen 1608 Middle Era

“It’s no use. We’ve lost another soldier,” Thomas lamented. The teen sighed as he rose from where he’d just crouched, checking the Albaron soldier, who only continued shivering and looking into the distance. “Pale as snow, hands, feet, and eyes all ringed with the blackening. He definitely has it.”

Fifty out of two hundred men in this company had fallen victim to the mysterious illness referred to in whispers by some as “The Devastation.” Others called it “Ilyron’s Hammer.” Whatever name one gave it, for the Restoration’s Army, the Devastation had come to mean one thing—death.

With a strained groan, the other man straightened from where he had examined a similarly stricken soldier. “Fifty-two. These two over here came down with it yesterday and already fading.”

Behind the black hood-like mask and goggled eye holes, the physician William looked deceptively more sinister than those he treated. Adjusting his wide brim hat, also black, he raised his

dark leather gloved hand and gestured to the tent's exit flap with a ghoulish silent insistence.

Outside the tent, Thomas was able to remove his frightful head covering and breathe in the fresh air of the moor. Before them stretched Kilkern's Redoubt. A strong Albaron breeze coming off the sea and sweeping through the verdant heather and puce thistle enveloped him. From atop the Redoubt's dark stony outcropping, Thomas had more than once found this place to be imbued with a tragic beauty.

Tragic, because it wasn't the castle looming behind them that kept them safe. Castle Kilkern boasted thick stone walls and jagged spires that blended well with the mountainous backdrop that typified Albaron. It had once withstood a two-year-long siege. Years ago, centuries ago. Before cannons and mortars and all the dread force of Monarch Ilyron's devastating war machine rendered it merely a target to pummel into powder. No, they weren't in danger here, but only because this was where the wounded and sick had been assembled. The Monarchists wouldn't be immune to the sickness that bore their master's name.

"How bad is it?" Thomas asked as William came up beside him, solemnity etched deeply into the Albaron's face.

"Worse than we can stand. But better than the heart of winter. Spring brought with it a flicker of hope."

"Let's not waste time speaking in code, good physician." Thomas turned his gaze squarely on the other man. They were roughly the same height, but the steely grey beard and wild wispy tangles of the William's hair betrayed the great gulf in experience between them.

"Unless the Libertians, you, and the Viceroy were able to add significantly more pressure in the south or this disease stops ravaging Albaron's armies ... we won't see the summer."

Thomas ran a hand through his thick brown hair. “Thank you for being blunt.”

“You did ask for it.” William carefully began removing the rest of his protective attire. Shedding his dark cloak, he revealed the brazen blue of his people. His silky tunic betrayed that he was far more than a physician. As an aged cousin of Albaron’s highest noble, the Laird Ringan clan Loch, William was Steward of Kilkern, the ruler of this area. Embroidered on his tunic was the golden Clach, the fabled ram that led a tribe of Ecthel explorers deep into the mountains of Albaron to found their nation more than a thousand years ago. Whenever Thomas saw it, he could scarcely fight the gnawing ache inside him. There was a potent temptation to shed a tear for Steward William Kilkern the Physician, who would rather be among his people as a servant than a master. And for the pride-filled land symbolized in the stern ram’s portrait as it teetered on the precipice of ruin. And for its people who fought to keep Ecthelowall from descending further into the depths of darkness to which Monarch Ilyron would drag it and all the Lowlands, if given the chance.

“You cannot wear such melancholy around the Baroness,” William reminded him. His stout resolution the very sort of rebuke Thomas needed at such moments.

“It’s no use to pretend. The Baroness sees straight through me. She always has.”

This earned a knowing smile from the Steward, who clapped his hands on Thomas’s shoulders and gave them a hearty shake. “Love reveals much. But it also hopes still more than it knows in this world.”

Albarons were surprisingly a romantic people despite their gruff exteriors. Stark but beautiful in their way, not unlike the land in which they dwelt. Perhaps that was why Steward Kilkern was one of the few to whom Thomas had revealed his

secret courtship. “I wouldn’t, for the expanse of the Lowlands, let Mia think I’ve lost all hope.”

Much as he did with William, Thomas could not bring himself to stick with formal honorifics. Not when he and Mia had grown up together, and especially not after they had grown together in the many months past as they fled the murderous Monarch and his forces. They had come so close to death so many times in their eighteen years of life. Both lost so much, enough to almost drive Mia to a bitter desperate end. But he had been there for her and she him in those darkest hours.

“I wouldn’t think that you’re allowed ta’,” William replied, his thick burr showing as his expression turned conspiratorial. “Sir Thomas Fenwrest, heroic Knight of Light, you bear the banner of the High King. If you do no’ rally us all to hope, who will?”

“Oh, please. Don’t swell his head any further than it’s already become,” a strident voice, struggling to make the transition from tones of boy to man, called out. Gregor had snuck up on them. His arms were crossed, but more in dramatic protest than actual indignation. “Isn’t it enough I have to see the Baroness swooning over him?”

“Cousin Gregor, are you really accusing me of having become conceited?” Thomas gave a poignant nod to the lavish outfit Gregor now wore.

“Mm-hmm. The lad does look to be settling into his role as Heir Apparent to Echelowall’s throne quite comfortably.”

Gregor rolled his eyes. “Over pert as you are, you’re both lucky I’m about as likely to live to become Monarch as you are to actually win a game of bastions against me.”

Thomas grimaced. Gregor was the most suitable candidate to take Echelowall’s archaic title and throne, more so than Maldes Ilyron, who had usurped rule of Echelowall from his father, the Viceroy Echelion, and overturned the

Commonwealth. As a rival claimant, it made the younger teen both a target and a beacon for the Restoration effort. Even as the likelihood of restoring Viceroy Ecthelion became an ever more ethereal hook to hang hopes upon.

Gregor scowled, seeming to realize his humor had gone too far. “Sorry. It’s just all a bit much.”

Thomas walked over to his cousin. Gregor’s head hung, looking dejectedly at the tent of the ill and dying. It was remarkable how much the events on the Isle of Geists had transformed Gregor. Once insufferable, now only occasionally a boor. Sir Hurstwell would’ve been proud to see the change. Were he still with them, he’d no doubt know just what to say to buoy their spirits.

But he wasn’t. Which meant Thomas had to do his best in memory of his mentor. Nudging Gregor with his elbow, Thomas said, “Come on Your Highness. It wouldn’t be fair for us to deny Mia a daily dose of your effervescent wit.”

A sharp retort looked ready to launch from Gregor’s lips when a rider on horseback galloped up to them and leapt down from his horse. He strode straight past the teens to Kilkern.

“Your Honor,” he addressed him with a typical Albaron gesture of obeisance.

The steward waved back in acknowledgment. “Bodde, what news do you bring?”

“Ill, I’m afraid, Your Honor. A Monarchist fleet of ships landed on the shores west of here about an hour ago. They’re disembarking troops now and look ready to march against you before dawn!”