



The Haunted Lands | Book III

u n h o l y

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prologue

12–13 Ches, The Year of the Dark Circle (1478 DR)

Khouryn Skulldark patrolled the study. He picked up chairs and returned them to their proper places. Straightened sheaves of papers and arrangements of knickknacks. Shelved books. Checked surfaces for dust and brushed away a spiderweb in a corner of the ceiling. Since he was a dwarf tidying a room sized for humans, many of the tasks required him to climb up on the stool he'd brought along.

As he peered around seeking the spider that had spun the web—he'd catch it and carry it outside if he could—someone chuckled. Khouryn pivoted atop the stool without any fear of falling. Decades of martial training and warfare made him sure of his balance.

But he didn't turn quickly enough to catch the person who'd laughed at him. The doorway was empty.

He scowled. He was a thick-built warrior with a bristling black beard, who never went anywhere without his *urgrosh*—a weapon

combining the deadlier features of a war axe and a spear—strapped across his shoulders. Some folk found it comical to see such a grim-looking fellow fuss over the minutia of housekeeping. But that was because they didn't understand that on campaign, order was everything.

No one lost and mislaid articles like an army on the march, and that included items that could mean the difference between victory and defeat. The only way to guard against such a calamity was through order and organization. And the only way to make sure that one would maintain such habits amid the myriad distractions of the field was to practice them even when the Brotherhood of the Griffon was billeted in pleasant cities like Veltalar.

The night doorkeeper, one of the servants who came with the house, appeared in the entrance to the study. The stooped old fellow looked shaky and ill at ease, and Khouryn wondered for a moment if he was the one who'd snickered. But no, with his hangdog countenance, he scarcely seemed the type.

"Someone outside?" Khouryn asked.

The doorkeeper swallowed. "Yes, sir. Asking for the master."

"Anybody we know?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it's too late for strangers to come calling, and the captain's not here anyway. Tell the whoreson to make an appointment like everybody else."

The doorkeeper swallowed again. "I tried."

"What do you mean, you 'tried'?"

"I wanted to send him away. He wouldn't go. I . . . I don't think I can try again."

"Why in the Hells not?"

"I don't know! I just . . . Please, sir, will you see him?"

Khouryn wondered if the doorkeeper had been tipping. It might explain his strange manner and why he suddenly seemed incapable of doing his job, mindlessly simple though it was.

“All right, show him in,” Khouryn growled. Because somebody had to get rid of the intruder. After that, he’d sort the doorkeeper out.

“Thank you!” the elderly human said, almost as though Khouryn had just saved him from a dreadful fate. “Thank you! I’ll fetch him at once!” He turned and scurried away. More perplexed than ever, the dwarf climbed off the stool.

The caller strode in a few moments later. Tall and gaunt, with a fair complexion and a mane of wheat blond hair, he had a face his fellow humans might have found handsome if it weren’t so haggard and stern. He wore the brigandine and bastard sword of a warrior but also carried a small harp slung across his back.

Khouryn realized the stranger was alone. “Where’s the doorman?”

“After he pointed out the proper room,” the swordsman said, “I dismissed him.” His baritone voice was as rich and expressive as his features were cold and forbidding.

“*You* dismissed a servant of this house.”

“Yes. I need to speak to Aoth Fezim immediately. Do you know where he is?”

“Back up a step. Who in the Silverbeard’s name are you?”

“Bareris Anskuld. Once upon a time, Aoth and I were comrades.”

Khouryn shrugged. “I’ve never heard of you.”

“Is Brightwing here? She’ll know me.”

Khouryn eyed the human quizzically. “I have heard of Brightwing. Many of the griffons we ride today are from her bloodline. But she’s been dead for forty years.”

Something altered in Bareris’s implacable expression. Some emotion revealed itself. But it disappeared before Khouryn could make out what it was.

“I had hoped,” Bareris said, “she had attained longevity in the same way as her rider. But since she isn’t here to vouch for me,

you'll just have to take my word for it that I am what I say."

Khouryn snorted. "I don't have to do a damn thing except follow my orders. Which say nothing about helping you."

"Please. I've traveled a long way, and my business is urgent."

"Everybody's business is urgent. Get out of here now, and I might let you in to see the captain another time."

Bareris started to chant blaring, rhyming words that pierced the ear like the brassy notes of a glaur horn. That got inside a listener's head and echoed and echoed there.

Khouryn finally understood what ailed the doorkeeper. Bareris had cast a spell on him to addle him and make him compliant, and now the bard or warlock or whatever was trying the same trick again.

But Khouryn was a dwarf, not a weak-willed human. With one fast, smooth motion, he pulled the urgrosh from behind his back, sprang, and cut.

Still chanting, Bareris leaped backward, and the stroke fell short. Khouryn instantly renewed the attack, this time stabbing with the spearhead at the end of his weapon's haft.

Bareris sidestepped, grabbed the urgrosh by the handle, and he and Khouryn struggled for possession of it. Khouryn felt it start to pull free of his opponent's grip. Then Bareris let go with one hand to grab him by the throat.

The human's fingers were icy cold, and the chill spread through Khouryn's body. Meanwhile, Bareris's chant kept reverberating in his head, louder and louder, paining him and shaking his thoughts to pieces.

The combination was too much. Khouryn's legs buckled and dumped him onto the floor. Bareris crouched over him, maintaining his frigid grip on his neck, and stared into his eyes.

"Where's Aoth?" the human demanded, and though he wasn't declaiming words of power anymore, something of the bright, pitiless essence of the chant still infused his voice.

Khouryn still didn't want to tell, but he couldn't help himself. The words just spilled out. "Spending the night with Lady Quamara."

"Who lives where?"

"A mansion on Archer's Parade."

"All right." Bareris straightened up. "Rest now."

Khouryn didn't want to rest, either. He wanted to jump up and attack. But with magic leeching his strength and resolve, it really was easier just to lie still and let his eyelids droop.

As Bareris reached the doorway, a new voice asked, "Was that truly necessary? He's one of Aoth's men."

"We're either in a hurry or we're not."

.. .. .

The golden glow of dozens of lilac-scented candles revealed a chamber ideally suited for pleasure. Roast pheasant and beef, white and yellow cheeses, cherries, apricots, ginger cakes, and other viands along with a row of wine and liquor bottles, covered a tabletop. Somewhere—close enough to be heard but not to see or be seen—a trio of musicians played. An open casement admitted fresh air and provided a view of the stars. Mirrors gleamed around a bed heaped with pillows and covered with silks and furs.

It occurred to Aoth that the only discordant note was his own reflection, captured in one of the glasses. For with its squat, swarthy, extensively tattooed frame, coarse features, and weirdly luminous blue eyes, it scarcely looked as if it belonged in the middle of all this luxury.

But he did, curse it. These days, he did. He'd climbed to the top of his chosen profession, and if it was his renown and importance rather than any notable comeliness or grace that made a lovely, sophisticated, half-elf aristocrat like Quamara invite him

into her arms, well, who but an idiot would care?

“Is everything all right?” asked the slim, auburn-haired servant, pretty in her own right, who’d conducted him into the room.

Aoth realized he was frowning and put on a smile instead. “Fine.”

“My mistress will be with you shortly. May I pour you a drink while you wait?”

“A brandy would be good.” He flopped down on a plush velvet chair, and she brought him a golden goblet a moment later.

He lifted the cup, but stopped short of bringing it to his lips. The dark liquid inside was bubbling and fuming. And while he realized it wasn’t really happening, he also knew the vision was a warning.

More than ninety years ago, he’d suffered the touch of blue fire, one manifestation of the universal disaster called the Spellplague. Generally, the azure flames killed those they burned. Others, they warped into monstrosities.

Occasionally, however, someone actually benefited from their excruciating embrace, and Aoth belonged to that small and fortunate band. The fire had either entirely stopped him from aging or had slowed the process to a crawl. It had also seared its way inside his eyes and sharpened his vision. He could see in the dark and perceive the invisible. Sometimes he even glimpsed symbolic representations of other people’s hidden thoughts and desires or portents of things to come.

The hallucination ended. He lifted his eyes from the poisoned cup to look at the servant. His altered sight didn’t provide any supernatural insights into her motives or character, but he did belatedly realize that, even though he’d been calling at this house for nearly a month, he’d never seen her before. Neither her nor any of the other servants he’d glimpsed this evening.

Which meant impostors had usurped the places of the

originals, quite possibly murdering them and Quamara, too, all to set a trap for him.

Something in his expression alerted the servant that he was on to her. Her eyes widened in dismay. She whirled and bolted for the door.

Aoth rattled off an incantation and stretched out his arms. A fan-shaped flare of yellow flame leaped from his fingertips to catch the servant at knee level. She cried out and fell, then floundered around and slapped at the patches of fire leaping on her skirt.

Aoth jumped out of his chair and strode toward her. It would be prudent to get out of the mansion before his enemies made a second attempt to kill him, but maybe he had time for a few questions first.

Or maybe not. A hideous figure heaved itself through the door. Tufts of coarse fur bristled from a body clothed in rolls of rotting flesh, and a pair of horns jutted from the sides of its head. It wheezed and gurgled as it breathed, and it gave off a nauseating stench. It tramped right over the servant as it advanced on Aoth, and the slime dripping from its myriad sores burned and blistered her like his blaze of conjured fire.

The thing was a vaporighu, a kind of demon. Nasty, but Aoth wouldn't have feared it—well, not too much—had the spear that served him as both soldier's weapon and warmage's talisman been ready to hand. But unfortunately, he'd witlessly given it to one of the false servants downstairs, and without it, his magic was weaker than it ought to be.

But at least he'd fought vaporighus before and knew what to expect. As it sucked in a deep breath, he recited words of power, and, when the creature spewed its murky, toxic exhalation, thrust out his hand. Wind blasted the poison back in the brute's simian face.

Alas, it wasn't susceptible to its own venom, but the conjured

gale did slam it reeling backward. That bought him time to assail it with darts of emerald light.

Bellowing, snot flying from its mouth, it rushed Aoth, pawlike hands flailing. He dodged out of the way and began another spell as it lumbered past. When it lurched back around to face him, he pierced its torso with a brilliant, crackling bolt of lightning.

Though the attack charred and blackened a patch of gangrenous, blubbery flesh, the vaporighu still didn't falter. It charged again. Aoth dodged and ran for the open casement. It seemed the quickest way to his spear.

A second demon swung itself into the opening. This one was as emaciated as the vaporighu was bloated, and a corona of flame played around its dark blue body and the sword in its right hand. Pale, stunted wings protruded from its shoulder blades.

A vaporighu *and* a palrethee. Wonderful.

But the latter was still taking stock of the situation in the room as it clambered through the window. Aoth pivoted back around toward the vaporighu, bellowed a war cry, and raised his balled fists, just as if he were crazy enough to try fighting such a horror with his bare hands. The vaporighu rushed him, and he flung himself out of the way. It slammed into the palrethee and, tangled, they both toppled out the casement.

Aoth whirled and sprinted the other way.

As he raced down the broad, curving staircase, he heard motion above him and glanced around. Two of the false servants were aiming crossbows at him from the top of the risers. He vaulted the railing, and the weapons clacked.

He landed hard on the floor below the steps, but the quarrels missed him. The assassins tried to reload their weapons, but failed to do it as fast as he could jabber a spell. A booming explosion of fire tore them apart.

Nice to see that his magic could still kill *something*.

Praying his spear was still in the false porter's closet, he raced on through spacious rooms paneled and furnished in gleaming wood harvested from Aglarond's many forests. Then a pair of blood red lions, their fangs and claws longer than those of their terrestrial counterparts, bounded through the doorway ahead of him.

Jarliths. The coursing beasts of the princes of the Abyss. Aoth didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Considering how quickly jarliths could charge and spring, he doubted he'd have time to do either.

But the lions of the Abyss didn't attack. Rather, they glared and growled, and the room darkened as though the flames in the lamps were guttering out. The creatures imagined they could blind him.

Their mistake gave him time to bring his powers to bear. He surrounded himself with a circle of floating blades spinning like the spokes of a wheel.

Evidently hoping to clear the obstacle, a jarlith ran at him and sprang. He leaped backward, and the defense moved with him. The whirling blades tore into the cat's forelegs, stopping it before its claws could reach him. It screamed, recoiled, and the other jarlith charged him. He caught both of them in a rain of conjured hailstones that hammered them to the floor.

But, bloodied though they were, they got up again, and the next moment, the vaporighu and palrethee stalked into the room. It looked as though, tangled together, each had inflicted ugly burns on the other. Still, like the jarliths, they showed no signs of being on the brink of incapacitation.

Despair welled up inside of Aoth, and he struggled to push it down. He raised his hands to cast another spell, quite possibly his last. Then a song, a pounding battle anthem, rang out from somewhere behind the vaporighu and palrethee. The fierce sound of it washed away Aoth's fear and sent fresh vitality tingling through

his limbs even as it made the demons falter and peer around in confusion.

Aoth laughed. Though he hadn't heard that voice in nearly a century, he recognized it nonetheless. And he was suddenly confident that he was going to survive this nightmare after all.

Whisked through space by the arcane power of bardic music, Bareris Anskuld appeared near Aoth—but just out of reach of the wheel of swords—with the warmage's spear in his hand. As he tossed the long, heavy spear to his former ally, the semblance of life departed from him like a cloak he'd discarded so it wouldn't hamper the action of his sword arm. Undeath had bleached his skin and hair white as bone and had turned his eyes to ink black pits.

Aoth caught the spear and felt whole again. "Thank you."

Bareris didn't answer. He just kept singing, pivoted toward the enemy, and came on guard. The vaporighu lumbered at him, and one note of his melody banged loud as a thunderclap. The noise ripped chunks of rotten flesh away from the demon's bones.

The palrethee sprang forward, then lost its balance and pitched forward. When it did, Aoth could make out the vague smoky figure who had just plunged his sword into its back. At first, the spectral swordsman resembled a smeared charcoal sketch of Bareris. Then he flowed into a murky semblance of the demon he'd just attacked.

The phantom could only be Mirror. Somehow he too had survived.

The astonishment of it all might have slowed a less-seasoned combatant, but the roar of one of the jarliths recalled Aoth to the business at hand. Time enough to marvel at this unexpected reunion when he and his friends were out of danger.

He leveled the spear, rattled off a tercet, and power groaned through the air. Seven rays of light, each a different color, blazed from the spear like a whip made of rainbows to lash the jarliths.

One jarlith turned to gray, unmoving stone. The other froze and jerked in spasms as arcs of lightning danced across its body. But when the sizzling, popping effect blinked out of existence, it charged.

Aoth braced the butt of the spear against the floor and impaled the cat as it sprang. The impact jolted him but failed to knock him over. The jarlith's razor-sharp talons slashed the air in front of his face, falling short by the length of his little finger. Meanwhile the wheel of blades sliced into its guts again and again and again, and he sent destructive power stored in the spear burning up the shaft and point and into the creature's body.

The jarlith screamed and then went limp. Aoth dumped the carcass on the floor, yanked the spear out of it, and turned to see which of his comrades needed help.

Neither of them.

Mirror and the palrethee were fighting sword against sword. The ghost had changed again, into something approximating the form he'd worn in life, or so his friends believed: the appearance of a thin warrior with a drooping mustache and a melancholy countenance, armored in a hauberk and carrying a target on his arm. Sometimes he shifted the shield to catch the strokes of the blazing sword. At other moments, the demon's weapon seemed to whiz harmlessly through his insubstantial body.

Meanwhile, he landed cut after cut on the demon, his shadowy blade plunging deep into its starveling torso. Strangely, whenever he did, the palrethee jerked, but Mirror's form wavered, too, like a mirage threatening to flicker out of existence. It was as if he couldn't strike this creature shrouded in hellfire without hurting himself as well. But every time, his shape reasserted itself, reclaiming as much definition as it ever possessed.

Bareris was using his sword, too, but defensively, just to hold the vaporighu back while he attacked with his voice. Aoth could feel the fearful, disorienting power in the keening melody.

It was magic devised to rip a mind to pieces.

The vaporighu dropped to its knees, pawed at its head, and tore away pieces of its own decaying flesh. Bareris gripped his sword with both hands, stepped in, and decapitated the demon.

At virtually the same instant, Mirror plunged his sword into the palrethee's chest, and its halo of flame blinked out. Its already emaciated body shriveled still further, and then it pitched forward onto its face.

Bareris sang a final descending phrase that brought his battle anthem to a conclusion. Aoth took another look around for onrushing demons or slinking crossbowmen. He didn't see any, and his instincts told him the fight was over. All the demons were dead, and any surviving human assassins had fled the scene.

He realized how winded he was and drew a deep breath. "It's good to see the two of you. Better than good. But what are you doing here? Did you know someone was going to try to murder me?"

"No," Mirror said. "We came in search of you because we need your help. It's the mercy of the gods that we tracked you down just in time to aid you. Who wanted you dead, do you know?"

"Nevron, almost certainly." The Spellplague had changed everything, including magic itself. The specialized disciplines that formed the basis of the old Thayan Orders of Red Wizardry had largely passed from the scene. But Aoth was certain that the former zulkir of Conjunction still commanded a veritable army of demons and devils.

"We have to talk," Bareris rapped.

"We will," said Aoth, "of course. But I have to finish figuring out what happened here. There's at least a chance Lady Quamara and some of the servants are still alive."

.. .. .

They weren't alive. Aoth and his comrades found the bloody corpses in the wine cellar.

Mirror recited a brief prayer for the fallen and swept his semi-transparent hand through a semicircular ritual pass. Millennia ago, he'd been a knight pledged to the service of a beneficent deity, almost a priest, in fact, and he still practiced his devotions despite the seeming paradox of an undead spirit invoking the holy. When he finished, he said, "I'm sorry. Were the two of you in love?"

Aoth sighed. "No. I was her amusement, and she was mine. But she was a sweet lass. She certainly didn't deserve to end like this. Nor did these others, I suppose."

"Now can we talk?" Bareris asked.

"No!" Aoth had half forgotten how the bard's grim single-mindedness used to annoy him. "I have to tell Quamara's brother and the city authorities what happened, and it's probably best that I do it without involving you. I know the undead are accepted in Thay, but Aglarond's a different matter. I'll meet you at my own house as soon as possible."

.. .. .

"As soon as possible" turned out to be dawn, but luckily, unlike many undead, both his rescuers could endure sunlight. He ushered them into his house and study and found Khouryn snoring on the floor with his urgrosh lying beside him.

"He's all right," said Mirror quickly. "He wouldn't tell us where you were, so Bareris forced him. At the time, I didn't approve, but since you were actually in danger, I'll concede that his instincts were on target."

"You're sure Khouryn's all right?" asked Aoth.

"Yes. I can rouse him if you like, but it might be better to let him wake naturally."

“That’s what we’ll do, then.” After all, Mirror had a master healer’s knowledge and discernment, even if his chill touch was poisonous except for those moments when he deliberately channeled the power of his unknown god. Aoth bent over, picked up Khouryn with a grunt—dwarf soldiers were damn heavy, considering their stature—and deposited him on a divan.

He then dropped into a chair. “Sit if you like,” he said. And they did, although Mirror’s shadowy, faceless form seemed to float in the general vicinity of the stool he’d chosen, as opposed to actually resting on it. His shape and the seat’s even appeared to interpenetrate a little. “Now tell me what’s going on.”

Bareris smiled bitterly. “Perhaps the easiest way to explain is to tell a story.”