



THE MOONSHAE TRILOGY BOOK THREE

# DARKWELL

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Hobarth shivered, a strange mixture of ecstasy and fear. He knelt, closed his eyes, and prayed with all his heart.

“O mighty Bhaal, Reveler in Blood, master of my destiny. . .” The cleric moaned his prayer softly, wondering at the presence of his god. Was Bhaal angry? Was he pleased? What was the purpose of this visitation?

*Approach the well.*

Hobarth froze for a moment as the god’s command grasped his heart. He felt cold fingers engulf his soul, only to let it free again after a glimpse of something awesome and terrible. Numb, he stood and stepped slowly toward the Darkwell.

*The Great Druid.*

Hobarth understood the command instantly and stopped beside the Great Druid—or rather, the statue that had been Genna Moonsinger, the mistress of Myrloch Vale and Great Druid of the isles. Now she stood frozen as a white stone sculpture, lifelike in every detail. Many times had Hobarth stood before her and cursed her defiant expression.

He saw the challenge still lurking in her eyes, and in the firm set of her jaw. Her wrinkled skin and tightly wrapped hair might have given her a grandmotherly look, but instead she looked more like a warrior.

*The Heart.*

This command brought a glimmer of defiance, for just a brief moment, to the cleric. Hobarth kept the Heart of Kazgoroth in a pouch at his side, and he was most reluctant to remove it for anyone or anything. The stone was black, shaped more like a lump of coal than a heart, but it was a talisman of great evil. In the cleric’s hands, the Heart of Kazgoroth had brought death and decay to the formerly pastoral vale.

But Hobarth overcame his reluctance instantly and hastened to obey the word of his god. He removed the stone from its pouch and held it out before him. It seemed to absorb the rays of the sun, already dimmed by the pale haze. In its own shadow, the cleric reached



Why did that land hold such fascination for him? The Red King himself did not know, though certainly the roots of the answer lay in the disastrous invasion and his army's subsequent defeat. Grunnarch had been fortunate to escape with half of his ships and men, while many of his allies had suffered worse. The men of Oman's Isle, of the kingdom of Ironhand, had been virtually annihilated.

Now the *Northwind*, accompanied by the slightly smaller longship *Redfin*, sailed past that land after a long summer of raiding shores far from the Moonshaes. In less than a tenday, they would be home, but even the prospective homecoming could not lighten the Red King's brooding sense of foreboding.

True, the raiding had been highly successful. They had sailed south along the Sword Coast, plundering the towns of Amn, and even northern Calimshan. The *Northwind* rode low in the water from the weight of silver stowed along her keel, together with golden chalices, mirrors, fine tapestries and silks, and all manner of things treasured in the Moonshaes.

And there was the scroll. Grunnarch wondered why that lone treasure, scribed in a symbology he could not read, should figure so prominently in his thoughts about the trove.

*The lord mayor of Lodi stood before him, outlined by the blazing framework of his blockhouse. The man met his gaze without fear, but Grunnarch could see defeat in his eyes. The Red King, his bloody axe in his hands, watched the mayor with interest.*

*"I offer you our greatest treasure. In return, I ask only that you spare the children."*

*Grunnarch took the ivory tube, surprised at its lightness. He had expected the container to hold platinum, or at least gold, in quantity. Curious, he pulled the cap off and saw that it held but four small sheets of parchment.*

*"Treasure?" he said menacingly. "This is worthless!"*

*But the mayor did not flinch. "You are wrong. You have probably never held such worth in your hands!"*

*Grunnarch paused. The man's plea meant little—northmen did not slay children, so the town's youth had never been in danger. Truly the Red King had no use for a scroll. Yet, as he held it, he began to sense that it was indeed an object of rare worth.*





