

DIABLO



MORBED

MICKY NEILSON

Thank you for downloading this Pocket Star Books eBook.

Sign up for our newsletter and receive special offers, access to bonus content, and info on the latest new releases and other great eBooks from Pocket Star Books and Simon & Schuster.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

or visit us online to sign up at
eBookNews.SimonandSchuster.com



MORBED

A NOVELLA BY

MICKY NEILSON

BASED ON THE BESTSELLING VIDEO GAME
FROM BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT



POCKET STAR BOOKS

New York • London • Toronto • Sydney • New Delhi

CHAPTER 01E



One by one they set foot on the island, six weary souls battered for days by the storming Great Ocean.

The sea was calm now and the shore was solid, but to Morbed it felt as though the ship still pitched and swayed beneath him. The sharp, salty breeze buffeted his ears and flapped strands of walnut hair over his pale blue eyes. He glanced farther down the beach, where the skeleton of some long-dead whale, each rib bone twice the height of a full-grown man, shone in the dull sunlight. With a shiver he lifted the hood of his wool capote.

“Which way, fisherman?” Jaharra was the most restless of the band. Morbed mused that patience must not factor highly in the training of a sorceress—no, *wizard*, he corrected himself. Jaharra bore the title as a coat of arms.

She huffed indignantly, haversack pushed to one side, eyebrows lifted, awaiting a response. Morbed’s thoughts wandered to the shapely figure beneath her mixture of cloth and plate vestments. Jaharra’s eyes caught Morbed’s. He wondered if she was capable of reading his mind, hoped she couldn’t, and quickly looked away to the fisherman.

With one hand the seaman tugged at his ill-fitting sheepskin coat. With the other he reached up over his gray-streaked beard and stroked the sharp, jutting bridge of his nose. He turned inland, dark eyes darting nervously over the dense coniferous forest and high peaks beyond. Finally he nodded toward the northeast. “That way.”

“How far?” the wizard asked.

“Less than a day,” the peculiar man answered, scanning the woods as if expecting some howling army of savages to break from the tree line at any instant. His gaze flickered to Jaharra, whose own twinkling eyes burrowed into him, weighing and assessing.

“Very well,” she said. “Marching order—”

“Just a wild suspicion.” A husky voice broke in around a mouthful of bread, as Aedus, a druid from the distant wilderness of Scosglen, stepped up next to Morbed. “We’re trekking into woodland, so you’ll want me in front with the fisherman. And since our good thief here treads lightly, you’ll want him next.”

“Former thief. And I say the holy man should take a turn in front,” Morbed replied.

Aedus picked crumbs from his ruddy beard as he clapped Morbed on the shoulder. “Nonsense,” Aedus said. “No chance of a silent approach with that armored mountain stomping before us.”

Morbed and the druid turned to regard the hulking figure of the crusader, Clovis. The man stood like a fortress, girded for war. To his right side he held a thick wood-and-iron shield, more than half his height, which bore on its face the carved head of a mighty dragon. Massive, intricately crafted lion-maned spaulders flared from his shoulders. Tucked under his left arm was a great helm, and in that hand was a two-headed flail. The symbol of Clovis’s order, a design resembling a small upright pitchfork, was emblazoned on a tabard across his barrel chest.

Excepting the fisherman, Clovis was the last to join their circle. For the flax-haired easterner, it was an alliance of convenience. For Morbed, it was also convenient—convenient that much of the ribbing normally leveled at him was now aimed at the crusader.

Clovis gazed back at the two of them with quiet stoicism.

Jaharra was set to respond, when a long, deafening peal shook the trees.

The earsplitting tumult blared from the woods, rolled out over the water, and left a persistent ring in the air. It took several breaths for those gathered to recognize the sound as an outcry—the terrifying bellow of something perhaps primal and most certainly immense. Morbed’s hand instinctively hovered near the six-inch blade sheathed at his side.

Aedus swallowed. “What manner of creature inhabits this isle? That wasn’t the roar of any animal I know.”

The druid called to the fisherman, “You hear that sound before?”

The seaman held his hands together, working one thumb back and forth in his palm as he shook his head. “No, no. I would surely remember!”

Morbed looked to the east. The sun was still climbing. Maybe . . . maybe there was time to reach the stronghold before nightfall.

“I sense spirits,” a threadbare voice offered, scarcely carrying over the keening wind. “Confused, angry.”

Morbed glanced toward the necromancer, Vorik. The gaunt figure stood alone, the ocean breeze whipping his sparse, silken hair. His eyes were closed as if he was in contemplation, and even from this distance Morbed could make out the

bluish veins that traced his skin. Dark robes and bone-plate armor added little girth to the stooped, skeletal man.

It was said that necromancers could raise corpses. Morbed often wondered just who had raised the necromancer.

“There has been a great passing here. Many have expired and yet linger. This island is home to a host of restless dead,” Vorik warned.

An uneasy silence hung.

Aedus cleared his throat. “*Ahem*, friend Morbed, I see now the wisdom of your words. You had the right of it all along . . .” The druid pointed to Clovis. “The holy man should go first.”

* * *

The sharp wind whistled through the dense jungle as the band pressed inland.

Morbed looked ahead to the fisherman, then to the crusader. The holy man, while not altogether stealthy and despite his heavy armor, was remarkably light-footed.

The only sounds had been those of the occasional small animals dashing through the brush or the needling buzz of insects. The creature had remained silent. Morbed’s eyes roved constantly. The druid, hiking on his right, seemed far more relaxed, although he scratched at his beard, a compulsive habit he displayed frequently. Morbed had wondered not long after their first meeting if the man had fleas nesting in the thick furs he wore over his leathers.

Aedus drew a deep breath. “Ah, blackroot’s in bloom. Where I come from, they grow in dense patches resembling pools of dark water in moonlight.” Aedus’s tone was light, jovial, but his keen eyes remained vigilant, and his hand never strayed far from the long-toothed blade on his thigh. Morbed had been through enough harrying situations with Aedus to know that the druid was a stalwart fighter, regardless of his seemingly casual mien.

He hadn’t been sure that he would like Aedus, Jaharra, or Vorik when their paths first joined. But fate had cast its lot, and slowly Morbed had grown fond of them, and, he hoped, they of him. There was distrust at the outset. Morbed, for the most part, shunned violence; he had spent his life as a wanderer and at times a thief and a grifter. But eventually his talents—lock picking, climbing, subterfuge, and especially the ability to recognize and take advantage of opportunity—had gained him the respect of his comrades.

The fisherman looked back as if to reassure himself that the others still followed, his brows raised, eyes moist. Morbed frowned at him, and the older man's head whipped forward once again.

"I see myself returning home to Scosglen," Aedus continued, "before the next snowfall. I see myself gathering the novices in our great colleges, teaching them of what I have learned in my travels."

Morbed knew that their time together was finite. They would inevitably go their separate ways. And what of Morbed? He would survive. That was what he did best; that was, most simply, what he had always done. He was a survivor.

The party soon reached a rocky knoll that afforded a wide view of the land. Chewing a last bit of dried meat, Aedus scanned the horizon and pointed to the northwest. "Is that it?"

In the distance a monolithic redoubt hunched atop a low, craggy peak, accessible via a winding, treacherous path that cut through stony foothills.

"Aye," the fisherman answered, rubbing his fingers as if he were invoking prayer beads. His voice was little more than a hush.

"We'll need to move quickly if we're to reach it by nightfall," said Morbed, setting off.

* * *

They encountered the first corpse near the trailhead.

Aedus had smelled it well before they laid eyes on the bloated form, still covered in leather and light armor, its skin the color of cream custard in some places, blackened in others, wedged in the crotch of two thick branches. It appeared to have been male. Large black flying insects busied themselves nesting in and feeding on the remains.

"Looks as though he was cast off from the trail above," Aedus observed. "Hard to say whether or not he was already dead when he hit the tree."

"He was dead," croaked Vorik. Morbed turned to see the necromancer gazing up at the tree, holding his hand and fingers outstretched as if calling upon some forgotten deity. "The spirit appears to have departed this mortal shell within the last two fortnights. It remains here, as do the others." The old man nodded his head and gently closed his eyes. "The Balance in this place is greatly disturbed."

Morbed knew that to a necromancer, life and death were more about an evening of scales—the Balance between light and dark, good and evil—than about mortality. Here some great calamity had tipped those scales.

Without a word, the fisherman continued on. The others also departed. Casting a final glance at the putrefying corpse, Morbed followed.

* * *

The trail was narrow and loosely paved with gravel. They passed two more corpses, dressed as the first, one lying in the center of the path and the other by the wayside, its left leg missing, presumably deposited somewhere in the rocks above. Both exhibited the same creamy, partially blackened pallor and had become hives of beetle activity. Movement of the insects *under* the cadavers' skin made even Jaharra cringe.

While the others scrutinized the bodies, Morbed observed the fisherman keeping his distance, back turned, scanning the forest anxiously. It seemed as though the seafarer purposefully avoided the corpses, and he appeared relieved when the party continued up the trail.

The air had grown icier with the sun now hidden behind the mountain. Morbed's legs protested with every step.

The path doubled back, and after a few more strides, Morbed could make out above them a grand entry carved in stone. But where one would expect to find massive doors, he beheld only a gaping void.

The curtain wall towered skyward, and from it small, squat bartizans loomed at each corner. The formidable, weatherworn stone face stretched outward, its span giving little indication of the fortress's overall size. A long crimson standard hung over the former gates, billowing in the crisp wind. Upon it was a sigil: a cross with a curved line joining the vertical and horizontal, creating a closed loop on the top-right side. The stonework of the structure was uneven, and the entirety of it seemed to lean ever so slightly.

As the leaders climbed the last stretch to the threshold, they spied missing chunks of mortar and stone from both sides of the aperture. Just beyond the path's elbow, a vast, thick, timeworn door lay where it had fallen. Of its companion there was no sign. What struck them most acutely was the stench of decay flowing out of the musty, inscrutable depths.

Jaharra and Clovis drew close. Morbed turned around to survey the forest below. The higher ground afforded a greater view of the woods, and Morbed now spied a swath of felled trees creating a path that led north and out of sight. The fisherman stood several steps away, eyes wide and darting to and fro, one hand over the other, knuckles white.

Jaharra spoke what the rest were thinking. "Looks like something broke out. Something big."

As if in response, a great echoing cry rumbled across the dense woodland. A mounting dread tugged at the pit of Morbed's stomach.

Without a word, the necromancer passed the others and shambled through the doorway. "Best we go inside," he announced unnecessarily.

* * *

They stepped into a darkened, cavernous space. Morbed lowered his hood. The sun's final rays, tinged a faint crimson, beamed dimly through upper windows but revealed little of the area below.

Jaharra spoke words of magic and called forth a glowing orb. The enchanted light behaved in an unreal manner, seeming to illuminate beyond obstructions and around corners. It exposed a setting of utter disarray: furniture, mismatched bits of armor, weapons, trinkets, baubles, linens, baskets, tapestries, chests, a dusty loom, pieces of siege machinery, and all other form of miscellany. Staircases at either side of the entrance led to levels above, and several gloomy fireplaces huddled inside the stone walls.

Just within the entry lay four bodies. Beetles scattered in the orb's light. Three of the dead wore garments dissimilar to those adorning the corpses outside the walls: crimson cloaks and tabards over plate armor. The tabards bore the same sigil as that on the standard above the entryway. The fourth body had fallen near the three and was dressed as the outsiders had been. The rug beneath all was stained black with blood.

"Defenders of the house," Clovis intoned. "A personal guard. They killed one attacker . . . but the other assailants lived. Until . . ."

"Until what?" Aedus asked.

"Exactly," Jaharra replied.

The fisherman hastily stepped forward. "So you'll be wantin' to explore. I can wait here and holler if any—"

"You remain with us." Jaharra's voice was sharp, and her critical eyes gleamed in the orb-light. "At least until we unravel what took place here."

"No worry. I have just the thing," Aedus offered. The druid produced from his haversack five runestones. "Of course, we could always let Morbed keep watch. We all know he can talk his way out of just about any predicament."

Morbed cocked his head and exhaled loudly. "Again . . . Will I never hear the end of it?"

"Our friend Clovis hasn't heard the tale," replied Aedus, kneeling.

"No need to bore him with—"

"It was two summers ago," the druid continued. "We had uncovered the hideout of a band of thieves in the desert wastes of Aranoch . . ."

Aedus cast the stones onto the floor, whispering in a language Morbed could not understand.

Jaharra added, "While we forged into the dusty ruins to overtake the meager guard, Morbed kept watch at a crumbling tower, waiting to signal the return of the thieves' full contingent. Before he could issue warning, however, he was captured. Captured but not killed, because—"

"Because I convinced the bandit king that I was the son of a wealthy merchant and could be ransomed for a hefty sum," Morbed broke in.

On the floor, the runes glowed.

Jaharra continued, "The bandit king then pressed a direct assault against us—a critical mistake. We routed their main force, a collection of poorly trained, half-drunk fools, the lot of them."

Morbed finished. "We all survived. The stolen goods were returned, the bandits killed. All in all a successful venture, yet my fellows ensure that my own misfortune will not soon be forgotten."

Clovis was turned away and seemed to be only half listening. But Morbed knew that the crusader had a way of appearing not to be aware when, in fact, he was taking account of every word. He recognized this because it was a talent he himself had perfected. What he wasn't sure of was *why* the holy man behaved in such a way.

Jaharra exhaled. "No matter. We may as well be talking to ourselves."

Above the stones, ghostly moving images took on greater definition, finally assuming the forms of animals—spirit wolves that circled Aedus affectionately. The druid issued several commands in his strange language.

The wolves obeyed, their hazy paws padding soundlessly over the tile floor as they dispersed. Two ascended the nearby stairs, two more loped ahead, and the last fell back to the entryway, walking in a tight circle before lying down, tail tucked, resting its muzzle on crossed forepaws.

Aedus inclined his head toward the wolf at the doorway. "Roshan will notify us if the thing outside returns. The others will scout."

Jaharra adjusted her haversack. "Very well, then. Let's keep moving." With that, she strode deeper into the keep. All followed save Morbed, who stayed a moment, watching the ghostly guardian at the doorway.

"Morbed!" Jaharra shouted. "Are you with us?"

The thief did not answer but fell in with the others.

* * *

They drove farther into the wide, open hall. At the far end, the floor dropped down to a lower level accessible via grand, deep stone steps. Jaharra descended, followed closely by the others. The fisherman's attention was fixed ahead and to the right. He stared, lips parted slightly as if in anticipation.

The glowing orb's luminescence filled the antechamber, revealing another jumble of items. Vorik shambled diagonally across the massive room toward the northeastern corner, where a rounded section of wall indicated the base of a large tower. The orb's light reached deeper, exposing an arched alcove next to the base, along with three more slain defenders and one more attacker.

The alcove housed a great staircase that curved down around the tower base and out of sight. Although the stairs were wide enough to easily allow the passage of five men abreast, much of the masonry around the arch and along the wall and ceiling was dislodged, as if something too large for the space had forced its way through.

Despite the cold, Morbed felt a bead of sweat trickle down his temple.

The fisherman glared at the access with round eyes, pupils constricted. His hands were held tight across his stomach.

Vorik stood at the edge of the stairs, peering down. "Whatever transpired here . . . the answers lie below," the old man stated.

Jaharra strode purposefully to the steps. "Then answers we shall have!" Over her shoulder she called, "Fisherman, keep up!"

Morbed kept pace with the wizard as they descended the winding stairs. After several spiraling turns, their path opened onto a large, long passageway.

Jaharra gestured, and the glow from her orb illuminated the full length of the hall like water filling an aqueduct. The stench of death hung heavy even in the immense subterranean space.

The explorers stepped around giant dislodged chunks of stone and passed small storage rooms filled with old furniture, linens, and tools, arriving finally at an intersection where the spokes of four hallways joined. Jaharra's light spread to illuminate the corridors, each two and a half times the height of a human and five times as wide.

Vorik stood staring down a corridor that ran opposite the tunnel ending under the great hall. This led deeper into the mountain. Massive hunks of masonry littered the path. Markings of forced passage were etched in the walls to the end of sight, where the corridor appeared to bend.

"This way," the necromancer rasped.

Just then one of Aedus's ghost wolves came trotting from the recesses of the hall that the group would have entered had they continued forward.

The druid kneeled as the wolf barked silently. Aedus muttered an unintelligible phrase and held his hand to the spirit's head. He closed his eyes. His brow furrowed. "Bones. Further in and below. Many and many of them."

Vorik turned. "Crypts."

Clovis removed his helm. "I will begin my search there."

Jaharra cut in, "We still don't know what happened here. What if the thing outside these walls returns?"

"Then I will know the glory of righteous battle," the crusader responded.

Jaharra stood before the crusader, and although he towered over her, somehow it seemed as though she looked down on him. "I say we find answers before all else."

Clovis's tone was even. "Command as you wish. I am my own master."

Aedus sighed. "Though his time with us has been brief, I think we all know that this easterner will do as he pleases."

Without saying as much, Morbed agreed. Since their meeting, the holy man had displayed a single-minded determination to find a means of vindicating his religion, a quest the warrior hoped might be realized in discovering the remains of Akarat, upon whose teachings the Zakarum Church was founded. For the crusader, it was more than just a mission to venerate his order's patron; the Zakarum had long ago fallen to corruption, and Clovis believed that Akarat's bones held within them an unassailable purity, capable of scouring the historical blight and restoring faith in the order.

On the rare occasions when Clovis spoke, he said that if he found the bones, the world would see the Zakarum in a different light. Morbed had questioned early on if Clovis's own faith had truly weathered years of scorn. Indeed, the more time he spent with the crusader, the more Morbed believed that the warrior's faith was, in fact, unshakable.

Then, too, there were the late nights during their recent voyage, while the others slept, when Morbed would tread softly to the galley and see Clovis seated alone, head bowed, eyes distant and forlorn over a brim-filled cup of cold tea. He often wondered what transpired in the mind of the holy man during those long, quiet moments.

Aedus indicated the spirit wolf. "Kasha will go with him and lead him back when necessary."

Jaharra responded, her eyes not leaving the holy man, "Very well. We've wasted enough time."

Clovis and his new pet set out. The wizard drove past the others, and the light moved with her.

* * *

Jaharra and her companions rounded the bend. Before them stretched another long passage, and at its end were more bodies, a score of them heaped just outside the ruins of two massive iron-banded wooden doors. An open chamber lay beyond.

In their approach the visitors crunched insects beneath their feet. Here in the depths of the stronghold, the smell of decay and putrefaction had thickened to become nearly overwhelming. Slowly Morbed and the others stepped over the fallen, all of whom, save two, wore the light armor of the harriers. The two defenders lay closest to the chamber entrance.

The room itself was a grand, towering space. Niches in the walls housed statues of various horned aberrations, situated in a ring and posed as if holding court. Spaced between these, around the periphery, were large arched tunnels with wooden doors set deeper in, flanked by great stone braziers. The floor was starkly etched with a wide circle at the outer perimeter, intersecting lines and loops combining in the center to form an elaborate symbol.

Higher up and stretched along the wall's circumference were rusted chains, pinned to the mortar in various places, where skeletal remains hung from timeworn shackles, their bony frames held together by yellowed ligaments and ragged cloth. Jaharra's light ascended the tower's height farther, where the

macabre display continued upward, circling them, grim skulls leering down in immortal condemnation. At the uppermost reaches of the tower, a rounded parapet jutted out, winged gargoyles looming at each side, mouths set as if in screams.

Jaharra's voice sounded strange; although it should have echoed in the expanse, it seemed instead to flutter from her lips and die at their feet. "I heard tales that the wayfarer was versed in various magical arts."

Aedus was looking around, wide-eyed. "This is unnatural. Noise does not even carry here . . . almost as if a spell has been enacted to mask screams."

"Or the bellows of giant beasts," Jaharra offered.

Vorik spoke next, his words barely more than a whisper. The others crowded close to hear him. "I've seen summoning chambers such as this in my youth . . . in Kehjistan, once called Kehjan . . ."

In his youth, Morbed thought. How many ages ago was that?

The old man's eyes seemed clouded. "There it was, in the distant past, that Vizjerei sorcerers tore at the veil between worlds and called forth demons . . . at first to learn from them but later, foolishly, to enslave, to bend the hellspawn to their own dread purpose. Summoning was quickly forbidden, but in time the Vizjerei once again set about their profane rituals. The Mage Clan Wars erupted. In a desperate bid to tip the scales of battle, the Vizjerei employed demons against their enemies. At the gates of Viz-jun, carnage gave way to chaos as binding spells broke. Brother fell upon brother. Great horned monstrosities rent flesh, bone, stone, and mortar. Walls tumbled, corpse mounds rose, and a red haze obscured all. It is said by the most gifted necromancers that the horrors of that final conflict left an indelible stain upon the fabric of our world."

When Vorik finished speaking, a pall of silence reigned. For a moment it seemed as though no one breathed.

Morbed felt a draft and turned to the closest archway. The door set into the wall there was open. He quickly scanned the room, blurted, "The fisherman!" and tore off in pursuit.

CHAPTER TWO ⊕



The goal of their journey should have been simple enough, but events had taken a sour turn since they had set out from Westmarch.

It had all started with a summons from none other than Justinian, the king of Westmarch. Rumors of their band's success against the Aranoch bandits had earned Jaharra and her compatriots no small notoriety.

Within the gilded confines of his royal chambers, Justinian disclosed the existence of lost, inaccessible ruins sprawled beneath the realm, the time-ravaged remains of a long-forgotten civilization below the bogs—ruins that few living mortals had ever glimpsed.

His Highness also divulged rumors of a prowling vagabond. Although the marauder's activities were carried out on moonless nights, there were those who witnessed a shrouded figure toting cartloads of crates from within the city proper; still others at the riverfront docks told of deckhands in red tabards hauling covered items aboard a dark vessel that would arrive and depart before the rising sun, not to be seen again for several fortnights. Season upon season the elusive scoundrel had preyed upon the realm and its people. What distressed the king most, however, were hushed reports of the unnamed wayfarer stealing into the catacombs of the time-lost ruins beneath Westmarch's neighboring bogs and plundering the tomb of Rakkis, the founding monarch of the kingdom. And so it was that His Highness enlisted Jaharra's band to find the vagabond, kill him if necessary, and reclaim any stolen items or artifacts.

Shortly after this audience with the king, Clovis threw in his lot. Rumors of the wayfarer's possessing rare and unique artifacts sparked within the holy man a hope of discovering the remains of Akarat. Although he was greeted at first with suspicion by Jaharra, Clovis pressed his case and, on the merits of his piety and value as a warrior, was granted reception.

They soon set about gleaning information. To learn more of their elusive quarry, they palavered with merchants, sailors, innkeepers, and the harlots who solicited along the docks. They elicited occasional sightings of a black-sailed merchant cog drifting westward into the Great Ocean beyond all known trade routes. However, no such accounts had surfaced for nearly a full lunar cycle, and

no glimpses of the furtive pilferer or his red-garbed fellows had been evidenced for the same length of time. Aedus worried that the trail had grown cold.

It was near the end of these inquiries that the party was confronted by the fisherman.

From the outset the old man's demeanor aroused suspicion, but the longer he spoke, the more knowledge he seemed to possess. He claimed to be a onetime friend to the vagabond, a humble ocean harvester who delivered bounty to the reclusive man's island home. He claimed also that the wayfarer's mood in recent months had grown turbulent, that many of his house guard had abandoned him, that no payment or trade for the fisherman's last consignment had been given, and that the sailor feared to strike out alone, seeking compensation. And so the arrangement was made for the old seafarer to lead them to the hermit's doorstep, and on that very same day they set out.

Despite his testimony, there were times during the voyage when the fisherman didn't seem to know his own ship, and Jaharra especially kept a more watchful eye on the sailor. His behavior had become increasingly curious upon their approach and yet more troublesome after their arrival at the island.

Now, as Morbed raced through the darkness of the passageway—right hand repeatedly touching the cold stone on one side to guide him, left hand reaching out in front—he wondered exactly what it was the fisherman was playing at.

Noises echoed ahead, and he allowed the sounds to lead him through what he sensed was a labyrinth, the passages here much tighter than the grand halls that led to the summoning room. He lost track of how many turns he took, and there was no indication that his companions had followed him.

A dull glow made barely visible yet another turn in the warren. Morbed rounded the corner and stopped, spying the fisherman rushing out of a side room, aided by the faint purplish light of a lantern clutched to his chest.

Odd to carry the lantern in such a way, Morbed thought offhandedly as he set off after the old man.

The fisherman led Morbed on a swift chase up several flights of spiraling stairs and down another close hallway before ending in a cramped nook, where a narrow set of tall stone steps was briefly illuminated until the lantern light was cut off from above, the sudden darkness accompanied by the sound of a wooden trapdoor falling shut.

* * *

Winded from his exertions, Morbed fumbled up the stairs and, dagger ready, threw open the trapdoor to see the fisherman huddled at the base of a statue, staring into the lantern as if probing it for some hidden meaning. Morbed noticed for the first time a thick rusted chain fastened to the lantern's large top ring, its other end affixed to a single manacle locked around the sailor's left wrist.

Frigid air bit deep as Morbed climbed out and into the open space. The sky above had not blackened entirely, but here and there twinkling stars pierced the gloom. Surrounding him were several marble statues: men and women, some clothed, some nude; two small, imp-like creatures; a horned ghoul; something that appeared to be half-human, half-animal; an armored giant hefting a massive double-bladed axe; and just behind the thief, a hooded figure draped in flowing robes, arms outstretched as if awaiting an embrace. Wind hissed through the gallery.

A waist-high crenellated wall, the battlement of a rampart, swept out and around, enclosing the statuary. The blustering gale outside the wall suggested a wide, open gulf, and Morbed could tell without nearing the edge that a steep drop-off lay beyond. He looked up and over his shoulder to see towers looming above. He was in the bastion's upper reaches but not at the highest point.

Morbed considered the statue hunched over the fisherman. It was a gargoyle-like creature, similar to the ones at the parapet in the summoning room, its bat wings thrust forward and curling in as if to shelter young, its mouth gaping like a snake with its jaw unhinged. Set deep within the gullet was a glittering white crystal. The sailor sat against the marble base in a heap, cradling the lantern, seemingly oblivious to his observer. Sensing no threat, Morbed sheathed his dagger and looked down to see one of the spirit wolves clambering up through the closed trapdoor. It emerged, its keen, twinkling eyes taking in the scene.

There was a sudden flash of light and a noise like a small crack of thunder.

Jaharra appeared opposite the fisherman. She stared, her pupils black pinpricks. Her hair whipped about like a tethered bird struggling to break free. "Something you'd care to explain?" she asked the fisherman, her voice uncharacteristically restrained.

The old man looked up as if just realizing they were there, his eyes wide and moist, pressed brows wrinkling the center of his forehead. "I prob'ly shoulda stayed away," he managed, his jaw slack. "That's what I shoulda done, but I couldn't."

Jaharra stepped forward. The sailor pulled the lantern closer. "You're no fisherman, are you?" the wizard asked.

The old man's lips pulled back on one side, revealing two missing teeth. "Spent my life on the water but not on no fishin' hulk. Grew up on merchant ships . . ." The old man's eyes fell once again to the lantern, its dim glow deepening his wrinkles.

Morbed sat near the edge of the trapdoor, listening intently.

The fisherman's voice had dropped so low it seemed as though he was speaking to himself. "Trade. I always believed in fair trade," he said, lantern light reflecting in his wet eyes. "It ain't right to just take and not give nothin' back." Tears spilled over. "Pirates killed our whole crew, all except me. Hardly seems fair, does it?" His eyes flickered to Jaharra for an instant before locking once more onto the lantern. "They didn't offer no choice, not really. Join the crew or feed the sharks. So I joined. Did things . . . awful things. Thievin', fightin', but I's grateful I didn't have to kill nobody. One night we come upon a fishing boat. Took everything the old sea dog had, and they was set to take his life, too, but he traded . . . Told the captain 'bout this island, 'bout the hermit who was thievin' from Westmarch. Traded so he could live, see?"

Jaharra took a knee and propped her elbow atop it. The spirit wolf sat, cocking its head to one side.

"We came at nighttime. They made me walk with him up to the main gates, to make sure he didn't give a signal or try to run, while they snuck off his boat, shadowed us in the forest. He told the guards we come to talk to the master of the house, that there'd be a new fisherman delivering goods and the master would want to know my face. They opened the doors, and that's when the captain and his men swooped outta the darkness. That's when the alarm sounded. They told me to watch the fisherman while the others washed the castle floors red."

The old man's hand rubbed down his face from forehead to chin. "We stayed behind while they pushed their way through, deep inside . . . We heard things . . . god-awful screams like I ain't never heard no dyin' man make. The fisherman begged me to let him go. Told me I could say he just escaped, but . . ." The seafarer's face constricted. Spittle hung from a quivering lower lip. "I was scared, too scared o' what they'd do to me if he got loose. Then we heard a sound like a white squall, a rogue wave roarin' up outta the dark, and there was a crash . . . Me and the fisherman shut the doors, but they just come apart. We ran . . ."

The fisherman's feet kicked out as if he were still running. "Chunks of stone twice the size of your head come down all around us. One caught the fisherman square on the crown. He fell but was still alive, callin' for me to help him to his feet, but I could hear that thing comin', and I kept runnin'. I didn't look back, but

I heard the old sea dog's scream, sailin' out across the night sky. That thing, it threw him . . . threw him way out into the woods. I heard that scream, and then I didn't hear it no more, except . . . except every night when I closed my eyes."

The old man stood up shakily and turned toward the battlement, holding the lantern close. "I made it to the hulk and out to sea. I lived . . . again. But nothin' . . . nothin' sat right with me. Shoulda been glad to escape, but I knew. Knew I had to come back. Had to make things right . . ."

Still staring out at the chasm, the sailor shuffled first one foot, then the other, toward the edge. "Kept hearin' his voice inside my head after we got here. He wanted me to tell you. Warn you . . ." The old man took another step and held the lantern in both hands, gazing into it as if divining portents from a scrying glass.

Jaharra rose quickly. "Whatever you're thinking about doing, don't."

"I shoulda had you go find him. Give him a burial or maybe set him out to sea. But I know now . . . I know how to make it right . . ."

Another footfall. Morbed stood and saw for the first time a groove cut into the stone a cubit's length from the base of the rampart. It was inlaid with a yellow lustrous metal and, as far as he could tell, ran the perimeter of the ledge. The sailor stepped once more, his toes a hair's breadth from the marking.

The old man did not turn, did not take his eyes off the emptiness beyond the wall. "A life for a life. It's a fair trade."

Jaharra stepped forward, one hand out. "This isn't the way. Let us help you. A wise man once told me that redemption is a journey of many steps. You still have a long road ahead of you . . ."

Morbed was aware of Jaharra gesturing slightly, most likely preparing some kind of spell to restrain the sailor. For his part, the old man took no notice of the wizard or Morbed but instead continued on. Just as his foot passed over the metal inlay, a skull-rending squeal pierced the air. Hands flew to ears; torsos hunched. This was not the throaty bellow of the creature beyond the walls but a much higher, screeching wail. As Morbed oriented his head, he judged the sound to be coming from the winged statue under which the old man had huddled. He caught sight also of the cringing spirit wolf dissipating, turning to smoky wisps that scattered in the wind.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he spied movement. Something was slowly shifting among the statues. Morbed turned. No . . . the movement wasn't amid the statues; it *was* the statues. Cracks appeared at joints, allowing limbs to flex as, one by one, they took on some abominable semblance of life.

Morbed straightened and was held fast in a cold embrace. Stone arms encircled him. He twisted his head and was confronted with a faceless, hooded visage.

The stooped carving that appeared to be half-human, half-animal broke from its base and lurched toward Jaharra and the old man. The wizard's hands shot out, and the stone figure rose as if plucked by the wind. Jaharra turned toward the battlement, and the statue soared out over the chasm. Just then the armored giant descended from its foundation and crossed the platform in two strides, axe held high. Morbed called out. The old man rushed forward, pushing the wizard aside as the axe fell.

Jaharra spun back but not in time. The chiseled blade cleaved the center of the old man's head down to the jaw, spewing chips of bone and brain in all directions and driving the sailor to his knees. Lifeless hands dropped to his sides; the lantern collided with the platform but did not shatter.

The wizard grasped the massive arms of the behemoth and closed her eyes, mouth working in a silent chant. Veinlike fissures spread over the marble surface, up the arms, over the torso, and down the legs. The giant's actions ceased; the cracks widened. The carved warrior shivered once, then crumbled to pieces at Jaharra's feet. The sailor pitched forward into the debris.

Morbed fought to free himself, but the arms only squeezed tighter. He could hold no more air in his lungs. He kicked and thrashed.

Jaharra suffered raking scrapes from the two animated imps as she raced past them toward the gargoyle.

There was a tingling sensation in Morbed's head, lights dancing before his eyes. He was aware that his feet had stopped kicking and that his ribs would soon break and stab through his lungs. He thought of reaching for his knife but knew it would be useless against the cold marble. Still, he would not give up; he would find a way to survive . . .

Then the wailing died out, and so, too, did the movement of the statuary.

Morbed tried to yell but succeeded only in wheezing. Jaharra appeared before him and placed a hand on the robed arms. A fine tracery spread over the surface. The lines deepened and widened, and at last the arms fell away in chunks. Morbed drew in long hitching breaths and stepped forward, clutching at his chest.

Jaharra stumbled to the detritus of the armored warrior and knelt by the still form of the old man.

As the starbursts finally faded from Morbed's vision, he glanced at the gargoyle to see a void where its head had once been and a scattering of rocky clumps at its base, glittering pieces of crystal among them. He shambled to Jaharra's side. She held the lantern. Morbed noted that the light was extinguished, and the manacle was now open and free of the sailor's wrist. Perhaps it was never locked to begin with?

"What was it that drew him to this?" the wizard wondered aloud. "Whatever power it possessed seems mostly gone now . . . though I still feel a kind of undercurrent. In any case, we should return the lantern to its place and get back to the others. That creature is still out there." She nodded toward the sailor. "I'll speak with them about a proper burial." She reached down and softly touched the old man's shoulder. "He saved my life." She stayed that way for a long moment; then her eyes looked up. "Are you well?"

Although his chest still burned, his muscles ached, and there was a vicious throbbing in his head, Morbed attempted a half-smile and offered his hand. "I'll survive," he said.

CHAPTER THREE



Jaharra and Morbed deposited the lantern in the room the thief suspected it had been taken from.

“For now, I want to leave everything as we found it. We’ll use the ship’s logs to record the most important items, and let the rest remain undisturbed. When we return to Westmarch, we’ll seek audience once again with the king, collect payment. If needed, I can aid Justinian’s men in undoing the keep’s protective spells.”

“You assume the hermit is dead?”

“I assume nothing yet. Let’s be off.”

The wizard provided illumination with another orb, but it seemed weakened; its light stretched only several paces ahead of them as they retraced their path back to the chamber. Her stride was sluggish, her shoulders forward. Morbed wondered just how deeply she had been affected by the incident on the ledge, but he knew better than to ask.

Footfalls echoed from the darkness ahead. Aedus called out, “Jaharra! Ah, at last,” and emerged into the orb’s dim glow. “I felt Ishkara dissipate shortly after you left.”

The wizard continued walking. Morbed and Aedus kept pace.

Jaharra spoke quickly. “There are defensive wards that detect and act against the removal of items from the keep. There is a device that suppresses magical energies yet allows the defense mechanisms to function. I don’t fully understand it yet, but I am aware of a counterspell. Still, these wards are powerful.”

Aside from fatigue, the pain of nearly being crushed to death, and the continued ringing in his ears, Morbed felt normal. For the wizard, he now realized, it wasn’t her body that was diminished; it was her power. That drain had taken a toll.

They stepped into the summoning vault to find the braziers lit, Vorik sitting cross-legged in the center, his eyes closed in deep meditation. Vorik’s and Aedus’s haversacks and waterskins lay on the floor.

The necromancer's eyelids lifted. "Of the remains gathered in this room, none belong to the patron Clovis seeks. I've learned as much as I can from them. Had I my dagger—"

"Yes, we know," Aedus interrupted curtly. The necromancer, when he did speak, would let no one forget that he was in need of a new dagger, since his old one was destroyed. Necromancers' daggers were more than just weapons; they acted as instruments to focus many key spells.

The druid turned to Jaharra. "What of the fisherman?"

Just then a voice, husky and weathered, in words distorted by aged lips, carried to them. "The old man was a—*hhough! hhough!*—fool to bring those pillagers here!"

Morbed drew his knife and looked to the tower's heights. There he spotted a silhouette hunched in the parapet just outside the braziers' light, flanked by the stone gargoyles.

Gargoyles resembling the one that emitted the piercing scream in the statuary.

The chains rattled slightly against the walls. Beneath them, the floor trembled.

A smoky form raced through the main doorway, silently skidding to a stop at the druid's feet. It was Roshan, tail tucked between its legs. It turned, pressed against the floor, and eyed the entry.

Aedus knelt, petting the ghostly fur. Morbed wondered if the druid could feel it beneath his fingers. "Shh, be calm." He looked up at the others. "That thing is here, and it's coming this way."

Jaharra stood defiant, shouting—or attempting to shout through the room's strange muting—to the upper reaches. "We know what happened. No one else has to die. Call off your lapdog, and we'll spare your life!"

Hoarse laughter drifted eerily. The chains and skeletons shook with approaching rumbling footfalls, and the skulls jostled as if participating, mocking gleefully.

Sshunk! Sshunk! Sshunk! Sshunk! One by one, iron portcullises dropped in the arched passageways, barring the wooden doors within and preventing any chance of escape. Only the main entry remained unobstructed.

The floor quaked. Skeletons danced. Chains clattered. The room shuddered violently.

“Summon the pet with Clovis! Call him back to us!” Jaharra called with an urgency almost lost in the dead air.

Dread clawed deep into the core of Morbed’s being. The same high-pitched shriek from the statuary cut the air. It was, however, not as sharp as the squeal heard on the battlement. Here, both distance and the sound-dampening enchantment of the chamber seemed to affect its potency.

Still, its power to suppress or interrupt abilities was not greatly diminished, as evidenced by Aedus’s scream. “Aagh! I . . . cannot!”

With a silent howl, Roshan burst into swirling dust and was gone.

Morbed pressed his inside forearms against his ears. Though reeling in pain, all those gathered locked their eyes on the main entry as the juggernaut forced its way through.

To Morbed, who had seen humanity at its worst and lowest and had endured all manner of evil throughout his life, the thing that stepped over the sill was beyond any horror he had ever confronted or imagined. It was diabolical, wholly unnatural, and nearly indefinable. It was, he believed, a thing never meant to be gazed upon by mortal eyes, a thing that should not exist in any sane world.

Stonelike armor, three plates deep over the shoulders and back, shielded its frame. From the shoulders sprouted long and thickly muscled arms (although the muscles appeared not to be those of any human anatomy), four times the girth of a stout man. Its right limb ended in a kind of massive flail, with spiked and knobby protuberances over the surface; its left limb, though slightly smaller, widened into a hulking, three-fingered, clawed fist. Its legs were squat and bowed, a single broad horn jutted from its sloping brow, and tiny eyes gleamed from the shadows of deep-set sockets, like faraway egresses glimpsed from the bottom of fathomless pits.

Its flail-arm swung into the nearest brazier, obliterating it and launching burning embers into the room as the demon stomped and hunkered down, extending its head on a brawny neck, opening wide a plated jaw, and emitting a thunderous roar that drowned even the deafening skirl from above. Within the creature’s cavernous maw, a white-hot fire blazed.

Morbed’s heart felt as though it might rip free of his chest. His mind threatened to unravel. He staggered backward, barely registering the wall against his shoulder blades.

A bright light formed around Jaharra’s left hand. The keening wail seemed to weaken. “Fight, damn your eyes! I’ve cast a counterspell on that dampener, but I

don't know if it will hold!"

Aedus was quick to react. Morbed had seen him shift only a few times but never into anything bigger than a wolf. It was always an extraordinary sight, but the form he was taking on now was something altogether different, something much larger. The druid's legs shortened, thickened, accompanied by popping noises, as he fell to all fours, tooth-dagger in hand. His entire aspect expanded in size. The dingy furs he wore moved and stretched over his body; hair burst across his face and grew long, even as his features extended, ears raised and rounded, the dagger becoming one with his re-forming hand, joined by four gleaming claws as bones snapped and cracked like unfurling whips.

As the transformation took place, Vorik, standing near the center of the room with arms outstretched, pitched his head backward and muttered a series of incantations. A rattling, chattering cacophony joined the gargoyle's squeal.

Morbed glanced upward to see the chained skeletons shivering and dancing like puppets on strings.

Around the periphery of the room, braziers guttered as Jaharra gesticulated with her right hand, her left still alight, still held high, although its luminescence appeared to be fading. With rumbling strides the demon stepped farther into the dim space. The air took on a frigid chill; liquid gathered over the rocky hide of the horned monstrosity and quickly formed into a coat of ice. The creature's movement slowed.

Aedus's body swelled, and in the druid's place an enormous bear now reared on hind legs. The beast bellowed, took to all fours, and in one bound collided with the frost-encrusted giant, raking away chips and shards of ice to swipe and bite at the creature's armored hide.

One by one, the skeletons adorning the stonework answered Vorik's call, ripping iron pins from stone and yanking chains down with them onto the floor. They collected themselves, rose as if manipulated by unseen hands, and swarmed over the hulking form of the fiend, wrapping chains around its limbs and neck.

Jaharra turned to Morbed, arms and hands motioning in the air, sweat causing her skin to gleam in the dimness. "My spell weakens. Climb! Stop that damned screeching!"

Morbed, arms still over his ears, right hand still clutching the dagger, assayed the walls, looking for handholds. It could be possible . . .

The demon grasped the fur at the nape of Aedus's neck, worked its club-arm across between them, then yanked the bear backward and swung out with its

flail-arm, catapulting the bear into the portcullis just to Morbed's left, warping the metal gate. The bear regained its paws, rolled its head as if shedding water, and rejoined the fray.

Veins were standing out at Jaharra's temples, and Morbed could tell that the effort to cast amid the screaming ward was taking an enormous toll. The luminescence around her left hand was now a faint, fading corona.

As Aedus charged, the armored titan swiped, hurling the beast across the room.

Morbed backed slowly toward the buckled portcullis. The demon crushed the marauding skeletons as though they were kindling, shedding the chains, pressing forward, as unstoppable as the tide. Vorik, without his dagger and hampered by the magic-suppressing wail, was unable to bring the height of his abilities to bear against their otherworldly opponent.

Morbed knew with instant clarity that they would all die very soon. He returned the useless knife to its sheath, lowered his arms, and gazed at the unfolding predicament. Suddenly it all became distant, distorted. He was transported back to the day he had stood guard while his comrades infiltrated the thieves' camp in Aranoch.

Part of what Morbed had later relayed to his allies was true; he had convinced the bandit king that he was the son of a wealthy merchant and therefore worth ransoming. What he hadn't admitted was that he had abandoned his post when he saw the bandits drawing near.

He had weighed their superior numbers, realized he had no means of warning his fellows, and knew that the entire party would surely be lost. So he left. Left them all to die at the hands of the vagabonds, before being outflanked and captured himself.

Jaharra was backing away from the advancing demon, screaming at Morbed to climb. Vorik was in its path. In its left hand the behemoth was grasping the nape of Aedus's bear-neck.

He had been wrong about the event in Aranoch. They had all lived because the bandits were drunk and poorly trained. But this time, there was no doubt. Yes, they would all most certainly die.

All but Morbed.

He was, if anything, a survivor.

The thief caught enough of Jaharra's expression—open mouth and wide, wet eyes—to register her shock at his betrayal as he wriggled his body through the opening in the warped portcullis. As he rushed through the wooden door and headlong into the darkness, Morbed was vaguely aware of the muted screams and shouts—soon drowned out by the ear-rending skirl—of those he left behind.

CHAPTER FOUR



The hammering in his chest did not subside as Morbed raced through the inscrutable dark, arms flailing right and left, colliding intermittently with stone as his path weaved and ragged breath hitched in his lungs.

He sped on, down one corridor after another, his only thoughts of escape—to make his way back to the longboat, onto the fishing hulk, and out to sea. His ears were still ringing as he plunged ahead—

And slammed face-first into a wall.

Rebounding, he rocked onto his heels and fell hard. His head spun. Blood ran freely from his nose, over his mouth, and down his chin. He sat forward and felt around in the gloom. A dead end.

Holding the sleeve of his capote against his nose, Morbed gained his feet. He ran his right hand along the wall before him and followed the stone for several steps before coming to a corner. To his left was a faint haze, a shapeless aura that was simply *less black* than its surroundings. It lingered briefly, then disappeared. A tingling sensation worked through Morbed's core. He was loath to trail the apparition, but any thoughts of turning back the way he had come were not to be entertained. He must escape.

Breathing heavily, Morbed shuffled forward and stopped at another corner, where he spied a dim lavender glow originating from a side passage, feebly illuminating a small section of the corridor ahead. Was it the same glow he had witnessed just before? It couldn't be; that glow had *moved*.

Pinching the sleeve against his nose, Morbed stepped toward the light. He halted mid-stride and spun as he heard a noise behind him, the sound of an unintelligible whisper followed by silence.

Squinting in the faint glow, he could detect no presence nearby.

Had he imagined it? Was it the echo of his own footstep? It must have been. There was another sound, like a rushing wind intermingled with snippets, as of voices. It grew louder, closing in on him from all sides. Morbed stooped, bared his teeth, yanked his hood up, and buried his head in his arms.

He underwent a sudden wave of emotion . . . emotion not his own but rather a heated ardor aimed *at* him, for lack of better understanding. It was as if he could

feel what some other being felt toward him. While difficult to identify, it nonetheless twisted his guts and robbed him of his senses. He struggled to put a name to the sensation, and the only word that surfaced in his thoughts was *judgment*. He rushed toward the glowing passage in an attempt to escape the impassioned onslaught.

Another hallway. The lavender glow now brighter, Morbed recognized the illumination, emanating from where he had replaced the lantern after the battle in the statuary.

There was a sharp hiss in his ear. Morbed snatched his dagger out and recoiled, certain that someone or something was set to assail him, but upon turning, he was greeted only with empty space and the cold stone hall.

Breathing haltingly through his nose, tasting his own blood, he shuffled to the doorway of the lantern room.

There it sat against a wall, chain coiled at its base, and for a moment Morbed was transfixed by its shimmering violet luminescence. It glowed brilliantly, far more lustrous than it had been when carried by the fisherman, and in that glittering light, so warm and pure, Morbed found a kind of solace . . .

But there was no time to tarry, to become lost in its depths as the fisherman had. He must quit the fortress immediately, and the lantern would light his way. He bolted forward, snatched it up, and was off.

* * *

It would not do to simply return to the statuary ledge. Even if Morbed put aside the lantern to avoid the protective wards, the climb down the sheer fortress wall would be too treacherous. Teeth set, dried blood flaking from his skin, Morbed rushed through one stone hall after another, lantern held before him in his left hand, dagger clutched tightly in his right, searching for another exit.

Coward.

Morbed stopped. The thought had flitted through his mind but felt somehow detached, as though not his own. Morbed rarely, if ever, engaged in self-recrimination. There was no value to be had in it, to becoming immobilized in a quagmire of doubt and guilt.

No regrets. What's done is done. All that's left is to move on.

And move on he did, although the passageways were all beginning to look the same. Whether he walked or ran, it made little difference; he still had no sense of where he was.

He moved through an arched passage and found himself in a much larger space. The air was heavy and wet and carried a musky, malodorous stench.

He sensed movement above, as though the roof had come alive. Bats, hundreds of them, wriggled and squirmed. Morbed shuffled back and nearly slipped in guano. Then with a screech the vermin dropped and flew, a black, leathery tempest buffeting his upraised arms seemingly from all sides.

When the cloud of vermin had dissipated, Morbed squinted into the darkness beyond the lantern light to his right and left, then followed the direction of the fleeing bat colony. Surely they, like him, were seeking an exit.

Traitor.

Morbed froze, listening . . .

Again, the unwelcome, disconnected voice, so like a stranger inside his head, chastising him. Why was his own mind suddenly becoming his enemy?

Morbed thrust the lantern before him and drove on, coming soon to a doorway and, beyond, another large, open space, a corridor where shadows receded on either hand. He stepped forward, struggling to determine which direction the bats might have fled.

A sound, soft and unintelligible, drifted from his right. Hoping the noise indicated the colony's movement, Morbed bent his steps in that direction . . . and soon came to a dark iron gate standing open on rusty hinges, set into a sturdy metal fence anchored to the wall on both sides. A key extended from the gate's lock, and from it hung a wide ring fixed with several other dangling keys.

Still grasping his dagger firmly, Morbed held the lantern high, stepped through the gateway, and paused, glancing to the walls on left and right. He beheld horizontal, oblong recesses, one atop the other. Within some lay crumbling wooden coffins; yet more housed only bones.

The crypts.

Further, just within the lantern light on either side, Morbed beheld wide pillars spaced evenly apart, set halfway within the walls, and atop them were statues. Each figure was seated with straightened back against the wall, as if sitting on a throne, hands on knees. Many of them bore misshapen features: enlarged brows, distended crowns. The eyes of the statues glittered with white crystals. Beyond the bend lay only darkness.

Stepping to one side, Morbed leaned forward and scrutinized a nook more closely. There a grim fractured skull surrounded by dozens of bones gazed back

at him. Morbed held the lantern near his face and drew closer still. The skull, like the statues, was abnormal—deformed. The eye sockets were set far apart, and there was a great protrusion along the forehead. It sat atop an unusually wide, large mandible.

“What news?”

Morbed nearly jumped clear of his boots. He whipped the dagger up to chest height, confronted by the scowling visage of Clovis. He had doffed his helm and set aside shield and flail.

Lowering the knife, Morbed replied, “I was . . . separated from the others.”

Liar! Betrayer!

A roiling maelstrom of scorn ripped through the mind of the thief. He pressed a palm to his temple, eyes clamped shut.

“Are you ill?” the crusader asked. “What of your face? The blood . . .”

“It’s nothing.”

Clovis carried a torch and was now looking down at the spirit wolf that had accompanied him. The animal was silently barking up at the two men. Morbed imagined he could hear the sound as if filtered from a great distance, but he thought it must be his own mind playing more tricks.

Clovis eyed the animal curiously.

Morbed realized just what the phantom beast might be trying to warn the crusader of. The thief was overcome with the sudden fear that the animal was naming him betrayer and, further, that Clovis sensed his treachery.

“Probably urging us to depart. Perhaps the others have already left,” Morbed said.

Clovis absently gestured at their surroundings. “I’ve been occupied here, searching through the remains. I’ve studied every hollow, to no avail.”

The crusader’s eyes were distant, his features slack. Presently he sighed, his gaze falling to the hand of Morbed bearing the lantern.

“Why are you shackled?”

Morbed looked down. Tendrils of dread twisted and burrowed deep within him as he noted the lantern’s manacle, which was *closed around his left wrist*.

When? How? He had not even felt it; he had been wholly unaware until just this moment. With renewed dismay, Morbed remembered Jaharra’s assessment,

that the lantern was an object of power, that she had detected within it a kind of undercurrent. Whatever power it held seemed now to be at full capacity.

Morbed ignored Clovis's question, wanting nothing more than to flee. He turned and quickly passed back through the gate. "I'll seek out the others and let you know when I—"

Just then the walls and floor trembled insistently. The tendrils inside Morbed constricted. Clovis and the spirit animal stepped up next to the thief.

It's here.

The spirit animal dropped, belly and chin to the floor, eyes wide and frightened.

The wolf was trying to warn us of—

There followed a bellow, a long cry of primal ferocity, a challenge of predator to prey.

"There it is, then. Hold this!" Clovis handed his torch to Morbed and with long strides hurried deeper into the crypts. An instant later he returned, fully girded for battle. He dropped his two-headed flail, snatched the torch from Morbed, threw it a fair distance in the direction of their only escape, and waited.

A grinding sound grew louder. The passage trembled with footfalls, the tremors increasing in intensity until the hunched, nightmarish form of the demon entered the torchlight, its immense girth rending the surrounding stone.

Clovis swept up his flail, gave voice to a battle cry, and charged, feet pounding the earthen floor.

"Mal'shallorok!" he boomed. The shifting torch flames flared outward and up in a blazing column that illuminated the dank crypts as if they were bathed in scorching sunlight. The creature bellowed in pain and stepped back as the fiery pillar dissipated, leaving only the guttering torch.

The crusader extended his shield before him, and just before colliding with the behemoth, he twisted, swinging the flail in a tight arc, slamming it with titanic force into the chest of the demon, where it landed with the sound of a meteor crashing to the earth.

The nightmare-giant staggered and shouldered into the wall. Dirt and small chunks of rock fell from above.

Join the fight! Help him!

The voice, now identified by Morbed as female, screamed inside his head. It was soon joined by another, this one masculine.

Don't make the same mistake again!

Morbed backed away, right palm pressed to his temple, visage contorted, eyes set on the unfolding struggle. The spirit wolf circled several paces away, barking soundlessly. Locked in grim purpose, crusader and demon grappled, the sputtering torch beneath them flinging sinister dancing shadows over the cold stone.

Beams of light shone from the folds of the carved dragon head gracing Clovis's great shield. Rays burst from the dragon's eyes and open mouth as the holy warrior gained space and jammed the shield into the demon's knee. The behemoth hunched further. Clovis spun, plunging his momentum into a vicious backswing, flail aimed squarely at his opponent's face. But the giant was faster than its bulk would attest. It ducked the blow even as the crusader recovered and bashed the colossus in the crown with his shield, then slammed the flail heads into its spiked back.

The nightmare-giant fell to all fours. Clovis raised the flail for what surely must be a killing blow; then the high-pitched scream of the magic-dampening crystals shot through the corridor.

The crusader hesitated. The demon stood until its hunched shoulders once again scraped the ceiling. In a single fluid motion, its left hand swept outward, seized the twin flail chains, and swiped the bludgeon from the crusader's grasp.

Act now, for Vasily's sake! a voice shouted inside Morbed as he stepped backward, hood pressed tightly to his ears. He remembered the statues with the crystal eyes. It would be impossible to get to them all in time.

The spirit wolf at Clovis's feet disappeared in wafting trails of smoke.

Despite the black blood dribbling from small fissures in its chest and back and running freely from its injured knee, the gargantuan demon was undaunted. It twisted, driving all its weight into a downward blow of its battering-ram arm, smashing Clovis's left leg. There was a loud crunching of metal and a series of sharp snapping sounds. Remarkably, the holy warrior did not cry out.

Morbed retreated further, back through the open gate.

Help him! Help him!

Clovis endeavored to remain upright. Rather than attempting to use the holy man's flail against him, the demon simply swung its closed hand toward the

crusader's helm. Clovis spun and raised his shield in time to block the blow, but he was still blasted off his feet and into the wall, where he collapsed onto his right side. The sharp whine of the devices grew in pitch.

The creature moved to a position facing the crusader, extinguishing the torch. The only light remaining was the ghostly lavender radiance of Morbed's lantern. Despite the screeching of the crystals, it was all the thief could do not to pass out from the screaming in his own head as he shut the gate, reached through the bars, removed the key, and retrieved the ring.

Standing before Clovis, the demon closed its mammoth hand over the crusader's helm and squeezed. Metal crunched as the fist clenched. Clovis's feet kicked out, shuddered, then stilled.

Without a sound, Morbed withdrew further into the crypts.

* * *

An outcry of rage blasted the thief's mind. The starburst flare of the lantern threw light onto the walls, pillars, statues, and tombs. Morbed tossed down the key ring as the screaming of the crystals finally died away. He lowered his hood and raced on until movement over one of the pillars caught his eye—a hunched figure adorned in robes, not a statue like the others. With a swift motion, it depressed a jutting stone in the wall. The disc atop the pillar spun, revealing a secret passage. As it rotated, Morbed spied a carving, identical to its fellows, on the other side of the cutout. When the rotation ceased, the figure was gone, replaced by a statue as if the other had never existed.

A rending of iron echoed through the crypts. The gate.

Morbed weighed his options: continue deeper into the crypts or . . .

Using a low tomb as a foothold, Morbed gripped crevices in the stone. He gained purchase with both hands, allowing the lantern to dangle from his wrist as he scaled the wall beside the pillar. The stone shook, nearly dislodging him. With renewed effort he reached the point in the wall that activated the revolving door. Dust fell from above, and with a quick glance over his shoulder, Morbed could see the tiny ember-glow of the demon's approaching eyes. Grasping the crouched statue, he maneuvered until his weight hung from it; then he pulled himself into a seated position, embracing the carved image. He cast about for the rock, pushed on it, swung the lantern up into his grip, and felt the disc beneath him slowly spin just as the behemoth drew within reach.

* * *

The crawl space barely allowed room for Morbed to scabble on hands and knees, but the thief was determined to put as much distance between him and the nightmare-thing as possible. He clamped his teeth on the ring atop the lantern's ventilator. The chain, linked to that same ring and then to his wrist, provided a short leash for his left hand, but once he adjusted his capote to allow freedom for his knees, Morbed made do with quick shuffling motions.

An instant later, there was a shuddering impact that threatened to dislodge the thief's teeth from his mouth and sparked a sudden terror that the masonry would collapse around him. Morbed knew without seeing that the statue outside the passage was now obliterated.

As he scrambled on, Morbed suffered a sensation similar to the feelings of judgment and reproach, only this was akin to hearing a whispered conversation where one was unable to discern the words being spoken—a conversation taking place inside his head.

Ignore it and focus on getting out of this alive, he told himself.

His efforts were soon rewarded as he came upon a larger, short passage ending at a ladder that disappeared into the heights of a musty shaft. Morbed ascended. His body ached, and the voices still lingered on the fringes of his consciousness, as he pushed on and quickly reached a closed trapdoor.

CHAPTER FIVE



Morbed hauled himself up and into one side of a room choked with clutter. Beyond the small clear space around the door, mounds of equipment—clothing, furniture, artifacts, relics, and bagatelles—were packed floor to ceiling. As he looked closer, Morbed identified what might be a navigable path deeper into the room.

There was no indication of where his unseen observer had fled. The faint conversation in the fringes of his mind continued as he stepped over and onto the many items that still clogged his way, reaching out to the piles on either side of him to maintain balance, wary that at any time, the towering stacks might collapse and bury him. The lantern threw shadows in all directions as he progressed.

Farther on, a gleam caught his eye: the ivory-hued blade of a necromancer's bone knife, resting on a shelf of debris.

Seize it! a voice urged from within.

Morbed possessed a blade of his own. Still . . . what harm in having more than one weapon? He snatched the bone dagger in passing, tucking it into his boot before moving on.

After picking his way into the center of the large room, Morbed rounded a heap and beheld a throne of sorts, built of various items: a grinding wheel, a cooking pot, a training dummy, bellows, bits of armor, and other things Morbed could not readily identify. There on the crude seat waited the robed figure, legs apart, his right elbow resting on his right knee, chin planted on the knuckles of a cloth-wrapped hand. He regarded Morbed silently. The lamplight reached just far enough into the hood to reveal what appeared to be a bandaged countenance.

"See you found the lantern," the figure rasped in a phlegmy baritone, lowering his hand. "Heard legends about it, passed down from the forefathers. They say it feeds on the guilt of those who sin against themselves." The stranger leaned forward, and his dark eyes, yellow where they should be white, widened. "I've never felt the faintest stirring from it. What does that tell you, mm?" Then began a coughing fit, and the man's body shuddered violently.

With just the slightest movement, Morbed reached for his dagger.

“Don’t—*hhough! hough!*—bother. While not the world’s most accomplished sorcerer, I am more than a match for you and your rat-sticker.”

Morbed held fast.

The other man continued. “You are the last of them, mmh? Your friends did not fare so well.”

The impression of judgment flooded through Morbed once again. His features tightened, and he strained to maintain a sense of awareness, a readiness to capitalize on any opportunity to improve his situation. “It seems your pet has slipped its leash,” he replied. “How long until these walls come down around you?”

His tormentor laughed mockingly, a thick chuckle that turned into another coughing fit, after which he spat a great stream of phlegm that did not fully escape his mouth. “Birthed in darkness, bent on destruction . . . it will do as its nature commands. Besides”—he waved his bandaged hand—“it would not be the first time these walls had been razed.”

The hooded head rested against the grinding wheel that made up the seat back.

Keep him talking, a feminine voice urged in Morbed’s mind.

“Who built the bastion?” he asked.

The stranger’s head straightened. He pointed a finger in the thief’s general direction, the nail of which had grown into a kind of claw. “Not built. Rebuilt. After! After the banishment of my ancestors.”

A sharp edge overtook the other’s voice. “This fortress was transported, brick by brick, beam by beam. For more than two hundred years, this bastion has stood here on this island, but there was a time, whelping, when the house of Bulkhan reigned over the lands of the Gloomings Moors.”

“I have heard of no such place.”

The voice of the other grew louder. “Little surprise, that! No . . . no, you hear only of Westmarch!” The word was laced with venom. “So named after the coming of the interloper, the trespasser, the usurper.”

Morbed thought back on what history he knew. Westmarch was named after the long journey of Rakkis, who brought the religion of Zakarum to the untamed lands of the far west. It was Rakkis’s tomb that King Justinian believed was being pillaged.

“Rakkis?” he blurted.

The figure's upper body shot forward, hands gripping what passed as armrests. "Do not speak his name here!" The outburst was followed by another coughing episode.

Taking a deep breath, the bandaged man relaxed slightly; his tone softened. "The house of Bulkhan ruled the realm, a dominion bought with blood. For my ancestors have always been . . . afflicted."

Lifting his hands, the figure pulled back his hood to reveal a bandage-laced head, the upper portion of the crown protruding bulbously. The skin glimpsed between wrappings was dark and weathered. A thick stream of green mucus clung to the chin.

"No healer has ever eased this burden in my kin. It is said that in time beyond memory, my ancestors were beggars, derelicts. But there was one, one who rose above the shackles of his station and gathered men and women through wisdom and words but also . . . an ability. A gift for sorcery that none had seen, of which legends had only whispered. What he could not gain by kindness he took by strength. It was he who first ruled the land of the Moors. He it was who first raised the house of Bulkhan."

The stranger scanned his surroundings, licking parchment-dry lips. "So it was for many generations. It is said that the powers of sorcery in our bloodline diminished in that time. And then . . ."

With a clenched fist the figure pounded the right armrest. "*He* came. With his grand ideas and honeyed words and his following. He turned hearts and minds against the line of Bulkhan, and so it was that the rightful master of the land was deposed. But rather than kill the proper lord, the usurper deigned, in his boundless magnanimity, simply to cast out my ancestor and those who remained loyal!" The other leaned forward in his seat, the timbre of his voice rising. "To banish them to this island, to dismantle House Bulkhan in both name and deed, to tear down the walls and transport them here, to be forever ferreted away and forgotten!"

The old man's cheeks lifted in what Morbed supposed was a smile. "But my forebears heard the rumors: a discovery in our homeland, pathways that led to ruins beneath the bog, far below the marshes. Scattered, sprawling remnants of a time and people long gone. What ancient relics, what artifacts and weapons of unknown power, might be found in such a place, hmm? Well guarded those ruins were, until Rakkis's death and beyond. And Rakkis himself buried there! Staking his claim, even in death, to what was ours by right!"

A coughing spell followed, more violent than the last.

Remove your knife! Do it now! the female voice urged in Morbed's mind.

I can't get to him in time, the thief answered.

Do not let another opportunity pass. We can help you!

What did that mean? Was it true? Did the lantern contain such a power? Perhaps . . .

The coughing spell ended. The stranger hacked up more phlegm, then laid his head once again against the wheel.

"Surely you possess a ship," Morbed said. "Why stay? You could go anywhere. Start over."

Morbed could read the other's scowl beneath the wraps. "There is no ship, not anymore. The hellspawn saw to that. Even so, beforehand . . . Where exactly would my bloodline, with our sickness, be welcome, hmm? What affection might be shown to a countenance such as this?" The bandaged hand, fingers spread, indicated the hermit's face. "No. We stayed. And in order to further our line, we did as we had to do. My father and his father before him took unwilling wives, sired offspring. Sired me. And over the course of my life, though I was weakened by disease, a power awakened within me. I could feel it!" The wrapped hand clenched into a fist. "As though I could do anything! Anything but . . ."

The hand fell. The shoulders slumped. "It is no matter. I learned the truth of our dynasty, and I have spent my final days reclaiming the Stolen Kingdom piece by piece. I have taken back from the descendants of Rakkis, and I have ventured into the lost ruins and seized that which was buried with the trespasser 'king,' and I have spat upon his grave. I've collected quite a bounty. And here it shall remain, guarded by the most terrible watchdog of all."

An understanding dawned on Morbed. He grinned widely, began to laugh, softly at first, then with increasing intensity.

"Something is—*hhough! hough!*—funny, boy?"

Morbed transferred his weight to the balls of his feet, moving his hand ever so slightly closer to his dagger as he did so. "You can't procreate, can you? That's what you meant when you said you could do 'anything but.' For all your talk of strength and power, you—you lack virility!" Morbed laughed heartily.

The wayfarer stood. "I'll grind you—*hhough!*—beneath my feet, you insolent—*hhough! hough!*—"

"And the items of the lost ruins were never yours to begin with. Your dull-witted ancestors built atop the ancient city without even knowing it existed!"

The deepest onset yet of coughing and hacking ensued. The old man doubled over . . .

Now!

What happened next transpired in the space of a hair's breadth. Morbed reached for his knife and pulled it from its sheath; the vagabond recovered enough to enact a spell; a bending distortion of light appeared around his suddenly outstretched hand; the knife flew from Morbed's grasp faster than he could have possibly thrown it; and the blade lodged itself to the guard in the diseased old man's throat.

The eyes between the wraps grew wide. The wayfarer shuddered, his trembling fingers reaching to pull the weapon free. A gurgling noise escaped his throat. Blood bubbled from the wound. The old man's fingers brushed the handle as he fell into the nearest pile of equipage, causing the entire column to collapse on top of him.

Morbed heaved a sigh of relief.

Told you we could help you, the female voice intoned within his mind. The thief turned to his right and beheld for the first time the upper half of a full-length trifold mirror, its bottom portion obstructed by a jumble of large, dusty items.

Within the grime-covered sections of glass, Morbed witnessed not his own reflection but an ethereal visage of Jaharra directly in front of him, eyes burning. In the mirror pane to his right stood a transparent Aedus, arms folded. To the left, Vorik, his gaunt face impassive. Morbed noted that a large shard of mirror was missing from the bottom of that segment. Looking farther to his left, the thief spotted it resting against a sheet-covered object, and reflected in its surface he sighted Clovis, standing in full armor, features hidden within his darkened helm. The entirety of the tableau was made more ghostly by the soft hue of the lavender lantern glow.

"What ... ?" Morbed began.

Jaharra's image spoke, and Morbed heard the words inside his head. The effect was unnerving. "I should think it mostly obvious," she scolded. "Despite your best efforts, you are not rid of us. In fact, it would seem the opposite is true. We are now, the five of us, inextricably linked through the relic you hold in your hand."

Morbed looked down at the lantern, then back up, as he heard Vorik's strained hiss. "While our mortal forms have been dispatched, our spirits remain captive. We are tethered to the lantern and, through it, also tethered to you."

The old seaman-who-claimed-to-be-a-fisherman's words came drifting back to Morbed. *Kept hearin' his voice inside my head after we got here.*

But the not-fisherman was clearly insane, wasn't he?

"This isn't real," Morbed said suddenly. "My mind is bent."

Jaharra's eyes drilled into his very core. "How convenient that would be, hmm? To simply dismiss us, to dismiss what you *did*."

"You had our trust." Aedus spoke for the first time. "Why betray us?"

"He's a thief!" Jaharra spat. "Should we have expected any less?"

"What you did was dishonorable," Clovis intoned.

"And what of it? What good has integrity done any of you?" Morbed shot back loudly. "What of honor?" His voice softened. "Cemeteries lack no room for the honorable dead."

Morbed was tired, more exhausted than he had ever been in his life. Spent, in mind, body, and spirit. "Yes, I'm a thief. I steal. I lie. I run, and I live. I'm not sorry for that."

"But you do feel guilt," Clovis replied.

"No!" Morbed protested. "Guilt accomplishes nothing."

"And yet here we are," Jaharra persisted. "You heard the old man: he felt no guilt, and therefore no spirits vexed him. The sailor who led us here was rent by guilt, haunted by the death of the true fisherman. Our very presence here is testament to the compunction you bear."

Morbed felt that he could argue no longer. He desired now more than anything a way to silence the voices. "And so? What would be my fate? To cast myself from a battlement as the old man would have done?"

"The sailor was, in a very misguided way, seeking to restore balance," Vorik answered. "I believe this may be achieved through other means. Through acts of selflessness, perhaps you might purge yourself of regret, and also atone."

"Is that what you believe?" Morbed replied. "That the only way to be rid of you and still draw breath is to . . . aid others out of kindness?" The thief shook his head. "And no doubt risk my own life in the process."

"Not kindness," Vorik corrected. "Selflessness."

The lantern hung in Morbed's limp hand. "Yes, of course. It's worth a try," he lied. "Just as soon as we return to Westmarch, I'll begin a search for endangered

orphans or tormented widows. But first, I—we—must quit this cursed bastion.”

“In seeking to deceive us, you deceive only yourself,” Aedus said. “You can no more hide your intentions from us than you could hide your nose from your face.”

Morbed released a long sigh. “What do you ask of me?”

“Your pursuit of salvation could begin with the extermination of our slayer,” Jaharra suggested. “Others are sure to come to this island and would no doubt face destruction. With our aid, you might defeat this demon.”

Morbed laughed hollowly. “Or I might, more likely, get myself killed. And what of your precious spirits then? What if I fail?”

“You would not fail,” Aedus said. “We can join our abilities and exert them through you. Without the master of the house and his magic-suppressing traps, and with the demon wounded, I’m confident we would emerge victorious.”

Morbed’s tired eyes drifted over the mirror images. “And this would rid me of you?”

The necromancer was first to answer. “This alone? I would say . . . most likely not.”

“But it would be a first step on the path to redemption,” Aedus was quick to add.

“A demonstration of faith,” Clovis offered.

Morbed stood quiet and still, considering.

“Or you could just do as you’ve always done . . .” Jaharra taunted. “And run.”

CHAPTER SIX



Morbed raced through the darkened woods as fast as his feet would carry him.

There had been no further deliberation. Instinct took command. Discovering a route that led from the room and out beyond the castle walls had required effort, but self-preservation lent vigor to Morbed's exertions. In time he uncovered an iron-strapped door opening into a dark, musty corridor, then to a cramped drainage pipe, and with Jaharra's assistance in defeating the bastion's outer wards, the thief was suddenly free of the redoubt without crossing the demon's path. In that much, at least, fortune was on his side.

Now it remained for fortune to smile on him just a bit longer, to lay clear his path to the longboat, to the fisherman's hulk, and on to the Great Ocean.

Despite this enterprise, the voices of his companions had stubbornly refused to remain silent. Even as they lent aid, such as in the case of the wizard's assistance in overcoming the wards, they derided and chastised him for choosing once again to flee.

It eased Morbed's anxiety somewhat to know just who and what the voices were, although a lingering doubt still dwelled in the back of his thoughts, maintaining that the thief had, in fact, gone insane, that the disembodied talk and visions were tokens of a fractured mind. If so, how long until his sanity shattered irreparably? As with all hesitations, second guesses, and reservations, Morbed pushed these nagging notions away.

There was, after all, one scrap of cold comfort to be had in the thief's predicament: despite their protestations, the spirits apparently had no direct control over Morbed's actions. So far as he could tell, they could effect change only with his consent.

Once to safety, Morbed would pick the lock on the manacle and toss the lamp overboard!

You're carrying an ensorcelled lamp that magically shackled itself to your wrist, the wizard's voice interjected wryly. And you really think that will work?

He would find out, one way or another. There was always the possibility of hiring a blacksmith to solve the problem.

Ha!

Failing that, there existed the potential of seeking out a master mage and employing said magic user to extricate him from—

The thief stumbled over an encumbrance and pitched headlong into the loam. Cursing, he rolled over, sat up, and raised the lantern.

In its violet aura he spied a corpse, broken and twisted, its limbs contorted at impossible angles. Around it lay dislodged branches, as if the body had plummeted through the trees. Morbed held the lantern away, directed his gaze skyward, and noted the stumps of sheared tree limbs against the starless night. Returning his attention to the dead man, he beheld a white beard and weathered, sunburned skin.

Morbed leaned farther forward, holding the light close. He reached out and lifted the dead man's hand, turning it over. There, across the palm, he saw scars upon scars, marks of lines and ropes abrading the skin throughout years of toil and hardship, of harvesting the bounty of the sea.

The true fisherman, Jaharra's voice spoke.

"Yes, the fisherman. So he's not . . . in there with you? His spirit?"

No. Vorik this time.

Jaharra rejoined, *The impostor saved my life. He restored balance, and now the spirit of the fisherman is free. It is as Vorik said: acts of selflessness are the only way to even the scales.*

You should bury him, Aedus offered.

"You're a bunch of damned fools! There's no time."

It is the right thing to do, Clovis added.

Morbed turned to his side, gained his knees, and was soon back on his feet. "Bury this corpse, and I may as well bury myself with him," he said as he lit out once more toward the coast.

* * *

By the time a heavily winded Morbed neared the edge of the forest fronting the coast, the sky had begun to lighten. With a final surge of energy, the thief broke through the tree line.

Yet where he should have seen the masts of the fishing hulk and the great bulk of the vessel itself, he beheld only ocean and lapping waves carrying debris onto the shore, where planks, spars, shredded sails, chains, wood, and various other evidence of wreckage lay strewn up and down the coast.

The lantern hung in his hand as Morbed stumbled forward. He ambled out among the debris, where he spotted a shattered wooden spine—the keel of his party’s longboat. It lay inland, and Morbed realized with sickening dread that the tide had gone out, allowing the demon a less obstructed path to the fishing hulk.

Not long after discovering the fisherman’s corpse in the forest, Morbed had heard a thunderous crashing sound, but in the thick wood, it had been impossible to determine its origin. The thief had imagined his pursuer to be raging through the forest, shearing trees to kindling, and he ran all the harder. Now he realized that the echoing clamor had been that of the fishing vessel’s destruction.

Morbed dropped to a sitting position near the ship’s anchor, its yard-length of chain trailing out like the tail of a slumbering serpent. Twisted bits of iron lay about where the links were snapped at the end.

Staring out along the coast, Morbed spied the massive, gleaming white whale bones he had noted upon his arrival. Grimly he wondered if his own skeleton would soon accompany them in their lonely vigil. Overhead, a bank of clouds unfurled in rippling waves, tinted red by the rising sun, a crimson ocean tide.

Morbed had not been sitting for long when the noises came to him. He heard them faintly at first: great rending sounds deep within the timber. Over the next breathless moments, they grew louder. Nearer. Morbed’s stomach turned into a nest of snakes. His blood ran cold.

You must face it, came the voice of Aedus. Let us help you.

As he did in any life-threatening situation, Morbed weighed his options. He could just run. Run and keep running until some kind of rescue arrived . . .

How far do you think you’d get, Jaharra asked, before you tire and can run no more? The demon is an engine of destruction. It will not pause. It will not grow weary.

Morbed scanned the watery horizon for any signs of a vessel. None. No rescue there.

The crash of timber was louder now.

His thoughts took a much darker turn. He withdrew his small blade and rotated it over and over in his hand as he considered what the demon could do to him. How effortlessly it could rip him apart, treat him as little more than a plaything, a mouse seeking desperately to evade the cat’s claws.

Don’t you dare give up, Jaharra all but shouted inside his head. Ending your own life would be the ultimate act of cowardice.

Morbed was silent for a long moment. "I thought you could so easily read my intentions," he spoke aloud. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not a coward . . ."

Slowly, he gained his feet.

"I'm a survivor."

Nearer the forest edge, trees smashed to the ground, shivering the leafy canopy.

"You said you could help me . . . I need to know that what you say is true—that your claims are not just the ramblings of my own deteriorating mind. Show me. Before I do this, I have to know."

There was an immediate twisting inside his stomach, nauseated disorientation, followed by a change in his surroundings. In an instant, he had moved from where he was and was now looking from the opposite direction at the discarded anchor and shattered longboat. The action was accompanied by a low boom that scattered sand at his feet and echoed out over the ocean.

Morbed raised his arms to steady himself. He forced bile back down his throat and turned his head. The bleached whale bones loomed behind him.

At the forest's edge, a massive tree crashed down onto the rocky sand.

"If you can do this," he said, "you could use your power to move me farther away, maybe even to the other side of the island. Then I might—"

I could, Jaharra answered. But I won't. You don't seem to understand, boy. Her voice had suddenly turned colder than it had ever been. We're dead because of you. We no longer draw breath because you ran away. You've spent your entire life running, and people have died because of it. So you don't get to run anymore. You can either stand and face this or die. There is nothing else.

The monstrosity emerged, parting the trees at the forest's edge and lumbering out onto the shore. Black, dried blood coated its left leg. It moved sluggishly yet with dread, elemental purpose. The creature turned. Faced with its fierce enormity in the predawn light, the thief felt like little more than a helpless bug, small and weak and wholly insignificant. He tried to swallow but found he had no saliva. His heart raced. Blood drained from his limbs.

Do not waver, the voice of Clovis encouraged. You must believe.

It is up to you now to restore balance, Vorik added.

Remember, you are not alone, Aedus counseled. You'll feel compelled to act as we exert our will. Bend to each perceived purpose, and we will guide you. But remember also that we cannot do this without you.

And at the last, Jaharra exclaimed, *Fight! Claw! Outmaneuver fate and spit in the face of death!*

Morbed advanced two steps. Blade held in one shaking fist, lantern grasped by the ring in the other, he stood, feet firmly planted, terrified yet resolute beneath the killing skies.

Shifting its weight, the behemoth hunched, rose, sent its bludgeon-arm smashing into the sand, then charged.

At once Morbed felt a presence other than his own, an *otherness* working to compel his actions. He detected in some instinctive fashion that it was Jaharra seeking to come forward, and he allowed it. Instantly his hands were raised as he struck a stance, muscles tensing, a string of foreign incantations pouring from his lips.

A breath later, time stalled. The demon's onrush slowed; it moved as if fording water. Morbed sensed the enactment of a temporal spell, a bending of time around him. He felt compelled to let fly the dagger, knowing somehow that its own speed would be unaffected. His wrist flicked out, and the blade drove itself into the demon's left eye.

The churning in Morbed's stomach returned. He briefly lost all sense of time and place as he was physically removed . . .

. . . and transported several paces behind the creature, appearing with a crack like that of a small cannon. He swayed and fell backward as the demon regained its former speed, stumbled, halted. Its horrific bellow shook the sand beneath Morbed as it turned and fixed its remaining eye on the thief.

There was an instant of confusion as two inhabitants of Morbed's mind tried to exert control simultaneously. A tempest raged briefly inside his head. When he looked up, the armored giant was almost on top of him.

Morbed scuttled away, fumbling with his hand and reaching the cold solidity of the anchor. Clovis came forward then. A radiant, resplendent warmth pervaded Morbed's core, washed out over his limbs, and infused the anchor with a magnificent holy light. At once he felt indomitable, armored in righteousness.

The demon closed. Morbed gained his feet, twisted, and swung the Light-imbued anchor up into the heathen's right flank. Brought up short, the

monstrosity cried out in primal fury, rendering Morbed temporarily deaf. It yanked the anchor from its side, cast it to the sand, seized the thief's right shoulder and arm, and flung him in a high arc.

Morbed somersaulted through the air and plunged into the forest canopy. He collided with several branches, felt ribs break, and slammed into the unforgiving ground, where he lay gasping. Blood flowed where the manacle had cut into his wrist. The lantern sat unbroken in the loam.

With mighty strides the hulking demon swept aside timber in a mad rush to overcome its prey, even as healing powers within Morbed fought to mend the damage to his broken body. He had seemed so invincible, but although he had felt as the crusader felt, his physical constitution was not that of the holy warrior.

Movement above shook Morbed to his senses. The demon had struck a thick, burlled cypress, and the barrel-like column of its trunk was crashing down, a heartbeat away from crushing the thief. The presence of the crusader was gone and replaced instantly by the rugged steadfastness of Aedus.

A collection of esoteric entreaties rolled over Morbed's tongue. All of a sudden, he felt a oneness with each individual species of tree, grass, fern, and shrub on the island. He was aware of every nearby insect, and for the briefest instant he believed he could hear worms burrowing in the earth beneath him.

Incredibly, a long branch jutting from the falling cypress lashed out, striking the ground inches from Morbed's face, intending not to smite him but to arrest its own descent. The trunk twisted, and two more branches on the opposing side groped and snared the raging demon about its torso. Nearby, a rangy pine leaned in and snagged the creature's right arm. The demon strained against its arboreal bonds, reared, then raised a massive leg to stomp the prostrate thief.

Aedus receded. Morbed felt his stomach churn . . .

Boom! Morbed found himself outside the tree line, lying on his back just inches from the chain of the cast-off anchor. Pain, white-hot and agonizing, flared up and down Morbed's right side. His hearing had returned enough to register terrible thrashing sounds erupting from the forest. The violent cacophony persisted until at last the demon reemerged, its thick hide marred by wide gashes, its right flank a black and bloody ruin, the handle of Morbed's dagger thrusting from its left eye. It strode slowly, battered but still alive and far from beaten.

For his part, Morbed was now acutely aware of Jaharra's dominant presence. Words of power passed his lips; his muscles tensed; a singular mental focus came upon him. He felt reserves of strength and power welling up, building, then

channeling out and away, and he heard then the thunderous roar of waves crashing to the shore.

The nightmare-behemoth had not seen Morbed; its malefic gaze was set on the shoreline and something forming there.

A light rain fell on the thief as he wheeled. Towering columns of ocean water swelled, gushed, and thrust upward, shaping what looked like three heads rearing and swaying against the ice-gray sky. To Morbed, the elemental construct resembled the legendary hydras of old.

Wind whipped at Morbed's hair. Waves pounded the shore. The demon advanced even as each of the water hydra's heads slammed down onto it, driving it to its knees. Then, as quickly as the force of nature had appeared, it was gone, its salty form soaking into the sand.

An empty, desperate lethargy stole over Morbed in the spell's aftermath. He knew that Jaharra had little energy left to give, at least for now, and the demon was rising. He felt a coalescing of strength, a final whisper of an arcane command, and then, incredibly, he saw himself standing just in front of the whale bones, hands on his hips, chest thrust out, taunting the behemoth—who turned, huffed, then stood and set off after the false image.

The debilitating pain in Morbed's side had grown slightly less agonizing. He attempted to stand, winced, cursed, and fell back down.

Jaharra withdrew. A kind of cold detachment overcame Morbed then. In contrast to the overriding determination of Jaharra, he felt a calm equanimity. Whether he lived or died was, in the final tally, inconsequential compared to maintaining the Balance of all things. The thief realized at once that these thoughts and feelings were not his own but the innermost makeup of the necromancer, Vorik. Morbed's overpowering imperative to survive clashed with Vorik's detachment, but understanding soon dawned—realization that Morbed did not have to share the old man's views in order to benefit from Vorik's abilities.

The thief was compelled to withdraw the bone dagger he had taken from the wayfarer's room. He set the lantern down at his side as he snatched the blade; then he sat on his haunches, dagger extended in his hands, tip pointed downward. He felt the instrument acting to not only focus but intensify his energies.

In just a few massive strides, the creature reached the false thief, raising its bludgeon-fist and dropping a perfectly placed blow on its head. Had the image

been Morbed himself, every bone in his body would have been shattered by the strike. As it was, the maul passed through the illusion and smashed with terrific force into the hard-packed sand.

Bewildered, the demon turned, scanning the shoreline, its cold eye fixing at last on the real Morbed. Before it could set off, however, the gleaming whale bones erupted up and flew forward, locking onto and around the baffled creature the way a manacle might close on a doomed prisoner's wrist. The ribs formed a cage of sorts; then, with supernatural force, the skeleton jerked the behemoth back and down with a shuddering crash, leaving the armored nightmare briefly stunned.

With no words exchanged, Morbed understood the strategy. He must take up the anchor one final time and rush the demon's position. At just the right moment, Vorik would draw back; Clovis would come forward and imbue the anchor. Without the necromancer's power holding the bones, the demon would quickly break free, and Morbed would have a narrow sliver of time to deal the killing blow.

Morbed replaced the bone dagger in his boot and tried once again to stand, but his fractured ribs held him fast. Down the shore, a bellow of frustration escaped the demon as it struggled mightily to extricate itself.

There was little time. If Morbed was going to act, it had to be now. He repositioned the lantern, snatched the last link of chain connected to the anchor, and pulled, hand over hand, reeling it in. Once he had grabbed hold of the anchor's shackle, he rolled to the opposite side of his injury, tucked his knees, and pushed himself into a kneeling position. He shifted his weight and planted one foot in the sand, grasped the lantern ring, and, using the upright anchor as a prop, fought through the torment to stand.

He set out. Hot iron shards of pain speared his right side. He carried the anchor limply in that hand, knowing full well that he would be incapable of raising the makeshift weapon on his own. He would need Clovis's help.

I am ready, the crusader encouraged.

Morbed closed the distance. The demon thrashed and fought, kicking and flexing the arms pinned at its sides. The thief drew closer and then to within striking range.

Vorik withdrew. A bold, warm radiance enveloped and infused the thief once again as Clovis came forward. The demon arched and strained, snapping the rib bones that served as its cage. The creature was free, but Morbed was now more than its equal. The agonizing injury became, if only for the briefest instant, a

distant memory as the thief leaped upward; the black blood coating the anchor melted away as the holy power of the Light shone forth. The rising sun caught the glowing, upraised metal, which blazed with a starlike aura as Morbed swung the anchor down, splitting the demon's skull and burying the pointed fluke in the blood-drenched sand.

Morbed stood panting on the fallen behemoth's chest. The mammoth body convulsed, shuddered, and moved no more. As the sun broke the horizon, Morbed reared back and loosed a long, fervent cry of victory.

EPILOGUE



Close to dusk on that same day, Morbed had nearly finished his task. After spending several hours borrowing Clovis's healing powers of Light, the thief was able to move and function once again. Following a brief search of the shoreline, he had found a half-buried cask, cracked it open, and filled his waterskin.

He had ranged inland, tracing the steps of his flight from the fortress, and within a relatively short time, he had come upon the corpse of the fisherman. It took him another two hours, digging mostly one-handed with the same anchor he had used to dispatch his horrific foe, to create a hole large enough for burial. Despite the canopy's shade, the sun was hot and stifling within the trees, but the ground was forgiving enough, and the thief was just now packing the last bit of soil atop the grave.

It had been his foremost intention to find and lay to rest the bodies of his comrades, but they had all insisted that the fisherman be tended to first. He stood, picked up the capote he had earlier cast aside, and was preparing to set out for the bastion, when a voice carried through the timber.

"Hooooo!"

Jaharra was only too happy to transport the thief instantly from the burial site to a location just within the tree line. After watching the newcomers long enough to assess any potential threat, Morbed stepped out onto the shore.

A portly sea captain in a long-sleeved tunic and breeches hailed. A handful of sailors ranged along the shore, inspecting the debris. None had drawn weapons. Morbed spotted a longboat beached nearby and, farther out to sea, an anchored galley flying the flag of Kingsport.

"We saw the smoke," the larger man said, indicating the pyre Morbed had built around the giant's corpse. It had taken long for the body to catch, but when it did, the carcass blazed throughout the afternoon, and it was now a smoking ruin. "What a wreck! How many survivors?"

Morbed stepped forward. "Just me. But there was a terrible battle. Many dead and many yet to be buried."

The captain eyed the lantern in the thief's left hand and took in the other man's overall appearance. "You look as though you've waded through the deepest pits

of the Burning Hells and barely come through the other side," the burly man decreed. "You'll have your help with burials, but first let's get you fed."

Take note, thief, Jaharra spoke, that when you do good, good will come of it.

Jaharra's voice had lost a bit of the edge it had possessed in the aftermath of the thief's betrayal. In fact, the overall tone of condemnation from those he had betrayed had softened since Morbed's battle with the hellborn colossus. The thief knew, however, that any real forgiveness would take time . . . if it came at all.

And what of his own opinions? He had, after all, experienced what it was not only to be *like* his former comrades but to actually *be* them. And as loath as he might be to admit it, something deep within him had changed as a result. Would it be enough? Would he be capable of performing selfless acts, and even if he were, would those succeed in freeing the spirits who would otherwise be his constant companions?

Time would tell. The road would be long, Morbed had no doubt—a journey of many steps. But perhaps, just perhaps . . . he had taken his first.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Micky Neilson is a lead story developer at Blizzard Entertainment, where he has worked since 1993. Micky's game-writing credits include *World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, *Warcraft III*, and *Lost Vikings 2*. Micky is a television and movie fanatic, and with his writing partner, Sam Didier, he writes screenplays in his spare time. (What spare time? Luckily, he was able to create a fold in the space-time continuum!) Micky's first comic book, *World of Warcraft: Ashbringer*, hit #2 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for Hardcover Graphic Books. His most recent graphic novel, *World of Warcraft: Pearl of Pandaria*, reached #3 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. With the support of his wife, Tiffany, and daughter, Tatiana, Micky looks forward to continuing his adventures in the world of Sanctuary and beyond for many years to come.

DON'T MISS THESE OTHER TERRIFYING TALES
IN THE WORLD OF

DIABLO®

STORM OF LIGHT
BOOK OF TYRAEL
THE ORDER
BOOK OF CAIN

We hope you enjoyed reading this Pocket Star Books eBook.

Sign up for our newsletter and receive special offers, access to bonus content, and info on the latest new releases and other great eBooks from Pocket Star Books and Simon & Schuster.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

or visit us online to sign up at
eBookNews.SimonandSchuster.com



Pocket Star Books

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

www.SimonandSchuster.com

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2014 by Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved. Diablo and Blizzard Entertainment are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Pocket Books Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

First Pocket Star Books ebook edition April 2014

POCKET STAR BOOKS and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Cover art by Yuan Zhang/Blizzard Entertainment

ISBN 978-1-4767-8946-0