



THE MOONSHAE TRILOGY BOOK ONE

# DARKWALKER ON MOONSHAE

DOUGLAS NILES





friendly greetings from most of the Ffolk. As usual, Tristan felt a brief flash of annoyance, for no one addressed him by his title. Just once, he would like to hear “Hello, my prince!” or something equally appropriate.

But then he shrugged these thoughts away, just as he shrugged away all serious thought of his rank, and the responsibilities of his name. One day, perhaps, he would give some thought to the duties he would eventually face as king, but today . . . today he had a mission here at the fair!

His step speeded up, and pretty country maids, in fresh gowns of light linen, smiled coyly at him. The prince felt very dashing, reflexively stroking the new coat of hair upon his chin. His first beard had grown in full and curling, slightly darker in color than his wavy brown hair. His new woolen cloak and leather trousers looked clean and shiny against his black leather boots.

He felt alert and alive, full of spring fever.

Passing from the tents and stalls of the goods merchants, Tristan moved between corrals and pens, ignoring the sheep, the cattle, and even the horses. Finally, he reached an expanse of clustered pens, and here he found his objective.

“Greetings, my liege,” piped a cheerful voice, and Tristan smiled at the advancing form of Pawldo, the halfling.

“It’s good to see you, my friend,” the prince said sincerely, clasping the diminutive man’s hand. “I’m glad you made it back from your winter voyages safely.”

Pawldo beamed at the greeting, but his eyes held a hint of avarice. The halfling was a stout and sturdy little man, perhaps an inch or two over three feet in height. He wore a weathered leather jacket and old, but well-oiled boots. His gray hair hung over his ears and collar, and his smiling face was clean-shaven and free of wrinkles, though Pawldo was over sixty years old.

Halflings lived on all the Isles of the Moonshaes, mostly as neighbors to human settlements. Though they were one of the original races, along with the dwarves and the Llewyr elves, to inhabit the islands, they had adapted well to the coming of humans. They profited from business dealings with the Ffolk, and benefited from the protection afforded by nearby castles.

“And how are you, old crook?” asked the prince.



"Where did you find him?" Tristan asked.

"Came across with me from Norland he did. Rode in the bow like he was born to the sea. I've never seen him take any notice of a man—until now that is."

Tristan strode to the dog's side, and knelt on the muddy grass, his eyes level with the dog's. He thought of his hounds. Already they were fierce and loyal hunters—but with a dog such as this to lead them, they would be the finest pack of dogs in the Isles! Tristan slowly took the great head in his hands. The shaggy tail flickered slightly, swaying from side to side.

The prince stared into the moorhound's eyes and whispered, "We shall be the greatest hunters on Gwynneth—no, on *all* the Moonshaes! Even the Firbolgs of the Highlands will tremble in fear at your cry.

"Your name will be Canthus." The dog regarded the prince keenly, brown eyes shining. His mouth opened slightly as he panted, and Tristan noted teeth the size of his little finger.

A number of onlookers had gathered to observe the prince, and Tristan felt a quick rush of pride as he realized that they looked with equal admiration upon his dog. A pair of savage, yellow-bearded northmen stood behind Pawldo, jabbering in their strange tongue full of *yerg* and *url* sounds. Several fisherfolk, a woodsman, and two young boys also watched. A crimson cloak, among the plain garb of the villagers, marked a young Calishite trader, staring in wonderment.

Tristan tried to conceal his eagerness as he stood and turned back to Pawldo, but his palms were sweating. He must have this dog! Trying to look disinterested, he opened the bidding. "He is indeed a fine animal. I'll give you ten gold for him!"

With a wail of anguish, Pawldo staggered backward. "The sea swelled over the bows," he cried in his high, squeaking voice. "Bold sailors grew pale with fear, and would have retreated, but I pressed on! I knew, I told myself, of a prince who would sacrifice his kingdom for such a dog—a prince who would reward well the steadfastness of an erstwhile friend . . . who would—"

"Hold!" cried Tristan, raising his hand and looking the halfling in the eye while trying to keep from laughing. "You shall have twenty, but no m—"

“Twenty!” The halfling’s voice squealed in outrage. He turned to the listeners and threw out his hands, a picture of wounded innocence. The two northmen chuckled at his posturing.

“The sails hung in tatters from the beam! We nearly capsized a dozen times. Waves the size of mountains smashed us . . . and he offers me twenty gold!” Pawldo turned back to the prince, whose smile was growing thin. “Why a dog like this, to one who knew such creatures, would fetch a hundred gold in an instant—in any civilized port in the world!”

The halfling smiled disarmingly. “Still, we are friends, and so I would remain. He is yours . . . for *eighty* gold!” Pawldo bowed with a flourish to the gasps of the growing crowd. Never had a dog been sold for half of that asking price!

“You overestimate the size of my purse,” retorted the prince, knowing full well that the price was going to stretch the limits of his allowance. Ruefully, Tristan groped for a bargaining strategy, but his purse felt very vulnerable. Pawldo knew him too well; the prince could not resist such a magnificent dog.

“I can offer you forty, but that is all I—”

“Forty gold,” pronounced Pawldo, still playing the crowd. “A respectable sum, for a dog. If we talked of a normal dog, I would say yes in an instant.”

“Fifty,” declared the prince, starting to get annoyed at the high cost of doing business with Pawldo.

“Sold!”

“Well done! Bravo!”

The praise was accompanied by hearty handclapping and a delighted, feminine laugh.

“Thank you, my dear Lady Robyn,” acknowledged Pawldo, with a theatrical bow.

“And you—I’m surprised you got that crooked halfling down from a hundred,” Robyn said to Tristan. The young woman’s black hair gleamed in the sunlight, and her green eyes sparkled. Unlike most of the young ladies at the festival, she was clad in practical garb—green leggings and a cape the color of bright rust. Yet her beauty outshone that of the most daintily dressed maidens.

The prince returned Robyn's bright smile, pleased to encounter her. The festival would be even more fun if he could enjoy it with her on his arm.

"Are you here to buy a dog?" he asked, ignoring Pawldo's outstretched hand.

"No. I just came down here to see the animals. The castle was too dark and cold for such a lovely day!"

"Did you talk to my father this morning?" Tristan asked, and immediately wished he hadn't when he saw the flash of pain on her face.

"No," she said quietly, turning her head to the side. "The king . . . wanted to be alone."

"I understand," replied Tristan. He looked at the mass of *Caer Corwell*, towering above the commonsfield on its rocky knoll, and thought briefly of his father. If the king would not even see Robyn—his beloved ward—then he would have nothing to do with anyone.

"Never mind. Let the old coot sit and brood if he wants to!" Tristan ignored the hurt look upon Robyn's face. "Did you see my new prize?"

"He's a fine animal," admitted Robyn somewhat coldly. "But so was his price!"

"Yes, indeed," chuckled Pawldo. The halfling thrust out his hand again.

Tristan reached for his coin purse. He took minor notice of a crimson flash to the side—the passing of the Calishite in his bright cloak.

And then his hand closed upon air, where the fat pouch had been.

He looked toward the ground, suddenly alarmed, but then turned and stared. The red cloak was nowhere to be seen.

"Thief!" Tristan cursed loudly, and sprinted in the direction he had last seen the flash of crimson. Robyn and Pawldo, momentarily surprised, started after him.

Darting around a tent, and barely avoiding a tall stack of kegs, Tristan saw the flash of red some distance away. He caught a glimpse of dark eyes, and then his quarry disappeared.

The prince dashed through a wine tent, leaping several low benches and scattering several early imbibers. Stumbling from the canvas structure back into the aisle between tents, he looked for the thief.

Again the flash of red, and this time the prince closed the distance.





even pleasant, yet he must know that he had been caught. Why did he not simply surrender?

Suddenly, catlike, the man sprang. The attack almost caught Tristan off guard, but his keyed instincts sent him darting to the side. He grasped the thief's wrist as his attacker's momentum carried him past. Then, kicking out sharply to the side, the prince knocked the Calishite to the ground.

But suddenly the grip in which Tristan held his foe reversed itself, and the prince felt himself being flung backward. The wind exploded from his lungs as he landed heavily on his back. Like lightning, the thief sprang toward his chest, curved dagger flashing toward the prince's neck.

Ignoring the pain in his chest, Tristan thrust his knife to block the attack, then grasped his attacker's wrist with his free hand. In a dizzying roll, they tumbled across the muddy grass, first one, then the other holding the advantage. Giving a wrenching twist, the thief suddenly broke free and stood. Before he could step clear, however, Tristan swept his leg through a circular kick. His foot landed behind the thief's knee, and the man dropped heavily. Tristan leaped onto him, holding his knife to the stranger's throat.

Slowly, the Calishite relaxed and then, amazingly, began to laugh. Tristan wondered if the man was crazy, then he realized he was nodding toward Tristan's stomach. The prince looked down to see the curved dagger poised a scant hairsbreadth from his gut. As the prince tried to keep from gasping, the thief relaxed his hold, dropping the dagger to the ground.

"I had no wish to hurt you," he announced, in a heavy accent. "I only wanted to see if I could best you." He laughed again with unmistakable good humor.

"Stand aside! Make way!" A squeaking voice parted the crowd, and Pawldo burst through the ring of onlookers. With him came Erian, a great bear of a man and one of Caer Corwell's veteran men-at-arms. Robyn trailed behind.

"Are you all right, my prince?" inquired the halfling.

Tristan was about to answer when he noticed, with some annoyance, that Robyn was not looking at him, nor did she seem in the least bit



crowded close, but the broad, scaly body thrust the interfering plants aside like blades of grass.

Kazgoroth moved slowly, reveling in this new freedom. Yet the Darkwell had served its purpose, for the monster felt power coursing hotly through its body as never before in its long centuries of existence.

The goddess—the Beast’s ancient enemy—must be vulnerable. The Beast allowed a trickle of acidic saliva to drool from its widespread jaws, Turning its hot, fiery eyes to the pool, it watched the thick waters of the Darkwell bubble in its wake.

Pulling its feet from the sucking mud, the creature pushed its way into the fens. Tree trunks snapped like brittle twigs as broad shoulders pushed them from its path. A heavy, clawed foot squashed flowers, insects, and rodents with equal lack of note. The sounds of cracking limbs, crushed vegetation, and sticky mud slurping with each mighty footfall shot violently through the wood. Wildlife shrank from the path of the Beast, racing in terror or cowering in abject fear until the monster passed.

As the Beast walked, the Firbolg were called to serve their ancient master—and serve it, they did.

Those misshapen giants—cousins of the Beast itself—ran fearfully at its approach. It took considerable coaxing, and a certain amount of potent enchantment, before the Beast could draw the chief of the Firbolgs to itself.

The ugly giant cringed in fear. His bulbous nose covered with sweat, the Firbolg scratched nervously at a wart, and bobbed his head in mute understanding.

The Firbolg were the first spawn of the Beast, brought by Kazgoroth to the Isles of Moonshae in the dim recesses of the past. Pulling the ancestors of the Firbolg from the sea, the Beast had taken them to Myrlock Vale. Here they lived in isolation, becoming sullen, bored, and lazy.

Emerging eventually from the muck and mire of the fens, the Beast roamed through wilderness for many days. Finally, the monster passed from the wilderness into farmland, and soon came upon a herd of cattle, sheltering in a remote glen.

The fat cows made a fine feast. Blood-spattered jaws gaping, the Beast

again moved, this time cautiously. It knew instinctively that it neared the realms of men. The Beast felt no fear, but preferred to avoid detection for as long as possible.

Its mind grew sharper with the fresh blood of its kill and the life-giving oxygen of the spring air flowing through the giant body. The monster realized that its present shape was the wrong one for the Task. What form should the new body take?

Kazgoroth recalled its bovine feast, and was pleased. Slowly, its scaly shoulders shrank, and its lizardlike head shifted into a broad snout. Horns sprouted, and claws and scaly legs became hooves and knobby legs supporting the wide, hairy body. Soon, Kazgoroth concealed itself in the body of a huge bull. The glittering redness of the Beast's eyes seemed to fit the new guise naturally.

And the change was timely, for the monster now felt a disturbance. Humans! Two of them, emerging from woods into the glen. A man and a woman, running to the carcasses of the herd, making strange, keening noises.

Kazgoroth liked this body. This was flesh of power and speed . . . killing flesh. The great head lowered, heavy horns swinging. The charge was swift, the deaths satisfying. The Beast reveled in the human blood, knowing that the slaying of lesser creatures could not compare to this sensual gratification.

The great bull moved majestically from the glen, following a wide track toward the setting sun. The monster knew, without understanding, that it would find many more people in that direction.

As the twilight faded to night, the Beast saw many people quickly shuttering windows, and saw others run in fear at its approach. The crude brain, becoming more adept with each passing second, realized that the body of the bull would attract too much attention from humans in these settled reaches. Something more subtle was necessary.

The monster recalled its human victims. One, the female, had a body that was rounded, and supple, and strangely pleasing. A body that would blend well here. Deep in shadow, the creature again shifted, gradually rising and walking on two smooth, shapely legs. Arms and a face, soft and white, adorned the rounded torso.

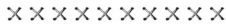
This type of body would serve admirably. Instinct guided the monster

to make several alterations. Hair, the color of ripe wheat, spilled down its back. Teeth straightened, and the small nose tilted slightly toward the sky. The body became slimmer at the waist and thighs, but other places the Beast kept plump and rounded.

Clothing, the Beast perceived, would be necessary for the disguise to be complete. The night grew darker, and Kazgoroth slipped silently into a small building, where it sensed many humans were asleep. The necessary garments lay within a large trunk. For a moment, Kazgoroth considered with longing the fresh blood coursing through the bodies of the sleeping humans. Caution prevailed and the monster left, allowing these humans to live.

Dawn colored the sky as Kazgoroth again moved west. Now the chill reflection of the sea came into sight, stretching away to the horizon and beyond. But the monster's goal was much closer than the horizon, or even the sea.

Before the waters stood a small castle, and Kazgoroth knew that humans in abundance would lair here. Before the castle spread broad fields, covered with tents and banners and stirring with activity and life. To this field, Kazgoroth moved.



Enjoying flexing his muscle at his prisoner's expense, Erian firmly propelled the thief toward the castle. Although a capable man-at-arms, the huge fighter had little patience for peacetime, and obviously relished the opportunity for violence. Robyn and Tristan walked behind Erian and his prisoner, who still retained his sense of good cheer. They started up the paved roadway leading to the castle's gatehouse.

Caer Corwell loomed above the festival, and the town and harbor of Corwell, from high upon a rocky knoll. The castle's outer wall—a high, timber palisade—ran along the circumference of the knoll, broken only by the high stone edifice of the gatehouse. The top of the knoll was mainly devoted to the courtyard but the tops of some castle buildings, particularly the three towers of the keep, jutted above the spiked parapet.

The broad parapet of the tallest of the three towers was visible as the

highest point for miles in all directions. Fluttering boldly from this platform streamed the black banner emblazoned with the silver bear—the Great Bear of the Kendricks.

If the three Ffolk moving up the castle road had been less familiar with the sight, they might have marveled at the panorama opening around them as they climbed higher. The commonsfield, sparkling with the colorful tents and banners of the festival, immediately caught the eye, its commotion contrasting with the calm, blue waters of Corwell Firth stretching off to the west. In the center of the commonsfield, the green and pastoral circle of the Druid's Grove remained pristine, dignified and natural.

The village of Corwell lay next to the firth on the far side of the festival grounds. Made up mainly of small wooden cottages and shops, the little community was nearly empty now, as the villagers were all at the festival. A low wall, more a symbol of a border than a real bastion of defense, surrounded the village on three sides. The wooden docks of the waterfront created the fourth side.

These docks reached into a placid circle of blue, formed by a high stone breakwater. Within the circle were anchored the dozens of vessels of the Corwellian fisherfolk, as well as the larger vessels of the visiting traders.

The little party neared the castle, their steps slowing from the steepness of the climb. The castle road spiraled around the steep knoll, making a long curve to the gatehouse. To the walkers' left, the side of the knoll itself dropped rapidly to the commonsfield below. To their right, the same slope rose steeply to the base of the wooden palisade.

Robyn finally broke the awkward silence among the four. She fell in step with the thief, caught his eye, and, with a bold smile, spoke.

"I'm Robyn, and this is Tristan."

Daryth looked at the prince quizzically. "Your . . . sister?" he asked, indicating Robyn.

"No. Robyn was raised as my father's ward," explained Tristan, suddenly eager to clarify the relationship. He remembered, momentarily, how annoyed he had been at the way Robyn had looked at the thief after the fight. She was looking at him that way again, something more than curiosity in her eyes.

"The pleasure is all mine," offered the thief. "I'm afraid circumstances prevent me from—urf!" Erian gave a sharp tug to Daryth's cloak, cutting him off in mid-sentence.

"Not so rough, Erian," Tristan told the guard. "He offers no resistance." Erian almost sneered at the prince, but settled for turning his back in disgust.

"Very perceptive," muttered Daryth, nodding his appreciation. "As a matter of fact, I hope to convince you that this is all a giant misunderstanding. In truth, I like this little town, and intend to stay here—for a while anyway.

"You see," he continued as if in confidence, "I'm really no sailor. I came here on the *Silver Crescent*, working my way.

"I, a master trainer of dogs, forced to such . . . Well, anyway, your little town seemed like a convenient location. I was going to settle down, start an honest business—"

"But temptation got the better of you," concluded the prince.

"Er, I am really very sorry about that. Rather mischievous of me. If I had known then what I do now . . . but I suppose there's no sense crying about it."

The group reached the gatehouse, and the bulk of Caer Corwell towered above them. The great wooden palisade stretched to the right and left until it curved out of sight around the crest of the knoll.

The gatehouse, which stood astride the road at the top of the steep, rocky knoll, consisted of a large stone building with four squat towers at the corners. Since the road allowed the only easy access from the coastal plain to the knoll, it was the most heavily defended approach. As usual, however, the heavy wooden gates stood open, and the sturdy portcullis beyond was raised out of the way.

Daryth stopped for a moment and cast a hurried glance back at the festival grounds and the harbor. For a second, his eyes scanned the scene, as if seeking something.

"Move, you," ordered Erian, giving Daryth a shove through the open archway in the gatehouse. Tristan stepped forward to rebuke the guard, but paused at the pressure of Robyn's hand on his arm.

"What can we do?" she whispered, urgently. "Surely he doesn't deserve to die!"

Her tone brooked no argument, and in any event, Tristan shared her sentiment. "He seems like a decent fellow," he said in a low voice. "But the king will look harshly on any thief who has preyed on festival-goers. What can I do?"

"I don't know," she replied, irritated. "Think of something, for once!" Before he could reply, she dashed forward and caught up with the guard and his prisoner as they entered the sunlit courtyard. Cursing under his breath, Tristan followed.

A dozen moorhounds came racing from the kennel at the far end of the courtyard. Sniffing and wagging, they swarmed around Tristan, investigating Daryth and Robyn as well. They kept their distance from Erian, since the big guard's heavy boots were well known to dogs who ventured too close.

Daryth looked surprised at the savage appearance but friendly dispositions of the large dogs. He talked to them, and stroked their shaggy necks. Soon they all crowded around him, following him as he walked along, prodded by Erian.

Reaching the doors to the great hall, the prince, suddenly inspired, turned to the man-at-arms. "You are dismissed, Erian," he announced. "Tell my father we wish to see him!" Robyn flashed him a look of surprise.

The guard opened his mouth to protest, but Tristan cut him off with a stern gesture. "Very well." The big man shrugged, then turned and moved across the courtyard.

Apparently Daryth, busy scratching the chin of Angus, Tristan's oldest hound, did not notice the exchange. He was absorbed in the veteran hunting dog, which wrinkled his brown face in pleasure, and swung his tail slowly in a circle.

"These are beautiful dogs," declared the awed Calishite. "They are yours, are they not?"

Tristan felt a flush of pride. His hounds were the passion of his life, and he was always pleased to have them complimented.

"Indeed," he said. "Are you familiar with the hounds of the Moonshaes?"

"Any man who enjoys dogs has heard of the moorhound. I have trained many types of dogs in my life. For many years, in Calimshan, I



worked with desert racers. I had thought no dog could compare to the racer as a hunter, but these hounds are superior in size and power! Oh, for a chance to train such as these!”

Robyn looked warmly at Daryth, then turned to Tristan, a mute appeal shining from her dark eyes. Again the prince felt that surge of jealousy.

The doors to the great hall swung open, and a maid emerged to escort them in, for Caer Corwell had no heralds. “The King awaits you,” she announced with a polite nod.

The trio entered the shadowy hall. They walked between a pair of huge oaken tables toward the great fireplace at the far end of the hall. Before that fireplace, in a heavy wooden chair, sat King Kendrick of Corwell.

The king looked up at their approach, but said nothing. Tristan could not help but feel an irrational flicker of guilt at the sight of the deep lines of sorrow etched into his father’s face. He steeled himself for the encounter.

King Bryon Kendrick’s hair was black grown heavily streaked with gray. Among the lines on his face, one could see strength and determination, as well as pain and grief. The king’s beard, like his hair a mass of black salted with patches of gray and white, flowed down his chest.

As usual, King Kendrick looked bored at the prince’s approach. It was no secret to anyone that the prince of Corwell was something of a disappointment to the king. Tristan hoped the king would not harangue him with sarcasm in front of Robyn and the others.

To Tristan’s relief, the king turned to smile at Robyn, and his eyes, briefly, flashed a spark of warmth. Then, cold again, they regarded the approaching Calishite.

Next to the king sat Arlen, captain of the king’s guard and Tristan’s lifelong teacher. The grizzled warhorse looked at Tristan speculatively as he and his companions reached the seated men.

“Hello, Father, Arlen,” began Tristan, while Robyn curtsied quickly.

The prince looked again at Daryth, and the Calishite responded to the glance with a fast smile. And with that smile, Tristan felt the beginning of a deep and true friendship, something stalwart and fine that would last between the two of them for the rest of their lives.



And indeed, two days before landfall, masts were sighted upon the northern horizon. In a matter of hours, Grunnarch recognized the blue whale insignia of Raag Hammerstaad, king of the Norheim Isles. Raag also sailed with many ships. Grunnarch wondered how many other kingdoms might decide to join the warlike throng this summer.

The two fleets merged, and the wind freshened. A hundred ships coursed through the waves, all intent upon Oman harbor. Soon the rocky outline of the island broke the southeast horizon. Grunnarch's vessel in the lead, the fleet filed around the promontory that protected the harbor. Grunnarch grunted in pleasure at the scene in the harbor.

The hundred ships of Thelgaar lined part of the shore of the harbor. In addition to the Iron King's warships were those of many other kingdoms, already arrived and arrayed for war.

This would indeed be a summer of blood and plunder.

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*The goddess shivered, and flinched. She felt her body growing numb—not from fear, but from a distant and wistful sadness. The feeling was remote, and she took no great notice of it. Gradually, though, she began to recognize the numbness for the dire threat it was.*

*With an effort, she forced herself to stir. Passivity now, she knew instinctively, would be fatal. The call she sent reverberated through the earth, thrumming deep within the mountains and hills, and even rolling along the bottom of the sea.*

*Hoping that it was not too late, the goddess tried to awaken her children.*