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## THE MOONSHAE TRILOGY BOOK TWO

# BLACK WIZARDS DOUGLAS NILES





Let's go swimming now! Can't we, Robyn? It's so hot, and we've been working so hard...."

"You mean *I've* been working so hard!" said the young woman, pausing to push a sweat-soaked strand of black hair back from her face. "All you've done is get in the way!"

Her companion, a two-foot-long orange dragon that buzzed like a hummingbird around her, turned his scaly snout away in momentary indignation.

"Besides, Newt," Robyn continued, "I've got to sort out this tangle of vines before we do anything else. They seem to grow thicker every day! I don't know how Genna tended this entire grove by herself." Once again, she pried the vines away from the trunk with a heavy stick, grasping one and pulling it free from the ground. She tossed the vine onto a pile of its fellows, destined for an evening fire.

"Why do you have to sort these stupid old vines anyway?" the dragon sulked. "Let them grow the way they want to—and let us go swimming the way we want to."

"I've told you a hundred times, Newt. This is the sacred grove of the Great Druid of Gwynneth, and she is training me in the ways of our order. Part of my training is to obey her instructions and to aid in caring for the grove."

The explanation sounded a little hollow even to Robyn, who had, for nearly a year, dutifully followed the instructions of her aunt and tutor, Genna Moonsinger. Today was not the first time the Great Druid had rested peacefully in the shady comfort of the cottage while her erstwhile student toiled away in the summer heat.

Still, Robyn was a devout pupil. She paused and drew a deep breath, relaxing as she exhaled. She repeated the process as her teacher had shown her, and soon she felt the annoyance pass away. Robyn turned again to the thick vines that threatened to strangle the trunk of an ancient oak. She even felt guilty about her doubts. Genna always works so hard, she reminded herself. She certainly deserves the rest.

Robyn's job was near the periphery of the enchanted area that was the Great Druid's grove. Near her were the tall hedges that bordered much of the grove, and she was surrounded by massive oaks. Closer to the heart of the grove sprawled a wondrous garden and its placid pond, and within these areas stood Genna's simple cottage.

Behind the cottage stood the grove's dominant physical feature, and also its spiritual heart: the Moonwell. The deep pool was surrounded by a ring of tall stone columns covered in bright green moss. The tops of several pairs of pillars were capped with stone crosspieces, raised by the earthpower of great druids in ages past.

It was to learn the secrets of this earthpower that Robyn studied her craft so diligently. She had proven, both to herself and to her teacher, that she had the innate talent to perform druid magic. This was the legacy of the mother she had never known. Inherited power was one thing; it was another matter to learn the skills and discipline necessary to control that power.

Robyn pulled on a thick root, bending it away from the trunk until it snapped free. She tossed it onto the pile and grasped another tendril with a hand that had grown strong and calloused during her training. That vine, too, came reluctantly away from the oak tree, but it required most of her strength to pull against the tension of the plant.

"Well, I'll help too, if that's what it'll take to get done with this. Here—I'll pull on this one and you grab that—"

"No!" cried Robyn, but before she could stop him, the little dragon had seized a loose end of vine and pulled it with a strength that belied his small size. The vines she had so carefully untangled burst free and instantly twisted back around the tree trunk.

The springing mass of vines caught the faerie dragon in their coils,

pinning him against the tree. A short, wriggling stretch of red tail and a tiny, clawed foot stuck from the tangle of vines.

"That serves you right!" she chided him as she began to pull the vines from the tree once again. "You should pay attention to what you're doing."

Newt finally forced his head from the tangle and shook it quickly. "That's the last time I try to help you," he huffed as he crawled free. Flexing his gossamer wings, he buzzed into the air and hovered before her.

"Why don't you just use your magic on these vines and be done with the job?" he asked, eyeing the tree belligerently.

"The tending of the grove is a matter for a druid's hands and heart," replied Robyn, reciting one of her lessons. "The grove is the source of her magic, and thus cannot be maintained with it, or the magic would lose its potency."

"I should think it would be very boring to do all these studies and silly jobs, day after day, forever and ever. Don't you miss Tristan? And don't you ever want to go home?"

Robyn caught her breath sharply, for the questions were painful ones. She had come to the Vale nearly a year before and had had no contact with her previous home. Genna insisted that such diligence was the only way Robyn could properly develop her skills. She thought carefully before answering, more for her own benefit than Newt's.

"I miss him very much—more, each day, it seems. And I want to be with him. Perhaps, someday, I will be. But for now, I must learn what I can of the order of the druids—find out for myself if I am destined to serve, as my mother did and my aunt does, as a druid of the isles. This is something I have to do, and if Genna tells me that the only way I will learn is by performing mundane tasks around her grove, then so be it."

"Of course," Newt said nonchalantly. "Tristan's probably got plenty to do at Caer Corwell, anyway. Festivals and hunts . . . all those pretty country lasses and barmaids. I don't imagine for a minute that a prince of the Ffolk would waste his hot summer afternoons in a cool alehouse, of course, but just supposing he. . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Robyn, more harshly than she intended. Newt had an uncanny ability to aggravate her. She did miss Tristan. But, she reminded herself, she was doing the right thing by following in the footsteps of the mother she had never known—the mother that had left her a book and a staff as proof of her druidic legacy.

Wasn't she?

She remembered the sense of awe and wonder with which she had opened her mother's book, only a year ago. It had been given to her by her stepfather, King Kendrick of Corwell—Tristan's father. Through its pages, Robyn had begun to understand the nature of the work she was capable of doing. She saw that she had the power to serve the goddess, Earthmother, and to use druidic magic to maintain the balance of nature in the islands that were her home.

Now she recalled the smooth ashwood staff, plain and unadorned, that had nonetheless become her most treasured possession. Crafted by her mother's own hands, it was both a receptacle and a tool for the earthpower of druidic magic. Not only had it saved her life, but it had been instrumental in rescuing the kingdom itself from the terror of the Darkwalker. Now it stayed safely within the Great Druid's cottage, awaiting her need.

Wistfully, she wondered about her mother—as she did so often. Her Aunt Genna had described her to Robyn in such detail that she now seemed completely familiar. Sometimes Robyn felt as though she had indeed known her mother. As always, a great sadness washed over her at the thought that she would never truly know the woman who had brought her into the world.

A sudden sound—the snapping of a dry twig—cracked through her thoughts, and Robyn froze. She knew every creature that visited the grove, and none of them would make such a careless noise. Even Grunt, the cantankerous brown bear who lived with them in the grove, moved his bulk silently among the plants.

The cracking was repeated, and Robyn located its source in a clump of bushes behind her. A sharp prickle of fear ran along her spine, and she reached for the stout stick leaning against a nearby stump. Slowly, she turned.

The bushes rustled, indicating that a large creature was moving toward her. Suddenly, they parted to reveal the staggering figure of a man. At least, she thought it was a man—the shaggy, matted hair and beard, the filthy, spindly limbs, and the dazed, sunken eyes looked more beastly than human. The creature shuffled forward like an ape, clad only in a tattered rag tied with a crude belt.

But a sound croaked from an unmistakably human throat as the figure collapsed on the ground at her feet.

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The boat's slim prow slipped through the black waters of Corwell Firth. The boat blended perfectly into the moonless night, as did the eight cloaked figures within. Each of them used a narrow paddle to move the craft away from a huge galleon that sat quietly in Corwell Harbor.

The port was silent, for the hour was past midnight. No splashing disturbed the boat's graceful movement as it glided slowly toward the overhanging protection of a high pier. Here, six paddles were withdrawn into the boat, while the remaining two pushed the narrow craft carefully between the pilings.

The shadowy figures lashed the boat to the pilings. One after another, they sprang to the pier and slipped quietly onto shore.

The figures moved carefully up the street of Corwell Town, darting from building to building with perfect stealth. The leader of the group, taller and stockier than the rest, paused to let the others pass while he watched for any sign of danger.

A silken black mask concealed the face of each of them, but this one pulled his aside to peer more effectively through the darkness. While manlike, he was not a man. A broad nose with wide, flared nostrils spread across his face, and his teeth were gleaming and sharp. Quickly, he pulled his mask into place and slipped after his band.

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Tristan Kendrick, Prince of Corwell, was a little drunk. Perhaps more than a little, he decided, as a swelling of nausea rose within his stomach. His head hurt, and he wanted to go to bed—all of which made this argument seem that much more unpleasant.

"You don't act like a prince! You don't look like a prince! You'll

never be fit to be a king of the Ffolk!" His father's harsh voice boomed behind him and cut through Tristan's weariness. The prince whirled to face the king.

"A year ago I routed an army of Northmen from these very walls!" he growled, resisting the urge to shout. "I fought the Beast that stood within our courtyard. Father, I even found the Sword of Cymrych Hugh!"

Tristan gestured at the mighty weapon, hanging in its place of honor above the hearth, crossed with his father's favorite boar spear. The sword was a treasured relic of his people and had been missing for centuries—until he and his friends had discovered it in the depths of a firbolg lair.

"All deeds very fine and heroic—and dramatic," the king sneered. "You've enjoyed the adulation of the ladies and the drinks of the aleman on those merits.

"But there is more to being a king than heroism. What do you know of our law—of the administration of this realm? Could you sit in judgment over shepherds who argued about a shared pasture, or fishermen who quarreled over rights to a berth? Until you change this, you are not fit to rule. You know the customs—you can only be granted the kingship if a majority of the lords think you capable! I doubt they would, were the vote taken tomorrow!"

Tristan clenched his hands into fists, and for a moment he was so angry he could scarcely keep from striking his father. He walked away in frustration, finally flopping heavily into the largest chair in the study. Already the fog of alcohol was dissipating.

But his father would not abandon the attack. "It's amazing that the houndmaster even got you home," he said scornfully. "And where is Daryth now?"

"Probably in bed—but leave Daryth out of this! He's my friend, and I will not allow you to insult him!"

"Ever since Robyn left to study with her aunt, you've been acting like a brooding puppy one minute, and a drunken buffoon the next!"

"I love her! She's gone, and nothing seems to matter except the next time I can see her face. By the goddess, I miss her! I don't even know if she'll ever come back—what if she decides to spend her life in the woods, tending some Moonwell of the Vale?" The king stalked around the chair to face his son, and the prince forced himself to meet his father's gaze.

"And what if she does? That is her privilege—and perhaps her responsibility. But you wouldn't know about that, would you? Responsibility has never—"

"Father, I have decided to go to Myrloch Vale and visit Robyn. I will leave as soon as I can prepare," Tristan interrupted bluntly. He had contemplated the idea several days earlier, but had not had the courage to tell the king. At least, he thought, this argument had given him that fortitude.

"That is exactly what I mean! You—"

"Perhaps you're right about me," Tristan interrupted, leaning back to look at his father. "After the adventures of last summer, the thought of spending my days cooped up—"

Suddenly, the door to the study crashed inward with a wood-splintering slam. Tristan saw his father's eyes focus on the door, and then the king pushed wildly at the back of Tristan's chair.

The prince heard several "clicks" and felt some sort of missile whir past his head before his chair crashed backward onto the floor. The wind exploded from his lungs, and a cold shock of panic washed over him, driving the last vestiges of alcohol from his mind.

Instantly Tristan rolled from the chair, watching a silver dagger flash over his head from where he lay on the floor. He saw his father pluck a slender dart from his own shoulder, then pick up a wooden chair to block the attack of a charging black figure.

Tristan sprang to his feet in time to meet another black figure faceto-face. The face was covered by a terrifying black mask, and the body was cloaked all over in black silk, but Tristan's eyes focused on the gleaming dagger that seemed to reach forward, questing for his blood. Desperately the prince looked around for a weapon, at the same time remembering his sword hanging ten feet away. A low table separated him from the hearth.

Tristan feinted a lunge at his attacker and then dropped prone to roll under the table and spring to his feet. The attacker leaped over the table at the same time, and his dagger cut a bloody nick in the prince's ear. Tristan drew the weapon and continued the motion through a full turn, driving the point deep into the attacker's chest before the intruder could strike again.

Tristan saw his father stumble backward as another black-cloaked figure burst through the door. Behind that one were several others. The prince kicked a chair into the path of his new attacker, slowing him enough that he could pull the king's boar spear from its place above the mantle.

"Father!" he cried, tossing the stout weapon sideways across the room.

Tristan leaped over the chair he had toppled, certain that the figure before him, armed with two daggers, was no match for the gleaming Sword of Cymrych Hugh.

But one of those daggers clashed into his blade, nearly knocking it from his hand. Only by stumbling backward did the prince prevent the weapons from driving into his bowels. As it was, a dagger cut a burning streak across his abdomen.

Even more frightening than the nearly fatal blow was the deep, rumbling growl that emerged from behind the silken mask. Although the other attackers had seemed human, the one before him was stockier and smellier than a man. The creature attacked with savage intensity, forcing Tristan back against the fireplace with a dazzling series of blows. Each slash and thrust was accompanied by a bestial snarl. The prince found himself desperately wanting a look behind the black mask, to assure himself that this creature was indeed flesh and blood and not some demon conjured from a drunken nightmare.

Grimacing, Tristan drove his sword against the foe, struggling to gain room to maneuver. Once again the intruder forced him off balance with lightning-fast cuts and lunges.

The prince whirled away from the hearth, catching his breath as he saw his father driving the boar spear into the chest of the other attacker. The king fell on top of the enemy, and the pair lay motionless on the floor.

Tristan's attacker surprised him by suddenly dropping to the floor. In a flash the prince remembered the men at the door, and in the same instant he fell prone, sensing the whirring passage of deadly missiles over his head.

Then Tristan scrambled to his feet and sprang toward the foe. At the same time, he heard a scream of pain from the doorway. Apparently the growling attacker was equally startled, for his masked face turned to the door in surprise. The prince almost caught the creature with the point of his sword, but he looked back at the last minute and sprang to his feet with catlike speed. Even so, the tip of Tristan's blade struck a glancing blow against the thing's head, tearing the silken mask away in the process.

The prince stared for a second at the snarling face. The creature looked like a cross between a man and a beast—his body and features were humanlike, but his widespread maw was studded with fangs, and his close-set eyes looked hellishly intense and bloodshot.

Another cry of pain shrieked from the doorway, accompanied now by growls. The prince saw one of the attackers there stagger into the room, a huge hound biting his neck in a deadly vice. He caught a glimpse of a flashing scimitar, driving a third bowman against the wall. Daryth!

The loyal houndmaster, skilled at combat and stealth, must have heard the disturbance. With his blade helping, Tristan thought, the fighting odds looked more favorable.

Daryth leaped into the room, past the great dog that was just raising his head from the gored body. Abruptly, Daryth froze, his darkly handsome features gaping in shock.

"Razfallow!" he finally said, his voice tight.

Tristan's foe had also paused at the sight of the houndmaster. "So, Calishite, this is where you have run to," he snarled. "You did not expect to hide from me forever, did you?"

"I don't need to hide anymore," muttered Daryth, advancing slowly in a crouch. "Especially from a killer of children!"

The monster chuckled, and then, before Tristan could react, he flicked one of his daggers straight at Daryth's heart. The silver scimitar moved very slightly, however, to knock the weapon harmlessly to the ground.

Razfallow obviously sensed that the battle was lost. Before Tristan could react he sprang to the window, thirty feet above the courtyard. He turned once to stare at the prince, hate spilling almost palpably from those crimson eyes, and then he leaped into the darkness.

"Guards!" shouted the prince, racing to the window. "Intruder in the courtyard! Take him alive!" Already the black figure had disappeared into the night, but the cry of alarm was taken up throughout the castle. Turning, Tristan saw Daryth gently cradling the king's head. The great moorhound Canthus stood next to him, gently nuzzling the still form. The only wound upon Tristan's father was the little pinprick, barely bleeding, in his shoulder. Nevertheless, the houndmaster looked at the prince with deep pain and shock in his eyes.

"The King of Corwell is dead."

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Like all of the gods, Bhaal communicated his will to his worshippers via his clerics priests, priestesses, holy (or unboly) people. These clerics drew their strength from their gods, and many were capable of feats of magic rivaling those of the mightiest wizards.

As a powerful god, Bhaal numbered a great many clerics among bis faithful. It so happened that one of the most powerful of these was on the Moonshaes. This one would serve his purpose now.

Bhaal decided, slowly, upon a scheme. It would entertain him, and it could enhance his status among all of the gods of the Realms. It was a complex plan, but he had numerous willing hands to aid him.

To start, he would send the cleric of the Moonshaes a dream. He could regard it as a prophecy, or a command—in any event, it would be the will of Bhaal.

The cleric, Bhaal knew, would obey.