

THE MOONSHAE TRILOGY BOOK THREE







Heavy breakers assaulted the stone barrier protecting Llewellyn Harbor. They crashed against the rocky rampart, sending clouds of spray through the air, roaring in frustration as the eternal power of the sea dispersed against the fundamental strength of stone.

A lone figure stood near the end of the breakwater. The man was heavily wrapped in oilskins and ignored the salty shower that doused him each time a fresh wave expended itself. If anything, he relished the bracing cold of the water.

The man was young, but he was a king of many lands. He had bested creatures foul and wizards of might, yet he felt unsure of his own strength. He held the love of a strong woman in his heart, but still his future remained a muddled blur before him.

Tristan Kendrick claimed as ancestors a long line of kings, but for two centuries the Kendricks ruled only the small, sparsely populated land of Corwell. Now, as High King of the Ffolk, King Kendrick accepted fealty also from Moray, Snowdown, and mighty Callidyrr.

The king had recently won a war, the Darkwalker War, besting a supernatural beast and its human allies. He had claimed as allies the graceful warriors of the Llewyrr and the doughty fighters of the dwarven realms. His blade, the Sword of Cymrych Hugh, girded him

as ample proof of his heroism, for he had returned the weapon to the Ffolk after many decades of absence.

Finally the man turned from the sea, walking slowly along the rocky barrier toward the welcoming lights of Llewellyn Town. The sea had given him no answers. Nothing, it seemed, could give him the answers.

And there were so many questions.

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The eagle soared slowly. Its eyes, dulled by fatigue, searched the barren landscape below, seeking any morsel of lifesaving food.

But the bird saw nothing. No trace of animal, small or large, appeared across the stretches of brown marsh. Even the trees of the once-vast forests now resembled gaunt skeletons, barren of leaves and needles, surrounded by heaps of rotting compost.

The great bird swirled, confused. It sought a glimpse of the sea, or even the high coastal moor. But everywhere the view yielded scenes of rot and corruption. With a sharp squawk of despair, the eagle soared off in a new direction.

A sudden movement caught the eagle's keen eye, and it swept into a diving circle to investigate. But it pulled up short, screeching its frustration at the shambling figure on the ground. Though the creature smelled of carrion, it moved. Though it moved, it was not alive.

Growing desperate now, the eagle soared away in search of something, anything, to eat. It came upon a region of utter desolation, a place that made the past reaches of barren land seem fertile. The predator flew north, over a stagnant brown stream. It crossed a reach of dead, fallen timber.

Finally it came to a small pond. The water was surrounded by twenty stone statues, remarkably lifelike human figures in various poses of battle. The surface of the pond itself was an impenetrable black.

But what was that? The eagle saw, or imagined, motion below that flat, lightless surface. It could have been a trout, swimming complacently in the center of the pond. It could have been anything.

The bird tucked its wings and plummeted toward the shadow. The water rushed up to meet it, and the true nature of the dark shape became visible. The eagle shrieked and struck outward with its wings, slowing but not halting its descent. One claw, still extended to clutch the imagined prey, touched the surface of the black water.

A crackling hiss broke the silence, and for a moment the eagle froze, outlined in blue light. In another instant, the bird was gone, though no ripple disturbed the surface of the dark pond. A lone white feather, caught by an errant breath of wind, drifted upward and fluttered forlornly to settle upon the muddy shore of the Darkwell.

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Bhaal, god of murder, relished the eagle's death. Though he still dwelt in his fiery bier upon the distant and hostile plane of Gehenna, the minor snuffing of life in a place unimaginably remote was power transmitted directly to his foul essence.

Such was the power of the Darkwell. And such was the power of Bhaal.

The patron god of any who would slay another of his kind, Bhaal found plentiful worshipers among the humans and other creatures of the many worlds. Foremost among them were the people of the Forgotten Realms.

It was in the Realms that the eagle flew, and died, and it was in the Realms that Bhaal's most powerful minions had been fought and bested by these humans who called themselves the Ffolk. Now Bhaal focused his entire baneful nature on the land claimed by these humans. Now one servant, a cleric of great power and even greater evil, still remained to do his bidding.

Slowly Bhaal's vengeance took form. The humans who obsessed him would die, but only after everything they loved had died before them. He himself would see to that. No longer would he trust his revenge to the talents of his minions. To this end, Bhaal fostered the Darkwell.

A deep laugh rumbled in his cavernous breast as he pondered the history of the pool. Only a month before, it had been a crystalline symbol of hope and purity, a Moonwell, sacred shrine of the goddess Earthmother. Her body was the earth itself, but her spirit resided primarily in pools such as this—clear, unspoiled water blessed with the benign enchantment of the goddess Earthmother.

This had been her most sacred well, but now the might of Bhaal, coupled with the deadly skills of his servant, the cleric Hobarth, had desecrated and polluted the water so that it no longer resembled its former state. Indeed, now it was a festering sore upon the land spreading decay like a cancer through the rocks and clay and sand of the earth.

The former soul of the goddess now gave Bhaal a window into the world of man, and he liked what he saw. Slowly the god of murder moved toward the Darkwell.

He knew exactly what to do.

The stag stumbled weakly against a rotten trunk. Its bedraggled flanks heaved with the effort of breathing. Its sweeping antlers swayed toward the ground, and the creature's dry, swollen tongue fell limply from its jaws. Unsteadily the huge deer lumbered away from the dead tree, past many more, through the dead forest.

Blinking in confusion and despair, the animal sought some sign of the Myrloch Vale it had known all its life. The broad valley of sun, the brilliant leaves of autumn, vast meadows of flowers swaying easily in the fresh breeze . . . all these things were gone.

The stag's ribs showed clearly through its torn pelt, for it had not eaten in many days. Yet this was not the greatest of the animal's needs.

The stag had to find water. It sensed that it could live no more than a few hours without it. The swollen tongue flopped loosely, and the wide eyes were obscured by an unnatural glaze. A feeble breath of wind stirred the dead wood, and with it came the smell of water. Not clean water, to be sure—the scent was well mixed with those of rot and decay—but it was the scent of water nonetheless. With renewed vigor, the stag trotted toward the promising sign.

Soon the great deer came upon a black pond. The stag ignored the unnatural stillness of the water. It paid scant notice to the twenty stone statues arrayed around the perimeter of the pool, except to ascertain that the humanlike figures were indeed stone and not flesh. Even had they been living huntsmen, however, it is doubtful the deer could have turned from that compelling pond.

Bhaal watched the stag approach, willing it closer and closer. The god remembered his flash of pleasure upon the death of the eagle, and Bhaal relished the thought of the much larger body that approached.

The swollen tongue reached for the black surface. At the last moment, the stag sensed the *wrongness* of the water. It tried to pull back, to raise its broad antlers away from this awful thing. But it was too late.

The neck bent, pulled by a force far greater than the stag's own muscles, and its muzzle struck the surface of the Darkwell. A crackling blaze of blue light illuminated the stag's body, casting an intense glow across the pond for an instant.

Then the deer was gone. As with the eagle, its body had caused no ripple to mar the inky surface of the well. Only the skull remained, resting on the muddy bottom in several inches of water. Its empty eye sockets stared skyward, while overhead spread the massive rack of antlers like a ghastly tombstone.

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Robyn of Gwynneth lay in the hold of the lunging ship and prayed for a word from her goddess. The wooden timbers around her seemed to thrum softly with the power of her prayer, but that was all she sensed. She felt lonely and afraid, fearing for the Earthmother more than for herself.

In the darkness of the hold, she felt the touch of her spiritual mother, but it was faint and frail. She sensed a growing void between herself and her goddess, but she was at a loss to close it. "Mother, hold me, help me!" she whispered, but the unfeeling planks of the hull gave no comfort, and there was no reply. The source of her faith and her power was on the verge of extinction, and the druid could do little to help.

Strangely, even as the presence of the Earthmother faded, Robyn felt her own earthmagic growing in potency. Within the confinement of the long sea voyage, her body grew stronger daily. Her muscles were hard and wiry. Her mind was sharp and alert, to the point that she could hardly sleep. And she could feel the power growing within her.

But when she prayed, or on those rare nights when she slept deeply enough to dream, there was no word, barely the faintest image, to suggest that the mother was near.

Robyn knew of no other druid still walking free upon any of the Moonshaes. The most powerful of her order all stood frozen, locked in stone at the moment they had lost their most crucial battle. Only Robyn had escaped, and she felt pitifully inadequate for the tasks arrayed before her.

But she had no choice except to try.

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The fat cleric wiped a hand through his greasy hair, anxious now to reach his destination. For several days, he had explored the surrounding lands of Myrloch Vale, but his journey was nearly complete.

The entirety of Myrloch Vale was now known to him. The vast valley, in the center of the island of Gwynneth, had long been a bastion of the goddess who had watched over these isles. Now, however, it had become a land of death, a monumental wasteland in testament to the awesome power of the cleric's god.

And he had ventured to northern Gwynneth, beyond the vale and into the lands of the northmen along the fir coast. These invaders had claimed the land from the native Ffolk, establishing a number of villages and even one good-sized town, but had nothing resembling a separate state there. Bhaal had wondered about these humans, and so the cleric had investigated.

The southern land of Gwynneth, occupying nearly half the isle, was the kingdom of Corwell, of the people known as the Ffolk. This land the cleric had not visited, but that mattered little, for Corwell was already well known to the minions of Bhaal.

Now Hobarth, cleric of Bhaal, returned to the Darkwell with good news for his foul master. Decay spread rapidly across the vale. Everywhere he went, Hobarth found death and rot, as whole forests died and placid lakes shriveled into festering swamps.

The area around the well was particularly barren. The corpses of the many zombies he had raised from death were gone now, as Hobarth had ordered them into the well. Their presence, in fact, had been a prime source of the pollution that had so effectively corrupted the Moonwell. And the decay seemed to be spreading rapidly. Bhaal, Hobarth knew, would be pleased.

As he neared the Darkwell, he sensed a difference around him. It was not a difference in the land or even the air, but a subtle presence on a deeper level. Something was here that had not been here when he left.

He saw the well before him, its slick black surface barely reflecting the white outlines of the statues. The Darkwell had, since its creation a month before, been a center of power for his god.

But now Hobarth sensed something mightier, more dynamic than the gate connecting his god's world to his own. In a flash of understanding, he understood, and as he understood he dropped to his knees.

Bhaal was here!

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

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

Approach the well.

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

The Great Druid.

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

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

The Heart.

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

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

Bhaal must be very near, Hobarth thought, for it seemed to the cleric that the god leered over his shoulder. Hobarth acted as if by instinct, performing a ritual he had never seen, yet one that he knew without question or doubt. He sensed that Bhaal was pleased, and his god's pleasure was a thrill unlike any the cleric had ever known.

The black surface of the heart touched the white stone of Genna's breast. Yellow smoke hissed at contact, and trickles of clear liquid ran down the statue's stony robe. Where the stone was wet, it became a bright red, like freshly spilled blood.

Hobarth stared into the statue's eyes, and he saw the defiance that had been etched there begin to fade. He pressed his hand against her and was gratified to feel the Heart of Kazgoroth sink into the stone. More smoke spewed, nearly blinding him, but he kept his gaze fastened upon the statue's eyes.

His own eyes watered. The statue grew soft, and Hobarth's hand, together with the black stone, passed directly into the cold body. Quickly he drew forth his hand empty, and the surface of the statue closed behind it. He looked again into those stone eyes.

Only it was no longer a statue, and the eyes burned with a far from stonelike fire.

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The low green mass of Corwell loomed to starboard. To port, invisible in the gray haze of sea-miles, lay the island of Moray. And below the keel of the sleek longship rolled the gray swells of the Strait of the Leviathan.

But Grunnarch the Red knew that the Leviathan was dead. Had not the Red King played a role in its demise only a short year earlier? He found the memory vaguely disquieting.

Now the ruler of the northmen stood boldly on the deck of his ship, the *Northwind*, and stared into the distance. Not north, toward Norland and home, but east, toward Corwell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A strange feeling came over him as he examined the exterior of the scroll case. He saw a picture of a heautiful young woman, sensual and rounded, and yet his reaction was a wish to protect her. Other pictures—a vast field of grain, a smooth lake, and a cozy fire in a hearth of stone—all beckoned him with sensations of warmth and comfort.

Disquieted, he took the scrolls gruffly. He turned on his heel and ordered his surprised crews back to their vessels, leaving Lodi almost unscathed. They took no other plunder but instead put straight to sea under the harsh urging of the Red King.

And so came the scrolls with him to the Moonshaes.

This season of plunder had dragged on for Grunnarch, for he lacked the fiery battle lust that had once made him relish the strike of steel against steel, the striving of man against man. Now battle was merely another tiresome task that faced him all too often.

After the raid on Lodi, the Red King had lost heart for battle altogether. Rationalizing that the season was late, he had ordered the two ships homeward, ignoring the surprised reactions of his crew. After two tendays upon the Trackless Sea, they had returned once again to the Moonshaes. Now they slipped between two kingdoms of the Ffolk, headed toward his own lands to the north.

And still that feeling of foreboding remained with him, perched upon his broad shoulders like some unnatural apparition.

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A great brown bear shuffled across the dead land, pausing to turn over a log with his broad forepaw or to snuffle under a stump with his nose. Once again, the spoor of even a tiny maggot or grub eluded him. Grunt huffed in frustration, too weak to take even a half hearted swing at the offending stump.

There was no food here.

Grunt stumbled on, sensing that to stop was to die. Long gashes covered his shaggy flanks, now crusted with dried blood. One of the cuts lay freshly opened, a victim of some scrape against a looming trunk.

Even in the depths of his fatigue, Grunt moved with pride and purpose. His head held high, his posture was a challenge to any lesser creature that might cross his path. But his footsteps were unsteady, and the great brown eyes grew dull. There were no creatures to cross his path and behold his prideful agony.

This was land Grunt had known all of his life, yet he did not know it now. The grove of his mistress, Genna Moonsinger, the Great Druid of the isle, now festered and decayed. Many were the animals that had lived here, amid a lush blanket of greenery. Now there was no creature. Now there was no thing green.

Grunt growled, the sound rumbling low in his chest. He blinked, peering around as if trying to clear the nightmare vision from his eyes. Then he lumbered on, resolutely plodding across the wasteland in search of food or water.

Suddenly the bear lifted his great head and froze. His only motion was the twitching of his broad nostrils as they searched the air. Whatever it was, a scent excited the bear like nothing else in many days.

Grunt started forward faster now, breaking into a clumsy trot. He uttered one coughlike grunt, then another. Before him lay the former heart of the grove. Recently the bear had somehow sensed that this was the center of its corruption and had thus avoided it. But even the suspicion of the exciting spoor in the wind was enough to compel him there.

Genna? Hope swelled within the bear's breast. Was that not his mistress, standing there in the distance, staring at him? He sniffed at the air, lumbering closer. The scent was that of the Great Druid, he thought, but somehow different.

Blinking in confusion, Grunt struggled to focus his dim eyesight. He saw the short, rounded body, recognized the gray hair pulled tightly back from the face. He saw no smile upon that face, and the human's posture seemed stiff and unnatural.

Yet his eyes could not be wrong. He slowed as he reached the woman and grunted happily, leaning into her expectantly. The bear

was surprised when she did not scratch his ears. What was wrong? Grunt looked at the round, wrinkled face curiously.

And in an instant, he recoiled in fear. Cringing low, the bear looked up at her like a whipped puppy, puzzled and pained by the look in her eyes.

She raised her arm, pointing, and Grunt obeyed. His huge body moved toward the black water, where once the crystalline Moonwell had reflected the blessing of the goddess. Quivering, he approached the water.

The bear turned once to look back at his mistress, his eyes pleading. She pointed again, and he dropped his head obediently. His muzzle touched the surface of the Darkwell. And then his life was gone as he gave it, unwittingly, to Bhaal.

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Chauntea, as a goddess, was close in spirit to the Earthmother, though far removed in aspect. While the great mother's life lay in the earth itself, in the hallowed ground of the Moonshaes, Chauntea's being dwelled upon the joyous plane of Elysium, far removed from the world of mortals.

The Earthmother's followers were the Ffolk of the Moonshae Isles, led by their druids. Chauntea's believers came from across the planes, and even in the Forgotten Realms were spread among the many nations of the world. The tenets of the Earthmother's faith held that nature was sacred, and maintaining the balance of all things became the druidical creed. Followers of Chauntea held that the land should be farmed, that the growth provided by nature should be barnessed for the greater good of man.

Yet despite their differences, the goddesses both were beings of health and growth, cherishing the plants and animals, working to protect the humans who held to their faith.

Now Chauntea sensed the power of the Earthmother waning. She also felt the looming presence of Bhaal. As that dark god moved into the power vacuum being created, Chauntea also began to move. Though she lacked Bhaal's awesome might and implacable evil, she was a being of great resource in her own right.

Now those resources would be tested.