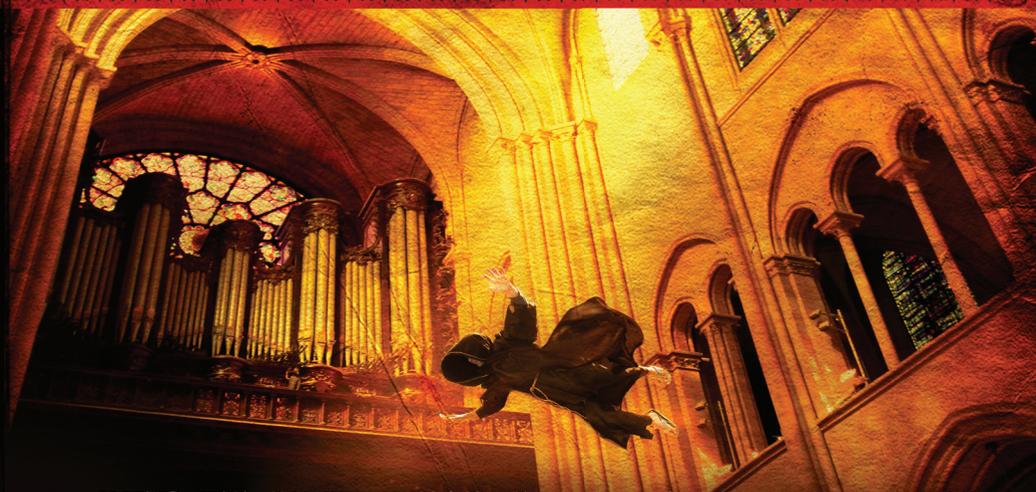




BOOK ONE

THE DARK
FAITH



JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



THE DARK
FAITH



THE DARK HARVEST TRILOGY

The Dark Faith

The Scarlet Bishop

The Threefold Cord



THE DARK FAITH



JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Gavin, Logan, Ewan, & Aidan:

But especially to Logan,
who prayed for Daddy's book

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PART I



THE DARK MADNESS

PROLOGUE

The little girl picked her way as quickly as she dared up the path toward the hill fort. The sky overhead was the color of dark slate and brimmed with thick clouds. It had not rained in this part of Dyfann for over a week, yet the track winding up the slope was slick. The mud squelched between her toes as she climbed. The air about her was cool and tense, and carried a metallic taste.

“Death is a natural part of life,” her father always told her, “We needn’t fear it any more than we fear birth. One feeds into the other, and the other back into the first.”

Like most little girls, this one wanted to believe her father. And so she did, in nearly everything. Until today, she had never questioned what he said about the naturalness of death. Yet as she left her escort behind, she found her faith . . . unsettled. Try as she might, she could not long bear the sight of the hill now that she ascended it alone. Too many lifeless gazes lined her path.

Some of the faces were smooth and young. Others, old and grizzled. All of them were vacant. Some of the bodies wore nothing but battle-paint. Others wore the tunics of Mersex. All were but empty husks, some with deep gouges across their chests, others with middles slashed open and their bowels spilled out. Still others had lost arm or leg or head to the hacking blows of the enemy. All of them lay strewn like broken

twigs. She remembered when the hillside had been green and lovely. Now everywhere she looked it was red and ugly. Blood smeared the dirty faces of the dead. Blood puddled between the heaps and ran downhill in ruddy rivulets. Blood had turned the dirt track to the hill fort into a foul mud.

The little girl always wanted to believe her father, but she did not understand. How could such a horrid thing be natural?

The wall of the hill fort had been burned in several places during the battle. She saw the charred beams and cracked timbers as she approached the gate. Though the gate itself remained intact and stood open, one could hardly say the same for the man who stood beside it. In his right hand he held an axe, his grip relaxed now that the battle was over. Yet where his left arm should have been, nothing remained but a short, wrapped stump above the elbow. Seeing her approach, the man smiled and stooped down.

“And who might we have here?” He did his best to sound grave.

Now that she saw him up close, the little girl smiled. “You know who I am, Firin!” She was only too happy for the *deaclaid*’s smile: it turned her mind from all those masks of death.



Sacred law forbade priests to carry a weapon or fight in battle. According to the Old Faith of Dyfann, offerings of blood could only be poured by hands that had shed none. This rule was inviolable: those who broke it were forever after barred from the Holy Groves. And so arose the office of *deaclaid*, Dyfanni for “right hand.” If a priest had to go near battle, he would take a *deaclaid*, a chosen warrior, with him to act as his protector. To receive this title was an honor reserved only for the most proven warriors.

“Yes, lass, I know you. Not a face as pretty as yours in all of Dyfann!” Firin stood and beckoned with his good arm. “Your da’s inside. Go on in and brighten his day. He could use it.”

The little girl paused, looking up at the bandaged stump. “You are injured, Firin.”

“A bit.”

“Does it hurt?”

“A bit,” repeated the man with a slight grimace.

“Was the battle bad?”

“Not as bad for us as for the Mersians.”

“Did my brother—”

“No more questions, lass. They’re all waiting for you inside. Off you go!” His tone was still gentle, but his gesture was now insistent.

Leaving Firin behind, the little girl pushed on past the gate toward the hall. Like the outer fortifications, the timber-built hall showed signs of the recent battle. At several places along its long roof, charred holes marked spots where Mersian torches had landed on the thatch. Yet today, the little girl saw smoke rising at one point only: through a man-made hole at the midpoint of the roof’s ridge.

The interior of the hall was dim, for the fire in the central pit was undersized and underfed. Yet even in the meager light the girl saw the crowd of men standing around the hearth. Each wore a long white robe wrapped in a green cloak, the attire reserved by her people for priests. It was only after she perceived the large number of them present—at least a dozen—that the little girl realized what she was witnessing.

It was an extremely rare thing for the Circle of the Holy Groves to meet in full. It had not happened in the girl’s lifetime. Even her brother—who was much older than she—had gone with their father only once to a meeting of the whole sacred council. Thus the little girl kept her steps soft as she approached the circle. Her silence stemmed not from fear of

discovery: having been summoned, she could draw near to the circle without fear of death. Rather, she stepped lightly out of reverence. Though she was too young to have seen much of the wider world, as a daughter of a priestly family she understood the significance of what was transpiring. For the full council to meet at all, something important had to happen. But for the full council to meet outside the *Mutha-dannach*—the Mother Glen—whatever happened must have been just short of cataclysmic. Whatever it was, the assembled men were too engaged in their discussion to see the girl come up behind them.

“How long do you plan to keep us in suspense, son of Comnadh?” asked one voice.

The little girl did not know the speaker, but Comnadh was her father, the priest of Banr Cluidan. Thus “son of Comnadh” could refer to only one person . . .

The girl caught sight of her brother through a space between two priests. All of her careful reserve in approaching the group melted away the moment she realized he had returned. “Somnadh!”

The conversation jerked to a halt as fourteen surprised faces turned in her direction. Slipping between the men into the circle, the little girl looked across the round hearth. There, standing apart from the others near the fire’s brink, were her brother and father.

“Urien!” Somnadh’s face lit up.

Beside him, her father’s face lifted in a broad smile. A bit of gloom seemed to lift from his features as he kneeled. “Come to me, my daughter!”

For years to come, Urien would look back on this moment with fondness. Here was everything she cared about. Neither Comnadh nor Somnadh possessed an imposing physical presence. Both had long, brown hair and, because of their office, both wore it tied with a golden cord behind the nape of the

neck. Likewise their facial features were more knobby than commanding, their dark eyes more pensive than piercing. In short, but for their priestly garments, neither father nor son would have garnered more than a single look among a crowd of Dyfanni. Yet none of this mattered. To one who had grown up deprived of a mother, father and brother were everything. Urien stepped around the hearth and buried her face in her father's waiting embrace.

"Father." She sighed, tears of joy escaping down her cheeks.

After a long moment, the silence was broken by one of the other priests.

"It is good to see such affections, Comnadh"—the grandfatherly voice came from somewhere behind Urien—"especially in days as bleak as these. The tenderness of our daughters is the strength of our people. Yet your son has summoned us with a promise of great tidings, and we have come at great risk and through many dangers to hear them. It has been generations since we have met beyond the shade of the Mother—and never by the call of an apprentice. Were Somnadh not the son of Comnadh, I would not have consented to this gathering. But even a great name can be lost, and our time grows short. If there are tidings, we will hear them now."

"Stand beside me now, my dear." Comnadh released his daughter and rose to his feet.

"Your words are truth, Seanguth." Her father used the formal language required when addressing the Eldest of the Circle. He stepped back into the ranks of the ring, pulling Urien with him. "My son will speak."

Somnadh, who now stood alone in the center of the circle near the brim of the hearth-pit, turned in place. He looked each of the assembled priests in the eye before stopping with his face toward the Eldest. He bowed, "Though I am but an apprentice, I beg leave to address the Circle."

“You have it.” Seanguth, the Eldest, was a short, wizened old man. His face was grave, but not unkind.

“Thank you, Eldest.” Urien’s brother bowed again, then began his formal declamation. “Fathers of the Circle, I bring you great and marvelous tidings. Two moons past, I stood among the throngs in the square of Toberstan as word of our raid on Hoccaster reached the ears of the king of Mersex. As this Circle hoped, the raid proved successful. The Aesusian council dissolved before an agreement could be reached.”

“*These* are the great tidings?”

Urien frowned at the scoffing priest who stood two places to the right of Seanguth. But he went on.

“Did we need to assemble for this? There are plenty of slain across our land—and outside these walls—who could testify as much!”

“Agreed,” said another, this time several places to the left of the Eldest, “And it was not ‘this Circle’ that sent the clans on such an ill-begotten raid.” He jabbed a finger across the fire. “It was the poor counsel of a few!”

“Poor counsel!” The accused, a grim-faced priest standing to the left hand of Urien’s father, all but spat the words “The Aesusians of the north are far more dangerous than the Mersians. Had we not broken up this council with our raid, they would all soon be at our throats!”

“They are at our throats *because* of this raid!”

“*Peace!*” Seanguth’s command boomed through the hall.

Instantly the disputants fell silent.

Urien had jumped at the Eldest’s exclamation. Who knew such a small man could make such a great sound? When she looked up she saw irritation in the furrows of his wrinkled brow.

“What is past is past. The apprentice misspoke. I am sure that the son of Comnadh did not call us here to speak in our

ears what our eyes can see.” The warning in his tone was obvious: Urien’s brother *better* have something more to say.

“The words of the Eldest are truth.” Somnadh nodded and touched one hand to his forehead. “Forgive me, Fathers: my words were poorly chosen. I was sent to observe the Aesusian council in Toberstan as soon as my father heard that it was to convene—before the raid on Hoccaster. I assumed that the raid had been the will of the whole Circle; I see now that it was otherwise. I withdraw the words.” Somnadh pinched the air with his hand, and then touched his fingers to his mouth.

Seanguth and several of the other priests nodded acknowledgement of the gesture. Then Somnadh resumed in a brighter tone.

“Yet I do have great and marvelous tidings, Fathers! As our law requires for priests who go beyond the mountains, upon my return I went to the *Muthadannach* to offer some of my own blood.”

“That is not strictly required in all cases, boy,” corrected Seanguth. “But you do well to show such zeal.”

Somnadh’s tone was deferential. “Thank you, Eldest. After Mother tasted and knew that I had not shed blood beyond her sight, I prayed beneath her boughs. It was then that it happened: I received a vision.”

The announcement was greeted with silence.

“Tell them what you saw, son.”

From beside him, Urien looked up at her father. There she saw the urgency in his voice matched by an unsettled expression on his features. In front of them, Somnadh never turned his face from the Eldest. But he nodded before continuing.

“In my vision I saw one of Mother’s limbs descending toward me. Held in her leaves was her Seed. She planted this Seed in the ground before me, and immediately it sprang up. But there was something strange about this sapling. It was white like the Mother, yet its form was strange. When it grew, I saw that it was shaped like an Aesusian cross!”

“What!” murmured several voices around the Circle.

“Yes!” Somnadh nodded. “I myself was at first repelled! I could not fathom what it meant. But then I heard Mother’s voice. She said, ‘I am the Mother. This is my Seed.’ Then I understood. After this, another of Mother’s limbs descended. Like the first, this one also held her Seed. ‘This is my Daughter,’ she said, handing the Seed to me. Then she showed me where I should plant it. It is a place far from here—beyond the mountains, beyond even Mersex—a place where our people dwelt long ago.”

For a long moment the only sound was the crackle of the fire, which by now burned quite low in the hearth. Finally, Seanguth broke the silence.

“Oh son of Comnadh”—he spoke slowly, as though choosing each word with great care—“these are great tidings indeed—quite marvelous to be borne by one so young.” His tone grew grim. “If you do not speak truth, you will pour out *all* of your blood before Mother as payment for sacrilege. If you *do* speak truth”—here he paused, surveying each face around the Circle before resettling on Somnadh—“you must show proof.”

Urien held her breath. She sensed that her brother was in great danger. What was going to happen?

“My words are truth.” Somnadh reached into his cloak. Withdrawing his hand, he stretched it forth so that all could see. Cradled in his open palm was an object the size of a walnut. At its appearance, the fire in the hearth seemed to flare up.

The light of the flames reflected across a pure white surface.

Urien was not the only person standing around the circle to gasp. In the next instant, everyone but Somnadh had fallen to his knees.

“The Holy Seed.” Seanguth’s voice quivered. “The first in thirteen generations!” He looked up at Somnadh, eyes wide. “You have been chosen by the Mother, son of Comnadh.”

“Yes, Eldest.” Somnadh gestured toward Urien. “Now you see why I asked the Circle to wait for my sister to arrive.”

Seanguth nodded. “‘The Hand of the Seed must provide a Heart for the Queen.’ Thus it is spoken in the ancient law.”

“I have no virgin daughter of my own,” said Somnadh, “only a sister.”

“W-what does it mean, brother?” Visions of the slain on the hill below the hall rose unbidden before Urien’s eyes. “Am I—am I going to die?”

“Oh no, dear Urien!” Somnadh turned to face her. “Far from it, my sister!”

Somnadh leaned down and gave his daughter a hug. “It means that you must go away with your brother, dear one. You, too, are the Mother’s chosen.”



It is a rule worth remembering as long as one lives: reality is far more frightening than fantasy. A second is like unto it: unwary travelers through a silent wood seldom come to the end of their way unscathed.

A healthy forest is full of noises. Birds cry, squirrels rustle, and deer tiptoe. Bears plod in their peculiar, preoccupied manner. These are the normal sounds. Yet absolute silence—of this one must take heed. Stillness in the woods is often a sign of something unnatural. Too many old stories speak of forests as the halls of fairy kings . . .

Too few mention them as the haunts of inhuman predators.

And yet, Morumus paid these things little heed this day. He knew well the wooded paths surrounding Lorudin Abbey. He had grown quite familiar with the length and breadth of them since coming to the country of Caeldora. He knew the contours of this forest, and he knew its character. He knew the tilts and turnings of its tracks, and he knew which trails were safe for men to tread. For years he had padded these ancient footways, sometimes in company but usually alone. It was not that company lacked for the asking. Rather, most days he simply preferred the solitude. For Morumus found

few circumstances quite as ideally suited for prayer and contemplation as a walk in the woods.

Such was the manner in which Morumus walked through the woods this day: reflective, silent, transported. With eyes as brown as bark, and hair and habit to match, he knew one might imagine him not a man, but rather a spirit of the wood. But Morumus was not prone to such light musings.

Life was almost as serious as death. How could it be otherwise, when the latter so often intruded upon the former without warning? What's more, how could it be otherwise when there were those who celebrated death by destroying life with impunity? Morumus had sworn to a faith that promised life beyond the grave while still regarding death as an enemy. But there existed in the world another faith, a faith that reveled in death. He knew this from bitter experience, for he had witnessed it firsthand. Morumus trusted Aesus alone . . .

But he had seen the Dark Faith.

And that had made Morumus a monk.

He possessed faith from childhood, for his father had raised him to trust and love and obey the Lord. Yet prior to his deadly encounter, Morumus took his faith for granted. But in that single helpless hour, when the Dark Faith destroyed nearly everything he held dear, all began to change.

Depravity was a cruel teacher, yet it taught him to cleave to the Light.

Morumus had spent the years since that hour preparing to return the affront. The power of the Dark Faith seemed somehow linked to its language. Thus he had studied languages and their roots, in the hope of uncovering the Dark Speech. Alongside of this he had studied Holy Writ to learn the True Faith. Someday he would return and spread the truth to those corners of his homeland that harbored and nurtured the Dark Faith. He would destroy the Dark Faith by exposing its lie and preaching the truth.

For years, this had been enough for Morumus. Until yesterday.

Yesterday, Abbot Grahem asked him a question: “You have been here for ten years now, Morumus, and you have learned much. But to what end do you intend to apply your learning? How will you use it?”

Although asked with a good will—for Abbot Grahem was a very gracious superior—the conversation had unsettled Morumus. For one thing, he realized then that he had not kept count of the time. Had he really been in Caeldora for ten years? And then there was the abbot’s question itself . . .

A question Morumus could not answer.

Though he had learned much of Holy Writ in ten years, Morumus had not uncovered even a trace of the Dark Speech. He had applied himself diligently; he had learned every language he could. He could speak and write both the language of Caeldora and the language of the Church. He had explored the connections between these languages. Yet for all this he was no closer to his goal today than he had been when he arrived in Lorudin. Abbot Grahem’s question had struck deeper than the older man could have imagined. For the first time, Morumus wondered . . .

What if he could *never* find a key to the Dark Speech? Could he still achieve his goal?

And so Morumus trod the forest trails this day, to pray and think over this question. The Rule allotted afternoons for quiet meditation, and he had left the abbey shortly after the conclusion of midday prayers. For hours he had walked, his body meandering while his spirit mulled. The sun was well past its peak before he realized it. When he did, Morumus stopped walking. He would have to turn back soon.

Then he saw it.

The strange color.

Summer had arrived in Caeldora, and all was green with new life. Off to his left, a stream wound through a wide hollow

where thick moss covered most of the space between the trees. But something was not right. A pale shape lay unmoving near the brink of the water.

“What is that?” He stepped off the path to investigate.

A sense of dread stirred within him as he approached. By the time he closed half the distance, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He did not understand this apprehension at first, but then he noticed the utter stillness surrounding him—

A thick hush had descended upon the wood like a shroud.

No birds chirped, no chipmunks chattered, no leaves rustled in the wind. The air was still. The only sound was the swift splashing of the water in the stream. Yet even that seemed muted.

It was not until he closed to within a dozen paces that Morumus recognized the shape. A lamb, or at least part of a lamb. But something dark covered the head and neck. At first it looked like a mass of fur or hair shed by whatever predator had made the kill. Yet as he neared the carcass, Morumus began to doubt his guess. The hair was too long and too fine to be animal shedding—it looked almost . . .

Human.

But it seemed attached to the head of the lamb, which made no sense at all. Unable to abide this incongruity or the suspense, Morumus closed the remaining distance and stooped down for a better look.

“*What—?*” He lurched back, losing his balance. Struggling back to his feet, Morumus took several steps away from the carcass.

“*How—?*” His voice trailed off to a numb whisper. “God have mercy.”

The hair looked human because it *was* human. It appeared attached because it *was* attached—but not to the head of a lamb. The carcass was a monstrosity: a lamb’s body with a human head and neck. And the face was that of a young girl.

A wave of nausea washed over him. His stomach heaved, and he tasted bile.

The girl had raven-black hair and blue eyes. The eyes were clear and lovely—the sort that would have gladdened hearts. But now the light had departed from those blue depths, and they stared unseeing from a face frozen by death. The girl's hair lay in a haphazard splash upon the ground, and the skin of her face was very, very pale. Morumus could see no color in it at all. He wondered at this, until he saw the deep gash in her neck. Then he knew. This creature—girl or lamb or devilish combination—had been bled empty.

Exsanguination?

Morumus was no stranger to death, not even the unlawful and violent sort. Yet nothing in his experience compared with the grotesque scene spread out before him. It was not just the appearance of the creature that bothered him—though to be sure, this disturbed him plenty—it was the method. Exsanguination was a butcher's technique: a sharp blow to the head followed by a sharp knife to the throat. The blow spared the animal. The bleeding preserved the meat. But who would do this to a child?

Morumus's stomach heaved again, and again came up dry.

Wait!

As the first moment of horror passed, Morumus's mind reverted to its habit of close observation. In so doing, he realized something: whoever had killed this girl had taken the blood, but left the body intact. The discovery did not explain anything, but it did rule out the most obvious—and most revolting—possibility. Whoever had murdered this creature had not been after food. But then why? And for that matter, who?

The next moment a chorus of inhuman cries echoed behind him. Morumus jumped and spun on his heels.

Halfway back to the path, in a wide space where there had been nothing but moss only minutes before, there now stood a

white tree. The tree was not tall compared to the surrounding oaks and elms, yet there was a certain regality to its bearing that defied its diminutive stature. Its leaves were the color of blood and looked like thin hands in scarlet gloves. Its well-proportioned trunk and slender limbs might have appeared graceful—had they not drooped with the weight of the crows.

At least a dozen large birds perched among the branches of the tree. From head to tail their feathers were so black that they seemed to absorb the daylight. Though it hardly seemed possible, the birds' eyes were even darker, making them look like empty sockets. These eyes fixed upon Morumus. They bore an unsettling intelligence. But what really made his skin crawl in those obsidian gleams was their unwholesome intensity.

The birds' harsh cries subsided, and for a minute the forest fell back into uncomfortable stillness. Then the tree's leaves began to stir. At first the movement was slight, and Morumus thought it was but a breeze. But as the stirring increased to a steady rustling, he noticed that it affected none of the surrounding trees. Then the noise grew louder and stronger, and Morumus no longer mistook it for a wind.

It was a voice. Somehow, the tree was speaking.

The language was difficult to pick out, for it consisted of a stream of hissing gasps. Each hiss was distinct in pitch, yet each overtook its predecessor so that there were no pauses. As a result, all of the words—for that is what the hisses were—tumbled together in quick succession. The sound was cruel and discordant.

Morumus's blood ran cold. Though he did not understand any of the words, he recognized the language.

The Dark Speech.

The crows resumed calling. The voice of the tree rose in response to their caws, and one by one the crows began dropping to the ground. Upon landing, each bird hopped out from beneath the branches and began to tremble. As it

shook, its feathers shook out—almost as if the creature were molting on the spot. But the birds were not molting. They were transforming.

In fits and spurts they grew, becoming with each moment both more human and more horrible. Spindly legs grew long. Long wings shortened to arms. Short, straight spines extended into broad backs hunched over at the middle. Gleaming coats of feathers became long black cloaks. Beady eyes and sharp beaks receded into the shadowy recesses of raised cowls. As these features reconfigured, the piercing caws become painful cries. When the transfigurations finished, the figures were human.

“*Dree.*” Adepts of the Dark Faith. Morumus spoke the word like a curse, standing transfixed, unable to move or look away.

One by one, each of the black-cloaked *Dree* turned its empty gaze toward him. Unaccustomed to the use of the human tongue, the best they could manage at first were awkward noises that sounded like short, raspy coughs. It could scarcely pass for speech, but it must have been adequate.

When the *Dree* next acted, it was in concert. A dozen hands reached into dark cloaks and emerged clutching long knives. A moment later the white tree hissed its malevolent command, and they sprung to the attack. Even in human form, the movements of the *Dree* were distinctly avian. Rather than full strides, they moved in combinations of quick steps and short hops.

Morumus regained his mobility, and in the next moment he was fleeing. He turned and ran as fast he could, holding up the hem of his robe with both hands. He did not bother to look over his shoulder. He would have known the fiends were after him even if he had not heard their angry cries. And he knew what would happen if they overtook him—he knew all too well!

Faster! Move faster!

Cresting a slight rise in the forest terrain, Morumus saw a bend in the stream about a hundred paces ahead of him. The water there appeared shallow, and from shore to shore a handful of rocks peeked wet heads about the waterline. Should he cross the stream? In some of the old stories, dark creatures feared to pursue quarry across running water. Would that be true of the *Dree*?

Fixing his eyes on the goal, Morumus increased his pace. But in that very moment his toe tangled in an unseen root and he tumbled headlong. He hit the ground hard, the breath rushing from his lungs. Gasping for air and choking on a mouthful of dirt, he pushed himself to his knees. Sputtering, he regained his feet and tried to continue running.

“Aagh!” He stumbled back to his knees. “No! No!” His voice strained with fear, frustration, and pain. His ankle—the one that had caught in the root—had twisted.

Behind him, the hissing speech of his pursuers grew louder. Ignoring the searing protests from his foot, he forced himself upright. As he did, he glanced back over his shoulder.

He felt a faint pang of hope as he noticed that there seemed to be fewer of the *Dree* behind him now. Yet this hope dampened as he realized that those which remained were closing the distance to him at an alarming rate. Despite their bird-like run—or perhaps because of it—the *Dree* moved much faster than one would expect from men wearing long cloaks in a wood. Like raptors swooping in for the kill, they seemed to glide above the ground.

“Must not be taken!” He groaned through the burning agony of his ankle. The memory of the murdered girl mingled with the terror of his childhood memories, spurring him to resume his hobbled flight. Grunting with each dragging step, he turned his head back toward the stream.

Instead of seeing water, Morumus found himself face to face with one of the *Dree*.

The ancient Dark Faith was destroyed long ago. Or so they thought . . .

Morumus was but a boy when the murderous shadow of the Dark Faith fell upon his family. Now a devout monk, Morumus has been given the task of his life: translate Holy Writ into the language of those who practice the Dark Faith. His translation could be a great, sweeping sword, used to break its power. But as Morumus and two fellow monks begin the task, dark currents drag them toward a dangerous conspiracy. Shadows from his past appear—in his sleep, on a lonely road, even on the cover of an old book. Coincidence? Or something more sinister? Can Morumus find the secret to vanquish the Dark Faith? Or will he lose everything—even his life?

An epic battle between good and evil commences in *The Dark Faith*, the first book in the masterful Dark Harvest trilogy. It is a battle that will push three warrior-clerics to the very limits of their strength—and their faith—as they fight to unearth the truth of an ancient evil, a tree rooted in bloodshed, and a fabled book that holds the secrets they seek.

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—**Kathy Tyers**, Author of the Firebird series

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The realization of his doom struck him like a sledge. He had not eluded any of his pursuers. They had outflanked him. His stomach lurched with a sharp, piercing pain.

Gasping, Morumus looked down. Several inches of a grey, stone blade had vanished through the fabric of his robe. As he watched, the *Dree* plunged the remainder of the knife into his abdomen, twisting it so as to force the blade up toward the heart. Black specks flitted in his vision, followed by a terrifying cold.

Morumus looked up into the face of his murderer. But his dying gaze only met inky blackness. If the *Dree* had a face, it was lost in the deep shadows of its hood. Morumus wanted to shout defiance, but his lungs would no longer fill. For a long moment, all he could do was glare at the *Dree*. Then the black curtain came down over his eyes to meet the rising wave of cold.