



DIVINE HAMMER

KINGPRIEST
TRILOGY



VOLUME TWO

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CHAPTER I ▼

ELEVENTHMONTH, 942 I.A.

Folk called the rock the Hullbreaker, and as he squinted through the lashing rain, Cathan MarSevrin could see why. It was a sea captain's nightmare, a great spire of dark stone half a mile from shore, jabbing up from the angry sea like the talon of some ungodly beast. The stub of an old lighthouse jutted from its peak, but it was dark as a skull, abandoned to weeds and the gales. Any mariner who plied the seas off Istar's northern coast knew well enough to give it a wide berth, but if the fisherfolk were to be believed, the sea floor about the rock ran thick with ancient shipwrecks. The young and foolhardy, craving riches and adventure, sometimes went diving out by the Hullbreaker, seeking treasures lost for centuries. Few returned with any booty of value. Some didn't return at all.

Cathan hadn't come to the Hullbreaker for wealth. The rock held other promises for him. He ran a hand up his face, pushing water into his dark hair—thinning now as he neared his fortieth year, and graying at his temples to match the frost in his beard—and reached down to touch his sword, Ebonbane. Its hilt, gold encrusted with shards of white ceramic, had seldom been far from his reach in the twenty

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years since he'd first buckled it on. A Knight of the Divine Hammer seldom went anywhere without blade or bludgeon at hand.

Lightning forked across the sky, pink and jagged. Thunder followed an eye blink later, loud enough to set Cathan's ears ringing. He didn't flinch, though some of the other knights standing nearby did. There were better places to be during such a violent storm than standing on the edge of a high sea cliff, particularly clad in heavy armor.

"Abysmal night," said Sir Damid Segorro. He was a small, wiry man whose nut-brown skin and beaded hair marked him as hailing from the province of Seldjuk. He wore glistening scale mail in place of the other knights' plate, and his sword was short and curved. He scowled at the clouds, which seethed with flashes of light.

"Dragon weather. I'd sooner do this when we're less apt to get smashed to flotsam."

Cathan didn't glance at his second in command. He'd fought beside the little easterner for more than a year—long enough to know Damid was no coward, only cautious. He may have a point, Cathan thought, glancing over the cliff's edge at the rocks below. Surf exploded against them and about the Hullbreaker in great white blossoms. Beyond, the sea heaved and chopped like a living thing. *Audo conib*, mariners called it, from the safety of harbor taverns. *Hungry water*. Those who sailed it called it worse.

Cathan shook his head, a smile curling his lips. "Where is your faith, friend?" he asked. "The god will protect us."

Damid met his gaze, but only for a second, then looked out to sea. Despite all the months they had served together, the Seldjuki still couldn't look into Cathan's eyes for long. Few men could. Cathan's were no ordinary eyes, but were dead white, empty. In the storm's coruscating light they seemed to flash with their own inner fire. They had been so for more than half his life, and Cathan had long since gotten used to

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men and women averting their gaze. No other man on Krynn had eyes like his.

But then, no other man on Krynn had died and lived to tell the tale.

He looked past Damid to his fellow knights. They were all mailed and armed, white surcoats plastered to their breastplates by the rain, golden hammers burning upon them. A few had donned their helms, closing the visors against the weather, while others let the storm's fury buffet them. They were thirty in all, a smaller force than Cathan was used to commanding. A senior marshal in Istar's holy knighthood, he usually led regiments of a thousand men or more, both knights and *Scatas*, the common footmen of the imperial army.

Tonight, though, a thousand men would not do. He only needed these few to bring down the Skull Brethren.

Cathan had been hunting the Brethren for more than a season now, following one clue to the next. They were followers of Chemosh, among the last of the death god's cultists left in the empire. They practiced their foul rites in secret, stealing corpses from beneath the earth and live folk from above it to sacrifice to their unholy deity. Week after week, month upon month, Cathan and his men had searched in vain, finding only a few abandoned fanes with altars rusty with old blood. Finally, however, their quest had led them to the Hullbreaker. The Chemoshans' main temple was there, far from the eyes of common folk, where they could practice their foul rituals in safety.

That will end tonight, Cathan thought, touching Ebonbane again. By the god, it will.

"Sir? Sir!"

He blinked, snapping away from his musings to face the man who had spoken. It was his squire, a boy of sixteen summers with a wide, freckled face and a mane of straw-colored hair that he had gathered into a long ponytail. His

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armor was simple chain mail, the hammer on his blazon silver, reflecting the fact he had not yet been dubbed a knight. The eagerness in his eyes made them shine nearly as bright as Cathan's own.

"What is it, Tithian?" Cathan asked.

"Sir, the boats are ready," said the youth, who was Cathan's squire. "Shall we go now?"

Cathan glanced at Damid, who shrugged, a grin twisting his lips. Tithian's enthusiasm amused the Seldjuki, and Cathan had to fight back an answering smile. A Marshal of the Hammer didn't mock his men, least of all for zeal. Besides, his own blood was beginning to warm a little, as well. After many years fighting evil in the Kingpriest's name, the song of battle still rang within him.

"Very well," he said. "Let's attend the clerics first, though. We need our blessings before the battle."

There were four priests in Cathan's company, and now the knights gathered before them, heads bowed. Serissi, a silver-haired, iron-jawed woman in Mishakite blue who served as the band's healer, prayed to her goddess to keep the knights safe from harm. Revic, a mountain of a man with Kiri-Jolith's golden tabard over his mail, cut the palm of his hand with a dagger, pouring his blood on the ground in the hopes that it would be the last they would shed that day. Athex—swarthy, fat, and draped in the purple of Habbakuk the Fisher—daubed the knights' foreheads with blessed saltwater, reciting prayers of protection from the sea. Last, stooped by age and snowy vestments made heavy by the rain, came white-bearded Ovinus, Revered Son of Paladine, who sanctified them in the name of the holy church.

"*Ucdas pafiro*," Ovinus prayed, signing the sacred triangle of Istar's highest god, "*nomas cridam pidias, e nos follas ebissas. Sifat.*"

Father of Dawn, bring us glory, and guide our swords true. So let it be.

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“*Sifat*,” the knights echoed. Each drew his weapon—sword, mace, or hammer—and laid a gentle kiss upon it. Then they turned and started down the cliff face.

The men who had once tended the Hullbreaker’s lighthouse had carved a long, narrow stair from the stone here. Wind and water had worn the steps smooth, and they were slick with rain, so the knights had to move slowly, creeping down to the rocky shore. Spray from the bursting surf billowed high above them. Most of the younger men, and a couple of the older ones too, stared at the water with dread—all the more so when they beheld the pair of boats that would carry them to battle.

They were puny things, six-oared shorecraft that bobbed and thudded against each other in the shallows. Damid coughed and sucked on his wispy moustache, and Tithian’s eyes were so wide, it seemed they would pop out of his skull. Cathan, however, merely nodded to himself, staring past the seas to the pillar of rock that was their destination. The storm was bad, but there would be no better time to assail the Chemoshans’ temple. The cultists would not see them coming in the tempest.

“Get in!” he shouted, above the storm’s roar. “As we arranged! Go!”

Several of the men were pale, their faces looking green in the lightning’s glare, but they all obeyed. They had taken oaths when they became knights, so on they went, sloshing through knee-deep water, then hoisting themselves over the gunwales. Cathan went last of all, clambering up to the prow of one vessel. It bucked beneath him as the sea swelled and dropped, but he kept his footing. He reached to his belt again, but this time his fingers didn’t find his sword. Rather, he pulled free a string of glistening pearls, letting them slide and dangle among his fingers. Drawing a deep breath, he held them out, pointing toward the rock.

“*Palado Calib*,” he said, “*me iromas, tus ban abam drifo.*”

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Blessed Paladine, clear my path, that I may walk it without fear.

With that, he broke the string and flung the pearls away. A tiny hailstorm of pearls pattered down into the water before the skiff. Cathan held his breath, waiting. The sea swallowed them and continued to seethe for a time. Then silver light flared beneath the surface, and the water began to change.

Legends spoke of ancient priests, so rich in Paladine's power that they could calm whole oceans with a prayer. This invocation wasn't so strong. Beyond the foam-drenched rocks, the waves kept hurling themselves madly toward destruction. Around the two boats, however, the surface grew smooth, like a great sheet of Micahi glass. It didn't even ripple when the oarsmen dipped their blades into it. The knights regarded it for a good while, wonder in their faces, then looked to Cathan again.

He smiled, his silver eyes flashing as a bolt of lightning struck the ruins atop the Hullbreaker. Slamming down his visor, he drew Ebonbane and pointed it forward.

"On, then! In the Kingpriest's name!"

"For the Lightbringer!" the knights replied as one. Then the oarsmen set to, and the boats shot away from the shore.

The Chemoshans had set watchers on the rocks at the spire's foot: six men with leather cuirasses under dark cloaks, and helmets made from the skulls of goats and wolves. In the storm's fury, though, they didn't notice the boats gliding toward them on patches of smooth water until they had pulled up to the Hullbreaker itself. The knights began to pour out even before the skiffs bumped to a stop, shouting the names of Paladine and the Kingpriest as they clambered up the slippery rocks. Shocked, the cultists hurried to block

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them, five brandishing sickle-bladed swords while one scrambled back toward a fissure in the stone, his robes flapping behind him.

The guards died quickly, in a clamor of steel. They were too few, the Divine Hammer too well trained. The followers of the death god fought without fear of being killed, but that didn't stop steel from sliding between their ribs or opening their throats. Less than a minute after the battle began it was over, their bodies sprawled in tidal pools, the water billowing red about them. One young knight won a fresh scar on his chin from a sickle-blow, but other than that the knights escaped unharmed.

Still, the cultists achieved at least one goal: the last of them escaped, disappearing into the fissure, shouting madly. The knights tried to give chase, but the ground was too treacherous, and he was gone before they could stop him. Cathan cursed.

"So much for surprise," said Damid.

Scowling, Cathan waved his sword, then plunged ahead toward the cave. "Quickly, men!" he shouted. "Take the fight to them!"

In the knights went, Cathan at the fore, Damid at his side. The tunnel was rough and close, its walls smeared with bloody handprints. Torches guttered in wall sconces, making the shadows dance. The way sloped down, a trickle of rainwater flowing along its midst as it twisted deep beneath the spire. As they left the din of the storm behind, a new sound rose, seeming to come up through the rocks beneath their feet. It was a deep thunder, the pounding of drums. Cathan signed the triangle. The Chemoshans skinned their instruments with hides flayed from living men. They made pipes of bones, too, but the knights were too far away to hear those yet.

All at once, the drumming stopped. For a heartbeat, the tunnel was horribly quiet, save for the clatter of the knights' armor. Then came a chorus of angry shouts, punctuated by

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ululating howls that echoed up the tunnel. Biting his lip, Cathan glanced over at Damid. The Seldjuki's eyes were closed, his lips moving in silent prayer. Cathan offered a quick entreaty to the gods as well.

The smell hit them.

It was sickeningly sweet, like the attar of some terrible flower, with a meaty, greasy stench beneath: the reek of rotting flesh. Several knights choked as it clogged their nostrils, and toward the rear a squire was noisily sick. Cathan focused and held firm. He had fought Chemoshans before. He'd been expecting this, and he tightened his grip on Ebonbane as the shadows down the tunnel began to move.

The fane's defenders wore no skull helmets, wielded no sickle swords. They walked unsteadily, the scuff of feet dragging across the floor the only sound of their approach. They did not speak, growl, nor even breathe. The Chemoshans' protectors were dead.

The stench grew unbearable as they staggered into the torchlight. They were horrible to behold, all rancid flesh and glistening bone, slack-hanging mouths and clutching, clawed hands. The Chemoshans' rites gave the dead power to move but not to think. They were as mindless as the creatures that scuttled among the shipwrecks outside. They shambled on, seeking warm flesh, every step an affront to all that was holy.

The first of the dead was a big man who had clearly died by drowning. His flesh was swollen and blue, and there were hollows where the crabs had taken his eyes. Cathan cut him open with a stroke of his sword, slitting his belly to let his entrails slide out. The wound barely slowed the lurching horror, though, and it took a second slash from Damid to drop it, its bloated head spurting free of its shoulders and smacking against the corpse behind it. The creature went boneless, hitting the floor with a wet smack.

The second ghoul had died more violently, a gash in its throat gaping like a second smile. The cut did not bleed, nor

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did its arm when Damid's scimitar took it off at the elbow, leaving ragged strips of sinew behind. Cathan finished it with a thrust through its mouth, turning it as limp as a Pesaran puppet with the strings cut off.

On they came, one grisly wight after another: one with the side of its skull staved in, another with a broken spear shaft still sticking from its belly. Cathan's eyes watered at the stink as Ebonbane rose and fell, rose and fell, in concert with Damid's weapon. After a time, they began to tire, their blows becoming slow and clumsy, so they fell back, letting the next two knights take over the gruesome butchery.

It was one of that pair, a young knight named Sir Alarran, who became the first of the Divine Hammer's casualties. He was fighting his fourth corpse, his blade dancing in tandem with the mace of the man beside him, when somehow the enemy got past his defenses and buffeted the side of his head with its fist. His helm came off, clattering against the wall, and he staggered to one knee, jabbing his sword through the corpse's gut as he dropped. The ghoul did not fall, however. Even as the other knight rained blows down upon it, it lunged at Sir Alarran, broken yellow teeth clamping down on his forehead.

Alarran screamed. There was a sickening crunch.

A heartbeat later, the other knight's mace struck the corpse in the ear, crushing its head to a pulp. It was too late, though. Alarran was dead. Another knight rushed forward to take his place.

The knights pressed forward. By the time the tunnel's slope began to level, six more of their number had fallen, and more than half a hundred corpses lay in their wake, hacked and crushed, a few still twitching. Finally, the numbers of the dead began to thin, and the tunnel opened out into the enormous cavern that was the Chemoshans' fane.

The cave was vast, fifty paces across. A great, dark pool filled half of it, fed by dripping stalactites above. Firelight

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painted the walls, leaping from copper braziers festooned with skulls—animal and human alike. The dreaded drums towered atop the broad stumps of two broken stalagmites, and more skins hung upon the walls, stretched on wooden frames and painted with unholy sigils. Skull-helmed Chemoshans, two score and more, filled the fane, and more ghouls lurked in the shadows. On a stony outcrop above the pool was the altar itself, the huge skull of a long-dead dragon, cut open so its brainpan formed a bowl for sacrifices. Beside it, clad in midnight robes and a bear-skull headdress encrusted with scarlet and black gems, was the head of the cult, the Deathmaster.

Seeing the knights from across the cave, the high priest raised a hand—dark with blood from whatever offering he'd been preparing in the altar—and roared for his men to attack. They obeyed, charging at Cathan and his men with sickle swords and wavy-bladed knives. The remaining ghouls lurched behind. The knights raised their shields to repulse the charge, and for a time the cavern filled with the crash of steel against steel. The wounded and dying shouted out the names of gods both light and dark.

The knights were outnumbered, but they fought hard, and again the cultists were no match. Men died on either side, but the Divine Hammer slew three for each of their own. In time, the Chemoshans' lines faltered, then gave way entirely.

The battle broke up, the Chemoshans' lines unraveling into small pockets that soon fell before the knights' swords. They died howling curses at their killers, their eyes blazing with hate. Cathan and Damid pushed past, Tithian and a half-dozen other knights on their heels as they charged the altar. Another knot of priests awaited them there, and these diehards fought even more furiously than their brethren had, desperation and fury fueling their strength. Even so, they were no match for the Hammer.

The Deathmaster had stayed by the altar, no weapon in his

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hand, his long-bearded face twisted into a cold sneer. There was no fear in his eyes, though his own end was surely at hand. He had made his pact with Chemosh, Cathan knew. His only desire now was to take his foes into death with him, as many as he could. Cathan led his men up the steps of the fane's makeshift dais, Ebonbane flashing red in his hand.

Smiling, the Deathmaster raised a finger to point at him.

Cathan froze, feeling the death god's presence surge through the fane. Seconds became centuries as he watched the high priest's eyes flare blood red, and crimson light swell around the man's fingertips. A strange, itching heat spread across his skin, swiftly gathering into pain. . . .

Something hit him from behind, knocking him to the ground.

Damid.

Cathan felt the Deathmaster's spell leave him, saw his fellow knight freeze, scimitar upraised. "No!" he shouted, reaching out. "Get —"

With a sound like claws scratching slate, the crimson light around the Deathmaster's hand became a whip, a scarlet strand that lashed out and wrapped around and around Damid. The Seldjuki screamed, dropping his sword, then shuddered as his cry rose into agony, muffled by the magical cocoon. Cathan clutched at him, but the webs burned where he touched them, and he snatched his hand back with a hiss.

For an instant, everything was still. Then the magical fibers sprang loose, and tore Sir Damid Segorro apart.

Bits of flesh splattered the stones, splashing down into the pool below. Steel armor ripped apart like tin. Red mist filled the air. Amid it all, Damid's ghastly skeletal remains collapsed in a ruin of bone and tendon.

A mocking laugh burst from the Deathmaster's lips as the knights stared at what remained of their fellow. Eyes blazing with madness, he reached out toward Cathan again—

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—and stopped, staring at the sword that had just buried itself in his stomach.

Cathan blinked, turned, and saw Tithian. His squire no longer held his blade. Recklessly, he had hurled it at the Deathmaster, and somehow the throw had struck true, burying the blade halfway to its quillons in the Chemoshan's gut. It was hard to say whether he or the cult's leader looked more surprised.

The Deathmaster fell to his knees, still gaping at the weapon. Furious, Cathan got to his feet, reached down, and lifted Damid's scimitar. Setting his own blade aside, he walked to the high priest, grabbed the bear's skull, and wrenched it from the man's head. The Deathmaster was old, his face scarred by some long-ago pox. There were fingerbones woven into his hair and beard. He looked up, his dark eyes shining with fanatical hatred. When he opened his mouth to curse Cathan, though, only a dark rope of blood spilled out.

"By the Divine Hammer," Cathan pronounced, raising his dead friend's blade, "in the name of god and Kingpriest, I condemn thee. *Du tas usam, porved.*"

Go to thy god.

The blade fell.