

# Flight of the Nighthawks

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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*Voyager*  
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers  
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,  
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

[www.voyager-books.com](http://www.voyager-books.com)

Published by *Voyager* 2004  
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 713374 X

Typeset in Janson Text by  
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Limited, St Ives plc

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• PROLOGUE •

## Harbinger

*T*HE STORM HAD BROKEN.

Pug danced along the edge of the rocks, his feet finding scant purchase as he made his way among the tide pools. His dark eyes darted about as he peered into each pool under the cliff face, seeking the spiny creatures driven into the shallows by the recently passed storm.

His boyish muscles bunched under his light shirt as he shifted the sack of sandcrawlers, rockclaws, and crabs plucked from this water garden. The afternoon sun sent sparkles through the sea spray swirling around him, as the west wind blew his sun-streaked brown hair about. Pug set his sack down, checked to make sure it was securely tied, then squatted on a clear patch of sand. The sack was not quite full, but Pug relished the extra hour or so that he could relax. Megar the cook wouldn't trouble him about

the time as long as the sack was almost full. Resting with his back against a large rock, Pug settled in to relax. He opened his eyes suddenly. He had fallen asleep, or at least he knew he had fallen asleep here once . . . He sat up.

A cool wet spray struck him in the face. Without having closed his eyes, somehow time had passed. Fear rose up within his chest, and he knew he had stayed much too long. Westward, over the sea, dark thunderheads were forming above the black outline of the Six Sisters, the small islands on the horizon. The roiling, surging clouds, with rain trailing below like some sooty veil, heralded another of the sudden storms common to this part of the coast in early summer. The winds drove the clouds with unnatural fury and distant thunder grew louder by the moment.

Pug turned and looked in all directions. Something was terribly wrong. He knew he had been here many times before, but . . . He had been here before! Not just in this place, but living this very moment!

To the south, the high bluffs of Sailor's Grief reared up against the sky, as waves crashed against the base of that rocky pinnacle. Whitecaps started to form behind the breakers, a sure sign the storm would quickly strike. Pug knew he was in danger, for the storms of summer could drown anyone on the beaches, or if severe enough, on the low ground beyond. He picked up his sack and started north, towards the castle. As he moved among the pools, he felt the coolness in the wind turn to a deeper, wetter cold. The day began to be broken by a patchwork of shadows as the first clouds passed before the sun, bright colours fading to shades of grey. Out to sea, lightning flashed against the blackness of the clouds, and the boom of onrushing thunder

rode over the noise of the waves. Pug picked up speed when he came to the first stretch of open beach.

The storm was coming in faster than he would have thought possible, driving the rising tide before it. By the time he reached the second stretch of tide pools, there was barely ten feet of dry sand between water's edge and cliffs. Pug hurried as fast as was safe across the rocks, twice nearly catching his foot. As he reached the next expanse of sand, he mistimed his jump from the last rock and landed . . . poorly. He had twisted his ankle!

He had been here before, and when he had jumped he had twisted his ankle and a moment later the waves had washed over him.

Pug turned to look at the sea and instead of the surge of water that would wash over him, the water was pulling back! The sea gathered in on itself and as it pulled away, it climbed higher and higher: a wall of water reaching angrily to the heavens. An explosion of thunder erupted over his head and he ducked, crouching to avoid the threat from above. Pug risked an upwards glance and wondered how the clouds had gathered so quickly. Where had the sun gone?

The roiling breakers continued to mount the sky, and as Pug watched in dread, he could see figures moving within the liquid wall. It resembled a barrier of sea-green glass, clouded with sandy imperfections and explosions of bubbles, but transparent enough to make out the shapes moving within it.

Armed creatures stood in ranks, poised and waiting to invade Crydee, and a word came to Pug's mind: Dasati.

He turned, letting go of the sack in his hand as he attempted to reach higher ground. He must warn Duke Borric! He would know what to do! But the Duke is dead, over a century now.

Panic-stricken, the boy clambered up the low rise, his hands unable to find a firm grip, his feet denied solid purchase. He felt tears of frustration rise in his eyes and he glanced over his shoulder.

The black figures stirred within the mounting wall of water. As they stepped forward the wave rose to impossible height, blackening out the already storm-grey skies. Above and behind the massive wave a thing of dark anger revealed itself – a murk without form and feature, yet coherent – a powerful presence with purpose and mind. From it poured pure evil, a miasma of malevolence so vast that it caused the boy to fall over backwards, sitting helpless as he waited.

Pug saw the dark army of the Dasati marching towards him, emerging from waves turned black by the hateful thing in the sky. He slowly rose, balled his fists and stood defiantly, yet he knew he was helpless. He should be able to do something, but he was only a boy, not yet fourteen summers old, not even chosen for a craft, a keep-boy without family or name.

Then as the nearest Dasati warrior raised its sword, a malevolent cry of triumph sounded, a bell-like clarion that brought the child to his knees. Expecting the blade to fall, Pug watched the Dasati hesitate. Behind it, the wave – now taller than the tallest tower in the keep at Crydee – also seemed to pause for a moment, then it came crashing towards him, sweeping up the Dasati before bearing down upon the boy.

‘Ah!’ said Pug, sitting up in bed, his body drenched with perspiration.

‘What is it?’ asked the woman at his side.

Pug turned towards his wife, sensing more than seeing her features in the darkness of their sleeping chamber. He calmed himself and said, ‘A dream. Nothing more.’

Miranda sat up and put a hand on his shoulder. With the briefest gesture she brought every candle in the bed chamber to life. In the soft glow from the candles, she saw the sheen of moisture on his skin reflecting the flickering light. ‘It must have been quite a dream,’ she said softly. ‘You’re drenched.’

Pug turned to regard her in the warm glow. He had been married to Miranda for more than half his life now, yet he found her a constant mystery and occasionally a challenge. But at moments like this he was grateful she was close at hand.

Their bond was a strange one for they were two of the most powerful practitioners of magic on Midkemia and that alone made them unique to the other. Beyond that their histories had intersected before they had met. Pug’s life had been manipulated by Miranda’s father, Macros the Black, and even now as they lived together, they occasionally wondered if their marriage might not have been another of his clever plots. But whatever else, in each other they had found a person who could understand their burdens and challenges as no one else could.

He got out of bed. As he crossed to a washbasin, and soaked a cloth in the water, she said, ‘Tell me of the dream, Pug.’

Pug began to clean himself off. ‘I was a boy, again. I told you about the time I almost drowned on the beach, the day Kulgan’s man Meecham saved me from the boar.

‘This time I didn’t get off the beach, and the Dasati rose from within the storm.’

Miranda sat up and moved back, resting her shoulders against an ornate headboard Pug had given her years before. She said, ‘The dream is understandable. You’re feeling overwhelmed.’

He nodded, and for a brief instant in the soft light of the candles she glimpsed the boy he must have been. Those moments

were rare. Miranda was older than her husband – more than fifty years his senior, but Pug carried more responsibility than anyone else in the Conclave of Shadows. He rarely spoke of it, but she knew something had happened to him during the war with the Emerald Queen years before, during the time he had lingered between life and death, his body a mass of burns from a mighty demon's magic. Since that time he had changed, he had become more humble and less sure of himself. It was something only those closest to Pug saw, and then only rarely, but it was there.

Pug said, 'Yes, I feel overwhelmed. The scope of things . . . makes me feel . . . insignificant at times.'

She smiled, got out of bed and came up behind her husband. Over a hundred years old, Pug looked no more than forty years of age – his body was still trim and athletic, though there was a touch of grey in his hair. He had already lived two lifetimes, and while Miranda was older, Pug had suffered more during his years. He had been held captive as a Tsurani slave for four years, and had then risen to become one of the most powerful men of that empire – a Great One, a Black Robe – a magician of the Assembly.

His first wife, Katala, had left him to return home and die among her people, succumbing to a disease that no priest or healer could cure. Then Pug had lost his children, something no parent should ever have to endure. Of his oldest friends, only Tomas abided still, for the others had only been allotted a mortal's span. Some, Miranda had known briefly, but most were merely names she recalled from his stories: Prince Arutha, who Pug still held in awe even after all these years; the Prince's father, Lord Borric, who had given Pug a family name; Princess Carline,



the object of his boyish infatuation; Kulgan, his first teacher, and Meecham, Kulgan's companion.

The list of names went on, but they were all dead. Laurie, his companion in the slave swamps on Kelewan, Squire Roland, so many of his students over the years, Katala . . . his children, William and Gamina, their children. For a moment he thought of his two surviving sons. 'I'm worried about Magnus and Caleb,' he said softly, his tone betraying his concern as much as the words.

She hugged him tightly from behind. His skin felt cool and clammy. 'Magnus is hard at work with the magicians of the Assembly on Kelewan and Caleb should reach Stardock Town tomorrow. Now come back to bed and let me comfort you.'

'You are always a comfort,' he said softly. He turned slowly in the circle of her arms. Facing her, he again marvelled at his wife's appearance. Beautiful, but strong. The planes of her face were softened by a high forehead and a delicate chin, and her eyes were dark and piercing. 'There are times when I feel I barely know you, given your penchant for secrets, my love. But then there are also times when I know you better than anyone, even myself. And I am certain that no one understands me better than you do.' He held her tightly for a moment, then whispered, 'What are we to do?'

'What we must, my love,' she whispered in his ear. 'Come, back to bed. Dawn is still hours away.'

With a wave of her hand Miranda extinguished the candles, and the room was plunged back into darkness. Pug followed his wife to bed and they nestled down together, seeking comfort in each other's arms.

Pug's mind wrestled with the images from his dream but he

pushed them aside. He knew what was troubling him: once again circumstances were forcing him to act against improbable odds, and that he must again deal with the repercussions of events that had taken place long before his birth.

*Why*, he thought, *must I spend my life cleaning up after other people?* But even as he framed the question, he knew the answer. He had made peace with his gifts years ago, and with such power came responsibility. Try as he might, it was in his nature to be responsible.

*Still*, he thought as sleep returned, *it would be lovely to return* – even if only for one day – to the time when he and Tomas were boys, filled with the hopes and ambitions of youth, when the world had been a much simpler place.