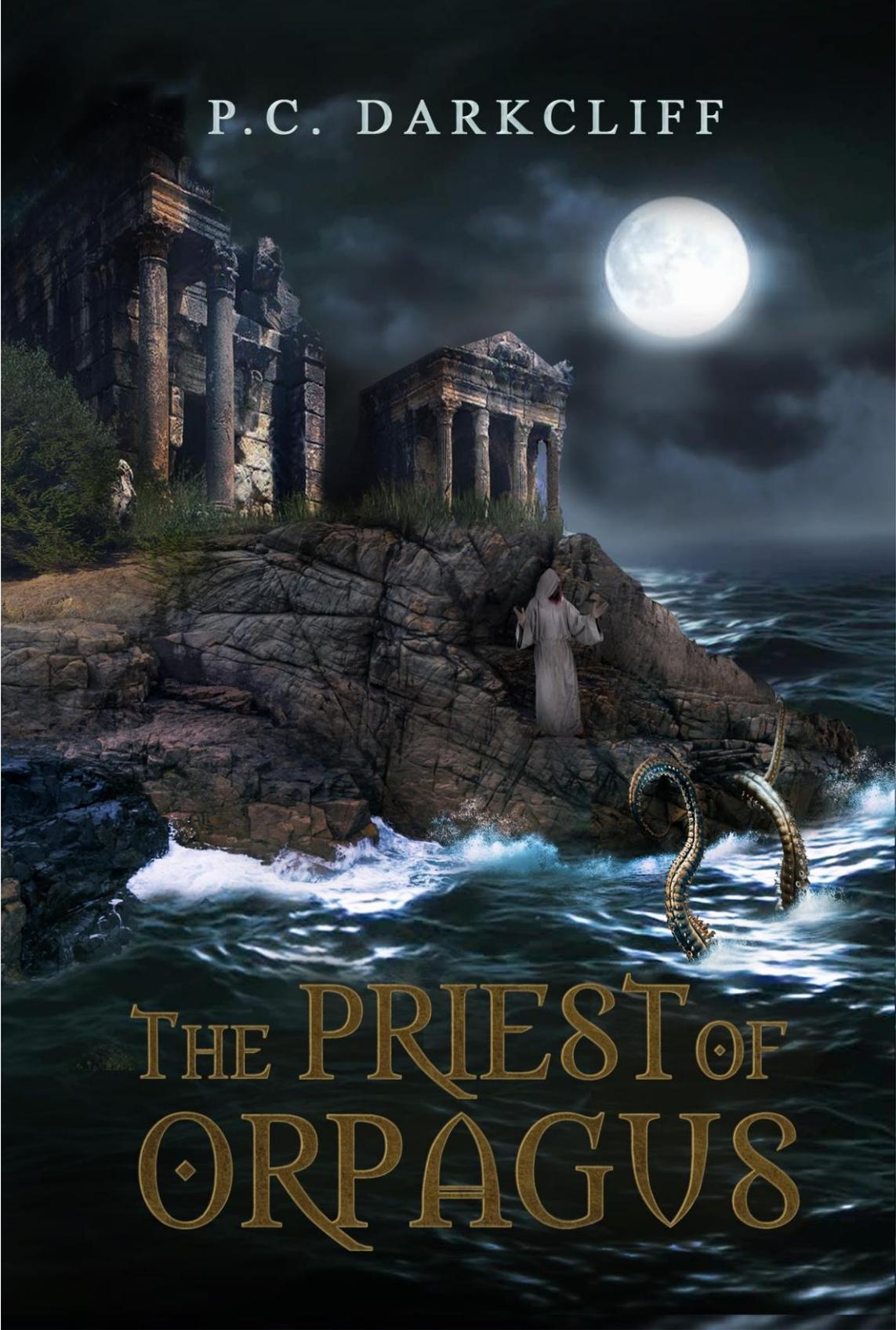


P.C. DARKCLIFF



THE PRIEST OF
ORPAGUS

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CHAPTER ONE

An old man emerged from the ruins of a temple and walked to the edge of a cliff. He huddled in his white robe as a gust of wind rushed up from the sea.

Whitecaps formed twenty feet from the shore and raced toward the temple like rows of crazed pilgrims. In their frenzy, they crashed against the cliff face and staggered backward, wringing outbursts from their followers. The spray drenched the man's hood in a salty drizzle.

The man's heart roared just like the sea. He tugged at his white beard when he spotted a ten-foot shadow gliding under the surface. How would the demon take the news he had brought? Not even three millennia of service helped the man predict his master's reactions.

The demon spread his tentacles, caught the undertow, and rode it like an eight-winged vulture. When he reached the cliff face, he wrapped his tentacles around undersea rocks and poked his head above the surface.

Saltwater poured down his yellow, slanted eyes, but he never blinked. Two pairs of puckered feelers squirmed around his mouth as he sent a telepathic message: "*Why have you summoned me? Is it that nosey woman again?*"

"It is, Master," the man said with a bow, relieved that the demon hadn't lashed out at him. "And this time, she's bringing another intruder: her nephew."

The monster revealed a set of shark-like teeth in a dreadful sneer. *“It’s time to show her whose realm she has invaded!”*

* * *

Black clouds rushed in to strangle the sunshine as the Jeep headed toward the Garus Mountains. Lush cotton fields and red and green pomegranate orchards gave way to barren hills and brown conifers. The wind slammed into the dying trees and made them bend and groan. Their bare branches waved as if to warn the intruders off. But Claudia Fleming barreled on. A fire of obsession blazed in her eyes as she stared through the windshield.

On the passenger seat, James watched his aunt with a frown, certain she had lost it. Her eyes had also twinkled during her last visit to the States while she’d talked about her research and excavations. They’d flared last week when she’d video-called him and talked him into coming to Turkey to see her “amazing discovery.” The fire of enthusiasm had died, though, and a maniacal glow had sprung up in its place.

Claudia had hardly spoken since his arrival, except to herself, and she hunched above the steering wheel like a vulture over carrion. Her hair dangled over her face in greasy, knotted strands. An acrid smell wafted from her armpits whenever she raised her hand to scratch her head.

And where the hell was she taking him? This was the most desolate place he’d ever seen. He couldn’t believe they were just an hour’s drive from the bustling city of Antalya, where he’d landed that morning.

“Where the fuck are we going, Auntie?”

She shifted on the seat and mumbled under her breath. James scowled and shook his bald head.

They reached an abandoned hamlet. The windows of the roofless stone houses stared at them as they drove by. The clouds thickened when they halted by a high chain-link fence five hundred yards down the path.

Claudia killed the engine, got out, and walked to the fence.

James followed suit and peered through the mesh down into a lifeless valley pockmarked with muddy holes that made it look like an abandoned construction site. “Is this what you wanted me to see? You spent thirty years of your life poking through this giant latrine? And you made me come from New York for this? What the hell, Auntie?”

“Come.” Claudia grasped his wrist and dragged him toward a hole in the fence.

“Did *you* make the hole?” he asked as she ducked to crawl through. “Aren’t we breaking the law? Shit, Auntie! You wanna go to a Turkish prison and get a kebab spit stuck up your ass?”

She dragged him to the other side. James cursed as he followed her toward the edge of the valley.

Fear wrapped its tentacles around his mind while they walked over the brown grass down the slope. His hand trembled as he ran it over his shiny scalp. Cold wind squealed around the valley, and yet he sweated more than he had in boiling Antalya.

“No wonder all your fucking team has abandoned you,” he growled, but she didn’t reply.

The sky got darker the deeper they descended. Oily raindrops fell on their heads as if the low clouds also perspired in fear. The mist slithering at their feet smelled of rot.

“I’m not surprised they sealed this fucking place off, Auntie,” he said to break the silence.

She walked on without a word.

They reached the bottom of the valley and passed the first excavation shaft. He felt an unclean presence lurking below the ground. Although he wanted to run back up to the Jeep, it was as if invisible hands rose through the mist, grasped his ankles, and made him walk on.

He gasped and hunched when a shadow passed over his head. A gray seagull circled above them and alighted on a pile of dirt by an excavation shaft. Its large, hooked beak made it resemble a vulture. Having lost many feathers, it looked sick and leprous. The seagull tilted its head and stared at them with a round, unreadable eye, then took off and disappeared.

Claudia led James to a shaft that yawned below an enormous acacia, one of the few trees growing in the valley. He winced at the sight of the thorns, which covered the tree from the roots to the tip of the crown.

She reached into her shoulder bag and took out two headlamps.

“Shit, Auntie, you want me to go down there?” he asked, staring at a wooden ladder whose end stuck out of the shaft. The prospect of descending into the black depths filled him with uneasiness.

“This is why I brought you all the way here, James.” That was the longest sentence she’d said since his arrival. He wondered at the hollowness of her voice, which was as strange as her actions.

She handed him a headlamp and put the other on. She descended with swift, practiced movements. “Come on, James!” she called when she was halfway down.

Curiosity placed his hands and feet on the rungs. As he followed her down the shaft, James’s hands trembled so much he made the ladder shake. God knew what crept down in the unseen corners of such a wasteland. He wanted to return, but the invisible

hands pulled at his ankles. A voice in the back of his head urged him to go on. And he listened.

When he reached the bottom, she led him down a narrow passage where a high ceiling arched above granite walls. His heart thrashed against his ribs at the screaming thought that someone was watching. He grabbed Auntie's hand like a frightened child. They climbed up a flight of stone steps—and he saw it.

A temple squatted two hundred feet ahead. It swam in a twilight that made him feel as if they were no longer underground. Whoever decided to watch could see them. The tunnel melted away, and he looked up. Although he expected clouds, a sheet of gray spread above their heads.

James heard a sound that reminded him of the hum of the sea. But how could that be? They were miles away from the Mediterranean that washed the shores of Antalya.

As they got closer, he saw that the lower parts of the temple's marble columns were solid, but they grew murky like ghosts as they rose higher. The pointed roof loomed in a blurry haze, a dim shadow of the past.

"Auntie, look!" he whispered when he noticed a white-clad man staring at them from the colonnade. A throng of swarthy people in short tunics stood behind him. Although they swam in haziness like the upper part of the temple, the man was flesh and blood.

"He's just a fucking vision," James whispered, praying he was right.

A pointed hood shadowed the man's face, yet James felt he observed them. The man turned around and walked into the temple. His companions melted away.

"He couldn't see us, right?" James asked.

Claudia stared at the open door as if mesmerized. "Let's go in."

* * *

The old man walked through the temple and halted by the edge of the cliff.

“They have arrived, Master.”

The demon sneered and hooked his foremost tentacles over the edge of the cliff. The suckers made hideous smacking sounds when they stuck to the rocky ground. He heaved himself up, like a corpse rising from a flooded grave.

As the demon left the sea, his tentacles transformed into humanoid limbs. While his head retained its fangs, feelers, and yellow eyes, from the neck down he'd become a muscular man with a pair of legs and three pairs of arms . . . which made him more gruesome as he towered over the old man.

“Lead me to the intruders, Priest of Orpagus. Let me see them—and let them see me.”

The man bowed. “As you say, Master.”

They turned toward the temple. *“I’ve had enough of that nosey woman. But we shall spare the nephew, at least for now: he might bring us more souls.”*

>> End of Chapter One <<

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