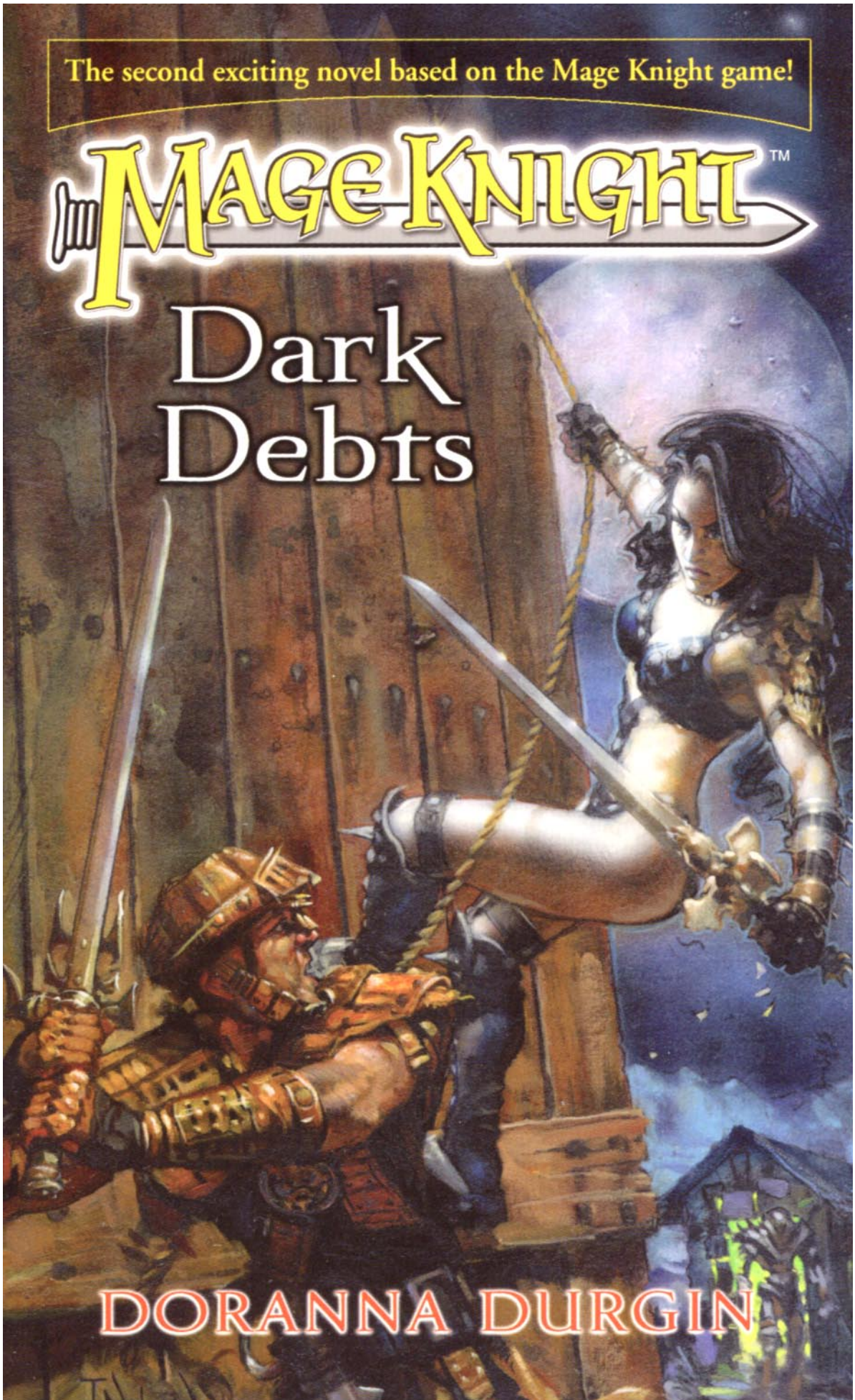


The second exciting novel based on the Mage Knight game!

MAGE KNIGHT™

Dark Debts

DORANNA DURGIN



Chapter Five

420Tz along the Roa Kaiten

Like all nightblades, Kerraii had hours of exposure to the shocking blast of Banshee wailing, in training and even in combat. More than one of the blood-pits featured mass melees with random Banshee strikes; the patrons of the pits enjoyed discovering which nightblade would be distracted enough to die the most horribly.

Like all nightblades, she hated the wailing anyway. She hated crouching in the darkness, waiting for the unearthly screams to shatter the air, for the skeletal fell beasts to swoop down with their keening riders, thunderclaps of sound from their wings punctuating the wails.

The Banshees always rode as though they were the ones possessed, not possessing; they rode as though the opportunity to wail provided them with a release so necessary and satisfying as to be an addiction. Kerraii's perfect night vision picked them out against the night sky, their heads flung back with the effort and their eyes eerily wide open, reflecting their deep, inexplicable pleasure.

This predawn morning was no different. Kerraii and her nightblades, positioned around the perimeter of the town, waited to target the crucial factors in the settlement's resistance—assuming the Banshee blasts didn't incapacitate the occupants right from the start. Kerraii herself occupied nearly the same position she'd held during her reconnaissance; she felt the presence of the seething knights on the hill behind her, tapping the uniquely stored angers that fueled them through their own fighting. Behind them, the Zombies. Only the Nightstalkers themselves knew where the Nightstalkers waited. Not a huge contingent of fighters overall, but plenty to ambush this modest settlement. Kerraii would be surprised if the fighting lasted beyond midday.

If only it would get started in the first place.

Gauze-winged insects hovered near her in their unsteady flight, almost as if deliberately tempting her to bat at them, giving herself away. A faint light appeared in the eastern sky. The merest whisper of dried, leathery wings against air warned Kerraii; she steeled herself for the pain of the Banshee

wail reverberating in her ears, head, and soul. Her heart started to pound, and though she could for that moment hear it in her ears, she knew it would be only a moment before she heard nothing but the powerful wailing, feel the literal shockwave of noise. The unprotected humans would have no chance—they would stiffen and writhe and even die, but they would hardly be able to fight.

Except—

Kerraii froze in disbelief. A faint haze of magic rose from the settlement. Not a small magic, not a feeble, wishful thing without substance, but robust magic. Magic that didn't falter as the Banshees flung themselves through the air and opened up their howls—magic that literally leaped to meet the attack, blasting the fell beasts out of the sky. The Banshees faltered, unprepared for such a fierce assault. Their cries died away to whispers, and even though one of them took up the cry anew, a leaping blast of magic immediately struck her down. For all the fierce joy they took in their power, the Banshees were unaccustomed to this kind of resistance.

A technomancer. They somehow have a technomancer.

It meant a longer fight. A bloodier one. The seething knights would be pleased, and so would the Nightstalkers—it was a chance to vent their fury and indulge in rampant vampirism. Kerraii tensed as the thwarted Banshees faded away, waiting for some sign of activity within the town. The seething knights didn't wait at all. They flung themselves down the hill with lung-rattling battle cries, an unmistakable clash of armor and sword and pounding feet. They built momentum charging down the slope and they swept past Kerraii into the town, all but pulling her into their battle fury—she had to force herself down, force her thoughts to the cool and calm place from which she fought her best.

And because she waited—because she held to her assignment—she saw how, as the knights poured into town, the town poured Atlantean forces back out at them. The building doors opened, the merchant stall covers ripped away, and altem guardsmen rushed to meet the seething knights in a clash of blade and blood, a visceral connection of forces that made the ground tremble beneath Kerraii's feet. The mage blasts continued, targeting not only the warriors but also the necromancers hidden up on the hillside.

Chaos bloomed before her. She fought the impulse to join it. *Follow the plan. They need you as a nightblade, not just as another sword—now more than ever.* The signs of magic faded as the sounds of battle swelled—the cries, the moans, the fierce shouts of attack. Skulk sent the Zombies in early, sacrificing them to give the knights as much edge as possible.

Had the settlement been lucky, or had they been prepared? And if they'd been prepared, how?

Not even Skulk's stray Zombie had given them time for *this*. Not with no sign of such preparation the day before. No suspicious trickle of Atlantean troops, no sign of Atlantean military at all. They had to have been there before the Necropolis troops ever made camp in the woods above town. They'd known the Dark Elves were coming. They'd *known*.

From a building at Kerraii's edge of town emerged an amotep gunner with his Magestone-powered lightning gun. With practiced precision, he aimed for the small group of seething knights who pressed an equal number of Atlanteans up against the rubble of battle-dismantled merchant stalls; the gunner blasted away with a giant burp of sound followed by the distinct *ker-ack!* of the lightning. The seething knights tumbled through the air like dolls, slamming against buildings and impaling themselves on rubble, scorched and singed. The stench of burnt air filled the market area so completely that Kerraii could smell it from the gunner himself.

Mine. This one's mine.

Indeed, he nearly invited her sword, so heedless was he of his back, expecting the two utem guardsmen flanking him to protect him.

But the utem guardsmen squinted into early-morning darkness, eyes blinking from the blast of

the lightning gun, and Kerraii did not. She could see at night, she could see during the day . . . she could do both at the same time if she had to. Sword in one hand, knife in the other, she crept up to the building from which they'd emerged, dipped her head around the edge to confirm their position, and moved out into the open with swift grace just as the gunner released another volley, this one not quite as successful but still damaging.

The soldiers were so distracted by the rush of Zombies coming in from the side that they didn't even know she was there, not even when she was close enough to smell their old sweat and rancid armor padding, to see the flush of red at the back of the gunner's neck above his high-collared protection. "Turn around, boys," she said, just enough of a warning so they'd know terror before they died. She punched the pointed triangular blade of her knife into one utem neck right where the most blood flowed, and channeled the effort of removing it into a sweeping turn that slipped behind the other guardsman's shield and sliced through his leather baldric, leaving him doubled over a fatal wound.

The gunner whirled to face Kerraii, prepared to impale her with the next crack of lightning, or perhaps merely with the jagged defense blades jutting out from the end of the gun. He thumbed the control jewels, refocusing—

Her sword sliced through his stiff gauntlet, taking those fingers right off. "Nice of you to let me in so close," she said, as blood spurted and he jerked his hand back, crying out in disbelief. Not pain; not yet. And mercifully, *never*—for she closed in, drawing the blade across his throat in a high guard position, whirling away as he fell, dying, to check her back. *Clear*.

She withdrew, easing back to the nearest building and the vague shadows of dawn. The chunky, debarked wood of the building pressed into her back as she reassessed the market area, looking for her next target. What she saw made her eyes narrow, and seeded the first doubt in her soul. More guardsmen, both altem and utem, poured into the limited space. Worse, crossbowmen clambered up both wreckage and standing buildings to find the high ground. Another gunner took position on the other side of the market, trying to line up for a clear shot. No Nightstalkers or nightblades in Kerraii's sight, just a handful of Zombies trying to bludgeon their way through. And, most startling, Skulk stood exposed at the edge of the road just outside of the market, his fists clenched at his sides, howling something in what she could call only thwarted fury.

Narrow eyed, she stared at him, half lip reading, half picking his words out of the battle din, trying to make them fit what she saw and what she knew. "No-ooo!" he cried, staggering slightly with the force of his own cries. "This isn't how it was supposed to happen!"

From up on the hill, one of the necromancers revealed his desperation by loosing his pack of Zombie hounds. They charged down into the town, amazingly swift with their awkward, leaping gait. Nothing more than a sacrifice—for this was the worst of circumstances for the hounds, who were best at harrying widespread prey. Another necromancer brought a nearby seething knight back to life. Gray magics danced around the body as the corpse climbed to its feet and regained its weapon. Face pasty and features mildly thickened, it immediately plowed back into the fight. And in the middle of the market area, in the thick of the battle, a Tormented Soul appeared, a difficult Mage Spawn ally whose appearance meant the necromancers were reaching for every potential weapon. The Atlanteans fell before its cold wrath.

But still the Necropolis forces died faster than the necromancers could bring them back, and still the technomancer lurked untouched, entirely free to wreak further havoc.

No. This isn't how it was supposed to happen. But Skulk's howling desperation was a much more personal reaction than that of a battle commander surprised by an opponent. Kerraii glanced away from him to take measure of the battle . . . and counted the fight essentially lost. Poised between

scant opportunities to help her forces and the unique opening to question Skulk, she shifted away from the building and into the brush by the side of the road, stalking one of her own.

Skulk's shouting continued unabated. "You can't possibly have gathered all these troops in a matter of days! This isn't right!"

His words held the tone of a petulant child discovering that the world didn't play by his rules. And Kerraii began to understand. Skulk spoke of *days*; their forces had been there but a day and a half. In a sudden flash of insight, she realized that while he'd denied sending the wayward Zombie out to walk the fields, he hadn't denied sending it out altogether. Zombies: slow, steady, never needing to sleep, to eat

He sent it long before I ever saw it. It had arrived before the Necropolis troops, meant to be seen. *Why?* And whatever Skulk's purpose, it had gone awry. Somehow this small settlement had known they were coming. The Zombie had merely confirmed it, allowing the settlers to turn the tables and grab the element of surprise.

She emerged from the covering brush to slink around Skulk like a cat on the prowl, until the tip of her smallest knife, deceptively innocuous, lifted the unsuspecting point of his chin. He ranted right up to that last moment, entirely unaware of her presence, and then cut off into sudden silence. Somehow even the battle cries seemed distant. It was just the two of them, facing off over the tip of Kerraii's blade.

Her dark velvet voice barely covered the hard steel of her anger. "No," she said, pushing close, using her Elven height to intimidate him. "It's not right. Nothing here is right. Where did these Atlantean troops come from? How long have they had a mage?" Her lips were just inches from his, their noses almost touching. "And just when did you send the Zombie away from your stable?"

"I—I don't—"

"You *do*," she murmured, circling him without releasing her dagger. Its point dug into the soft skin beneath his chin and made him pivot to follow her. Above them, a fell beast flapped in over the town, a lone Banshee tried once more to penetrate the shielded area with her shocking voice. For this once, Kerraii paid it no attention whatsoever. "You know exactly what I mean. The Zombie I killed. You may not have sent it to stomp around above that field, but you *did* send it out."

"I—" he said, protest and denial in his voice, but fear in his eyes—pale, weak human eyes. Kerraii smiled, fiercely with just a glint of glee.

From somewhere within himself, he found the strength to shutter his fear and replace it with haughty offense. "You will pay for this behavior."

"Possibly," she agreed. "Then again, you have to live through this battle for anyone to know I dared accost you at all. I think the chances of that grow smaller with every passing moment."

"You wouldn't dare," he said, and an ugly sneer crept into his expression, a bluff revealed by his desperate eyes. He looked over her shoulder, hunting one of his Zombies, or one of the Zombie hounds from which he could transfer loyalty.

"They're busy," Kerraii told him. "Would you like to try calling up a dark spirit? I hear that requires intense concentration." Her voice dropped to its most dangerous purr. "I know many ways to break a man's concentration."

Bitter voiced, he said, "It's true what they say about a nightblade, then. Never let one get close."

"In all ways, it's true," she told him, nudging his chin with the dagger and watching as a single drop of blood ran down the edge of the blade. She let him see her pleasure at that blood, and then she asked sharply, "What *did* you do?"

"Nothing of any great consequence," he said hoarsely. "Deathspeaker Spider required me to prove myself in this battle, to place the credit firmly with the Order of Uhlrik." He gave a little laugh,

cutting himself further with no apparent concern.

“With *Zombies*?” asked Kerraii. “Zombies are our workhorses, not our heroes.” Standard battle tactics—send the Zombies in to round up the prisoners, to overwhelm the opponent with numbers once the front lines had broken. “Zombies exist to die without actually costing us anything.” A Zombie hound howled fierce sorrow as if in agreement—and its cry choked off in the middle, making Kerraii’s point. Kerraii gave him a cool scowl, although she felt not nearly so calm on the inside, not as she realized the extent of his treachery. Whether he’d meant it or not. “So you did what? Created circumstances in which the Zombies could play a bigger role than expected? Sent your dullest Zombie out ahead to reach the settlement long before we did? Let the settlers get a good look at it, maybe make a few extra arrows?”

“It should have made no difference!” he cried. “A little extra fighting, nothing more! Our victory would have been less assured, but still certain—I was prepared! The Zombies’ entrance would have been the turning point of the battle! Instead, I had to send them in early—I have no idea where these mages came from. My loose Zombie should have made no difference, not in the end!”

She balled the front of his cloak in her fist and swung him around to face the settlement, watching his surprise as he felt her strength. “Look!” she cried, and shook him in her anger. Bodies littered the market area, Necropolis fighters the necromancers simply couldn’t revive fast enough. The hounds lay in pieces, cleaved by swords or blown up by the lightning gun at close range. The seething knights slumped over each other like crossbow-bolt pincushions, their partial armor no impediment to the utem weapons. Zombies struggled to function without limbs, determined to follow their recent orders but unable to comply. “*No difference*? You risked us all to impress your Deathspeaker? Didn’t you have the guts to simply assassinate someone like everyone else?”

He jerked away from her—or tried to. His expression grew more desperate, each grimace and fear exaggerated. “I was going by the reconnaissance reports—they mentioned no mages! How was I supposed to know?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if you hadn’t acted so foolishly,” Kerraii muttered, but like Skulk, she swung her gaze out over the carnage of the battle, feeling the despair of it. The dark spirit had succumbed, its essence shattered by repeated hits of a lightning gun. The nightblade who’d tried to stop the gunner lay dead at his feet, impaled by five arrows. *Silona*. “At least one of the mages must have been here when your Zombie showed up. The Atlanteans had the time to hide their readiness from us—maybe even to gather more troops.” She turned to him, anger flaring again. “Imagine how they laughed at us, knowing we thought this settlement easy to conquer—that our victory was assured!”

“Survival is victory,” he snarled. “No one but you knows why they were prepared for us. It will be easy to blame it on a nightblade mole who’s no longer around to defend herself.”

“Except I’m still here,” she said, softly and oh-so-dangerously.

A new rumble of noise came from the town; Kerraii no longer took her attention from Skulk, barely glancing at the town and even then relying on peripheral vision. The necromancers had banded together for a mass raising, to judge by the stirrings in the formerly still bodies scattered throughout the market area, and the gray, leaden haze wreathing the battlefield. No doubt they’d pulled everyone down from the encampment, from grave robber to Reeve himself, and they’d drawn death magic through every corpse within their magical grasp. A wave of unexpected hope strengthened her resolve not only to live through this, but also to bring Skulk to justice before his peers. They might slyly admire his ambition, but they’d be ruthless enough when it came to punishing his failure.

“Oh, yes,” she said, smiling darkly at Skulk. “I’m still here.”

It was that very moment that power slammed her body with the force of two giant hands clapping against her. Dazed, she staggered, losing her grip on Skulk. Skulk leaped away, much more able to absorb the blow than she. *Technomancer . . . magic blast . . .* Kerraii staggered a step, badly dazed, and though he could have easily escaped, his freedom assured, Skulk lingered, eyeing her. *Not one to pass up an opportunity*, she realized—in this case, the opportunity to kill her. He held a bone knife—a powerful thing beyond his means . . . a stolen blade. She'd seen it in Reeve's hands; the man must be dead, blasted by technomancers, for Skulk to have his weapon. And even in her hazy thoughts, Kerraii knew it would be tipped with magic; any injury it caused would fester and slowly—painfully—drain the life from her.

A magic blast rocked the other end of the market area, and Kerraii simultaneously met Skulk's gaze with the same unspoken realization. *There's more than one mage*. Skulk hesitated, lowering the bone knife, calculating the odds—and then he turned to run.

Kerraii wasn't about to let him get away. She started after him, still unsteady but swifter than he could ever be.

A second blast of pure magical power rocked the area. It knocked Kerraii right off her feet. And then it spun her down into darkness.