



IV  
DIABLO  
LORD OF HATRED

ON NIGHTMARE'S  
WINGS

LORATH

A SHORT STORY BY  
JONATHAN MABERRY

STORY  
JONATHAN MABERRY

ILLUSTRATION  
LINDSAY KERNER

EDITORIAL  
MEGAN WALKER

DESIGN  
SOPHIE ERB

ART DIRECTION  
ALEX CRESWICK

LORE CONSULTATION  
IAN LANDA-BEAVERS

CREATIVE CONSULTATION  
MATT BURNS, CASSIEL CHADWICK,  
CHLOE FRABONI, ZAVEN HAROUTUNIAN,  
DAVID LOMELI

PRODUCTION  
HANNAH MATTISON, BRIANNE MESSINA,  
TAKAYUKI SHIMBO, JT TORREA, TRACY WANG



© 2026 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. Blizzard and the Blizzard Entertainment logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in the US or other countries.

Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's or artist's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



**H**ear me now, for I am the Oracle Queen. It is mine to know what is, what has been, and what will be.

*Dreams are the doorways to the sleeping mind, that dark place where shuttered windows and locked passages cannot bar the truth from entering.*

*In dreams we plan and hope, we scheme and believe . . . and we wake thinking we have solved all dilemmas, discovered secrets about ourselves.*

*Oh, how the universe delights in such faith. As if the melody of a hopeful dreamer can impose its will on reality.*

*But it is not in dreams that truths are revealed. No. It is in the cobwebbed corridors of nightmares that truth waits to be found.*

*But at a cost.*

*Ah yes, at such a cost . . .*





## LORATH

Lorath went wherever the night shoved him, and it was not nice about it. And with every step he knew that he was being followed.

Not pursued, for the figure in a cloak of shadows never seemed to try to catch him. Instead, the thing frightened him so completely that he fled from it. His polearm was at the ready, but he dared not draw it for fear of learning that his pursuer could not be killed.

Lorath was no coward. He had survived many battles, but this . . . *this* . . . felt different.

And so he fled, as he had for days, staggering on without sleep until he chanced upon this town. He checked into the first inn he found—one with a heavy oaken door banded with iron.

The shadow did not come inside, and for a while his hopes rose. Had it moved on? Was it merely some ordinary traveler following the same road? He concocted lie upon lie to try to change horror into misunderstanding. Then . . . as he prepared to climb beneath the furs of his narrow bed, he glanced out the window for one last look to prove his fears were groundless.

*It* stood there. On the pavement on the far side of the street, a shapeless thing, black as the shadows beneath the eaves. Lorath could see no face, no glimpse of skin or blade, only darkness.

Waiting.

Lorath had no faith, no Light, no one to pray to. No saints who might listen to him. Even so, he looked from the *thing* to the pale, indifferent face of the moon and spoke a single word.

“Please.”

But of whom, or what, even he could not say.

He went to bed, yet there was no refuge there. Everyone he had ever failed appeared in his restlessness. The friends, the allies . . . everyone who’d trusted him to their peril and doom found him, and they clustered around him like a pack of killers. They stabbed him with words instead of knives, and even though he cried for mercy, he got none.

Lorath could not recall when he rose from that pointless rest, but he dressed and went back out into the night. It was as if his body woke before his mind, and when awareness caught up, he was already on the edge of town with the unknown wilds

beyond. The buildings were old and weirdly crooked, like they had grown up here rather than been built. The edges were soft with mold, and shingles dangled from their last rusted nails. Shutters banged open and shut like the lungs of some dying beast. The upper windows were mostly dark except for a few panes where desperate yellow glows spoke of someone huddled inside trying to pull warmth where none seemed to exist.

“Help me,” he murmured to the empty street, his words soft yet still too loud, too crass and jarring. Only the sky listened, and he half crumbled beneath the weight of its indifference. It was no friend to him, though he had once thrived in its embrace. His brethren, the Horadrim, had never feared the night. They had been torches of truth and strength that burned against the darkness. Their flame had flared brightly, and by its glow the Horadrim had raised their staves and scrolls and defended Sanctuary.

He ached for the light of that flame. For its heat.

Lorath did not need to turn around to see if the shadowy creature followed.

“Please,” he begged again, pleading with the night itself, perhaps. He had no real idea, and so he kept moving.

His feet felt heavy, oddly weighted, and misshapen. The soles of his boots caught on every cobblestone, every curb, even on the edges of shadows. He leaned away from the wind, but there was no angle to be free of it.


The thing that pursued him seemed to radiate its own cold, sending it like waves of cavalry to hunt and slash at him with blades of frost.

“*Leave me be,*” he shouted, and when he turned he saw that the figure was undeterred.


His next cry was wordless—merely a sound of fear and desperation—and he tried to go faster. Tried. Failed. The wind howled so fiercely it seemed to invade him and made Lorath forget how long he’d been out in this terrible cold. When he paused, clinging to a doorframe or a hitching post as he fought to breathe warmth into his frozen lungs, he looked wildly around. People came out of the gloom and passed him. Some gave him frightened glances and hurried on. Others sneered the way folks will when they encounter someone who has fallen from grace. Some of the faces were familiar—but he was unsure if his judgment was intact. He saw others of the Horadrim, but each of them carried the marks of the wounds—blades or claws or spells—that had killed them.

Was this some kind of magic? Had he been tricked into a spell?

He kept walking, leaving the town far behind as he climbed into the hills and blundered through dark canyons. Then a shocking awareness slapped him to stillness



BEFORE HIM,  
STANDING CROOKED IN  
THE ASHY REMAINS OF A  
BURNED FOREST, STOOD  
A SINGLE LIVING TREE.  
SOMEHOW, IMPOSSIBLY,  
HIS WANDERING HAD  
BROUGHT HIM TO THE  
TREE OF WHISPERS.



and he stopped, swaying and gaping, barely able to breathe because of what he saw. Something that could not be here. Something he was sure was far, far away.

Before him, standing crooked in the ashy remains of a burned forest, stood a single living tree. Somehow, impossibly, his wandering had brought him to the Tree of Whispers.

He recoiled. “No,” he cried. “I cannot be here. I cannot have come *this* far.”

The midnight wind snickered as it blew past him.

Lorath looked desperately around.

Why here? And why now?

Had he not traded himself to this tree for a path that ended in Lilith’s defeat? Yes, but things had only gotten worse. Mephisto, Lord of Hatred, had been freed. So much sacrifice, and now things were worse.

Far, far worse. For the soul of evil was abroad in the world. He felt the incalculable weight of it dragging him as he took small steps toward that tree.

He turned around and saw that the shadowy figure was still there. Standing a hundred paces back, its tattered cloak fluttering in the icy wind.

*It drove me here*, he thought. *It made me come to this terrible place. But why? What does it want with me?*

Above him, the clouds parted to allow the moon to spill light down on where he stood. Lorath felt his heart beating like cold fists on the walls of his chest. Reality lay in bloody pieces all around him. He realized that he stood on a plain of withered gray grass that seemed perpetually bent and frozen into painful shapes. Cloud-gray centipedes crawled through the weeds with agonizing slowness. Mushrooms as broad as shields leaned crookedly on their bloated stems. And the sky was the color of a fresh bruise.

The Tree of Whispers was before him, its arthritic branches reaching out in all directions. From each of the many tree limbs hung grotesque fruit—large as pumpkins, vaguely round, and hideous.

A voice called, “*Ah, here he is, old lonesome Lorath!*”

He turned, at first expecting that voice to have come from his shadowy pursuer, but deep in his heart he *knew* the voice came from the closest of those ghastly fruits.

Not a fruit at all, he knew, nor even a gourd.

From each branch hung a human head. Not dead and bloody, hung as trophies, but *alive*. They were part of the Tree of Whispers. It was their expired tongues who spoke.

And Lorath thought he knew why.

“No,” he protested, “it is not my time yet. The war still rages.”

The hanging heads mocked him with cruel laughter. Blood sprayed from their mouths and ran in scarlet tears from their eyes.

“*All ye have abandoned Lorath?*” whispered another.

A third sneered at him. “*Behold he who fails everyone in his path.*”

Lorath pressed his hands over his ears. “It’s n-not tr-true,” he stammered.

“*Tell that to all you have left in your wake,*” cried the heads.

“No! I have kept my vow.”

“*Tell that to Donan,*” mocked one of them. “*For you failed him.*”

“*Tell it to Neyrelle or Tyrael,*” mocked another. And on and on, with eyes opening and mouths speaking in haunting voices. They scorned him for his failures, counting them, forcing him to remember each person whose life had collapsed because of his poor judgment. Because of his arrogance and overconfidence. The ones who’d believed in him to their peril and damnation.

Behind him, Lorath could hear the veiled creature approach. What was the thing? Was it the rage of everyone he’d wronged made manifest? Was it the shadow of the deaths he had caused? The people he’d left behind? The lives he’d ruined?

Without knowing how, Lorath felt that his guess was correct. He was caught between the consequences of his actions and the certainty of his impending doom.

Even so, he found a splinter of courage left inside his bruised soul. “No,” he roared, speaking to the heads and the ghost. “I tell you I have stood *against* the darkness . . .”

“*Tell that to Elias,*” sneered another head, and when Lorath looked, to his horror he saw that it was Elias himself. His head, with its torn and bloody stump of a neck. Elias, with accusation burning in his eyes.

“You must listen,” begged Lorath. “I have done my best to—”

Every single one of the countless horrors shouted him down, battering him with the same bitter accusation. “*Tell that to Neyrelle!*”

“No, no, noooo!” Lorath screamed at them to be silent, to listen to him.

To have mercy.

The heads fell quiet, but Elias’s eyes were locked on him. “*Oh . . . worry not, Lorath. Your choices will catch up to you soon enough.*”

“No, please . . .”



*"You will be here soon."*

"By what justice is left in this world, no."

*"Here with me . . . with all of us . . ."*

"No, no, no!"

"Soon," whispered Elias. *"Very soon . . . just look . . ."*

Despite the rising terror in his chest, Lorath looked. He knew he should not, that no good could come of it, but he looked anyway. And there, hanging from a limb beneath all the heads, Lorath saw the most dreadful fruit swaying in the cold wind.

He saw his own head there. Hanging slack-jawed, gray-skinned, eyes filled with the total terror of absolute failure. Lorath turned and saw the spirit of vengeance raise its arms and then explode—tearing itself into a flock of night-black crows. They swarmed toward him, battering him, driving him to his knees.



Lorath screamed himself out of that terrible place.

He screamed his way across the worlds of darkness.

He screamed himself back into the bed in the sad little inn where he had lain the whole time.

He turned and saw a crow perched on the windowsill. Its eyes were black within black and yet seemed to burn with a cold fire.

Lorath snatched the knife from beneath his pillow and lunged at the creature, stabbing with such powerful hate and fear that the blade buried itself three inches into the sill.

But the bird flew out into the night.

As he collapsed back, a noise floated across the midnight sky. The sound of the crow's caw, mocking him like laughter. Lorath thought he felt the heat of fire and the stink of brimstone as if the Hells had blown him a kiss.



**A**nd so, you see.

No one, neither scholar nor queen nor warrior, truly owns their own soul. No one is free of the consequences of knowledge. We are all plagued by what we have done. Every choice we make has propelled us along our own road. Each decision, even when we are convinced of its rightness, cuts like a knife. Through those wounds we bleed away our hope, our purity. With each wound we invite corruption into our flesh and blood.

And yet . . .

*Some* minds are less easily corrupted. For good or for ill . . . who is to say?

I wake from my own dreams . . . my own nightmares. My eyes turn away from terror, and yet I can still see. I still *know*. The words tumble out of my lips.

“Something is coming,” I say. And in the trees outside a thousand nightbirds cry out in fear. “Something terrible . . . is coming . . .”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JONATHAN MABERRY** is a *New York Times* bestseller, five-time Bram Stoker Award winner, four-time Scribe Award winner, Inkpot Award winner, author of over fifty novels, and editor of thirty anthologies. He is also a comic book writer, poet, executive producer, and writing teacher. His *V-Wars* books became a Netflix original series; his novel, *Rot & Ruin*, is in development for film with Alcon Entertainment; and his *Joe Ledger* thrillers are being developed for TV by Chad Stahelski—director of the *John Wick* movies. He writes horror, sci-fi, fantasy, adventure, thrillers, and more. He's president of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers and the editor of *Weird Tales Magazine*. Find him at [jonathanmaberry.com](http://jonathanmaberry.com).