

ADAM LEE

*Dark Guardian*

It was a deep summer night in the great city of Ral Ardente. In the endless expanse of the night sky, a large waxing moon shone with its pale silvery glow, while a smaller, gibbous red moon was waning to a crescent. Millions of glittering stars made a broad river of light across the heavens—except high in the west, where there rose a disc of utter darkness, an emptiness almost tangible. This was the month of the constellation of the Void.

Below the city's densely clustered rooftops and turrets, a black carriage jounced through the winding cobblestone streets. This was the nobles' quarter, and the road passed by many fine estates: many-windowed mansions blazing with light, or silent, shadowed stone edifices that resembled castles. In night-shrouded gardens, rustling shadows of ivy clung to the walls, and plants imported from the furthest corners of Caliel filled the night air with spicy scents.

But the carriage was even finer. It was drawn by a team of four great black horses, guided by a well-cloaked, whip-wielding driver. Its sides were all black, with no crest or coat of arms to show the house to which it belonged, and curtains drawn across its windows blocked out any hint of light from within.

In the upholstered interior of the carriage, Arvis Sharadel was reading a letter by the light of a small glass globe, filled with heatless white fire, that hung from the roof on a thin brass chain. The swaying shadows cast by the carriage's rolling journey moved across his pale, gaunt face. His dark eyes, iris and pupil the same shade of onyx, frowned as they read and reread the lines penned by an elegant hand.

*Dark Guardian*

*Arvis,*

*I have a favor to ask of you, my old friend.*

*My only son has come of age, and the time has come for him to answer his destiny.*

*There has been danger to him already, and there will be more. You are the only one we can trust.*

*Will you come so we can speak of it? We can repay you in any way you desire.*

*Lian*

The paper was deeply creased; Arvis had opened and refolded it at least a dozen times that day. He knew what it meant, and he was less than pleased by it.

*I have better things to do than this, he thought. I am no mercenary for hire. But as much as he hated to admit it, it was true that he owed the House of Destin a favor. And Arvis Sharadel the Morin always pays his debts.*

Besides, he thought, if he accepted the invitation it represented, there was certain to be danger. His life would be threatened by men and by things that were not men. He would very likely make enemies from powerful, wealthy, merciless families. He might even be required to break the laws of the land, to do what was forbidden by the grim and unrelenting priesthood that served his god, Vraxor.

*Good, he thought with a sly grin.*

The carriage took a turn, then slowed. Arvis twitched the curtain aside, and saw that they had come to their destination: a palatial three-story mansion, one of the largest and finest in the noble quarter. A wide stone-paved avenue led through hedges and gardens to its front gate, and its high arched windows were all ablaze with light from chandeliers within.

## ADAM LEE

The carriage rolled into a stableyard and came to a halt. As grooms emerged to take the horses' reins, the driver leaped down and opened the carriage door. Arvis stepped down in a swirl of his black cloak, ignoring the servants who bowed as he walked past.

He took the path up to the mansion's main entrance, a set of huge doors carved elaborately of ironwood, with silver inlay in the shape of Vraxor's trident. Two men-at-arms stood on guard, one on either side. They were squat, stolid men holding pikes, wearing leather armor and caps sewn with metal plates.

Arvis barely spared them a glance. *Ornamentation*, he thought, glancing up and down at the building's many brightly lit windows. *Useless against any real threat. A good assassin lurking in the dark could wait for his target to pass in front of the window and then send an arrow right through that expensive glass.*

Careless of the guards, he lifted the knocker, a brass ornament shaped like a hawk holding a heavy ring in its claws, and rapped it sharply against the door. A thunderous booming reverberated within, and almost before the echoes had faded, the door was opened by a black-garbed servant.

"Good evening, noble sir," the man said with a bow. "How may I serve?"

"I am Arvis Sharadel," he said, impatiently brandishing the letter. "I am here to see the master of the house. He is expecting me."

The man's eyes flickered to the letter. "Lord Arvis. Yes, of course. I was asked to conduct you immediately to Lord Lian's parlor. Will you come with me?"

## *Dark Guardian*

The servant led Arvis down a long, high-ceilinged hallway, carpeted with ornately woven rugs. Chandeliers of polished brass and crystal blazed with light, and a series of framed oil paintings hung on the walls, tracing the line of the Destin patriarchs down the centuries. Starting from humble beginnings as a lowly merchant clan, the family had amassed a fortune through trading, and now had exclusive rights to some of the most profitable shipping routes in the land.

They stopped before a set of double doors, which the servant opened and stepped aside. “Lord Arvis Sharadel, here to see the master and mistress of the house!” he called out.

Arvis brushed past the man and stepped into the parlor. It was a huge room, large enough to serve as a ballroom, with oak-paneled floors and walls curtained with silk hangings. Around the edges of the room were relics collected by generations of Destins: tall fluted pillars of colorful pink and green marble, plinths that held expensive urns of fragile porcelain. There were more men-at-arms as well. They wore the livery of the house, and stood between the urns and pillars as if they were part of the decoration.

Sitting at a table in the center of the room, being waited on by black-gloved servants, were two people: a tall man with the dignified handsomeness of age and dark hair streaked with grey, and a woman with chestnut brown hair and a graceful, aristocratic bearing. They stood up to greet Arvis as he swept in.

“Welcome, Arvis,” Lian said warmly. “You got my letter.”

“Obviously,” Arvis said with the faintest curl of his lip. His dark eyes flicked around, taking in every corner of the room.

ADAM LEE

“Thank you for coming. I trust you are well,” Mara said. Her voice was low, musically soft. “May I offer you anything to drink? We have some excellent wines in the cellar—”

“I am in need of nothing,” he said curtly. “You summoned me because you said you had a favor to ask of me. I have a fairly good idea of what it is, but I would hear it from you before I decide. Speak, then.”

“Very well,” Lian said, clearing his throat. “We will dispense with pleasantries. You know that the time for the next Choosing is drawing near.”

Arvis acknowledged this with a slight shrug. “So it would seem.”

“We are minded to nominate a candidate this time,” he said.

“I am impressed by your forbearance. It has, after all, has been one entire term since a Destin sat as regent on Lord Vraxor’s throne,” Arvis said dryly.

“That is what we mean,” Mara said airily, entirely missing his sarcasm. “The priesthood’s memories of my husband’s able service are still fresh. They will know that whoever our house nominates will be the superior choice.”

“My brother, Ulra, is putting himself forward,” Lian said. “He has let it be known that he seeks our family’s nomination. And there are other relatives, mostly distant cousins, whose names have been bandied about. But I do not think they are the strongest candidates. I would much prefer to nominate my son, Raine.”

Arvis raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? I have not seen him

since he was a squalling child.”

“He is a young man now,” Mara said proudly, “with a head full of wisdom beyond his years and a heart fired by devotion to our almighty Lord Vraxor. He aspires to glory, and we believe he can attain it. But... there will be danger, as there always is.” She frowned slightly. “You know that Lord Vraxor will not accept the weak or the unfit into his service. Anyone who dies before the day of decision is not eligible, and naturally the other houses will send assassins against us.”

“Naturally,” Arvis agreed, thinking, *Just as you will surely send assassins against them.* Aloud he added, “And I presume you wish me to protect him.”

“That is what we ask,” Mara agreed. “If you are willing, of course.”

“You served me loyally once, Arvis, as one of the Voices,” Lian said. “We ask—humbly—that you do so once more.”

Arvis glanced around the room. “Surely you do not need my services,” he said, “not with so many men-at-arms standing guard.”

“They are only mercenaries,” Lian said dismissively. “Like all servants, they deal well with simple matters, but nothing beyond that. We have heard news of some of the other families that will be nominating candidates; our rivals are subtle, clever and dangerous houses. House Arlavan stands highest among them.”

“Oh?” Arvis was slightly impressed, in spite of himself. He had never met the patriarchs of House Arlavan, but he had heard of them, and he was certain they would make dangerous

ADAM LEE

enemies. *Perhaps this contest will be interesting after all.*

“Yes. We are sure they will send threats of all kinds—magical traps, demonic assassins, things we have not even thought of. But you are old, Arvis, old and wise, and full of craft and subtlety of your own. There is no better protection for my son than you.”

Arvis grinned slightly. He was flattered, though he would never have admitted it.

“You know I have other duties at the moment,” he warned them.

“Yes, we know,” Mara said. “You are... a godfather?” She pronounced the word as if she could scarcely believe she was finding it in her own mouth.

“To the child of Warde Kahliana, yes. While Warde conquers the western lands on behalf of the priesthood, I am overseeing his daughter’s education.”

Lian chuckled, a deep, rich sound. “And that is why you resigned my service all those years ago. To play at being a parent. I would never have dreamed it of you, Arvis.”

The Morin shrugged, an expressive gesture given his tall, lean, black-cloaked frame. “I owed Warde a debt, and I pay my debts. But Myrren is on the cusp of adulthood now, and she can care for herself most of the time. I can do this.”

But as he saw them open their mouths to thank him, he added sharply, “But I would at least like to set my eyes on the boy I am bound to protect. Where is Lord Raine?”

“We will call him.” Mara beckoned to a servant, who

swiftly hurried off.

*Sovereign*, Arvis thought with faint amusement and disdain. While they waited, he glanced around at the lavishly decorated parlor. *Can any good really come from this pampered house? I suppose Lian performed well enough, but he was hardened by war at an early age. I remember when he was a young man, full of ambition, eager to face any rival. Now he is old, and his family is softened by excess.*

While he was dwelling on these thoughts, the servant returned, opening a door in the rear of the room. “The Lord Raine Destin!” he announced.

The boy who swaggered into the room was young—no more than eighteen, Arvis guessed. He was tall and wiry, with unruly brown hair and a restless, flickering gaze, as if nothing could interest him for long enough to settle on. He walked with the careless insolence of one born to wealth and privilege. He was wearing a loose linen shirt, canvas trousers and slippers, and a long, slender sword belted in a calfskin scabbard at his waist.

“You called for me, father?” he said.

“Raine,” Mara said warmly. “Come and sit with us. We have important matters to discuss.”

“Is this about the Choosing?” Raine suddenly grinned, an easygoing, arrogant expression that looked natural on him. “I’m more than ready now. I was just practicing my swordsmanship with the house armstrong. A good ruler has to know how to fight—”

“We will discuss your studies, son, but first there is someone you must meet,” Lian said. “This is Arvis Sharadel, an old family friend.”

## ADAM LEE

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Raine said with disinterest. Then he noticed Arvis and did a double-take, peering at him more intently. “Are you human?”

“He is a Morin,” Lian said. “You have met him before, but you were too young to remember. We have asked him here to guard you, son, and to keep you safe. Until the Choosing, you will be under his protection.”

Raine sniffed. “Protection? From what? What could threaten me in my own house?”

Arvis saw Mara open her mouth, and he spoke first. “Do not be a fool, boy. You are about to announce yourself as a candidate for the highest office under Lord Vraxor. There will be more danger than you can imagine.”

Raine gaped at him. He was taken aback, but that shock quickly curdled into disdain. “I won’t be spoken to in that tone by a servant,” he said contemptuously.

Arvis grinned widely. That expression showed all his short, sharp teeth, which made it more threatening than friendly. “That is fine, for I do not intend to be your servant.”

Raine looked as if he intended to say something more, but Arvis stared levelly at him, and he flinched from that dark-eyed gaze. As if looking for help, he glanced at Lian, who said sternly, “Until the Choosing, son, you will obey Arvis as if he were me.”

“Yes, father,” Raine muttered, looking as if he had bitten into something bad-tasting. But Arvis barely noticed.

Until that moment, he had been slouching, relaxed. But some subconscious intuition of danger thrilled his senses, and

## *Dark Guardian*

instantly his body was as taut as a bowstring. Without turning his head, he glanced across the room from one side to the other, trying to identify what it was that had alerted him.

Then he saw it. In the far corner of the room, one of the men-at-arms was wrong. He was trying to look inconspicuous, but he was muttering urgently under his breath, and his fingers were moving, twitching as if weaving invisible threads. Arvis could recognize the signs of magic about to be unleashed when he saw them. And even as he had that thought, he sensed something else: a throb of power, like heat rising in the air. The magic was coalescing, and it was directed at Raine.

Arvis sensed the magic emanating from the rogue guardsman coalescing into a spell, and he could tell immediately that it was a lethal one. There wasn't enough time for him to dispel it.

But there was another option. He was standing about ten paces from Raine. *Close enough.* In a single, instantaneous reflex, he braced himself against the floor, preparing to push off, and willed his body to move with all its speed.

To anyone human in the room, everything seemed to happen in an instant of chaos. The air shimmered before the assassin, and a shape of fire materialized: a tiny white-hot orb trailing a tail of red and yellow, like a miniature comet. The instant it appeared, it rocketed toward Raine with the speed of an arrow leaving the bowstring. In the same instant, Arvis suddenly became a black blur, crossing the distance between them just a hairsbreadth faster.

Raine hadn't even begun to react, but Arvis had judged his leap well. He slammed into Raine's body, knocking them both down and sending them sliding across the floor. Barely an

## ADAM LEE

eyeblink slower, the magical bolt seared over their heads and exploded against the back wall of the room in a violent detonation. Two other men-at-arms were sent flying by the concussion, and a cloud of plaster dust, wooden splinters, and shards of stone and priceless porcelain rained down.

For an instant, there was stunned silence. The assassin looked nonplussed, and Lian and Mara were staring, open-mouthed. The men-at-arms, their wits made sluggish by hours of tedium, had been utterly blindsided and were only just starting to realize there was an enemy in their midst.

Then Arvis arose. He had landed in a balanced crouch, and he rolled smoothly to his feet and came up facing the assassin. Meanwhile, Raine lay in an undignified sprawl where Arvis had shoved him, still dazed, his scabbarded sword tangled in his garments, but unhurt save for bruises.

Without a word, Arvis advanced on the traitorous guardsman. It was a slow, inexorable, stalking glide, like a predator closing in on its prey. His dark, inhuman eyes were lit with a ferocious promise.

Now the assassin looked rattled. Hastily, he began muttering under his breath.

Arvis could feel the surge of heat build in the air, then turn in on itself and begin shaping the same spell again. But this time, he was prepared for it. He was a Morin, born of demon blood, and when it came to the arcane arts, he had never met a human who could outduel him. *He has only the one trick, and he needs words and gestures to invoke it. How typically pitiful. See how he deals with one who can control the power through will alone.*

## *Dark Guardian*

As the assassin completed his spell, two more of the fiery missiles appeared before him, then raced toward Arvis. But in the same instant, the air in front of the Morin wavered, and a shield appeared: a half-dome of utter blackness, an unlight that seemed tangible, as if pure shadow had been smelted and cast into solidity.

The firebolts slammed into Arvis' black shield, but there was no explosion. As they touched the shield's surface, they were absorbed into it; they dwindled to tiny points of light and winked out, like meteors fading from view as they plummeted into a dark planet's atmosphere.

Arvis grinned as he felt the opposing magic melt into his shield. *The fool. He should have known I would be prepared for him to try the same thing a second time.*

As he advanced, the assassin began looking increasingly frantic. Eyes wide, he backed up against the wall, preparing to invoke his magic yet again, but he had no time.

In the last few steps, Arvis' black shield shimmered and vanished, and he darted forward. Cornered and desperate, the false guardsman reached back, whipped a dagger from its scabbard, and stabbed wildly at the Morin's face.

The blow never landed. There was another blur of motion, and the dagger was stopped in midair, its tip just short of Arvis' face, by his hand wrapped around the assassin's wrist.

The false guardsman's eyes went even wider as he struggled to push the dagger down. He was a stout man, whereas Arvis had a slender frame and fingers like a poet's, but the dagger remained as motionless as if it had been embedded in concrete.

## ADAM LEE

For only a moment they were locked that way, then Arvis twisted viciously. The assassin screamed in pain as the dagger was wrenched from his hand and clattered to the floor. Before he could try anything else, another pale hand struck like a snake, wrapped around his neck and lifted him off the ground. Held at arm's length, he gurgled as he flailed and kicked helplessly at the air.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Arvis said calmly.

“I was paid!” the assassin gasped, struggling to get the words out. “Paid in gold! By House Arlavan! I was doing my job, that’s all!”

“As am I.”

With the barest flicker of concentration, Arvis called on the magic again. It was only a wisp of power he drew this time, far less than what it had taken him to conjure the shield, but it took very little to stop a heart.

With a soft sigh, the assassin slumped in the Morin’s grasp. Arvis tossed the body aside as if it had been a sack of garbage, and it hit the floor with a limp thud.

He turned to Lian, Mara and Raine. “I presume I have the job?”

They were all staring at him. Raine had half-risen, but other than that, in the time it had taken him to dispatch the assassin, no one else had moved. Black smoke was still billowing from the hole blown in the rear wall, and even as they watched, the silk curtains went up in flame and peeled away from the wall as they curled and blackened.

*Dark Guardian*

Lian, the onetime soldier, recovered first. “You... you have earned it a hundred times over, Arvis.”

“You saved our son’s life,” Mara said faintly, as if this had only just occurred to her. “There is no reward too great for this. We would be honored if you would stay in our house. We will make up a suite for you—”

“No,” Arvis said, his voice suddenly hard as flint. “Dismiss the servants.”

They looked at him in confusion, but Lian snapped his fingers and the servants and men-at-arms alike all filed out. When it was just the four of them in the grand room, Arvis spoke again.

“This house is a large and obvious target. What happened tonight proves that. The only way you can protect it all is by hiring many men, too many. Too many strangers, whose loyalties are unknown. Too many opportunities for a bribe, or for an enemy agent to slip in. You wish me to protect Raine, and I shall—by taking him to a place House Arlavan will never look for him. There are many districts in Ral Ardenite where the last person one would ever expect to find is a boy of noble blood.”

“You... you wish our son to mingle with... commoners?” Mara said in disbelief and faint horror, but Lian interrupted her. “Peace, wife. Arvis is right. It is a good plan.”

“You mean, leave my family’s estate? Have an adventure? Live rough, like a commoner? Sleep in their inns and drink in their taverns?” Raine was instantly all enthusiasm. “I *like* this plan. I can blend in so no one will ever suspect me. I’ll have the servants pack my trunks—”

“No,” Arvis said sharply. “No heavy luggage. Nothing

ADAM LEE

that will slow us down or draw attention. We must be ready to leave tonight, within the hour.”

Raine looked sullen. “Can I at least bring my sword?”

“Do you know how to use it?” Arvis sniffed.

“Of course!” he protested.

“Very well. But take only what you can carry. I am not your porter.”

“I’ll go pack then. Goodbye, mother! Goodbye, father!” Raine called jauntily. “I’ll write to you!”

“Where will you be taking him, Arvis?” Mara asked as soon as he was gone.

“I will not be telling you that,” Arvis said, “and he will not write. If you do not know where he is, your enemies will not be able to abduct you and torture you into giving up the location.”

“For Vraxor’s sake, Arvis!” Lian gasped, and Mara stared at him in slack-jawed horror.

The Morin rolled his eyes. “And, of course, knowing that you do not know, they will be less likely to try such a tactic in the first place. I will, of course, return Raine to you unharmed in time for him to present himself in public for the Choosing.”

About an hour later, Arvis and Raine were in the stableyard. The Morin had been waiting there with a snarl of growing impatience, glaring suspiciously at every servant who passed by, until they flinched and scurried from his presence. But finally Raine had emerged, staggering under the weight of a bag almost too heavy for him to carry... at which point Arvis had

## *Dark Guardian*

sent him back to the house with stern instructions to discard at least three-quarters of it.

At last, Raine had returned with a more suitable amount of luggage: one small sack of clothes, and his sword. They stowed it in the black carriage and climbed aboard, and with a command to the driver, they were off.

“I’ve never been on an adventure like this before!” Raine said excitedly, as they rattled through the dark streets. “I’ve always wanted to see how the common people live. Just think of me, hiding in the midst of them, like a king in disguise among his subjects!”

“So long as you are prepared for flea-ridden bedding, cold washwater, sour ale and spoiled food,” Arvis chuckled.

Raine looked momentarily queasy, but he recovered quickly, with the usual arrogance of his bloodline, as if he had already convinced himself that Arvis was joking. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“To an inn in the commoners’ quarter that has long been a favorite of mine. Since you wish to experience the rustic life, I think you will enjoy it. It is called the Two Daggers.”

\* \* \*

Arvis eased open the inn room door and closed it behind him, shutting out the noisy din from the common room below. He glanced around the small, spartan space: bare floorboards, plaster walls, a small window and a sooty ceiling. There was no furniture except a thin straw pallet, a chair and a bureau. The lamp was lit, and Raine’s few things were distributed around the room, including a shirt hung over the back of the chair.

ADAM LEE

“Raine?” he called. “Are you here?”

Raine emerged from the small adjoining washroom, wearing an undershirt, his thin rapier in hand and a ragged towel draped around his neck. “Arvis!” he said cheerfully. “I was just washing up. What news?”

“Where were you?” the Morin said angrily. “I called here earlier today and you were gone.”

“I was out,” he said carelessly.

“Again? I have warned you about this—”

“What are you, Arvis, my mother? I can’t stand to be cooped up in this tiny room all day. This is the first time I’ve ever gotten to see the city on my own, and I’m going to take full advantage of it!”

“This is no adventure from one of your nursemaid’s storybooks, boy,” Arvis snarled. “There are ruthless killers seeking your life. Every time you show your face on the street, you are risking detection by someone in the pay of Arlavan. They could be coming here at this very moment.”

“Well, *you* come and go all the time,” Raine said, stung.

“That is because I take precautions to make sure I am not being followed. You, on the other hand, saunter up and down the street as if you were in your parents’ mansion.”

“I thought you said we’d be safe here,” he muttered sullenly.

“I said you would be safe *if* you kept a suitably low profile. I have kept my promise to bring you to a place of safety, but I cannot shepherd you every moment. You must learn you

*Dark Guardian*

have a part to play in this as well. In any case, we will speak of it later; I come bearing important news. You are now your family's sole candidate for the Choosing."

"Really?" Raine's eyes lit up. Grinning, he flourished his rapier triumphantly. "That's great! My parents told me I was the best choice and that everyone from my family would agree sooner or later. I knew they were right! So my uncle Ulra is no longer competing for Destin's nomination? What happened? Did he withdraw?"

"You might say that. He is dead."

Raine's mouth fell open. He stared at Arvis' calm expression, as if looking for a sign that the Morin was joking. When he found none, he stumbled backwards, fell into the chair and sat down heavily.

Arvis waited patiently. After a moment, Raine recovered enough to ask, weakly, "What happened to him?"

"Yesterday, an assassin struck at him here in Ral Ardenite. His guards foiled the attempt, but it appears to have given him a fright. He planned to retreat to his estate in the countryside. But House Arlavan was expecting that. The first attempt may even have been a feint to draw him out; it was a brilliant ploy, if so. When he passed through the city gate, a guard in Arlavan's pay dropped the portcullis on him."

"I... I don't..." Raine passed a hand across his face in disbelief. "Did he suffer?"

"Yes. Quite badly. But not for long."

When this only deepened Raine's agonized grimace, Arvis reluctantly decided that something more was probably

ADAM LEE

required. “Were you... close to him?” he said stiffly.

“No... I mean, I hadn’t seen him in years, but... Damn them!” He sprang to his feet and whipped his sword out, stabbing and slicing angrily at invisible foes. “This will not stand! I’ll take vengeance on Arlavan myself!”

Arvis raised an eyebrow. “How, mount a one-man assault on their estate? You would be shot down before you made it to the front door.”

“I don’t care!” Raine spluttered. “I’ll find a way. I’ll hunt them down in the name of House Destin. I’ll—”

In mid-sentence, he realized his sword was no longer in his hand. He looked around in bafflement.

Arvis was leaning against the doorframe, holding Raine’s sword and using the tip to clean his fingernails. When he saw Raine looking at him, he set the weapon aside.

“I did that to make a point,” he said. “In single combat, I have no doubt I am the superior of any hireling that House Arlavan can command. But even I would not willingly venture into the heart of their power. *You* would stand no chance whatsoever.”

“Then what do you suggest I do?” Raine burst out.

“For now? Nothing. Stay hidden and safe until the Choosing. If you win, you will have ample opportunity to revenge yourself.”

Arvis opened the door, but paused on the threshold, turning back to Raine.

“One more word of advice. Being nominated for the

*Dark Guardian*

Choosing is an honor, and it did not come upon you by chance. You sought it out. If you did not know what it entailed, you do now. Try to be worthy of it.”

Leaving Raine alone, he went out, shutting the door behind him.

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