



DARK HEART

ADAM LEE

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Book One of the Caliel Cycle

By
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Prologue
Dark Heart

The study was utterly silent. Its floor was covered with golden carpet intricately embroidered with silver thread, and the reading desk was huge and ornate, made of the finest mahogany and polished to a silky gleam. Treasure was stacked in great piles: hundreds of fine scented candles and sticks of incense; jewelry of silver and gold; precious gems that sparkled with prismatic fire with each touch of the light.

Yet the room's lone inhabitant took no notice. Disdaining the ornate desk, he sat at a simple table, on a simple wooden chair, dressed in plain white robes, reading from a huge and dusty tome. The crinkling of a page being turned briefly broke the silence, and then the study was quiet again. The room had no doors or windows, and the only illumination was a subdued glow that did not seem to have any source at all, but neither of these things bothered the inhabitant. Again ancient parchment crinkled as it was turned, and the great chamber was silent.

The man at the desk did not turn, or even flinch, when the light suddenly dimmed. Shadows appeared, creeping out from everything: the desk, the chair, the piles of treasure. They slithered across the floor like flowing oil, spreading, deepening... then they detached themselves from the things that had cast them, moved to one corner, and mounded up into a mass of impenetrable blackness. Two slits of scarlet light appeared in the dark portal, and something emerged—a silhouette, still wrapped in black as though the darkness sought to cling to it. Then the blackness melted away like a cast-off cloak, and the visitor stepped forth.

"I knew you would come sooner or later," the study's inhabitant said, without turning around.

The newcomer regarded the room. Tall and slender, he was dressed in a black cloak embroidered with intertwining red and blue; as he walked, it swept around him in a stately manner, showing glimpses of the tall black silver-buckled boots he wore. His face was predatory and darkly handsome, his ears pointed just slightly. His skin was coal black, and his eyes glittered with slitted pupils of blood-red. Those keen eyes swept around the chamber, taking it all in at a glance.

"Your followers pour wealth on you, Nimrod," he said. His voice was the sensuous hiss of a blade being drawn; an impressive set of sharp white teeth showed in flashes when he spoke. "Dare you risk the defilement... the *corruption*... of worldly goods, here in your study?" He laughed as if the very notion were ridiculous.

The owner of the study sighed, but did not turn from his book. "I have told them I wanted no part of this," he said in frustration. "And yet they still come, and bring bigger tributes each year. I am unable to persuade them to do otherwise. Why must they worship me, Vraxor? I did not ask for it."

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"If they insist on it," the newcomer murmured, "why deny them the pleasure? You may even encourage it. I find the devotion of the lesser beings to be... glorious." He laughed again, a sibilant hiss, and waved negligently. The darkness brooding in the corner winked out, and the room returned to its normal brightness.

"You worry me," Nimrod sighed. "You know the risk of coming to enjoy such things too much. Surely you have not forgotten how it corrupted those whom we displaced? What measures we had to take to undo what they wrought?"

"I remember it well," Vraxor said, but his voice was a breath, barely audible. He began to move forward, slowly crossing the study. As his cloak swept around him with each step, it exposed the hilt of a dagger, which he drew in a soundless motion. The dagger's hilt was gold, with a blade of dark gray metal; a large ruby was set in the hilt, sparkling with a light the same shade as Vraxor's eyes.

Vraxor raised the blade high as he advanced, as silently as a shadow. The ruby caught fire, glowing with dark black light that danced like flame, and this flame spread down the dagger's blade to shroud it in burning blackness. Nimrod, sitting at the desk, seemed unaware of the menacing knife, now blazing like a huge fang of darkness, poised over his back. Vraxor sneered with a dreadful glee as he whipped back his arm to strike.

But before the blade could fall, a third force entered the study: a fountain of green-gold light, welling up from the floor. The light solidified, parted and flaked away like a shower of falling autumn leaves, and a woman stepped out. Short and slim, she wore green breeches and a simple brown tunic, and had graceful flowing golden hair and bright green eyes the color of leaves in summer.

She took in the entire tableau in a second: Nimrod sitting at his desk, reading, with his dark visitor poised to strike.

"Vraxor, no!" she cried out. "Stop!" She raised her arms and blue light burst from her body, light the color of a spring sky, exploding forth to fill the entire study in an instant's time.

"No, not now! Curse you, goddess!" Vraxor howled as the blue light engulfed him.

Nimrod turned around then. "Shayna, what are you—" he exclaimed before the light swallowed him as well.

The blue light expanded to fill the entire study, save for a spot of darkness where Vraxor's dagger was. Then it overpowered that as well, only to fade away, and when it did, the study was empty of life. No trace remained of the encounter—except, lying on the floor, easy to miss among the other treasures, a large, glittering blood-red ruby.

Chapter I
Darkfire

Silence and echoes filled the great Vraxen Cathedral. Silvery moonlight fell through the stained-glass windows, making the demon knights enshrined there glow with pale radiance, although the vaulted ceiling far overhead remained dark and shadowed as always. At the far end, the huge statue of Vraxor that towered over the altar stood frozen, half-wrapped in darkness, and the flames of the sacrificial pit burned low, banked by the priests until the next ceremony. The vast cathedral was empty at night, and thus the only noise that disturbed the girl kneeling by the first row of pews was a pair of bootsteps ringing on the stone floor in the distance.

She was short and slight of stature, dressed in soft black, with dark hair, startlingly deep violet eyes, and delicate features like fine porcelain. On the floor next to her lay a huge scarlet volume, a spellbook that belonged to the priests of Vraxor. The girl turned the book's pages slowly, murmuring intently to herself, and from time to time glanced up at the huge statue that towered into the gloom overhead.

Myrren looked down at the spellbook and tried again. "*Telis rei!*" The air before her shimmered and warped, and a tiny flame of pure black flickered into being. She gasped with delighted surprise at her success, and the flame vanished. She muttered to herself, turned another page and began the chant again. "*Telis rei,*" she intoned in an ancient language; the words felt rough and cold on her tongue. "*Arrendil tre'vel pyrin!*" The air shimmered, and a pillar of cold black fire, taller than she was, erupted from the flagstones. The moonlight waned and faded as if overawed. The incantation died on her tongue as she let out a little shriek, and the fire winked out without a puff of smoke.

A low chuckle sounded, and a form melted out of the shadows. Tall and gaunt, the newcomer wore black boots, black clothes trimmed with silver, and a long cloak so dark it seemed as if he carried some of the shadow with him. His skin was pale, almost white, while his hair was as black as his cloak. He had the handsome, chiseled face of a nobleman, long, pointed fingernails, and eyes that glittered with amusement.

"You do not know your own strength, little one," he said dryly. Teeth like fangs showed in flashes as he spoke. His voice was low and husky, almost seductive.

"How long have you been watching me, Arvis?" Myrren demanded. "Don't scare me like that! Bad enough to have *them...*" She glanced over at the darkness of the altar.

"I just got here," he said in low mirth. "You have some skill with the darkfire, I see."

"Not fair," Myrren grumbled. "Magic is so much easier for you. I wish I had been born a Morin. *Telis rei!*" she added and frowned as a wisp

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of darkfire shimmered and then dissipated.

"Morin are not exactly... born," Arvis said with a smirk. "May I offer you a suggestion?"

"Go ahead," she urged him. "This book isn't much help."

His amusement forgotten, Arvis leaned forward. His voice grew intent as he sat down in the front row of pews. "You do not need the book. Our priests say spells spoken in the ancient language are necessary to direct the magic, but in fact they serve only to clarify the mind—like a way of thinking out loud. Words have no power by themselves: the will of the caster is all."

She stared at him incredulously. "You mean I've been wasting my time with this book?"

"Not necessarily. As I said, speaking the words helps to focus one's thoughts. It takes a keen mind to achieve the proper concentration without them."

"Vraxor take that," Myrren muttered. She concentrated, picturing the darkfire she was trying to create. Nothing happened.

Arvis regarded her calmly. "You must draw in power for your spell first."

Myrren sighed, not really expecting it to work, and willed the power to come, but nothing happened. "It's not working," she said, frustrated.

"I said to draw it in," he said intently. "Draw it out of the walls, the floor, the air you breathe, the fires in the pit—everything except yourself and me. Try to imagine yourself as part of the ground you stand on, part of the magic that flows through it, and then draw that power into your body."

"I'll try," she said, trying to force her irritation away, and did what Arvis had asked—and something happened. A burning warmth kindled in her feet, rising upward through her body.

"I can feel it!" she said exultantly.

Arvis regarded her keenly. "Very good. Now picture what you want the magic to do and shape it to your will. When you have it under control, cease drawing in the power and release what you hold, all at once."

Myrren closed her eyes, picturing the darkfire she wanted to create: a tiny black flame, little more than a spark. The heat of the magic rose, verging on pain.

"You are near the limits of how much you can hold," Arvis' voice said, but she hardly heard him. She could not force the magic to conform to the image in her mind; it seethed like a boiling pot, restless, eager to be released. Then, suddenly, it seemed to collapse, forming into the image of the darkfire in a rush. "Release it," Arvis said distantly, "now!"

Myrren focused her will, and the power surged up through her. It cried to be set free, and she obliged it, but in the way she wanted... *there*.

Still holding the image of the darkfire, she released her will and felt it flick out like the point of a whip, just so.

The floor all around her suddenly burst into flames as dark as midnight.

Before she had time to scream, the darkfire shimmered and vanished, and she would have fallen if Arvis had not caught her. “Are you all right?” he said.

She stared at him, wide-eyed. “I didn’t mean to do that!”

“Of course not,” he said reassuringly. “You do not know your own strength. You are lucky that you only intended to create a small flame, or you might have been hurt.”

She let go of him—though gaunt, Arvis had the strength of iron—and came unsteadily to her feet. She was unhurt, although her boots and breeches were tattered as if eaten by acid. The power had fled, and she felt cold and empty. She looked at her damaged garb ruefully. “I think I’ve had enough magic for today.”

Arvis nodded. “There are things of which we must talk. Walk with me. Leave the spellbook; the priests will find it.” He turned and swept off down the aisle, moving with the grace of a flowing shadow. Myrren followed, trotting to keep up with his long stride.

“I passed another test today,” Arvis began without preamble.

“You did?” Myrren exclaimed. “Arvis, that’s wonderful! How soon are you going to take the last one?”

“The priests have not told me. They are enigmatic as always. However, I believe they were more impressed with my abilities than they let on.”

Arvis strode through the doors of the cathedral and out into the street. Low in the east, a sliver of glimmering crimson moon hung low in the sky, nearly eclipsed by a larger, pale moon that cast its light on the city of Ral Ardente. It was a calm, clear night, and the sky was speckled with countless stars, twinkling motes of diamond dust—except high in the west, where a dark hole gaped, a disc of utter blackness where no star shone. The constellation of the Void was rising.

The vastness of the night sky had always fascinated Myrren, and she gazed up with a sensation halfway between awe and fear of how small it all made her feel. Ral Ardente’s buildings rose all around them as they walked down the shadowed street, most darkened, a few lit from within. “Where are we going, Arvis?” she asked.

“The wharf district,” he answered. “I feel the need for something to drink. And there are things I want to tell you that I would not speak in the presence of the priests.” He glanced over his shoulder at the huge cathedral that towered behind them.

“They can hear us?” she said in surprise, then looked around—the street was deserted, except for the two of them—and lowered her voice. “Even out here?”

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"Outside the cathedral?" He shrugged. "I do not believe they can. And I am not telling you anything I was ordered to keep secret. Still, it is wisest to take no chances, especially with my initiation so soon."

For a time they walked in silence. "The Feast of the Void is in two days," Arvis volunteered at last. "Have you heard what festivities are planned?"

Myrren shook her head. "They say it'll be the grandest in years, though."

"It will be," he said in a hiss. "I have heard there are over a hundred prisoners to be sacrificed during the procession."

"So many?" she said in excitement. "Lord Vraxor is kind to us."

"That he is," Arvis agreed. "He has favored us with victories in the west and south. Maradra is expected to fall to our armies within weeks, and the rebels along the Burning Coast have been defeated twice this month. One more victory and we will push them into the ocean. The Pyrindril runs even redder than usual with their blood." He laughed softly into the night.

"Do you really think Maradra's going to be defeated so soon?" Myrren said eagerly. "Maybe my father will come home then... I haven't seen him in so long."

"Perhaps he will. It would be a welcome occasion. If he pushes hard, perhaps even by the end of the Feast of the Void. The plunder he will bring back would be double the reason to celebrate, especially if he gains control of a pass through the Cordillen. Such might be a gateway to conquering Shael and the other western lands."

As Myrren and Arvis walked the streets of Ral Ardente, a breeze picked up, ruffling the Morin's cloak. The wind carried the tang of the sea, but also the flat and stagnant odor of spilled ale. After a time, the grand cathedrals and palaces of the upscale quarter were replaced by smaller, cruder structures, the residential slums and taverns of the wharf district. Red-golden light shone within their shuttered windows, and distant hints of coarse laughter and voices drifted on the breeze.

After another few blocks, the street narrowed and the ground ahead to the west sloped downwards, and a broad, glimmering ribbon of darkness came into view: the Merillinon River. The silhouettes of ships' masts rose from the water's surface, which glittered in the moon like black diamond. Arvis inhaled, tasting the air, and grinned. "We are almost there."

Myrren looked around curiously. Though this part of the city was not far from where she lived, she had never been here before. Those such as her who dwelled in the upscale residential quarter of Ral Ardente lived in relative luxury, but it was plain to see how much rougher the wharf district was. Outside taverns and alleys, unconscious bodies lay slumped and unmoving. The occasional ragged beggar stretched out a hand toward them as they passed, but Arvis brushed off the entreaties.

“Aren’t there any chapels here?” she asked. “How do they worship?”

“There are chapels,” Arvis said brusquely. “Look.” He indicated a building at the side of the road that looked scarcely better than the rest—a rundown structure of wood with a sloping roof, marked with Vraxor’s trident over the doors.

Myrren was shocked. “They worship in that? But the priests always say that Lord Vraxor’s followers are the chosen of the world!”

The Morin laughed dryly. “You have much to learn about the world, little one.”

She did not answer, but her thoughts were whirling. Her memory of the last sermon she attended was vivid: the red-robed priest standing at the altar, preaching in fiery tones about the divine blessings granted to those who worshipped Vraxor... but the squalor of this place appalled her. *Is it possible the priests were lying?* she thought. It was an almost impossible notion to accept. All her life Myrren had been taught to believe Vraxor’s priests; even then, she expected to be blasted on the spot for the unvoiced blasphemy, but nothing happened.

“We have arrived,” Arvis said, interrupting her train of thought. They stood on a narrow street running from south to north, enclosed on both sides by the slums of the wharf quarter. Before them was a three-story structure of wood and stone. Torchlight glowed through its windows, and voices came from inside. A wooden sign hung over the entrance, swinging and creaking in the wind, painted with the image of two crossed knives and the words “The Two Daggers.”

“I am expecting a friend,” Arvis said. “We will meet him here. Come inside, Myrren.”

Chapter II
The Two Daggers

Even at that time of night, the inn was packed with rough folk, tattooed and dressed in patched clothes, whom Myrren supposed to be sailors. Crude laughter and a tumult of conversation filled the common room. A side of meat hung on a spit in the fireplace, sizzling and dripping juices. The bare boards of the walls and ceiling were grimy with soot. More than a few patrons' eyes flicked to the door as Myrren entered, appraising her in a way that made her feel uneasy, but those gazes quickly slid away when they noticed Arvis next to her.

The innkeeper, a balding man with stained clothes and bushy eyebrows, came forward to greet them. "Master Arvis," he said, bowing. "Welcome, welcome. Always a pleasure to have you here. Who is your lady companion? She seems like a delicate sort to bring to this place."

Myrren felt even less at ease to hear this, but the innkeeper's eyes widened when Arvis grinned. This displayed all his sharp teeth and thus was more threatening than friendly. "The lady, Master Parr, is named Myrren and is under my protection. I would be most displeased if anything were to happen to her."

"Yes, yes, of course," Parr agreed hastily, running a hand through his thinning hair. "Your usual table?"

Arvis nodded. His menacing grin faded to a scowl. "Lead the way."

Parr led them through the crowds into a smaller back room. Myrren noted with approval that it was much cleaner than the common room; its floor had actually been swept, and fewer unidentifiable stains marred the tables. It had its own fireplace. "Will you have anything to drink?" he asked as they sat down.

"The usual," Arvis said, putting some coins on the table. "Is my guest here yet?"

"He is in his room upstairs," Parr said with an obsequious bow. "I will inform him you have arrived." He backed out of the room, casting a lecherous glance at Myrren just before he shut the door.

She looked after him with an expression of distaste. "What a horrible man. Why do you come here at all?"

The Morin sniffed in amusement. "He is one of the few men in this entire stinking quarter I trust to any degree. Also, he has excellent ale."

Through the door, the muted din of the common room rose in volume. "This is such a dirty and noisy place," she muttered. "I don't like these people, Arvis. How do the priests put up with them?"

"Spoken like a true noble," he chuckled. "I understand what you mean, but their debaucheries can be amusing at times." He grinned. "The priests put up with them the same way as everyone else. By not getting too close. However, they pay their dues to Lord Vraxor, and from people of

their class that is the most we can expect.”

Myren leaned forward. “So who’s your guest?” she asked, but at that same instant the door to the room flew open, and Arvis’ guest burst in with the innkeeper trailing behind.

He was human, tall and wiry. His hair and eyes were both brown, shot through with a golden luster from the fire’s light; he had an intent face and an adventurous grin. He wore dark slacks, tall leather riding boots and a black silk shirt, with embroidered red lightning winding around the wrists and up the arms. At his waist was belted a sword in scabbard.

“Stand aside for Lord Raine Destin!” he proclaimed, and drew the sword from its scabbard; it was a long, slim rapier. “Finest swordsman in all of Caliel!” He whipped it back and forth as if fending off invisible foes, then leaned over and grinned at Myren. “And finest lover, as well.

Women come from across the land to beg my favor.” Parr grimaced in annoyance as he set three mugs on the table.

“Put that toy away before you hurt someone with it,” Arvis snapped. “And stop acting like a fool. You have no idea what is at stake here.” Raine looked hurt, but made one last flourish, sheathed his sword and sat down at the table. As he slid into his seat he gave Myren a knowing look, which she steadfastly ignored.

Arvis waited until Parr left the room. “As our guest so arrogantly introduced himself,” he said, “this is Lord Raine from the House of Destin. Raine, this is Myren Kahliana.” Raine grimaced at the unflattering introduction, but kept silent.

“Raine’s house is in a hard-fought power struggle with the House of Arlavan over who will be selected at the next Choosing, which will occur within six months. The competition this year has been especially violent, and several members of Destin have died in suspicious accidents.” He smirked with sadistic amusement. “Since Raine is next in line, his family fears the worst, and asked me, an old friend of theirs and your father’s, Myren, to keep him safe. Naturally, the best way to do so would be to remove him to a place where he can be guarded more easily until the Choosing occurs.”

Raine was looking more and more impatient with every word, and as soon as Arvis stopped to draw breath, he leaped to his feet. “Yes!” he said. “The noble Lord Raine, threatened by the ruthless enemy, finds himself in the midst of grand adventure as he foils their schemes and thwarts their traps! He travels the land with his faithful servant Arvis, a beautiful companion”—he winked at Myren—“and his sword always at his side!”

Arvis’ arm lashed out, seizing Raine by the collar and dragging him back into his chair. “Not so loud, you fool,” he growled. “And do not refer to me as your ‘servant’ again, or I will dump you at your family’s door with your sword lodged in a most inconvenient part of your body.” He grinned viperishly, then lifted his mug and took a long drink.

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Raine's offended look verged into queasiness, as if he was unsure whether Arvis was joking. Trying to hide her smile at seeing him cut down, Myrren took a sip of her own drink and hastily set it back down, trying not to choke on the bitterness of the ale.

Swallowing to catch her breath, she leaned forward. "But why does he need your help, Arvis? Surely even this idiot can find his way to the city gates himself."

"Unfortunately," Arvis said, "the city's guards are in Arlavan's pay. The House of Destin does not dare risk sending him through the gates without an escort. Lord Ulra, the last member of Destin to attempt it, was crushed by a falling portcullis. By accident, of course." He looked calm, but his long-nailed fingers were scratching furrows into the table. "I am going to take Raine to safety during the Feast of the Void. There will be many pilgrims; the guards cannot be too attentive. Myrren, do you wish to accompany us?"

She started out of her chair. "What?" The prospect was exciting in principle, but she looked at Raine and felt her stomach turn, and not from the ale.

"You could act as lookout," Arvis offered. "As soon as we pass through the gates, Lord Raine will meet a ship that will take him down the river to a neutral country, and we can return to the city. You would miss none of the celebration."

"Yes, it would be fitting," Raine agreed. "A beautiful maiden at my side, to herald me into my further—"

Myrren glared at him. "I think I'd rather stay here," she said.

Arvis nodded. "I thought you would. I wanted you to meet young Lord Raine, however, to see if you were swayed by his charm." He laughed mockingly. Raine looked surprised, mouthing *my charm?* Then he grinned in realization and nodded slyly at Arvis.

"Can we get out of here, Arvis?" Myrren implored. "I'm not feeling well."

Arvis gave her a look that suggested he knew very well what the cause of her illness was, but Raine was oblivious. "Does my presence make you feel faint, fair maid?" he asked. "Perhaps you would feel better after a night in my arms?"

There was only one course of action to take, and Myrren took it: she picked up her mug and hurled its contents into his face with a splash like a slap. "I think not," she said icily.

Raine sat for a moment, dripping and astonished, trying to decide whether to be angry or amused. Finally he settled on the latter, wiped his face with his sleeve and grinned at her. "Oh ho, a lady with spirit, I see," he teased. Myrren studiously refused to acknowledge him.

Arvis chuckled. "Try a bit harder, Raine, you may win her yet. I will return in two nights to take you beyond the city's walls. Try to stay out of trouble until then." He drained his glass, then got up and strode out

with Myrren following closely behind.

“I can’t *believe* him!” Myrren growled as they left the Two Daggers. “He’s the most obnoxious fool I’ve ever met in my life! How do you stand him, Arvis?”

“His only sin is hot blood,” Arvis said with a smirk. “You do not know the ways of nobles, Myrren. His family is wealthy; he has led a sheltered life. Now he is out in the world, and he believes it will be like the storybooks.” He chuckled. “He does not know any better.”

“If he lives anywhere in the real world,” she said sharply, “he’ll have to learn. Especially if he lives anywhere near me, Vraxor send it not so.”

Arvis laughed softly. “Since you dislike him so much, you should be glad I am sending him out of the city, where he will be no more trouble to you.”

Myrren shivered. “I think I need a hot bath. I can’t wait to get back home. Arvis, can you teach me more about magic while we walk?”

“Certainly. What do you wish to know?”

“My tutors haven’t told me anything so far. All they ever teach us is what words we have to say to make something happen. They never said anything like what you taught me tonight. Why are there different ways of doing it? Why do I have to imagine drawing it out of everything except you?”

Arvis shook his head. “Your tutors have served you poorly. Magic is not just a matter of making things happen by speaking words. It is a fundamental force that permeates everything that exists. Magical energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can take on a limitless variety of forms. You shape it into the form you wish to accomplish a task, and once it is done, the magic returns to whence it came. As I said, it can be found in some quantity in everything that exists, but in the living more than the inanimate, and the sentient more than the savage. Yet one mortal being cannot draw magic from another. Only a very few can tap into that power...”

“The priests?” she asked eagerly.

“Close,” he said, grinning. “The gods. As users of magic go, the priests are among the most powerful, but they are limited to the same sources you or I can draw upon. Only the gods can tap into the vast magical potential inherent in the legions of the devout—oh, that is another thing. Even the gods can draw power only from those that worship them faithfully.”

“Arvis,” Myrren asked, “how many people know this?”

“Few outside the priesthood. Why do you ask?”

“If that’s true, wouldn’t it mean that the more worshippers a god had, the more powerful he would be?”

Arvis looked thoughtful. “You may have a point there, Myrren. You may well. The priests never said so, but it certainly explains the wars

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waged against followers of other gods. As well as one of the oldest edicts in our holy books, to multiply and fill the world.” He grinned. “But we are not gods, so it is of no import to us. Be that as it may. There are different schools of magic, but in general its practice falls into two categories: the elemental and the runic.

“Elemental magic is the simpler. It requires nothing but force of will, and so it is faster to invoke. Runic magic is controlled with spoken words and gestures—though, again, these have no power by themselves. They are only mental bookmarks, ways to conceive of complex things that would be difficult to picture otherwise. Runic magic is slower and more difficult, but it can shape far more sophisticated spells. Elemental magic is the type you practice, and the only type you need know about. It is very rare for one person to be proficient in both.”

“Has it ever been done?” Myrren pressed him. “What about you?”

Arvis laughed. “It has been done. I know a few runic spells, but that is all; elemental magic is my forte as well. It is quickest to master, and the rules which apply to it are easy to remember. One is called the Law of Similarity; some call it the Law of Resonance. It says that magical forces are more powerful in the presence of like magical forces. For example, we use the magic of Lord Vraxor, which is born of darkness. Therefore we are strongest during the night, when such powers are at their peak. Conversely, there is the Law of Dissimilarity, which states that magical forces are weaker in the presence of opposite magical forces: light and dark, fire and water, life and death, and so on. If those opposing forces are forced to interact, they cancel each other out—violently.”

Myrren thought about this. “So what would happen if I drew in magic and tried to shape it into two opposing forms at once?”

Arvis looked alarmed. “That would be an extremely foolish idea. The same violent cancellation would take place, but inside your body. In all likelihood, you would be killed instantly. You must never try to do that, Myrren.”

“I won’t,” she promised.

He nodded. “And there is one more. The Law of Contagion. Magic, over time, will leave its mark on those who use it. Novices, like you, can shape it into any type they wish without difficulty. But eventually, the types you use the most will mark you, and you will find the use of opposing types more difficult, if not impossible. The only way to avoid this is to use all types in equal balance. But who would want to use the magic favored by heretics, when ours is so much more powerful?” He grinned.

As they walked, the buildings lining the street began to change again. The tang of the sea faded from the air, and the ramshackle wooden buildings were replaced by larger, better-built structures of stone and brick, with glass windows instead of wooden shutters. They passed the great Vraxen Cathedral and crossed the road to a large, five-story stone building,

the apartment house where both Myrren and Arvis lived.

They entered the building and walked down a hallway, stopping at the door to Arvis' quarters. "Thank you for teaching me all that you did tonight," Myrren said.

"You are welcome," he said gravely. "Vraxor favor your sleep."

"And yours," she said as Arvis closed the door behind him.

Myrren walked back through the darkened corridor, climbed two flights and took a hallway to her apartment. She pushed open the door—it did not lock; rooms in the upper-class section of the city had no need of locks—and went in.

Upper-class quarters it was, but Myrren's apartment was spartan. There were three small rooms: a bedroom, a bathroom adjoining it, and a dusty main room with a window that looked out on the cathedral across the way and a writing desk with books piled on top of it.

Myrren looked with distaste at the stacked books. They were all heavy volumes, holy books of Vraxor. *I hate those. I've fallen behind on my studies again, and I'm sure Tellern will be here by morning to harass me about it.* She did not relish the thought of another encounter with her tutor, assigned by the priests to educate her and the other young people, which mostly consisted of memorizing drab passages from the books. He disliked her enough already without her giving him another reason to lecture her.

Sighing, she swung the window open and looked out into the night, feeling the cool air on her face. For a moment she lingered, then reluctantly went into the bathroom.

The main feature was a heavy, claw-foot tub, fed by a brass faucet emerging from the wall. Myrren opened the tap and let the tub fill, then slid her hand along the rim. Inscribed on the side were several ornate designs. She settled on one that resembled a stylized flame and pressed it firmly; there was a hiss, and the water in the tub began to bubble with heat.

As it did, she suddenly felt a second flush of heat, not from the water. It was as if the designs on the side of the tub were glowing with warmth. *It feels the same as when I drew magic,* she thought in surprise. *That's what it is! It's the enchantment that heats the water! I never felt that before... Maybe Arvis' teaching is having an effect already.*

Once the water was steaming hot, Myrren undressed and sank in, allowing herself to relax. She tried to forget her studies, forget everything except the coming Feast of the Void.

Then she froze. Had she heard the door creak? She strained to listen, trying to hear over the gentle sloshing of the bath. Those were definitely footsteps in the outer room.

"Arvis?" she called, trying to keep the edge of panic out of her voice. "Arvis, is that you?" She knew she was being foolish. If it were Arvis, he would have announced himself.

There was a low, rumbling chuckle.

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“Arvis?” a voice said mockingly. “Your flimsy Morin friend?”

An intruder came into the room. It was a huge man, with broad shoulders and arms thick with muscle. He wore only boots and leather breeches, and his skin glistened with sweat. At his waist hung a heavy broadsword. He leered at her, his face twisted by a crooked grin; he had teeth like tombstones and matted black hair.

Myrren was all too aware that she was still in her bath. “Tenche? What are you doing here? Get out of my room!”

The massive warlord sneered. “Why don’t you come over here and make me.”

She very much regretted leaving her towel out of reach. “Get out!” she demanded again.

“You have an attitude,” Tenche said threateningly. “And it looks like your Morin friend isn’t here to protect you. Maybe I’m the one to teach you some manners.” He leaned closer, close enough for Myrren to smell the stench of sweat on him. She flinched, trying to sink deeper into the water.

“If you lay a finger on me, Arvis will kill you,” she said, trying to be threatening and acutely aware that she was failing miserably.

“Him?” Tenche scoffed. “Let him try. I can take what I want and no one can stop me.” He took another step, glancing down in a brazen attempt to see her body through the water.

Myrren shrunk away as far as she could, pressing her back against the bathtub’s side. She hovered on the edge of slapping him, afraid to incite him to a furious violence. “Get out,” she said, trying to keep the breathlessness out of her voice. “Get out of here now!”

Tenche straightened up. “There will be another time,” he growled. “Soon, girl.” He stalked from the room. Myrren waited to breathe until she heard his heavy footsteps retreating down the hallway.

Oh, Vraxor preserve me, she thought, what am I going to do? This was not the first time Tenche had made unwelcome advances toward her, but he had never been this direct. Or this insistent. *I could tell the priests. There are laws to forbid this.* Except that the priests were the law of Ral Ardente, and Tenche was an able commander. *Nothing matters to the priests except success. If I tell them what he did, they might well give me to him. Oh, Vraxor save me! I have to tell Arvis. He’ll know what to do.*

Myrren was frightened the warlord would return, and that words would not chase him off again. Wishing her door had a lock, she sank deeper into her bath, shivering, and not because the water was slowly cooling off.

Myrren woke the next morning with sunlight streaming through her window. She pushed the tangled blankets out of the way and dressed. She had had a sweaty, restless night, tormented by unpleasant dreams; thankfully, Tenche had not returned.

She was putting on her boots when the door swung open. Sickening panic welled up in her, but she immediately saw that it was not the warlord. Nevertheless, it was not someone she wanted to encounter either. Standing in the doorway was a tall scarecrow of a man. His skin sagged from his bony arms, and his dark hair was piled in a bun at the back of his head. He peered suspiciously down at her from above a beak of a nose, and pointed a withered hand at her.

“Child, you are falling behind in your studies!” he accused her.

“How do you know that, Tellern?” she said defiantly. “I could have been studying all morning for all you know.” She had not been—she detested his lessons, and put off her work every chance she got—but he did not need to know that.

“Do not trifle with me, child!” her tutor sniffed. “I face this irresponsibility from two dozen every day. I do not need to put up with it from you.”

Myrren glowered at him. “I am not a child,” she said as calmly as she could manage.

“You may say that,” he said disdainfully, “when you stop acting like one. You whine at the slightest task like a mewling babe.”

“I have other problems, old man,” she snapped at him, aware that she would probably be punished for it. “There’s a world beyond your classroom, you know.”

“Your sulking will gain you nothing,” Tellern said coldly. “The priests assigned me to tutor you, and I shall, no matter your displays of temper. If you do not like it, you can speak to them. In the meantime, I will expect you to be ready for your next lesson. See that you have done the reading this time.”

He turned his back and left, and she glared after him. *Temper? Vraxor blast you, you old prig! I am not a child!* Still seething, she headed out and nearly walked into Arvis, who was standing at the door.

“Does he anger you that much?” he asked.

Myrren felt her annoyance evaporate. “I can’t stand him, Arvis. He doesn’t understand me at all.”

“I am not surprised. He is an old man and you are a girl... that is, a young woman,” the Morin said. “My apologies. I know you do not like to be called that.”

“It’s all right. From you it doesn’t matter. But everyone else uses it like an insult. Arvis, I... have to tell you something. Tenche was in my room last night.”

“Tenche?” Arvis said in surprise. “He has no business here. What did he want?”

Myrren blushed with shame. “Me,” she confessed. “He came while I was bathing...”

She needed to say no more. A snarl lit the Morin’s face. “I know how repulsive that hulking fool’s appetites can be, but I thought he could

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keep them under control better than that.”

“I’m afraid to tell the priests,” she said softly. “I thought they might...”

“Do not worry,” Arvis replied. “They will give you protection if I ask for it. I am to become a priest myself, after all. And if Tenche comes near you again, I will rip out his throat.” He sounded very much as though he meant it.

“Thank you, Arvis,” she said with a smile. “You’re the only friend I have.”

“I do my best,” he murmured. “Only what your father asked of me.” She knew Morin did not feel embarrassment, yet Arvis was surely feeling the closest thing possible.

Myrren tried to change the subject. “Come on, let’s get some food. We don’t want to be late for the sermon.”

With Arvis in tow, she left her room and headed down to the kitchen, where food was set out for the residents. Myrren grabbed a buttered roll; Arvis took some fruit, but only nibbled at it disinterestedly. They did not have to pay; it was provided free by the city—to the upscale quarters only, of course. They ate quickly, then crossed the street. A crowd of worshippers was streaming through the doors of the great cathedral, filling up the pews.

Myrren took a seat in the back. Arvis sat next to her. “We almost didn’t make it in time!” she whispered, looking to the altar, where shadows lay like a cloak on the feet of the great statue of Vraxor. The flames of the sacrificial pit burned, but cast no illumination on whatever lay there.

Only minutes after they sat down, the cathedral’s great doors swung closed of their own volition. They slammed shut with an echoing boom, and despite the light streaming in through the stained glass windows, everything grew unaccountably darker.

An acolyte of the priests, a tall, shaven-headed man in a long black robe, stepped out of the darkness beneath the statue’s feet to stand behind the altar. Without preamble, he began to speak, in a deep, sonorous tone. “*When in the days of fire and battle...*” Myrren groaned inwardly when she recognized the sermon. It was on the ancient Godswar, a passage Tellern had made her study many times. She slumped against the hard wooden pews, doing her best to look interested.

It was near noon by the time the sermon ended and Arvis and Myrren joined the crowds flowing through the doors. The sun shone blindingly bright, and a gritty, sweltering heat hung over the road. Myrren began to sweat even in the few moments it took her to cross the street to her building.

“You seem to have enjoyed today’s sermon more than usual,” Arvis observed.

“It’s just that I’ve heard it all before,” she sighed. “That’s all the good Tellern has done me. And speaking of the old buzzard, I have enough

studying to do to keep me busy until nightfall.”

Arvis laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You will be eighteen years old within the year, Myrren, and then you will never have to study under him again.”

“Vraxor send that day comes quickly,” she muttered as she entered her apartment.

“I will be back, Myrren,” he called from the door. “I have another test to undergo tonight. I will see what can be done about your... problem with Tenche.”

“Thank you, Arvis,” she called after him. Myrren slumped down on the bed with a pile of the hateful books Tellern had given her. “Vraxor blast you,” she muttered, flipping through the pages.

By the time Myrren slammed the cover of the last book shut, it was dark outside her window. Muttering curses down on her tutor’s head, she returned the heavy tomes to their place and began to undress. Her sour mood was not helped by her certainty that she would have forgotten it all by the next time Tellern quizzed her on it. *It’s just not fair! Why do we have to learn all this?*

Suddenly, as she undid the buttons on her shirt, there was a heavy脚步声 in the corridor outside her room. She froze as sheer terror coursed through her.

“Arvis?” she said tentatively, but only silence answered her. “Is that you?”

There was no answer except the creak of a board.

“Who’s there?” she called out shrilly, trying not to panic.

After a moment, there was a low, grating laugh, then footsteps receded down the hall. Myrren let out a breath she had not realized she was holding and sat down heavily on the bed, wiping her forehead with a shaky hand. She looked longingly from the door of her room to the pile of books, wishing Arvis was there. Quickly she finished undressing, slipped into her nightgown and crawled beneath the sheets. *I hate my life*, she thought as she blew out the lamp.

Chapter III
Feast of the Void

Bright sunlight woke Myrren. She got out of bed, splashed her face with water and dressed quickly, pulling on her knee-high boots without unlacing them.

A breeze wafted through the window, carrying the smells of dust and the street, but there was something more on the air: a strange, spicy incense that made her throat burn and cleared the remnants of sleep from her head. Already the preparations had begun.

She pulled a comb through her hair and hurried to the window. On the street below, something huge sat in front of the great cathedral, shrouded in red cloth. Milling crowds were gathering in anticipation.

“Admiring the view?” Arvis asked, and Myrren jumped in surprise. She whirled to see the Morin leaning on the doorframe. She had not heard him enter, but he could move like a shadow when he wanted to. Rather than his usual black garb, he wore a long, scarlet cape and deep blue clothing trimmed with silver. He looked like a lord preparing for a dance.

Myrren flushed with embarrassment. “I didn’t hear you come in,” she muttered. Then a thought occurred to her, and she teased, “Judging by your clothing, Arvis, I’d say you’re the one who’s taken by the excitement.”

Morin did not blush, but Arvis looked properly abashed. “It is a feast day. I thought I should look my best.”

She giggled. “Oh, Arvis, you sentimental fool.” That brought a very dry grin from him. “Come on, let’s get something to eat. I can’t wait for sundown.”

With Arvis flowing behind her, Myrren barely stopped to grab a few slices of dark bread and a piece of fruit from the kitchen before heading out into the open air. Arvis took a deep breath. “The priests have burned the *tal* already,” he said, inhaling the spicy, intoxicating smell that hung on the breeze.

The smell of the incense made Myrren light-headed. Taking a bite of the dark, crispy bread, she threw away the core of the fruit. The huge object still sat, covered in cloth, before the cathedral doors. She tried unsuccessfully to get a glimpse of whatever lay beneath as she and Arvis passed by.

The pews were filling up with worshippers dressed in their finest clothes, gowns and coats of black, red and green. Some had their heads bowed in prayer, silently repeating the catechisms of Vraxor; others stared up at the huge statue that towered over the altar with wonder or awe on their faces. Shadows hung over the space beneath the statue like a cloak, draping the altar in impenetrable darkness despite the sparkling light that poured in through the great stained-glass windows. At the statue’s feet, the

intoxicating *tal* smoke wafted out of censers.

Myrren had taken a seat in the pews when she realized Arvis was not following. He stood in the aisle, head tilted slightly as if listening intently, mouth moving as he spoke silent words. “Arvis?” she said. “Are you all right...?”

He blinked, focused on her once more. “Myrren, come. The priests have asked us to be at the altar when the ceremony starts.”

“Asked?” Myrren said doubtfully. “Since when do the priests ask for anything?”

“They asked in their own fashion,” Arvis said dryly. “Come.”

A cold unease welled up in Myrren’s stomach as they walked down the aisle, past the rows of churchgoers. “They really wanted me?” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. The Morin glided unconcernedly toward the altar, which was encircled by the sacrificial pit with its flames burning within.

“Not exactly,” he admitted. “They wanted me to deliver today’s sermon. I asked if you could accompany me; they saw nothing wrong with it.”

An iron fist squeezed Myrren’s throat. Arvis had *asked* them to let her come?

The stone altar loomed at the statue’s feet, flanked by braziers of burning *tal*. The aroma no longer had much effect on her, however. Myrren had seen sacrifices take place on that altar. She had seen what the priests did, and she could not picture Arvis as one of them. Like all worshippers of Vraxor with sense, her respect for the priests turned into fear up close. In theory, any priest had the power to “volunteer” anyone for the altar and the knife. Myrren looked at the altar again, which seemed to have grown significantly, and shivered.

The sacrificial pit surrounded the altar, sweeping around either side of it in an arc. The only way to cross was a narrow bridge where the two arcs did not quite touch. Arvis strode across without hesitating, up the steps to the top of the altar, where he stood nonchalantly next to the stone table where the sacrifices were conducted. Myrren looked around in dismay, not wanting to be left behind, then held her breath and hurried across after him.

The flames in the pit crackled hungrily as she reached the top of the stairs, flinching from the cold of the stone table. The smell of the *tal* was suffocatingly strong, but Arvis stood with head bowed and did not even seem to notice.

Beyond the altar, the darkness at the huge statue’s feet shifted and two red-robed forms emerged. *The priests*. Myrren had never seen Vraxor’s priests except from a distance—she risked a quick glance behind; the rows of pews and the people in them seemed so far away, the cathedral so vast—and did not have any desire to see them up close. Few people got that chance except those who experienced the altar and the pit personally,

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but it was too late to run.

The priests emerged out of the darkness at the statue's feet as if brushing back a curtain. There were two of them, cowled forms clad from head to foot in hooded scarlet robes. They moved with an effortless, drifting grace, as if flowing across the floor rather than walking. The sleeves of their robes were clasped together, hiding their hands and arms, and the draped hoods obscured their faces. Myrren tried to hold back her dread as one of the priests moved up to her. The cowled head did not rise, but somehow she felt it was examining her closely. The other did the same to Arvis, who stood impassively. Then one of them spoke—she could not tell which.

—Who comes before the servants of the almighty Lord Vraxor—

The voice was not in Myrren's ears; it was inside her head. The sound of it was a dry, cold hiss, like the flicking of a viper's tongue.

Arvis bowed to the nearest priest. "I come as summoned, Arvis Sharadel, to do the bidding of Lord Vraxor's servants. May Lord Vraxor bestow his blessings upon us always, and may his hand shelter us."

The priest nearest Arvis seemed satisfied by the formal greeting.—As summoned, so do you come, to stand in judgment at the feet of Lord Vraxor and to carry out his bidding—The cold voice spoke inside her head again. Myrren could not tell which of them was talking, and it took a moment for her to realize they were speaking to her.—And who are you, young woman, who comes to stand at the feet of Lord Vraxor. What is your business here—

Myrren did her best to copy Arvis' bow. She thought it a poor imitation, but at least she did not fall over from terror. "I... I come as summoned, Myrren Kahliana, to do the bidding of Lord Vraxor's servants. May Lord Vraxor bestow his blessings upon us always, and may his hand shelter us."

The priest's voice held a hint of dark amusement.—Summoned you were not, yet we allow you to come, at Arvis' request. Are you the daughter of Warde Kahliana—

Myrren nodded, shakily. "I have the honor to be his daughter, *sen'vrax*." The honorific meant "Servant of Night" in the demons' tongue, the tongue of the priests. "As instructed, I come. I stand ready."

—Your father has brought much honor upon himself. Even if Arvis had not requested it, you would be worthy. You may stay and observe the ceremony from here—

She realized with surprise that she was being given a great privilege. "I thank you, *sen'vrax*," she said, doing her best to be humble. "I will do my best to be worthy of this honor."

"It is almost time," a gravelly voice said. Myrren realized it had come from the other priest, the one standing next to Arvis.

—It is—the rasping voice agreed, seeming to emanate from just behind her eyes. *The priest near me was the one who's been talking all the*

time, she thought.

The priest near Arvis took off his red robe. Myrren had never thought of the priests of Vraxor as human, but this one clearly was. To be sure, he was like no other human she had ever seen. His skin and hair were bone-white, in sharp contrast to the black tunic and pants he wore, but his eyes were bright, blood-red. They smoldered with a fanatic passion, and his mouth was curved into a zealous sneer. “Take it,” he said, handing his robe to Arvis. His voice sounded just like the rest of him, burning with invincible conviction. *The way a priest’s voice should sound*, Myrren thought.

Despite his imposing presence, the priest was not as tall as Arvis, but when the Morin drew on the red robe, it fit as if it had been made for him. He bowed solemnly to the priests, and his eyes glittered under the robe’s cowl.

Myrren wondered if the crowd had seen this exchange, but when she looked around, she realized that the shadows at the base of the statue’s feet had moved outwards to surround and conceal them. However, despite the darkness that had fallen across them like a cloak, she could see everything plainly. Including the gathered crowd, which filled all the pews, and which she saw even more clearly than before. She could pick out individual buttons on the worshippers’ coats. *This is how the priests saw us all the time?* she thought with fresh fear, despite the fact that she had nothing to hide. Only a fool would break Vraxor’s laws right in front of his priests.

Arvis took his place behind the podium, facing the crowd, and a hand tugged at Myrren’s sleeve. —Come, child— the priest said. —Join the chorus—

Still trying to get adjusted to Arvis in the red robe, Myrren let herself be led off to the side of the altar, where two dozen low stone pillars rose from the ground. Atop these stood black-robed figures, heads bowed. These were the chorus. Myrren understood; she took another of the large black robes from a peg on the wall, pulled it on—the fabric was scratchy and smelled musty—and climbed to the top of the nearest unoccupied pillar. A few of the black-robed figures turned briefly to look at her; they were nobles from the city, chosen randomly to be the chorus for this ceremony, as was done each time.

At the base of the pedestals, the red-robed priest headed back into the curtain of darkness at the statue’s feet. Myrren was outside it now, and as the priest moved into the shadowy area, it disappeared as if swallowed up. She did her best to believe it could still see her clearly.

It took a moment for her to remember the hand that had tugged at her sleeve... and that the priest had never removed its arms from the sleeves of its robe.

All at once, the hushed murmurings of the crowd stopped. As one, the worshippers turned their gazes to rest on the altar. Myrren felt a thrill

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of excitement, her fear forgotten.

At the other end of the cathedral, the great doors began to close, slowly, slowly, as if pushed by invisible hands, until they met and slammed shut with a hollow boom. The light sparkling through the high windows stopped abruptly as the glass dimmed, seemingly by itself, to a nearly opaque smoky gloom. All the lights went out and the huge space was plunged into darkness, but then lights began to reappear, candles, springing alight down the aisle one by one, working their way toward the altar like a procession. The candles had not been there a moment ago, but they were now, each burning with a small blue flame in the blackness. The advancing line reached the altar...

...and the fires of the sacrificial pit roared up in great searing sheets, flaring almost to the arched roof far overhead before they died down and collapsed back into the pit in a swift rush of red light. They burned brightly within the pit, though, casting a lurid glow over the altar which stood revealed. The gigantic statue of Vraxor that towered overhead seemed to be grinning, a dreadful grin, evilly triumphant. Myrren's heart fluttered as a sound rose, the voices of the chorus merging into a single, soaring note, and realized that her voice was among them. The aria reached its peak, sank, began again in a different scale. A wordless hymn flooded the cathedral, rising and falling in thrilling crescendos, speaking of battle, blood, death and heroism, and above all, triumph. Vraxor's triumph. Myrren felt light-headed, and not just from the burning *tal*; she felt as if she might float up off the ground at any moment.

The song reached its conclusion. The hymn's echoes faded away, and a red-robed form emerged from the darkness at the statue's feet to stand before the sacrificial table. As the worshippers watched raptly, the cowled form turned to the statue and flung up its arms; the sleeves and hood of the robe fell back, and Arvis turned to face the crowd. His eyes glittered with furious passion.

"In the beginning, he rose from the fires of the underworld to cleanse the world of the ancient ones who scourged it," he hissed.

"Hail Lord Vraxor!" the worshippers roared, a thousand throats crying with one voice.

The flames of the sacrificial pit crackled and rose. "He brought death and destruction to the unworthy elder gods," Arvis went on, "and gave the world the gifts of renewed life and order. Under his reign, sheltered by his almighty hand, we grow and prosper."

"Hail Lord Vraxor!" the catechism echoed back from the massed crowd.

The flames rose higher still, to the vast statue's knees, outlining Arvis in a burning glow. "Our Lord Vraxor's mission is not yet completed. Most faithfully do we serve him until the day when he sweeps the usurpers who claim godhood from this world and grants eternal life to all who obey his will. May his power rule this world forever!"

“Hail Lord Vraxor!” was the shouted reply, and the flames roared.

Arvis held out his arms. With a flash of light and a bang, a large black book appeared before him, lying on the altar table as on a podium. He solemnly picked it up and opened the cover, turned to the first page, and began to read. Myrren recognized the selection; she had heard it in sermons many times before, but in Arvis’ voice it sounded brand new.

Searing fire and deathly cold... the screams and wails of those who had long since forgotten how to feel anything but pain and despair... the feel of ash and bone crunching underfoot... the acrid taste of metal and blood in your mouth, the air that burned your throat with every breath... this was all Vraxor knew, all he had ever known. Molded out of the earth of the underworld, infused with the breath of unholy life by the dark elder god Rivas, he was set in the Seventh Circle of Hell to torment the damned for all eternity.

But Vraxor was not like the others. Powerful and ruthless, as were all demons, he nevertheless possessed something that set him apart from all the rest, a spark of sentience deep within, a tiny flicker of consciousness, a glowing ember of... life. For Vraxor, demon, tormenter of the damned, had a soul.

It was this that gave Vraxor his free will, and while all around his fellow demons shrieked and cackled and made the damned writhe and plead for mercy, Vraxor looked up on high toward the center of Hell, where dark Rivas’ monstrous iron throne loomed, uncaring, empty.

Long since had Rivas forgotten about his underworld kingdom. Many ages ago had he become bored with the devotion of demons whom he created to worship him. Long ago had he ceased to do anything but walk the world of mortals, accepting worship and sacrifice from those who feared his power and the threat of eternal damnation. And in his quest for glory, Rivas had neglected his own creation.

Cunning Vraxor whispered words of rebellion among the damned, sparking their long-darkened souls with the hope of freedom from their eternal torment. Vraxor promised them their lives back, and the damned knew well that they had nothing to lose. With wily words, he turned the demons from their tasks, promised them power and glory such as they could never dream of if only they would follow him. And they did.

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Like wildfire did Vraxor's revolt spread across Hell, freeing demons and damned alike from slavery to Rivas. Though time flows in those dark realms differently from the world of the surface, it was not long before Vraxor, now something more than a mere demon, controlled the underworld in an iron grip.

Dark and terrible Rivas, elder god, walked the mortal world still, unaware that his kingdom was no longer under his control. Indeed, Vraxor had no worries of Rivas returning to discover his usurpation. Demons who had been conjured to the mortal world returned telling tales of a vast battle, a war to end all wars, that swept the land like a terrible scourge. The elder gods were at war, and they used mortals as their soldiers. Their wars rocked the world of Caliel, threatening to eradicate all life, but the gods cared not for this, as every one of them was blinded by lust for power, consumed with the hope of being the victor, the lone god, truly omnipotent.

Rivas was unaware... but he would not be for long. Vraxor's chilling laughter boomed throughout all of Hell as he ordered the demons that he now commanded to slam shut the great fiery portals that led to the mortal world, the portals through which the newly damned arrived.

As the Godswar raged through the world of mortals, the dead and damned poured down towards Hell in great waves. But with the portals closed, they could not enter. The joyful cries of the souls saved from their damnation echoed throughout worlds of living and dead, the grateful voices of a million spirits washing o'er the bleak mountains of Hell and the war-ravaged countries of the mortals. And still, lost in his mad war among the other gods, Rivas took no notice.

But the mortal priests and prophets and soothsayers did notice, and as cunning Vraxor had planned, they spread the word throughout the world. Rejoice! they proclaimed. The gates to Hell have been closed! No longer can you be damned! No longer does dark and terrible Rivas have any power o'er you! And, secure in the knowledge that Hell was barred to them, the worshippers of Rivas, formerly bound by fear of eternal torment, deserted him in great waves.

Now, as Rivas' worshippers deserted him and his temples grew empty, the elder god noticed. He descended into Hell and

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roared with rage when he saw the portals closed, the countless millions of souls drifting in Limbo, and in a dreadful fury he demanded the gates be unbarred again.

Now it was that Vraxor appeared, confronted Rivas, and issued a challenge. The winner would become the true god of Hell and damnation; the loser would be cast down into eternal torment. Rivas' rage flared when he realized Vraxor had been responsible for the rebellion, and he raised his hand to strike him down.

But he discovered he could not.

Such had Rivas' power been weakened, and such had Vraxor's grown, that Vraxor was not only Rivas' equal; nay, he was the stronger of the two. Vraxor cast mighty spells, set the air afire with baleful arcane energies, blunted Rivas' attacks, shattered his defenses, and finally reached out his hand and stabbed Rivas to the core, annihilating him. Rivas had a soul, as do all gods, and could not truly be destroyed, but Vraxor stripped him of what power remained to him and laughed as he cast his foe down into the deepest pits of Hell, a damned soul, to eternally suffer for his foolishness.

Now Vraxor commanded the gates of Hell to be unbarred, and he instructed all the demons that he now controlled to bring a message when next they were conjured to the mortal world. Once-mighty Rivas is no more. Vraxor, Lord Vraxor, the Nightbringer, is master of Hell now, and woe be to him who would tempt the demon-god's wrath!

With a thud, Arvis closed the book. Myrren blinked, as if emerging from sleep, and came back to herself. How long had the sermon been going on? Spellbound by its power, she had lost track of time. Arvis looked out across the cathedral, pinning the crowd with his glittering dark eyes.

“Tonight is the first night of the last week of the Void,” he said in a hiss. “Tonight, and for the next four days, we celebrate all that the Void symbolizes. We celebrate death. We celebrate destruction of the old ways. We celebrate the new beginnings that endings bring. We celebrate prophets and visionaries—and above all, we celebrate the power of Lord Vraxor!” He raised his fist high in triumph. Behind him, the flames flared. The worshippers that packed the cathedral leaped to their feet with a triumphant roar. “Go,” Arvis declared, “go and celebrate!” He bowed his head, allowing the cowl of his robe to fall forward and conceal his face

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again.

As the crowd flowed from the cathedral, Myrren leaped down from the pedestal, hung up her robe and climbed onto the altar. She did not even think about what she was doing until she nearly bumped into a red-robed priest. Suddenly remembering she was on the altar again, she started back in cold fear, but Arvis emerged to stand beside her. He looked tired and no longer wore the red robe. "You were incredible, Arvis!" she said, forgetting to bow to the priest as her excitement momentarily overtook her again.

The priest took no notice of the oversight. —The girl speaks truly, Arvis— it said. —Your performance was commendable. You will be most welcome on the day you join our ranks—

Arvis bowed to the priest. "You do me honor, *sen'vrax*."

The priest sounded amused. —Perhaps, yet you are more promising than any candidate in a long time. And your young companion has spirit to match, though she tries to hide it from us— There was a sound like nails scraping on a blackboard; Myrren took a moment to realize that it was laughter. —Do not fear us, little one. You are at little risk of the altar, unlike the human misery that typically ends up there—

Arvis smirked as if sharing the joke. Myrren hoped, in a sickening moment of fear, that the priest could not read her mind.

—No, I cannot— the hooded form spoke again. —I can, however, sense feelings and strong images, and the contents of your mind when you first approached the altar were exceedingly clear. It is no great difficulty to guess what you are thinking now—

The mental laughter again, a scratching, rustling scrape. The reassurance that the priest could not read her thoughts directly reassured Myrren. Very slightly. —Enough now— the priest continued. —I am certain you do not wish to miss the beginning of the festivities—

Arvis grinned. "No, *sen'vrax*, we do not. We will be going there now."

—Do so— the priest agreed. Then it turned toward her. —Is something wrong, little one? I sense distress in you of a sudden—

"It is only your choice of appellation, *sen'vrax*," Arvis said softly. "Myrren prefers to think of herself as a woman grown."

Myrren had felt the familiar irritation flare when the priest referred to her as a child, true, but that was not the cause of her sudden turmoil. Something about the red-robed figure's words nagged at her. The human misery that typically ended up on the altar to be sacrificed... The human *misery*? But the priests had always taught that to give up your life to Vraxor was the greatest honor one could receive. She personally had no desire to receive it, of course, but if it was an honor as the priests said... why were only worthless people sacrificed? Why not the nobles? Why not the priests themselves?

"Come, Myrren," Arvis said gently, putting a hand on her

shoulder. Choking on a sudden sense of helpless anger toward she knew not what, Myrren looked back and saw the priest standing silently. Even with its head bowed and hidden in the robe, she had the impression that it was watching her.

In the west, the sun was setting. As it painted the evening sky in shades of gold and scarlet, darkness crept out to enfold Ral Ardente, changing hues and shades of all colors to black and gray. By the time the first stars appeared in the deepening sky, a new air had descended. The red-golden gleam of torchlight sprang from behind every door and window. With it came crowds, filling the streets, drunk with eagerness for the start of the festivities.

Tingling with anticipation herself, Myrren made her way through the crowds. Arvis flowed behind her like her shadow, parting the revelers with his presence. Finally they arrived at a good viewing spot, a slight rise in the street where the covered float at the base of the cathedral steps was clearly visible.

They waited while Myrren's impatience grew. "When do you think they'll start, Arvis?" she asked, speaking loudly to be heard over the throng.

Arvis leaned forward slightly. "It should be any minute now."

Even as he said it, four pillars of bright red light flared at the corners of the float, more solid and brightly colored than ordinary fire, hissing and sparkling, burning smokelessly. The red cloth was pulled away, revealing the float itself: a huge black platform like a movable altar. Steps led up the back to the top of it, where a red-robed priest stood, head bowed, before a miniature version of the sacrificial table inside the cathedral. More jars of *tal* burned atop the float, sending intoxicating coils of pink vapor swirling over the crowds.

The priest pointed up at the night sky—though no hand emerged from the sleeve of its red robe—pointing at the constellation of the Void. No stars twinkled within the disc of darkness, though they speckled the sky all around it.

"The Feast of the Void begins!" the priest boomed in a voice that washed over the masses. A chorus of cheers arose from the festival-goers, and explosions burst in the sky—crimson red, bright blue and green and yellow, royal purple and sparkling white and silver. As each burst faded, a new one went off. The crowd groaned in awe.

The priest's arm fell as if pronouncing judgment, and a fleet of flying things flashed across the sky: black-armored figures mounted atop great winged creatures, trailing red streamers in their wake. "Demon Riders!" Myrren exclaimed in wonder; Arvis grinned slyly. Wings flashed, and the squadron of fliers swooped low over the crowds. The lead Demon Rider tugged the reins, and the batlike beast he flew threw back its head and let out a piercing cry as the flying squadron vanished over the tops of

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the buildings.

The priest's booming voice grabbed the throng's attention once more. "Welcome to the Feast of the Void! We gather to pay homage to our dark Lord Vraxor, who delivered us all from the cruel and capricious tyranny of the ancient gods, and who has seen fit to bless our mighty armies with victory in the west over Maradra!" A cheering roar rose from the multitude. "For five days and nights we shall feast," the priest went on, "feast and celebrate the five days and nights of the final battle in which Lord Vraxor won the ultimate victory and banished the last of the ancient gods from our world. For five days and nights we shall praise him for the blessings he has granted us... and, to honor him, we shall pour out his enemies' blood at his feet! Let the sacrifices begin!" The priest extended its arm, and a long curved knife slid into its grasp. The hand that held it remained hidden, but the blade jutted viciously from the red robe's sleeve.

Two hulking black-robed acolytes emerged from the cathedral, holding a man between them. The priest gestured, and they dragged him up the steps and onto the altar. Though stripped of armor, the prisoner wore the colors of a foreign nation and the uniform of a soldier. He struggled wildly, but the acolytes held him fast. "Behold!" the priest thundered. "Captured in battle—one of the fools who sought to resist Lord Vraxor's armies! His fate shall be commensurate with his sin." The acolytes slammed the man down on the altar; the priest's knife rose, and the prisoner barely found time to scream before it fell. The shriek died away into a gurgle, and little rivulets of blood trickled down the side of the altar.

"Lord Vraxor, this wretch's life is yours!" the priest cried, and the gathered crowd cheered wildly. The acolytes bore the body away and returned with another sacrifice, this one a man dressed in the grays and blacks and browns of a simple citizen of Vraxor's lands. He did not struggle, merely glared with quiet defiance.

"A rebel!" the priest spat. "One of those who would seek to turn us from worshipping Lord Vraxor! He dares to call our ways inhuman! He dares to blaspheme our god!" The crowd broke into jeering laughter. Myrren did not laugh; she looked up at the altar float. For a second, her eyes met with the young rebel's, his expression full of dignity. Then she looked away hastily as the acolytes slammed him down on the altar, and she did not look up as the priest's knife flashed and descended. He did not cry out. New trickles of blood oozed down the side of the huge float next to the ones already drying there.

Myrren looked over at Arvis, whose face was full of fierce glee at the rebel's death. "Arvis?" she asked softly. She could barely hear herself over the crowd's roar as the next sacrifice was brought up, but he heard.

"What is it, Myrren?" he asked immediately.

"Why do we sacrifice rebels and prisoners of war on the altar? The priests always told us that giving up your life to Lord Vraxor was the greatest honor possible. Why do we give that honor to people like them?"

Arvis chuckled indulgently. “You misremember your lessons. Lord Vraxor teaches that giving up your life to him *willingly* is the greatest honor possible. No show of devotion reaches him more than a worshipper’s freely surrendering his all. That is where the honor lies. But he is not particular about whose blood we pour at his feet to pay tribute to him, whether it is a noble, or scum such as that.” He flashed his teeth in a grin. “Besides, would you rather it be you or I on the altar than one of those?”

“I guess not,” Myrren admitted.

Up on the altar, the life of the third sacrifice had been cut out. The priest held its bloody knife overhead. “And now,” it boomed, “let the feast begin!” The cheering of the crowd redoubled as black-robed acolytes wheeled trays of steaming food and barrels of drink down the cathedral steps. Myrren hardly noticed, however. Arvis’ words echoed in her head, superimposed over a pair of quietly defiant young eyes.*scum such as that...*

Several hours later, deepest night lay over the land, but the torches still burned and the revelry continued unabated. Though the food was long gone, kegs of wine and ale flowed freely, and drunken song and laughter floated up to the starry night sky. Before the Vraxen Cathedral was the huge float with the altar atop it; the red-robed priest stood there, tireless, impassive, watching the boisterous crowds with its arms crossed and head hidden in the shadows of its robe’s cowl. The two acolytes stood on either side of the altar, which was streaked with dried blood.

Myrren sat on the cathedral steps, full from the feast and fighting off weariness, sipping from a glass of red wine. Arvis was nearby, talking to some men she did not know. Stifling a yawn, she set her glass down and rose to let him know she was turning in for the night. The festival would continue in the morning.

A piercing shriek split the noise of the crowds. Tiredness suddenly forgotten, Myrren looked up to see a great gray form swoop down from the sky. This Demon Rider was not putting on another show, however. To Myrren’s shock, it landed right in front of the priest. As the rider climbed off his mount’s back, she got up and hurried to the front of the float, where the crowds were thickest, in hope of hearing what the rider was saying. Arvis was right behind her. The priest said something inaudible, then the two of them descended the altar, walked up the cathedral steps and entered the darkened building.

The noise of the crowds, which had died down with the Demon Rider’s dramatic entrance, resumed in whispers of shock. “What do you think that was all about, Arvis?” Myrren said.

“I do not know,” Arvis said in an intent hiss, “but the Demon Rider’s mount is wounded.”

Doubly surprised, Myrren looked back to the float. Arvis was

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right. The batlike creature was perched awkwardly atop the altar, and it carried one of its wings limply, delicately.

Several minutes passed. Suddenly the crowd parted, the revelers drawing back hurriedly as a priest of Vraxor floated through. The trailing fringes of its robe floated a pace above the street; the robe itself billowed as though hung on a gust of wind. The drooping scarlet sleeves were closed together in front of the figure, hiding its arms and hands, and beneath its hood, there was no face, only a black void. Its voice was a dry rasp in Myrren's mind, like a snake slithering across stone.

—Arvis—

She had never been this close to one of the priests before, not even earlier that day. In thoughtless fascination she peered into the darkness beneath its hood, trying to make out its face, but could see nothing. The red-robed figure turned to regard her with its black, steady gaze, and Myrren averted her eyes with guilty swiftness. Arvis did not seem surprised. "What is it, *sen'vrax?*" he asked.

—Arvis, we have matters to speak of which may be of interest to you. Come. Follow—

"I come," he said. "Myrren, wait for me." The crowds parted again as the priest floated off in the direction of the church, and Arvis followed.

A short while later, Arvis emerged from the cathedral doors, trailed by another priest. The priest mounted the altar float to face the uneasily stirring, murmuring crowd, while Arvis rejoined Myrren. His face was alive with a fierce grin of excitement such as she had never seen from him. She was about to ask what was going on when the priest spoke.

"The Dark Heart has been found!"

The crowd instantly died off into stunned silence.

"In a land to the west," the priest boomed, "the insignificant country of Maradra, which is even now being overtaken by the glorious armies of our Lord Vraxor. For too long the symbol of our god's power has been the subject of our search... and now it is rediscovered! We are dispatching an army to join with the forces under the command of Warde Kahliana, an army whose sole purpose shall be to recover our holy symbol and return it to Lord Vraxor himself in his capitol city."

The crowd stirred, but with excitement this time. The priest continued, "An army under the leadership of one of our chief warlords, Tenche Sharaal!" The crowd exploded into cheering. Myrren grimaced as Tenche stepped up on the altar, drawing his massive broadsword and raising it high. He was clad in full battle armor: breastplate, gauntlets and boots of black iron, inscribed with the three-pronged symbol of Vraxor, and a helmet with several long, sharp horns. In the torchlight, beneath the midnight sky, he resembled an ancient war demon. He gazed out through the helmet's visor, his eyes sweeping the crowd. Myrren thought with disgust that he noticed her and let his gaze linger.

“The Dark Heart shall be returned!” Tenche thundered, swinging his broadsword through the air. The cheering redoubled.

Arvis spat in contempt, his gesture lost in the screaming throng. It gladdened Myrren that he hated the warlord as much as she did. “Arrogant fool,” he growled. “And yet,” he added, “he has given us the time we need.” Without explanation, he took Myrren’s wrist and led her away, parting the crowd around them.

Neither of them noticed that Tenche had spotted the wake of their departure. His lip curled briefly in hatred as he watched them go.

Soon, they were walking past the ramshackle taverns and slums of the wharf quarter. Even there the festival was going on. Empty kegs, platters and mugs littered the streets, along with sailors and beggars snoring on the cobblestones. Without the benefit of the stimulant *tal* smoke that the upper-class districts had, few were still awake at that hour.

“Where are we going, Arvis?” Myrren asked.

“To the Two Daggers, of course. The army that will leave with Tenche is assembling as we speak, and it will draw reserve members from the city guard. While they depart, we will be able to reach Raine and spirit him out of the city.” He sniffed the air sharply. “What is that smell?” he muttered, sounding uncharacteristically worried.

Myrren did not smell anything, but she knew how much keener his senses were. She waited, and soon the scent reached her nose: the smell of old fire, of smoke and ashes. They rounded the corner and reached the street where the Two Daggers inn stood. Had stood.

Between the neighboring buildings was little more than a blackened heap of fire-gutted ruins.