

# *Black Mirrors of the Soul*

Book 2 of



*By Charles W. McDonald Jr.*

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## *Credits:*

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*Dedicated to:*

Brandy L. M<sup>c</sup>Donald  
& my twins: Raegen Gaites and Aiden Dylan M<sup>c</sup>Donald

Charles W. M<sup>c</sup>Donald Jr.

When all that is left of great miracles are the waning memories of distant accounts, now questioned by men, shall I come to you in the one undeniable breath of God that your tattered faith be renewed.

For in the final moments shall you need it.

## Preface: A Reader's Guide to A Throne of Souls

The complexity of weaving the intricate plot lines of this story required the breaking of a *lot* of rules to bring this product to you. Some of those rules involve capitalization and emphasis strategies. So, for example, there are many reserved words in this story (Humanity, Creation, Hate, Hope, etc.). Those reserved words will be consistently either capitalized or emphasized for this story and you might think *hey that word shouldn't be capitalized*, but I assure you everything is done with deliberate intent. Other uncommon standards involve handling of scene breaks. So, for instance, you'll see the following types of scene breaks in *A Throne of Souls* to which I'll try to stay as consistent as possible:

\*            \*            \*            \*

The four-star mark (above) will be used denote a scene break of a brief period of time without switching locations, or switching locations (roughly the same time) but staying on the same planetary body.



The flourish bracket (above) will be used to denote a scene break of a large time difference and/or a planetary body shift in location.

A simple carriage-return of white space will be used to denote a change in perspective within the same scene. For example, in a large battle sequence, it's important to understand the perspective of multiple key players as they are engaged in the fight—to see the same event from multiple camera angles if you will.

I want to be as assertive as possible here: *please* pay careful attention to the time and location markers when and where they are provided. It will greatly help you as the timelines begin to cross over one another, and I promise it will contribute substantially to the whole story making perfect sense to you. I'm not saying you need to take notes, nor have an eidetic memory. I'm just saying it will greatly help you deduce the clue drops and critical 'ah hah' moments I've woven into the story. I've tried my best to standardize the following format for the time/location markers throughout:

(Specific Place, Planetary Body, Specific Time If Applicable, Timeline)

If you look in the glossary, I provide specifics on timestream examples and what they mean in this story. For example, I give a specific window of time for the terms ‘Near Future,’ or ‘A Long Time Ago.’ I’m going to give you a little more guidance specifically for this book since we’re going so deep into the back-story of Damon. You’ll see the time marker ‘A Long Time Ago’ frequently used for these back-story scenes, but as I’m stitching together the storyline I will show you some of Damon’s back-story that is further in the timestream than another back-story scene also marked ‘A Long Time Ago.’ Let’s say, for example, a scene from the year 560 precedes a scene from 530 by some 20 chapters. Rather than give you specific years across multiple worlds and across multiple timelines crossing over one another, which would be even more confusing, I think the best way to anchor yourself in Damon’s timestream is to pay attention to his abilities in that given scene. I’ll make it obvious for you and you’ll be able to figure out pretty quickly that this scene precedes another scene I described earlier in the book, because of his ability level and his maturity level. *A Throne of Souls* is a story significantly beyond just Damon, but Damon is the primary reason I’m providing this ‘heads up’ for you, because this book is going to go deep into Damon’s history. I’ll even be more specific in providing you a line of demarcation... In the vast history that spans Damon’s life, the line of demarcation for him—where it moves from ‘A Very Long Time Ago’ to ‘A Long Time Ago’ is when Damon met Dallia for the first time and had cause for the making of *A Throne of Souls*.

You would have figured out all of the above as you read the story, but I thought it would be nice not to exhaust your effort figuring out mechanics of telling the story. Now, we can get to *A Throne of Souls*—Book 2...

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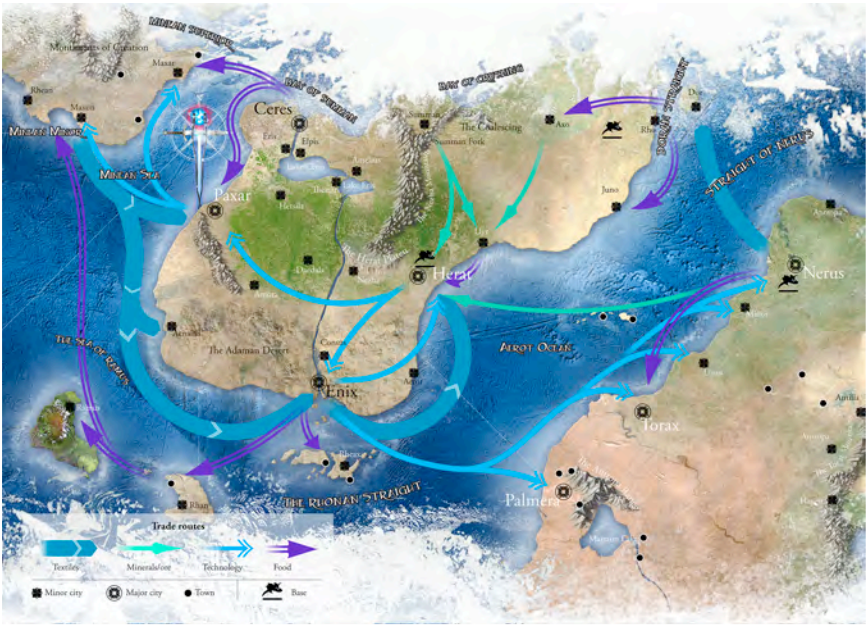
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Maps:



*Perion*





*Graela*



Eden



*Damon of Bawrat, The Dark Knight of Magic*





## Prologue: The Cauldron of Hate

(South of the Aegen River, Kaleion, A Very Long Time Ago)



he chores were the chores, and it didn't matter how sweltering the work was in the blasted heat of summer. Anything less than his best effort would see him punished yet again—severely! Brushing the hay straw off his brown wool pants, Kaylan checked the stack, ensuring it was plumb and level against the barn wall, with all the excess hay picked up in a feedpail for the horses. His welts still throbbed from when the last pile had fallen over. *That mustn't happen again.*

His starry, bright-blue eyes shined like star sapphire gems taking in the sunset for only a moment as he ran his right hand through his wavy black hair. Feeling the sweat on the back of his neck, running his handkerchief across it, then over his forehead, removing the sweat from his brow, Kaylan crossed off another one of his chores in his head, moving on to the next—collecting eggs from the roost.

Charles W. McDonald Jr.



The sound of his father's footsteps coming up from behind, with his heels scuffing the dirt path between the barn and house, made Kaylan cringe inside—if not visibly so.

"Where are my eggs?!!" Keirill demanded harshly, emphasizing his displeasure with his son with a slap of his huge hand on Kaylan's still tender shoulder, knowing how much it would sting after his last punishment.

"Doing it now, Pa." Pivoting away from his father's iron grip, Kaylan moved with all the haste his thirteen-year-old frame would allow.

From just inside the barn doorway, Keirill examined Kaylan's haystacks, taking the measure of how his last punishment had drastically improved his son's work. He didn't take pleasure in castigating his son—at least he didn't think it so. Seren wouldn't approve, but then she wasn't here to express her disapproval either...

Every day he intended to drive home his expectations for his son's development into a man. And he was going to meet those expectations. No matter how many whippings it took, his son was going to understand what it took to survive in this world. His father hadn't been easy on him. He saw no reason to take it easy on Kaylan. No reason at all.

After his own experiences with his father, Keirill didn't even want a child, and he'd made that perfectly clear to his wife from the very beginning. Yet, still...there he was—scurrying about the barn trying to prove himself. Keirill's lips pressed together in a hard, thin line at the thought and how Kaylan had come into being. Now, his responsibility alone whether he wanted it or not... Spitting into the worn path in the grass, Keirill silently cursed his dead wife.

Simmering as he retired back to his house, awaiting his eggs, Keirill contemplated his son's next sentence. He needed to be ready when his son next failed, for he knew failure was coming.

Letting out a heavy sigh of relief at his father's departure, Kaylan moved with all possible speed gathering up the eggs. He knew his father wanted the brown ones, and sold the white ones. A few sweat-filled moments later, sorting them out into separate crude wire baskets, he knew he'd have to repair the baskets soon. He went from hen to hen to hen, carefully collecting, but not dawdling about his chores. Maybe a little too fast, as the white egg basket caught itself on the edge of the pen's wire enclosure, sending every one of them to the floor of the barn in a hasty, hot, and scrambled mess. Words couldn't escape Kaylan's mouth, not a single curse or expression of any kind. Just shaking from the tips of his bangs to the toes on his feet in terror, standing there looking at the justification for his next beating.

"What's taking so *blasted* long?!" Keirill's voice hammered the barn loud enough to make the siding rattle against nails that threatened to loosen from weathering and wear. Noticing Kaylan using his body to shield something from his

view, Keirill shoved his son aside, looking at a week's worth of income on the dirt floor of his barn. Without a word, Keirill ripped his son's sweat-soaked, white tunic from his young body, revealing a series of lash welts across his back, shoulders, and chest.

The fresh ones, still raised red with pus, threatened to burst and infect. Kaylan had stopped shaking as he walked over to the barn wall where his father liked to beat him—trying to comport himself for what he knew was to come. He knew his father detested the emotion of fear even more than he reviled the action of failure so Kaylan didn't want to compound the forthcoming punishment.

Noticing his son taking responsibility for his actions triggered a faint and distant memory of a lesson from his own father—like unto a memory of a memory. “Kaylan, did you do what you promised me you would do?”

“No, sir.” His head faced the wall in obedience, awaiting the first strike.

“And what have I told you about doing what you say?”

“If you don't do what you say, you're just a useless bag of flesh.” A lesson he'd been taught many times and severely so.

“That's right, and that's why we punish the flesh. If the flesh is holding us back, then it must be pierced and cut away.” It hadn't gone unnoticed by Kaylan that his father had already picked up his whip from the opposite barn wall.

With his last words, the first strike came across his lower back, where he had the most severe wounds from the last several beatings. Kaylan's young body shook down to the tips of his toes resonating with the stinging pain his father's whip had brought him. The next strike wrapped around his right shoulder to the right front of his chest, cutting him deeply and leaving ruts in his flesh as the blood began to seep out of the fresh wounds.

No longer contained to the inside, Kaylan's body began to visibly shake as the tears began to surface. As the first of his tears hit the tops of his dusty boots, quickly followed by a second and third, he couldn't help but look down. Watching his own tears streaking fluid trails of vanquished hope in the worn and dusty leather just as the next strike came across the same right shoulder but over the top this time rather than around the outside. Those would leave deep scars as they merged with the previous ruts, driving the leather deeper into his young skin. The tears flowed freely now, clearing the dust completely from the tops of his boots. His body was shaking so severely it was hard to concentrate on any thought at all except the one that always came to him as he was beaten. *When will I ever get it right so I don't disappoint him? I'm sorry, Father. I'll do better. I promise.*

Somewhere inside, Kaylan began to hear whisperings; from where, he couldn't say, but as the next strike came, the whisperings became louder. Two words, overlapping one another again and again. *Fight and back.* The next strike of his father's whip landed on his outer left shoulder, wrapping around to his left pectoral, leaving a heavy stinging up and down his youthful frame. Whispers became shouts inside his thoughts. *FIGHT BACK.*

The next strike came in exactly the same spot as the last with Kaylan grabbing the whip this time before it could recoil back to his father. Pulling it with all his might, his father's massive frame came roiling towards him in mid-air. It happened so fast, and then his fist was smashing Keirill's face in mid-air so hard it snapped Keirill's neck, sending his father flying back in the opposite direction where his father crashed up against the wall in a slumping thud. *How did I?* He didn't understand what was happening.

Kaylan just stood there for a moment, standing over the slumped body of his father now coming to. *KILL HIM NOW!* Whispers no more; these were shouts, and they were *right!* Jumping on top of his father, Kaylan put his thumbs directly in his father's eye sockets, squeezing with all his might in a pinching motion between his thumbs and forefingers, watching his father's head implode in his own hands.

Spurts of blood, gore, and cranial fluid dotted and streaked down Kaylan's forehead and all over the barn wall planks of siding. It was over so fast for the thirteen-year-old boy—now a murderer. Watching his father's brains running down the weathered wood planks of the barn wall and out of his crushed skull, Kaylan knew he couldn't stay here. *Was that a glint amidst the violent bloodletting?*

Looking down at his hands, seeing them drenched in his father's bodily fluids, Kaylan stood silent for a few moments, contemplating his new freedom—his new future—as the gore of his boldness drained into his starry-blue eyes. Slowly, the blackness in deep charcoal-blue hues—a mixture of cranial fluid and blood—crept over the top of Kaylan's cornea, then his irises, turning them purple, then a smoky charcoal, then black. His only awareness was how upside-down his life had just been turned, and that staying here was not an option.

Moments later, after cleaning up in the house, grabbing a few necessities, Kaylan began heading east down the road to the biggest walled-city he knew—Basrat.

\* \* \* \*

Walking all the way through the night, Kaylan was exhausted and his wounds throbbed, but he had to put some distance between himself and the farm. The twenty-cubit-high walls of Basrat before him, he tried to form a believable story—a mostly true story of his effort to forge a new life—just absent some of the details. The city guard was coming up fast as Kaylan's position in line progressed.

"Aye, who goes there," the guard asked the frail, old man hauling fruits and grains into the city in a wooden cart.

"Raken the Merchant," the man replied. "Bringing only the freshest fruits and wheat for the king's people."

"Unlikely." The guard briefly eyed his cart, kicking the wheels forward toward the gate. "Get," he ordered as the elderly man dragged his cart inside the city walls.

“Who goes there, little boy?” The city guard paid little attention to what little threat a small boy could bring to his city, but something didn’t feel right about the boy as the guard scratched the gnarled and matted mess of sweaty hair on the back of his over-sized skull.

“Damon, looking for work.” He displayed the guard his callused hands—a working boy’s hands—turning them over for the guard.

A look at the boy’s black eyes caused an alarming, taken-aback glare from the guard, “What the...”

Damon knew why the guard was staring at him. He’d seen the reason in the mirror when he was cleaning up, but he made no comment, only letting his desperation speak for him in his sullen and worn expression. He needed a break and he didn’t have the words—nor the right—to ask for it.

Scratching the back of his head again, feeling the grit and grime of his long day rolling underneath his dirty fingertips, the guard wanted to reject the boy. Looking for any reason and finding plenty, he had all the justification he needed to send the boy away, but he really didn’t look like the bad sort. He just looked...hopeless. Something worked on him from within. It was just a brief feeling, and then it was gone. “Aye, let him through.”

Damon never looked back, only exhaling in relief as he crossed into the walled city of Basrat—his new home.



(Austin, TX, Earth, Present Day)

His work on the next new fundamental for Dark Energy wasn’t going as smoothly as had the one for Zero-Point, and Mira knew him frustrated by it. At least he had opened up to her about hearing the voices in his mind that came like ‘prayers’ he described. She didn’t know what that was about, but with Damon any number of things were possible.

“Are you hearing them even now,” Mira asked, considering his beautiful black, smoke-rimmed gems.

Her eyes blinking more than normal as he considered what that meant, given what he knew of her, Damon longed to open up to her, but feared the abyss of where that could lead. Each were very different from the others—Dallia, Mira, Mira Castille, Evanyil, Victoria, Sijil... All gave differing signals even though they were done with similar gestures. Each had a context all their own. Each time, learning a new woman was like unto learning a new language—having the potential to be either thrilling or exasperating depending on the individual, but he didn’t let the exasperating ones stick around very long.

This Mira was very special and he knew it. He wanted very much to let her in, but he just needed to figure out the safest way to let that happen—if there was one.

“Earth to Damon, are you listening to me or just looking into my eyes lost in thought again?” Lying in bed together, she longed for something more than mere pillow talk. She knew Damon’s intellect was both broad and steep and it was so rare to find a man who could carry an intellectual conversation with her instead of her having to do all the work. This was one of the rare opportunities they had to actually get to know one another and she wasn’t about to let it pass her by.

“Sorry, I heard you... Yes, I hear them even now. Even worlds away, I hear them asking me to heal this, or save them from that, or whether or not it’s safe to fall in love again with someone new they just met. I hear my society, on the rim of Creation, asking for guidance...”

“And...?” Mira sat up, placing her right hand on his chest, “Are you going to give them the guidance they need?” Internally wondering if Damon were even qualified. His power ran out in front of him like a great cantilever threatening to collapse for its overhang was too long without support from the main body that was the foundation of his identity.

He considered the question—in all its validity. Who was he to provide guidance? It was one thing for him to guide Radin in magic, but entirely something else to guide other Humans in life. What example was his life for others to follow? He needed the power of his new station to accomplish the Master Plan, but he wanted neither the responsibility nor the notoriety that came with it. Kellen was the one who sought infamy—not him. Yet, infamy found him far more often than it found even the mighty Kellen the Destroyer.

“I love your certainty of your own identity at such a young age. I miss that. It was so long ago; I barely remember it.”

Now he was talking in riddles. She loved his intellect...and his power, but often found herself in shaking terror at his ability to act with such mortal certainty with such quick decision-making. She knew and felt him a great doer of things, but she wondered if he foresaw all the outcomes of his actions before acting them out. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t feel like it. I can’t say I understand, because there’s no way I possibly could, but I understand feeling overwhelmed.”

A big rakish smile from Damon involuntarily made her smile in kind. “Thank you for that,” as fond memories of Dallia stirred in his mind. He didn’t want to share that part. Women didn’t like being compared to one another. Men didn’t either for that matter, but still the memory she raised was a good one.

“Thank you for what? Damon, what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“I’m thinking there’s a place I’d like to take you some day.” Deflecting away from the topic of prayers and of his past was the best way out of this conversation...

“To your new planet?!”

“No!” His response was both terse and firm, causing her to recoil her head back into her pillow against the headboard.

She didn’t understand what his deal was about not letting her go with him to the new world he’d made. It could really help her research, and she needed to find a way to make that happen. Turning her frown around, she shrugged off his rejection. Tracing ever-so-faint scars running across Damon’s pectorals, shoulders, and neck, Mira freely thought aloud, “Why haven’t you ever *Healed* these?”

His iron grip snatched her hand, immediately pulling her hand from his body. Rising from his king-size bed, Damon warned, “Some lessons are best left on the surface, where we can always remember them.” His caution hung heavy in the air as he walked away from her out of the master bedroom without even looking back.

She knew Damon didn’t fit the classical definition of bipolar, but the way he could swing from loving to completely shut-down terrified her. It was like walking in a minefield without a map of where the mines were buried.

Mira knew she needed to understand him better if this was ever going to work. She knew you didn’t craft a Damon with teddy bears and flowers; Damon was forged in a *cauldron of hate*, and she feared, every day, exactly what that meant—for the both of them—her fears justified.



(One of Setinon’s Moons, Present Day)

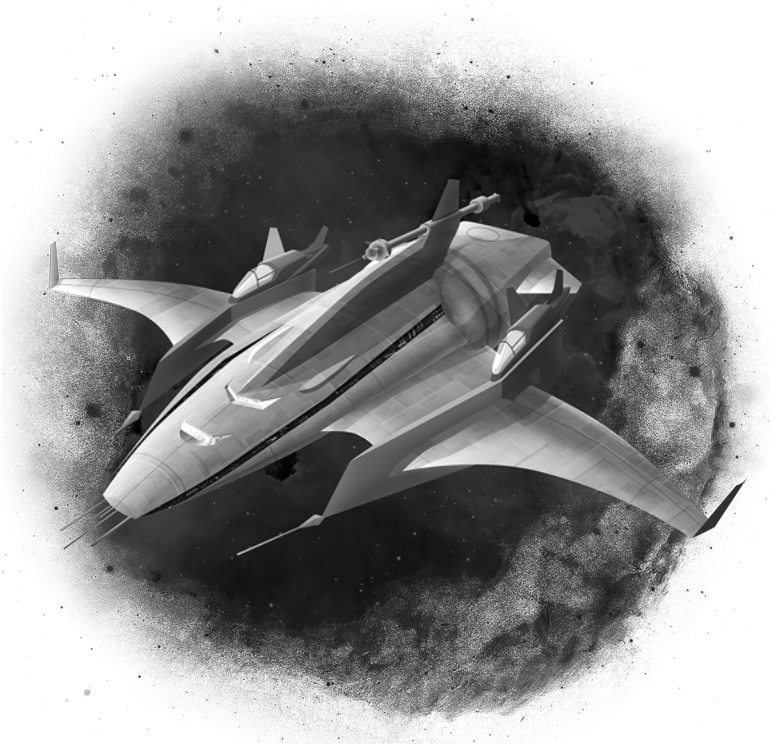
The fire crackled and hissed inside the mouth of the cave as the night winds howled—more than powerful enough to sweep a man off his feet, carrying him away to oblivion. Inside the mountain or below ground was the only safe place when the great storm of winds visited upon you. These winds would carry the death of intense solar radiation on them but for the transparent shield he’d placed over the maw of the cave.

The chaotic pattern of the fire’s light danced off the third of his face not covered by the cowl of his hood. What could be seen were hard lines, dirty and rustic with weathering and age. A grey stubble formed a jagged goatee with a star-sapphire-like mole birthmark buried in the dimple of his chin. Tall, dark, and lean, he was still menacing if somewhat succumb to the ravages of time. Oh, he could have kept himself young and handsome with his magic, but he had bigger plans than his appearance and needed all his capabilities focused on that outcome. Facing the mouth of the cave, he wasn’t so far inside the cave that he couldn’t see crux of his anguish just above and beyond the far horizon. Setinon rose over his vista like a blue-green spherical jewel bedazzled with the glint of diamonds and gold—the millions of lights making up the endless city that adorned the planet once his home.

Hard, thin-pressed lips spoke of his pensiveness, while starry, bright-blue eyes backlit with smoke-rings of his ancient profession spoke of his imminent intent.

Charles W. McDonald Jr.

Embers—lighter than the frail air of the moon—made staggered trails, dancing before the intensity of his gaze upon the home of his *hate*.



## Chapter 1: The Death of Men

(Southeast Corner of the Isle of Romney, Perion, Present Day)



Almost as far south into the Ocean of Mohers as one could go before reaching Carnac, the Isle of Romney had been both temperate and tropical—but that was before Radin had opened the First Seal terrorizing the world with the Blood Night. Radin had left Royvan Miral specific instructions to find the Second Seal, no matter the outcome of the battle of Axum. Royvan didn't know who to follow, Talemor or Radin, but both wanted and needed the Second Seal, so it didn't matter. The only way through the decaying bleakness of the Blood Night was pressing through it—with whatever will remained. It was as if they were lost deep in the bowels of a dark, dank cavern, the entrance sealed shut with debris. The only way forward was forward was deeper into the mountain. They were committed now!

Charles W. McDonald Jr.



Looking up to the pale red Blood Night sky Radin had brought to the world, Royvan Miral contemplated the words that kept coming to him in his dreams each night:

And there shall be but seven trumpets, bearing seven messages,  
For all the worlds to hear, and all men therein.  
And each message shall be sealed up in itself.  
And woe unto the men of the worlds, for once the first is uttered,  
What will be will be swiftly, and nothing in Creation shall hinder.

Often, he contemplated that second line, ‘For all the worlds to hear, and all the men therein,’ wondering if Radin’s words had been the catalyst of terror on other planets of Humanity. Shaking off the thought, bringing himself back to the world that mattered most to him right now—theirs—Royvan mustered the reserves of his resolve.

Looking to Kerrich, Levi, and Ham, each in turn, he knew their world was forever changed, and prayed for Radin’s soul. If Radin still lived, and that was a big *if*, he was surely being tormented by that great and unholy *thing* that took him. That moment had changed them all—Royvan especially so. Royvan Miral was neither a man of faith nor religion. He was a believer in what he could see, touch, and feel in the here and now. But now, they had first-hand knowledge of the extremes of what existed and interacted with them in their world; it had changed everything for him. This was it, and there was no denying it anymore, for any of them. He had all the motivation required to do what Radin had asked of him—even if Radin had never made the request at all. He didn’t know if he was now a man of faith or not. *Am I now?* He contemplated the prayers he’d offered for Radin. He wasn’t sure what to believe in except that his unique skills were needed now more than ever. People were counting on him and he trusted in those people that at least one—if not many—had the proper intentions of getting Humanity on the other side of this...unmaking of Creation.

Tracing his fingertips over the stone sculptures of a ring of Nine Men, half buried and weathered by the relentlessness of time, Royvan Miral recalled his knowledge of ancient Ferian. It was a dead language dating back more than a thousand years and didn’t always provide direct word-for-word translations. Some of what he was reading had no meaning in today’s tongue:

‘The Death of Men awaits you with the coming of the morning.  
East, as far East as the morning, you will find the doom of all men,  
for your age and the ages to come.’

It was a terribly inaccurate translation, he hoped, but the best he could afford from his memory of the dead, hieroglyphic language.

The ring of statues reminded him of the second ring on the holy grounds of Axum, but these were clearly not the same men as those depicted in Axum. The architectural style was vastly different as well. This ring was of a totally different time-period.

"What does it say," Kerrich asked, dismounting to get a closer look for himself.

"Don't," Royvan Miral warned. "Get back on your horse. And tell Quin to get ready; we'll need a *Portal*...and a ship."

"Where are we going," Levi asked, looking between them—looking for *hope*.

"East." Royvan wasn't in the mood for details. It could only be one of a few places from the other pieces to this puzzle he'd been putting together over the last several years. Even before he found the First Seal, he had found clues to the location of the second, the fourth, and the fifth. And this wasn't the first time he'd seen similar warnings of the 'Death of Men' associated with the Second Seal. It terrified him, but they were already living in a world of darkness, and the only way through it was through it.

\* \* \* \*

(Exeter, Perion, Present Day)

The four shades of grey stone that made up the Exeter manor gave a dead and muted contrast to the once green grass, now already turning brown as the pale red rain of the Blood Night worked its acrid magic on the topsoil, killing everything. The cathedral vaulted ceilings of the East Wing of the manor only blended with the square architecture of the West Wing by the identical spired smokestacks with decorative stone rings around the top. The center square tower allowed light into the keep from five massive rectangular windows, each nearly two stories tall, but only red light poured through now, and any other time of day or night. *Cursed Blood Night*, Brigance thought as he tried to console Elise. This part of his job was the worst part. He had to shoulder an even bigger burden than just that of Elise weeping on his arm as he stroked her strawberry-blonde hair with his massive burly hand. For what little time he had spent with the young man, Radin had earned his respect, and Brigance would carry out Radin's last wishes. Plans had been drawn up, before the battle, for this very possibility, and the fact that Radin could see beyond the now impressed upon him, even more, the need to carry out his will.

"I am with you, Elise. We all are. You can stay with us as long as you wish, and I'll see to it my finest men are watching you at all times."

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“Tell me the truth,” Elise demanded, punching his shoulder, knowing he’d barely feel it. “Is he gone? I have to know!”

“I don’t know, but I can only relate to what I see and hear, not what I believe or hope for. Hope is not a strategy I subscribe to, and from what I saw, and heard, I’d say you should start preparing for the worst.”

“GOD!” Elise howled, slamming both her fists into Brigance’s chest, blunting his armor. Fresh blood dripped from underneath gold fingernails—like unto living gold-dust—dripping onto dried, crusted blood of the battle upon Brigance’s armor. From Brigance’s point of view, he could see all the hope and light in her once-bright eyes now shadow-cast and tear-laden as tears heavy in her condemnation traced staggered trails of incomprehensible loss in his blood-stained armor.

“You have to take care of yourself now. You’re carrying a child—his child—your child. You have to think beyond yourself now.” He didn’t have the words to provide guidance to an already brilliant and capable woman, but she needed help. These were not merely tears of loss. They were tears of crying out for help...and for answers.

He didn’t know her full story, and she’d been very tight-lipped about her past, but he knew there was a lot going on behind those eyes, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to hear it should she have the courage to voice it. Still, he loved her like a sister, and he’d do anything to help Elise. Anything!

Brigance didn’t know of her children, left behind on Earth to seek out Michael’s soul reborn so he couldn’t comprehend her loss of both fathers of her children.

She wanted to die, like so many of the men on the battlefield last night. She deserved to die for leaving her children behind. Twice her God had punished her by taking the two loves of her life—the two that bore children with her. Twice her God had broken her soul and her heart, and she’d never forgive him for it. NEVER! This was a cruel and unjust God, tampering with Humanity in such a way—this God the Creator of all things. In the shadow-laden vision of Elise’s eyes, he was the Creator of Nightmares.

\* \* \* \*

His right hand draped across his waist, holding the star-sapphire-laden hilt of the great Starfire hung about his left hip. Talemar side-stepped wounded here, triage carts there, as his eyes took in the losses everywhere he looked. He didn’t even know where to begin as he counted the wounded while walking among what was left of his ranks with Rowarc, who he’d made a General in hopes of bringing some unity to the army Radin had assembled. They needed unity in their leadership ranks now. Over four thousand dead, with twice as many wounded. Even with *Healing*, they’d be lucky to get back to thirteen or fourteen thousand strong. It wouldn’t be enough,

and Radin hadn't even come close to solving the financial and logistical problems of keeping such an army, let alone mobilizing it for the battles to come. Radin had left a great deal unfinished, but he had also given the biggest sacrifice. Talemar needed loyalty, respect, unity, and organization above all things right now.

"Where do we stand on Treasury," Talemar asked Rowarc, side-stepping another group of wounded. He still wore the Crystal Crown always. He had to send a message and ensure it was received in every corner of their forces—and beyond.

"Terrible. Maybe two-and-a-half days at the most. Food for three days at the most. Now, I'm counting the six thousand men we took from King Aaron adding them back to replenish our own. I assumed you wouldn't want to release them from their fealty oaths they swore to you on the battlefield." Rowarc's eyes still watered over what he'd seen happen to his only son first-hand. He could only hope Radin hadn't suffered long, but he knew otherwise. It was virtually impossible for him to get the image of that devil of filth and vile out of his mind. It haunted him every waking moment, and he knew it would torment him in his dreams—if he ever slept again.

"No, and thank you for reminding me. That helps the count, dramatically replenishing our forces, but only if they can be trusted. Ensure the untrustworthy are executed publicly. I won't tolerate treachery or dissent in our ranks." Already hardening himself, the legend of Talemar was one of mercy and goodness, but the reality had proven quite different. Having been through a great war before and knowing his failings, he wouldn't let his own historical reputation get in the way of doing what needed to be done.

"I'll take care of it." Rowarc tried to force the image of his son being snatched by that *thing* out of his head, but it consumed him, destroying his *hope*. Could there be *hope* after what he'd seen? He wasn't sure anymore.



(The Trident, Kaleion, Tens of Thousands of Years Ago)

He wasn't sure where they'd dropped off his brother, except that it must have been tens of thousands of lightyears away as he heard the gravity warp drive disengage some weeks after Alexelio had been abandoned on what he could only assume was another inhabitable world—at least he hoped it to be inhabitable.

As he materialized, handcuffed on the virgin landscape before him, Durial observed the beauty and majesty of the shape of the snow-capped mountains before him. His digital handcuffs disengaged, falling to the ground beneath him. He felt the life energy of all that surrounded him flood his veins for the first time in as long as he could remember. A deep breath of the wondrous fresh mountain air and Durial felt renewed—reborn even. The ocher veil of his new homeworld's dawn made motes of dust glisten in embers of promise as he took in the unique shape of the

mountain range's northern edge ending in a great river feeding a massive downstream lake.

If his brother was this fortunate, perhaps they stood a chance at a brighter future. Wherever they'd left his brother, he would find Alexelio if it took him centuries. The Sentinels couldn't keep them separated for long; surely, they knew that. Banning magic wasn't necessary for technology to flourish. The two could co-exist. If only the Sentinels could see it their way...

Instead, he stood banished here on this new world. Looking around at the twin moons, both enormous in the sky above, this planet couldn't have been inhabitable all that long—a few thousand years at most perhaps. Those moons would relax in their orbits over time. And time was what he needed to start building here anew, but only if...

Suddenly, a magnificent young brunette with high cheekbones and bright blue eyes, wearing only a one-piece black iridescent bodice with a plunging neckline cut high on her hips, materialized a few paces away from Durial. His wife and children had been killed in the raid that had captured him and his brothers. He couldn't help but feel both excited and ashamed at the intoxicating beauty of the young woman before him, but she was handcuffed the same as him. As he watched those handcuffs disengage, falling to the ground, their blue eyes locked with one another and he knew they had a chance here on this magnificent new world—together...

## Part 1: Emrys Wledig

Through your promise and light,  
I will do my best to pierce the night  
That has consumed, by our own thoughts and deeds,  
The Seeds of Humanity. Though, I fear the  
Hatred and resolve of your judgment of Mankind,  
For yours is the light of hope  
And the despair of hate.



## Chapter 2: The Lord Thy God

(The Vyran Wyrms' Desert, Present Day)



ven dozens of leagues from the North Sea, Elise could hear it raging against the northern shoreline of the continent and the Northwest region of the Throne of Knor. Here at the Northwestern tip of the mountain range, Elise retraced her steps from her first arrival here, following Damon's wake to Perion. It was cold but warmer than it should have been this far north. The Blood Night was already taking its levy here too. She assumed there wasn't a place on the planet that wouldn't soon feel its blood-laden grip—choking out the life of the planet from the outside in. The pale red hue of the sky provided little pure light, making it difficult for her to recognize the exact crevice where she'd hidden it, but she was beginning to recognize a familiar turn here or boulder there. Another familiar turn, followed by a recognizably unique boulder, and she was finally there—at the mouth of a cave. She didn't want to leave it in the cave; that would have been too dangerous, and she couldn't risk it falling into the wrong hands.

With welled eyes, Elise focused, using her magic to move the giant boulder on the shelf below and to the west of the mouth of the cave. As the stone rolled for her, obeying the request of the arcane she gated through her left index finger, a section of the mountain, hewn by her magic revealed itself along with a longer than normal Roman short sword with a wider than normal gold guard with an elegant hand-and-a-half grip. Not long enough to qualify for a longsword, it—like its custom, hand-made scabbard—had five runes of magic in the center of the blade's fuller. She hadn't bothered to bring the scabbard, for this blade didn't require it. Whatever its composition, it wasn't steel, and Michael's lab examination of it on Earth had proven that. They couldn't determine its full composition.

Unseen hands brought the great weapon to her as it spun in the air until the Latin inscription on the other side of the blade could be seen. *'I am the Lord, thy God. Get thee behind me, Satan!'*

Her eyes could no longer hold back the tears as she recalled the last time her husband had held it, with it gleaming like a star in his hands. Now it was just a piece of burnished metal—a great sword no doubt, but it had only ever come to life in Michael's hands. It wasn't dead—only dormant she hoped. She had intended to

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see if Radin could bring it to life, but now those thoughts... She couldn't even bring herself to contemplate them.

*No*, she thought, *if Talemar is our last hope, then he needs all the help he can get*. There was no point in taking this home with her.



(Kent, England, Earth, Present Day)

His soft, purpose-built shoes hushed the sounds of his covert movements inside Leeds Castle where he was well on the way of being kicked out of MI-6 for disobeying direct orders from Quincy Author Billings, Director of Clandestine Operations. His SRR Unit was still seven minutes out, but his Heckler & Koch MP5 felt comfortable in his hands as he progressed inside where he knew his father to be held hostage by twelve or more active shooters. The six outside had already met his eight-inch tactical combat knife, as he moved stealthily through the foyer to the sounds of the voices speaking in Farsi in the near distance.

He could hear what sounded like a young woman screaming, following the noise of a loud slap and crack of someone being struck hard. Her screams suddenly muffled as one of them asked why the checkpoint outside hadn't checked in on time—assuming his Farsi was right. Even with recent ops in the sandbox, he was more than a little rusty with the language, but his Russian was much better.

Making the turn into the Banquet Hall, he heard the voices getting louder, but not because he was getting closer to the hostages. The hail of bullets from the young, thick-bearded man with the angry brown eyes lodged in Michael's body armor, sending him flailing against the heavy door casings, but not before he returned fire with his silenced MP5. His rounds splattered the would-be terrorist blood all over the slim rectangular lower-level windows with arched tops. Fortunately for Michael, his shots had killed, and without shattering the glass behind the jihadi. Unfortunately, the terrorist's rounds had not been run through a silencer! The very distinctively loud AK-47's 7.62mm rounds were violently loud, especially in a chambered structure with high-vaulted ceilings. Everyone in Leeds Castle knew where he was now, as he slumped down to the floor of the Banquet Hall, trying to gather his bearings and his breath.

Running his hands over his chest, in-between the body armor, Michael verified nothing pierced.

Quickly running over to the dead terrorists, Michael Day ripped the man's radio from his dying grip. At least he knew the source of the Farsi now, but that didn't help. He could hear footsteps rushing towards him at a fast clip. Given what he knew of the meeting scheduled to take place here, combined with the sounds of where the footsteps were coming from, he assumed they were in Thorpe Hall.

Throwing his back to the wall just inside the Banquet Hall—feeding his MP5 a fresh clip—Michael waited for the footsteps, listening for them to slow as they reached the other side of the entryway to the Banquet Hall. He knew they could see their friend slumped against a wall bleeding out from their vantage, but... *Shit*. Michael just barely caught the reflection in the glass.

Spinning, he fired just on the other side of the thick casing, hitting another young middle-eastern man, this one with just a small amount of designer stubble for a beard. A double tap to his chest, followed by a quick shot to his forehead, and he was out of the picture, but Michael's own body armor caught another round right in his left side, causing him to double over in the pain of the blunt-force trauma of his armor absorbing another close-range shot.

The pair had come down in standard two-by-two formation so the near shooter, opposite the man he had downed, had a good shot at him as he squeezed off another three-round burst at Michael.

Returning fire, Michael double-tapped the thirty's-aged terrorist in the forehead, dropping him opposite his younger jihadi brethren.

"Agh!" Michael let out a painful moan. He hadn't felt the round that grazed his neck, but he was vaguely aware of the blood leaking down his chest under his body armor. Funny how you often didn't feel the ones that struck for at least the first few moments, but it wasn't his first time being shot.

He hadn't been to Leeds for quite a while, but he still remembered the way to the Thorpe Room. Sprinting that way, he changed out clips for another fresh magazine. Approaching the Thorpe Room, he pulled out his tactical knife with his left hand, while his dominant right hand carried his MP5.

A glance off the once-mirror finish of his blade—now matted from blood he'd had to wipe—showed him the beautiful young strawberry-blonde woman he'd heard screaming before, gagged and bound to one of the antique and irreplaceable winged-back chairs, along with his father, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Leader of the House of Commons, and the Leader of the House of Lords. Standing behind them was a middle-aged jihadi with a robust and greying beard, maybe 6'1" talking into a video camera, holding a scimitar to the neck of the Leader of the House of Lords. Two more jihadis by the tall rectangular, arched-topped windows—typical to Leeds Castle—plus the one talking into the camera, plus the camera guy meant there must have been a few more still searching for him or hidden somewhere else in the room.

Bouncing the image off the windows, then off his blade, he caught a glimpse of two more men behind the antique Victorian sofas, guns drawn toward the main entry. The gloss finish of the wood panel walls helped him see a little better around the room, but reverse images of reverse images made it hard to paint an accurate landscape of the room. It was like life-fire practice in a fun-house, but with WAY more expensive furniture and priceless antiques.

Michael checked his watch. Still two minutes out, and this shitbag was about to stream the beheading of the Leader of the House of Lords on live feed!

Rolling a flash-bang across the wide hardwood floor planks of the Thorpe Hall Drawing Room, Michael chased the flash-bang into the room, standing in the doorway, shooting the men he most recently identified behind the sofas first, splattering their cranial fluid on the wood-panel walls. An immediate duck to avoid the scimitar thrown at him by the man behind the Leader of the House of Lords, Michael tossed his tactical knife weak-handedly at the cameraman—striking him in the neck. Ducking behind the cover of the sofas at the entrance of the room, he wanted to toss a grenade to wipe out the other two by the window, probably now hiding behind more priceless furniture, but he couldn't destroy Leeds Castle in the process of taking these guys out.

"You think yourself a Hero?"

Michael assumed the thick Middle Eastern accent had come from the man talking into the camera. He sounded at the very least unassimilated to the West if not a refugee—*Syrian maybe...*?

Pulling out his .40-cal SIG Sauer ® P226, Michael checked to make sure there was a round in the chamber—having intimate knowledge of the 5.5lb precision trigger he'd had installed—he knew himself ready if he could just coax out a clean shot or two. Readyng his last flash-bang, Michael leapt up from behind the sofas and tossed it to the last known location of the two by the windows. As the flash-bang flushed them out behind their cover with its concussive force, shattering glass all over them, Michael squeezed off two rounds hitting each in the head on the move. With only their leader left, Michael trained the red dot sighting on the middle-aged jihadi, taking a moment to talk to him in reply, knowing there would be no talking him out of his mission, but if there was a way to take him alive he had to try. They needed one alive to give them answers.

"I'm just here to make sure this thing doesn't go any more sideways than it already has." Michael knew reasoning with this asshole was an impossibility. Fanatics were, by definition, immune to reason. All this man cared about was his precious Allah, and Michael was about to send this shitbag to meet him. "Hey, tell me something," Michael not losing sight of the time, tried to keep him occupied just long enough for help to arrive, but with it down to just the two of them, he was pretty confident he could take this guy out. The question was could he do it without this asshole taking the life of one of the hostages.

"What's that?" The jihadi hissed at him in his thick and guttural accent.

Michael moved slow and easy from behind the sofas back toward the entrance of the room, giving the man a wider berth—though never moving his red-dot-sighting of the terrorist's forehead. The jihadi had his AK-47 pointed directly at Michael with a Colt®-45 pointed at the head of the Leader of the House of Lords.

"Tell me what all this is about. Why are you here? What do you want," Michael asked, closing the distance to his tactical knife sticking out of the neck of the cameraman.

The middle-aged jihadi smiled knowingly as if to intimate his knowledge of the rationale was beyond Michael's ability to comprehend.

It was all the opening Michael needed as he noticed the Colt®-45-barrel drift just enough at an angle away from its former target so as to give the hostage a fighting chance, but the instant had to be seized... NOW.

A quick, smooth movement of his familiar P226, put the red-dot-sighting on the jihadi's left shoulder. Calculating the shot would point the jihadi's Colt®-45 even further away from the Leader of the House of Lords' head, he took the shot in a smooth trigger pull, putting a giant hole in the jihadi's left shoulder as he returned fire in a death blossom of his AK-47 and two rounds fired from his Colt®-45, burying its rounds in the heavy door casing of the entrance to the Thorpe Room.

"Ugh!" Michael dropped to his knees as his vest took another two rounds from the AK. Seeing the terrorist swinging around the barrel of his Colt®-45 as he could no longer hold his AK-47 with his left arm nearly blown off from Michael's .40-cal tactical shot, Michael quickly raised the barrel of his P226 and fired.

"Uhhh," the terrorist groaned as his cranium was blown open from Michael's .40-cal P226. Slumping to the floor behind the Leader of the House of Lords, Michael looked into the Leader's terror-filled and swollen eyes as his own eyes closed for the first time in minutes. God, he was tired, *and* sore, *and*...in trouble.

"Michael..." A familiar voice called out from the open doorway to the Thorpe Room, causing him to rise and pivot, acknowledging his superior.

"Terry, sorry I couldn't wait."

"Well a proper faff you've made," Colonel Terry Goodwin quipped, taking the measure of Michael's kill ratio.

Killing the camera feed, Michael walked over to the beautiful strawberry blonde in the powder-blue and white lace summer dress, removing the duct tape and the hand-towel they'd used to gag her. He slowly tapped her face, looking at the Leader of the House of Lords and the Leader of the House of Commons—the only two awake at the moment. Seeing she was coming out of it, he moved to the Leader of the House of Lords, David Wright, removing his tape and gag.

"Yes well, ace congratulations all round, but how about we cut everyone else loose. What's say?" David Wright retorted, causing Michael to resume cutting the thick rope ties with his bloody tactical knife, making the Leader of the House of Lords cringe at getting his hands bloody. "You can all have your brilliant chin wag later." David tried shrugging off the near-death experience with his quips, but he was shaking on the inside and immensely grateful looking around at Michael's work, walking over to the camera which he smashed to bits with a crushing stomp of his right foot.

“Right, well, we didn’t really need that for evidence,” team member Mason jibed, filing into the room behind the SRR Colonel.

“If no one else is going to offer it, I will,” Janet Cook, Leader of the House of Commons, continued, “Thank you.” She offered to Michael as he unbound her, letting her shake his hand.

Now, cutting his father loose, lightly slapping his cheeks to bring him around, he gave another look at the beautiful young girl in the powder blue dress, now being doted over by David Wright. “Darling...” David petted her beautiful long hair. Michael wondered how a fifty-plus-year-old politician got off taking such a young wife.

“Ugh,” his father starting to come around while his team members started the evidence collection process. “What happened,” Michael’s dad asked, shaking his head as he came to.

“What were you doing here, Dad?”

“Meeting with some of the political leadership. They say they found something near Shrewsbury.” The words leaked and ached slowly out of his father, who was starting to show a bit of a shiner on his temple where they cold-cocked him.

“Not Shrewsbury. I told you it must be one of two places. Either the Berth in Shropshire, or in Wroxeter, at the seat of his ancient power,” the beautiful strawberry-blonde clarified, though Michael hadn’t the foggiest of what she was talking about.

“Whose ancient power, and who are you,” Michael asked trying to get the lay of the land, causing the Leader of the House of Lords to clear the room, evidence collection in progress or not—bleeding terrorists or not.

“Michael, I’m going to read you in,” David Wright announced with a tone of finality.

“Read me into what, sir? What’s going on, and what was this meeting about?”

“This meeting was to authorize a dig,” Janet Cook added, still trying to comport herself after the near-death experience.

“THAT’S what all this was about?! A DIG?” Michael scratched his head; more than just a bit of this mess wasn’t adding up. “Wait a minute, digs are supposed to be authorized by the English Heritage. I see politicians and political appointees here. Well..., and her.”

“And her, yes...Michael Day, meet Elise Wright.” The two exchanged glances across the room. “My daughter,” David Wright concluded. “I can assure you the English Heritage will abide by our decision to proceed here.”

“Wait, what are we...” he paused not wanting to get himself mixed up in this mess, “...I mean you, digging for?”

“Excalibur, of course,” Elise proclaimed flatly with not a hint of jest in her voice whatsoever.

“Phew,” Michael offered with a none-too-sincere wipe of his brow, “I thought you were going to say King Arthur there for a second. You’re just looking for his magical, mythical sword. THAT, I can believe.”

No one in the room was laughing—not even a cough was offered to break the suffocating and uncomfortable silence.

Michael’s father offering, “I don’t know how the terrorists found out about our meeting, but perhaps that would be more up your alley to investigate, my son.”

“NO,” Elise breaking in immediately, “I want him to help me. Make it happen.”

David looking to Janet, then to Michael’s father, then to his daughter with a frown, “Very well, Mr. Day, your job from this moment forward is protection detail for my daughter. Anything,” he looked directly into Michael’s eyes, “and I mean ANYTHING, that happens to my daughter is on you. Do we have an understanding?”

Michael looked between his father and the political leadership, then to Elise, where his eyes couldn’t move away, resigned to the fact he had been commandeered. “Understood, sir.” He paused, knowing that wasn’t quite ace enough for the man, adding, “Completely!” What had he just gotten himself into? Whatever it was, he didn’t like the way the daughter of the Leader of the House of Lords was smiling at him like a giddy-eyed school girl. *PERFECT! Just fucking perfect!*



### Chapter 3: The Key to the Abyss



ailing, moaning, and gnashing of teeth from those both living and not, both condemned and not, tormented Radin's every waking thought. Unfortunately, he was very much awake for every moment of this; sleep never to relieve. The cacophony of anguish never ceased. Crucified upside-down on a weathered and beaten wooden cross, his feet bled at the ankles where they were pierced with a thick and rusty iron pike. His wrists never stopped throbbing, where they too were pinned to the old, thick wood that pricked at him everywhere about his naked body. He should have bled out by now, but death wasn't allowed here unless it served a purpose not his own. The molten coals just beneath his forehead kept him painfully aware of his surroundings—as did the trio of massive black scorpions keeping watch over him. Pincers erect and wide at the ready, Radin heard their clicking constantly in his thoughts both conscious and not. His blood hadn't obfuscated both his eyes—not yet at least. He still had partial vision out of his left eye as he exchanged glances with the scorpion more than close enough to do him in if it so chose. He wasn't just hanging from a cross. He was hanging on the balance between life and death—between the living and the soul.

A glance away from his scorpion tormentors fortune'd a look of giant beastly feet with six toes each—each toe the size of his hand—walking right in front of him. A beastly and guttural laugh every time it passed him left him wondering how much he would continue to suffer... And for how long. Time mattered not here. A thousand years, or a thousand moments, they were all the same, allowing his torment to last an eternity regardless of how much linear time he actually spent here.

Radin tried to take notice of everything he could—at least in between the very brief moments of clarity. Seeing the fiery, acrid demon's whip trailing across

the hot coals that made up some of the ground here, he watched the Balak walk away behind him. He didn't know how long he'd have before the Balak returned to twist the spikes in his wrists and ankles again, but looking off into the distance he noticed a great gate, more immense than anything he'd ever seen. It must have been more than a dozen times the height of the Balak, with twin doors—each mirroring the other—ten times the width of the massive Balak. The colossal charcoal gate displayed every known hue of grey misery against the backdrop of Hellish, lava-red leading up to it.

A mostly blank but cracked canvas of grey stone curtain wall—save the great blood spill-gates spaced evenly along the wall—sharply changed at the colossal door casings made of great overlapping chevron-shaped shields cascading down either side of the Gates of Hell. Each cascading shield column provided false ladders of hope for those senseless enough to think escape possible. Diamond patterns in positive and negative shades of grey checkered the field of each door to the Gates of Hell with a great living representation of what he assumed was the Dragon of Darkness writhing about the center of the seam—its tail moving before Radin's eyes as its eyes locked with his in a glowing repose of molten, amber hatred. Upon the checkered field of diamonds lay one circle high, another low, illustrating symbolism he didn't fully understand. The fierce, malevolent face of a great demon flanked by massive snakes formed the capstone of the gate he understood well enough as the blood spilled in rivers down and out the fork tongue of the demon atop the Gates of Hell. Great pikes marched along the top of the massive curtain wall displaying ever-decaying skulls run through so the top of the skulls fell just below the rim of the tips of the pikes. There were no images, tales, or nightmares that could have prepared him for the sight now before him. It was...terror incarnate. It was the inescapable and unrelenting agony of all who'd come before him and all who would come after. It was the Abyss of all things living and not!

Even his flashes of the pure-white light amidst an endless crystal lake and booming voice had been silenced by this opaque termination of all things *hope*. The living energy of the arcane inaccessible here; attempting to cast again was both futile and justification for more attention. Attention was the last thing he wanted here!

The thud of beastly footsteps returning stirred coals around his head as the Balak slowly twisted his rusted iron pikes.

"AHHHHHHH," Radin cried out, causing the Balak to belly laugh; tufts of molten fire burst from its lips with each heavy guffaw. Radin's tears hissed as they fell to the coals below.

Another great laugh from the Balak as he tossed dropped feces on Radin's feet, watching them trail sources of infection down Radin's bloodied legs and waist.

\* \* \* \*

(Evanyil's Domain, The Abyss, Time Neutral)

Charles W. McDonald Jr.



The long hallway of smooth, satin-finish stone flooring was lighted smoothly and evenly by seemingly star-like portals in the apex of the ceiling, though each rib in the composition of the rounded, bone-like support beams held behind it a nasty surprise hidden in shadow. It wasn't Kellen's first time here, but he hoped it would be his last. Every protection he had was up right now, and his most potent offensive weapons at the ready. He was channeling right on the edge of his capabilities, but he couldn't take any chances here. This place was dangerous—even for him.

The hall opened into an abdomen-shaped massive chamber with exactly nine other points of entry, not including the one he'd just come from—one of the antennae. The bulk of the other entry points representing legs. A pair of spiders twenty-spans-tall flanked Evanyil on either side of her throne of Human bones. Her ever-present poisoned dagger hung tight on her magnificent right hip. Kellen was immediately reminded of what Damon saw in her, but she was far beyond insane. She was genius to the extreme and radically dangerous. She acknowledged his entrance in much the way a child would acknowledge the existence of a pest.

"Evanyil, it's been a while," Kellen intoned, walking smoothly and confidently as he closed the distance between them only to see both spiders up and in an attacking position immediately as he got within ten paces.

"Sit," she ordered, immediately causing her familiars to heel. Her warning systems had told her of his presence, but she wanted to allow him all the way into her trap before she decided whether or not to kill him. She did *need* him after all—for now... He was an important part of her plans with Damon. But after that... Then, she would re-evaluate Kellen's value to her and her future plans.

"I wanted to hear your plans from your lips."

"Wow, your foreplay needs work, Kellen the Destroyer." She smiled, but she was furious inside, and her dagger ached to be freed on his neck. *How dare he?!*

"Yeah, well I'm betting my immortality and my legacy on your little plan, and I want to be certain we're all on the same page." His eyes looked left, right, up and down almost constantly ever since he walked into the chamber. He might have been legendarily powerful, and immeasurably confident in his abilities, but he certainly wasn't comfortable with this 'visit.' Still, she'd never dare come see him on his turf, and arranging a neutral-site meeting had proven to take an eternity.

"Not like you to question your best and only pal." He wasn't questioning Damon. He was questioning Evanyil, and she knew it, but he was here, and she was bored, so why not toy with him...? Cocking her head ever so slightly, she rose from her throne in her shimmering and diaphanous black and silver bodice, letting her right hand fall to the grip of her familiar dagger as she began pacing around Kellen.

Kellen's eyes were now forced to follow her while keeping an eye on her familiars and all the entryways; it proved too much. He was spread too thin. He needed to force the issue. "Stop toying with me, Evanyil, or I'll pull out of this little venture of yours. You need me."

"She knows about our plans."

"She doesn't know the when, the where, or the how—only the who and the why."

"Exactly—the WHO and the why. Therefore, you can't pull out. You're already a named accomplice."

She was right. He was committed. Like it or not.

"I just want to hear the plan from your lips. That's all." Kellen's demands came across as a lack of trust of Damon. After all, this exact information had already been disseminated to Damon to give to Kellen.

"What do you want to know beyond the fact we're going to unseat her?"

"I got that part."

"What more is there to say?"

"How about who gets what afterwards? That would be a good start."

"Ah, now the legendary Kellen comes out to play." Evanyil rushed him head on, skidding to a stop inches from his face where her beautiful, feminine fingernails tapped delicately, on his cheek just under his left eye.

He didn't like her being this close to him, and his eyes darted downward, carefully watching that dagger of hers. *Still hanging on her hip—good.* He didn't want to let her see him freaked out, but he was way beyond unsettled inside. He managed to force his eyes to make contact with hers. "You're insane."

Pouty lips acknowledged the truth of his words. It was a well-known truth—for centuries. "Crazy is as crazy does. What does that make you for being part of our little plan?"

"Suicidal." This was pointless. He wasn't getting anything beyond what Damon had already told him—less actually. "Good to see you, Evanyil." Turning to talk away from the crazed cave elf, Kellen was done.

Pouting again at the recognition of his futility, Evanyil sought more play time. She never had visitors anymore—at least none she hadn't killed.

"We were going to let you keep the key. Is that fair?"

*The key to the Gates of Hell... Now that would be a fitting trophy. And, an incalculable increase to his fame.* He paused in his tracks, turning to look back at her, obviously considering her proposal.

"Damon doesn't want it," Evanyil informed him grudgingly, adding, "...though it suits him more than it does you."

"I'll be in touch, Evanyil." With that he was gone, lightning bolts blistering her stone floor, chasing Kellen's exit.



## Chapter 4: A Bridge of Shadow

(Eden, Present Day)



on Stencowsky drove in another series of nails with his compressor-driven air-gun at the top of the roof truss that would become yet another new home on this alien landscape, calling out for the crane to bring in the next truss as he finished nailing the hurricane clips into the top of the truss. “Let’s have it. Come on,” Ron ordered. His crew of mostly Earth Humans had been very busy from the moment they arrived as the clear majority of construction equipment had been brought from Earth—though a significant amount of the building materials were not like any he’d seen before. Some of it was familiar territory, which made for easier work, but they had to experiment with some of the materials till they found the most efficient and eco-friendly ways to use them, as per Damon’s laws.

Solar Powered DeWalt® digital media players blasted familiar tunes to work to. Country seemed to get the best results with this crew, though he preferred classic

Charles W. McDonald Jr.

rock. Ron wasn't sure how much of the planet was inhabitable, nor how far those *Portal* things had opened around the world, but occasionally he still saw one opening for more people to come through. Nothing like the first day, though, when hundreds of thousands had come through from Earth and several other worlds. It was going to be tough figuring out languages to work with everyone here, but Damon's laws also required every person to be able to speak at least two languages, so failure to learn another language wasn't really an option. For the most part, Damon's laws made sense, and he wasn't in the mood to start testing authority, especially reasonable authority that stayed out of their way to live their lives in peace. At least they were still alive, and that was something given his last images of Earth before he ran through the *Portal* to safety—to Eden.

Looking around again, never getting used to the alien landscape, Ron took in the little star and the huge moon in the skyline, along with the spiky spire-like construction of the alien life that ruled here before them. A giant spire, of a metal he didn't recognize, stuck out of the crust at a 22.5-degree angle. It must have been two hundred yards in length, and he didn't understand how it still stood like that without fracturing, especially with those diamond-shaped portals they must have used for windows weakening the overall structural integrity of the tower. A few of them had gone to investigate what alien structures still stood, in search of any living thing that might still present a threat. Damon had left weapons for them to use, M-4's, MP-5's, and the like. At least he had good taste in weapons, and had left them a way to defend themselves.

Working beside Derek Willis, another ex-football player from the University of Georgia, the two of them worked together setting the next truss in place. Derek worked shirtless in the light of Damon's Star, its pale-yellow light glistening off the sweat on his young black, muscular frame. "How about a break, Boss?" Derek shot his boss a wink and a disarming smile. They'd been working for hours straight, but looking out across the neighborhood under construction, there was still so much development left to do and so little time to do it. It was seemingly a never-ending job and they weren't going to get from here to there by killing themselves...

"Let's finish trussing this roof. Then we'll break." Ron used to be so much more carefree, but the Battle of New York had changed him, and caring after his men in their retreat to the American Resistance had taught him life didn't allow for the mistakes of carelessness or carefree actions. It also taught him to think and work in deliverable sets. Now, he always tried to finish one job before starting the next and didn't like pausing in the middle of a job. It was just a different style and way of thinking, but it proved more efficient at getting things done, and there was so much to do here; that was really what they needed—to get things done... "I want you and Charles to head out east again tonight, checking out those alien structures about ten clicks away. Don't spend more than an hour out there, and get back before sunset."

Ron oversaw all construction and security for New Georgia. It was the most responsibility of his entire life, but he was getting a handle on it.

"That's fine. Will do, Boss. But what are you expecting us to find out there?"

"Nothing," Ron replied flatly. "I expect you to find nothing, but that doesn't mean there's nothing out there to find."

That hadn't set well with Derek's stomach as it turned over, growling hungrily as they air-nailed the next truss into place.

\* \* \* \*

Running the crane wasn't anything like back home, this one being solar powered and all, but Charles was getting the hang of it. It wasn't as peppy, but it was stable, and he had to keep an eye on reported energy levels on the dashboard of the heads-up display. It was a busy level of instrumentation keeping him on the edge of distraction, but the most important thing was watching the load and the tow-line. He had almost knocked Ron off a structure yesterday, but Ron could be a forgiving sort when he wanted to be. He guessed it all depended on experience level. If he had claimed to be an expert on the crane, he'd bet Ron wouldn't have been so easy on him.

Picking up another truss and another tow-line, Charles began swinging the boom around, but as he boomed out at Derek's signal, his peripheral vision caught a flash of something. It was a light blue flash, kind of like one of those *Portal* things, but this was definitely not that. This was much smaller, and there had been two of them close together, like a pair of eyes bridged by shadow.



## Chapter 5: A Legendary Sovereignty

(The lake at Baschurch in Shropshire, Earth, Present Day)



ow four weeks into their search, they were not worried about money, but the English Heritage was down their necks about the lack of progress and disturbing the surrounding countryside with digging. They had some twenty men plus a detail from Michael's SRR unit. A military presence was part of the requirement from David Wright, someone to watch Michael watching over his daughter. Six hours in the eighteen-footer, staring at the latest sonar technology available wasn't just monotonous, it was lethally dull. Michael longed for a better assignment. Even Syria was preferable!

Standing beside this gorgeous young woman all day, inhaling her intoxicating perfume and not being able to do anything about it, was driving him over the edge. Far from the first time today, he considered throwing himself into the water, just to get away from her. "All anyone is talking about is the impact of leaving the E.U. Everyone seems to have an opinion except you." Trying to break the deafening silence between them, Michael decided to strike up a meaningful conversation in an attempt to get to know her better.

"Oh, I have an opinion. You just never bothered to ask." Elise smiled, both coy and beautiful, standing entirely far too close to him for his comfort. She could tell it was making him uncomfortable, but she loved brushing up against him just to feel him squirm.

"Why is it always the man's fault," Michael challenged her, his right index finger right in her face nearly touching her nose. "Pot of rubbish you know...thinking I don't care enough about you to ask. We've been out here for weeks, and you've had plenty of opportunities to bring up your own opinion."

"You're working yourself into a dither." Brushing up against him again, pretending to pay attention to the sonar, Elise used her feminine charms rather than her spells. She wanted to win him over without magic, but still longed for confirmation. All she had was a series of bread crumbs—nothing solid.

"Stop doing that!"

"Doing what?" That came with a feigned bat of the eyelashes. Elise toyed with him till the sonar delivered a rare but promising beep.

“What do we have here,” Michael asked, backing away from her, tussling the front of his pants for some measure of comfort.

Just a few yards from shore, Elise didn’t understand how they could be getting a ping here, now. They’d been over this part of the lake dozens of times before.

“Great,” Elise exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air, just as the rain hit the sonar and started to come down in sheets just as they were starting to make progress—par for the course. *This expedition sucks!* It wasn’t supposed to go like this. For a brief moment, she considered casting to halt the rain, but that could create far more problems than it would solve.

Looking to the shore, Terry was waving them in. Michael threw his jacket over the both of them as the boat closed the distance between them to Terry’s obvious displeasure, and Michael’s. His pants were intolerably uncomfortable as Elise backed herself into him repeatedly—mercilessly. “Stop it,” Michael barked at her, trying to make room between them without them getting soaked. “Make me,” she dared, turning to kiss him in front of God and everyone.

A brilliant flash of light in Michael’s mind’s eye drew a vision of a great lake of crystal on a field of pure light, diamonds like grains of sand for beaches, with a booming voice from the far side of the lake somewhat masked in the shadow of two figures, shaking Michael loose from Elise. Now teetering on the very edge of the port side, Michael fell away from Elise into Baschurch lake with a splash of his hundred-kilo frame hitting the water pelted by sheets of cold rain.

“*MICHAEL!*” Wanting to jump in after him, Elise considered it, but he disappeared from sight so quickly, and in water so shallow, she didn’t understand how that could be.

“Do you see him?” Terry was at the shore’s edge in a flash, taking off his boots, preparing to jump in right when a cluster of surfacing bubbles heralded Michael’s trudging out of the water as the rain hailed down upon them.

Both could see Michael dragging something just under the water’s surface. Terry’s eyes growing wider as Michael approached with the hand-and-a-half Roman short sword that was slightly longer than a traditional short sword. Pulling it from the water’s surface, it shined like a molten star in Michael’s hands as a booming voice—not from Michael—could be heard thundering from the sky, “I AM THE LORD THY GOD!”

Obedying the will of the Creator, the sheets of rain could not pierce the translucent and radiant shell of light surrounding Michael Anthony Day as he pulled himself from Baschurch Lake. Off in the near distance of the berth, a man could be heard, “God be praised, WE HAVE OUR KING!”

Looking at his friend unpierced by rain and untouched by the water whence he’d come, Terry was looking for the words that escaped him as his mouth worked in vain. “I...” Terry wasn’t the sort to be easily phased, but he was witnessing the impossible. “I think we better report this,” Terry Goodwin said finally, trying not to

appear too shaken in front of his men as he tossed Elise a tow line, though he couldn't stop staring at the white-hot, molten star in Michael's hand.

The look on Elise's face was somewhere between knowing and hope as she helped Terry pull the boat to shore—her confirmation shining in Michael's right hand.

As Michael started to hand Terry what could only be Excalibur, he witnessed first-hand its fiery-light go immediately dormant as soon as it left Michael's grip.

Like a crystallized moment of déjà vu for her, Elise had to stop herself from intervening. This was right, and she felt the next piece click into place in her mind.

The sword still humming in Terry's hands, Terry wondered how it could be possible that it had been in the water all this time without a single spot of rust or decay on the surface of the metal. Looking as if it had just come out of the forge of Creation itself, it didn't sing for Terry, but it resonated magnetically pulling at the MP5 he had slung over his shoulder. Turning it over he tried to read the Latin inscription down the fuller, *Ego sum Dominus Deus tuus. Vade retro me Satana: 'I am the Lord thy God. Get thee behind me, Satan!'*

"Right... Well..." Terry paused for a moment, looking for the words, "When we show this to the Prime Minister, I'll need you to be there to show them your little trick," Terry suggested, looking directly at Michael.

"You don't want to show Billings first," Michael asked, looking to Elise as the rain came to an abrupt halt, the skies clearing overhead as rays of the sun pierced the clouds.

"Oh, I'm pretty certain we'll be showing both of them within the hour," Terry retorted, helping Elise out of the boat. Terry could be heard making the call to Billings over the secure comm-link as they headed for the Land Rover together—Excalibur in tow, now wrapped a plain, matte-white, linen cloth.





## Chapter 6: A Last Resort

(Exeter, Perion, Present Day)



ooking at the scroll with Damon's broken signet seal, Michelle contemplated how this conversation might go, but they didn't have many options. *IF* Radin still lived, she couldn't save him, and she only knew one person—or *thing*—that could. She knew Damon a letch, so this unique visit called for a black netted mini-dress she'd brought from Earth, never considering she might actually be able to wear it. Fluffing her long blonde hair, adding just a tad bit more rose lipstick, she put her Glock® G43 9mm on a Velcro strap on her upper outside left thigh, just above the hemline of her dress. Pursing her lips to get the lipstick just right, she broke the seal, falling to the floor immediately where she had stood.



(Damon's House, Austin, TX, Earth, Present Day)

"Damon, help me understand you better. I just don't get it."

She'd been on him, in her words, like a ten-pound tick on a two-pound dog, ever since he'd left the room over her tracing of his scars and she wanted answers. How could he possibly explain what he'd been through and how it affected him? How it had changed the course of his destiny? *Had it really altered it that much?* It was the biggest mystery of his life. What kind of man *could he have been* if not abused as a child?

"What's the worst thing that ever happened to you," Damon probed her.

He didn't like where this conversation was going, nor where it could go with such a question of his own making, but if she truly wanted to understand him... Darkness, despair, and hatred would have to lead the way. He didn't intentionally

want to peel Mira's scabs—especially those not entirely healed, but she wanted to understand him—such was the way.

"I... Damon, I don't feel comfortable sharing that."

"Then don't," tousling through the variety of T-shirts in his dresser drawer, he wasn't intentionally blowing her off, but sometimes space was required to allow a conversation to breathe. Standing there shirtless in his pale Levis® 501's, he gave the conversation of his unmaking the space it required.

She stood there behind him, alongside his side of the bed dressed in only a towel from her shower. He could feel her presence and the electricity between them interacting with his ever-present field of arcane operating like a hemispherical shield around him.

Flip, flip, flip through his Android phone, looking for a specific song, Damon started playing *Stained – Tangled Up In You*, cranking up the song for the Bluetooth home audio system to pick up. Turning around to take Mira into his arms, he started slowly moving with her...with the music. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me. I was trying to find some relative equivalent between us, but I don't think there is one. I just want you to feel safe around me."

He felt the warmth of her pulse beating through her thumb pressed into the palm of his hand...the soft kiss of her fingertips gently caressing the back of his hand.

Her tears streaking his clavicle as she rested her head on his shoulders while they slowly moved to the beautiful music Damon had picked for them; she'd never in her life met anyone like Damon. Take away all his powers, he was still so unique that she struggled not to be eclipsed in the presence of his incredible soul. "I don't know what to say... Can you just hold me a little longer?"

"You mean a lot to me, Mira. More than you know. More than I can put into words right now. I'll try to help you understand me, but it will take time. Time for both of us. Time for me to explain. Time for you to understand."

"We'll go at your pace, Damon. You lead. I'll follow you *anywhere*." Glistening bright sapphire gems miraged with tears of wanting and knowing just out of her reach, Mira kissed him as the song collapsed inward on itself and on them.

The summoning seal tugged so hard on his inner thoughts, the shuffle it caused in his feet nearly yanked him from Mira's arms. "I'm sorry, Mira. I have to go."

"Now?" She barely got the question out and he was gone. No *Portal*. Just gone. She was left standing there, wet hair, just blinking and staring at where he'd just disappeared into thin air.



(Damon's Manor, Kaleion, Present Day)

The bright LED daylight-spectrum bulbs in the three chandeliers of Damon's foyer were the first clue. The burned, dead grass visible outside was the second. The twin moons hung in the sky outside the windows of Damon's foyer were the third. This wasn't Earth, but Damon had certainly brought some Earth to wherever this place was.

Michelle noticed the middle-aged man attempting to sneak up on her from a hidden room to the right. "May I help you," Edgar Hastings asked, walking up beside her.

"Yeah, don't even think about sneaking up on me again," Michelle threatened, pulling out her Glock® and aiming it right at him. "I'm here to see Damon!"

"I see," it wasn't the first time someone had threatened his life before. Damon had all kinds of very dangerous visitors, but he recognized the lethality of her weapon straight away. "You don't need to shoot me. I'm his Chief of Staff. My name is Edgar, and I might be able to help you. Has Master Damon explained how his summons works?"

"Not to me." Still holding her gun on him, she painted his forehead with a red dot originating from her weapon's sighting.

"I see." Unauthorized access was always a precarious position for Edgar. It wasn't the first time, and normally it resulted in the intruder's death, but something about her wasn't right. He had the means to take care of the problem, but her threats toward him didn't necessarily make her an enemy of Damon.

She hated this arrogant prick already, but she needed Damon, so killing him wasn't an option. *I could just knock him into the middle of next week. Damon would never know as long as I was careful not to leave any evidence...*

"That won't be necessary," Damon offered, descending the circular staircase from the second floor, still shirtless in his jeans in his haste to respond to the summoning seal. Damon waived off his Chief of Staff, causing him to retreat to the butler's kitchen.

She wasn't sure if Damon had read her thoughts. She wasn't sure how far his natural abilities extended, or even if he could cast without her knowledge.

"You know that seal wasn't meant for you. It could have killed you." Damon admired her from afar as he closed the distance between them—carefully so. She was certainly pleasant eye candy, except for the whiff of the undead she tried to hide with her perfume. Normally, he couldn't stand the undead. Though, he found something in Michelle that made her presence acceptable around him. Perhaps it was a kindred likeness in the way they went about getting things done. She was a doer—like him and Kellen, but there was something else about her that made him...respect her.

As he got close enough, she holstered the Glock® and, in a bold move, took Damon's hand, causing him to eye her sidelong, though he didn't retreat from her. "Radin was taken by a demon. I don't know his exact name, but he came out of the

ground projecting a very clear thought into everyone's head, 'I've come for what was promised to me.'" She paused, trying to recall the events in detail. "Immediately before that, Eldrac had pointed his right index finger up at Radin, but a translucent web fell upon him, then Eldrac's remains left a symbol on the ground in a black ash." Taking a deep breath after getting all that out of her system, she looked Damon in the eyes, taking the measure of his handling of the news—wondering really if it even was news to Damon. He knew so much each time she'd been exposed to him, she wasn't sure how far his information network extended. She knew him not entirely omnipotent, but she also knew he liked to leave people with impression that he was.

In her measure of him, she found...genuine concern in those smoke-rimmed black gems of his. Her keen senses picked up on his elevated heart rate and the advanced rate of breathing. Damon was worried about Radin... She could use that. She'd never seen him shirtless before, and his scars... They were also very telling. She estimated them to be made by lashings—many, many lashings. And they were old—very old.

"Describe the demon." She had his undivided attention, and this was always a possibility in dealing with stakes like this, but Radin being taken by a demon certainly qualified as unexpected this early in the plan. He'd like to hear more about this translucent web that fell upon Eldrac—that sounded like a spell he could use.

"Maybe fifty to sixty feet tall by twenty feet wide, with a whip of fire, huge wings, six toes on each foot—" Damon waved her off, interrupting her. He didn't need to hear anymore.

"A Balak. You're describing a Balak." Damon sighed, "Get me the spell of the translucent web that fell upon Eldrac just as he cast that spell that turned him to dust and I'll handle the Radin problem."

"What was that spell Eldrac was trying to use on Radin?"

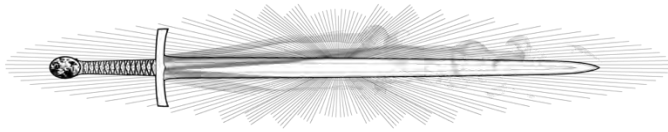
"Don't worry about it. I'll handle that." He thought Eldrac had stopped using *Damon's Damnation*, but he wasn't the only one that had gotten their hands on that spell over the centuries it had been in use. It was banned everywhere, but that just made it more infamous—more desired by the likes of Eldrac.

Damon would have to kill the immortal shell of the Balak, which meant he couldn't summon it—not without summoning his immortal shell too. He had to go to the demon's home turf. Sighing as he weighed the options he knew all sucked, Damon waved off Michelle, "Go get me that spell, and I'll take care of Radin. And Michelle," he tsk'd with his index finger, eyeing her carefully, "don't ever use my seal again."



(Exeter, Perion, Present Day)

Michelle gasped for air on the floor of her room in the Exeter Manor, coughing as her unique lifeforce fled the copy of her body on Damon's homeworld, catching up to her mortal shell on Perion.



## Chapter 7: Killing the Immortal

(Austin, TX, Earth, April 1<sup>st</sup>, Present Day)



urning the golden arrowhead with a thought as his right index finger gated heat from his Pyrokinesis, Damon summoned Goldenbow, not actually knowing if it would work from Earth. The molten metal filling the blue ceramic plate he'd set the arrowhead in on his desk, Damon looked into his reflection in the plate, knowing, from experience, it was time to ask for help.

"Babe, what are you doing," from behind him. He tried not to hide things from Mira ever since he had put permanent protections around her thoughts, as he had his own. They wouldn't protect her from every sort of probe possible, but it would make working with and around Mira more feasible...and safer for both. The encounter with the Dragon of Darkness on Eden was too close of a call. He had to take bigger precautions, but he also longed to be truly close to a great woman again, and Mira fit that description.

Recalling Michelle's description of the Balak, his mind worked the multitude of problems before him as the Master Plan threatened to unravel. One of Damon's many life-lessons-learned was 'don't be afraid to ask for help...and keep trustworthy people around you that *can* help.'

"I'd like you to meet a friend," turning to kiss a beautiful Mira dressed in hot-pink shorts, braless in a white T-shirt that read 'Sexy Nerd' with a graphic of a hot librarian, Damon looked around the room. *No Goldenbow. Hmmm, I might have to go back home.* Tap, tap, tap on his right shoulder from behind, causing him to turn back to the still-melting arrowhead. *Still, no Goldenbow.*

A snicker from Mira gave Goldenbow away. Spinning again, Damon saw Goldenbow standing beside Mira with his finger to his lips as if to shush her.

"Boy, you're fun to mess with, Day!" A million-watt smile from his incredibly lethal friend was a welcome site. "So, who's the babe," he asked, taking Mira's left hand to kiss it, noting her beautiful curves through the not-so-opaque T-shirt, long legs—her long brunette hair still wet from the shower. Damon could certainly pick 'em.

"Mira, this is Goldenbow, the most lethal assassin I've ever met." Damon presented, motioning to his friend dressed in only the most neutral of colors that seemed to pick up the hues of the room, making him barely visible even when directly

looking at him. “You’re in the presence of a living legend,” he said, motioning to one of the books on his desk, *Kaleion Warfare After Goldenbow*.

“So, what’s up, Day?”

“Why do you and Kellen call him Day,” Mira asked, picking up on the commonality.

“Oh, that,” Goldenbow paused, giving her that disarming smile again as he postulated with his right index finger in the air—remembering. “Kellen, Day, and I go waaayyy back! He doesn’t just let anyone call him that. You have to earn that privilege, right Day?”

“More or less,” Damon deflected, smiling as he ignored this part of the conversation as much as possible. But, he wanted to allow Mira her pleasantries and include her as much as possible.

Casting *Distorting Web*, Damon shelled the three of them for protection and encryption of the rest of their conversation.

“Uh oh,” Goldenbow interrupted, “Damon wants to talk business now.” Again, with the million-watt smile; again, directed at Mira. *What a flirt!* And it was working from what Damon saw of Mira’s body language.

“I’m honoring my word to you. Phase I is complete. You’re in the loop.”

Both looking sidelong at Damon, knowing that was not really the case. The only one truly in the loop was Damon. Goldenbow testing, “So, what’s involved in Phase II then?”

Damon sighed, knowing that’s where this would eventually go. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“That’s quite the loop, Day,” Goldenbow quipped, making a pinching motion with his right hand meant to mimic jibber-jabber, obviously only meant to be shared with Mira, though plenty open enough for Damon to see.

“Just because we have to keep this compartmentalized doesn’t mean you can’t help me execute part of the Master Plan.”

“Okay..., so, who needs to die,” Goldenbow casually asked, winking at Mira, causing her to smile back at him, which then immediately made her internally question her upbringing.

*Two of the most powerful men in the Universe are casually having a conversation in front of me about assassinating someone, she thought. Shut up and pay attention. This might get good.*

“Evanyil,” Damon proclaimed flatly, carefully gauging the response to come.

*Wow, this DID get good!* Mira’s blinking involuntarily halted, her eyes now staring at Goldenbow.

“Whoa!” Goldenbow got up, immediately beginning to pace—though making sure to stay within the encryption of the hemisphere of the *Distorting Web*—before answering, “But...”

“Can you do it, or not?”

"I mean, Day..." Goldenbow pausing, wiping the sweat already forming on his brow. Not a good sign. "I mean she's supposed to be part of all this..." Goldenbow motioning around the room with his hands. "Isn't she meant to be part of this MASTER PLAN of yours?"

"She is," Damon replied flatly.

"Am I part of your MASTER PLAN too," Goldenbow asked sarcastically as he stared down his long-time friend.

"Not in the same way," Damon smiled, being very careful how he navigated this discussion—and with good reason.

"Day, you've never asked me to assassinate a living goddess before."

"And I'd never consider asking anyone *but* you." Stroking Goldenbow's ego never hurt if you did it the right way and with total sincerity, of which Damon was an accomplished master.

"Sure, FUCK IT. I mean you only live once."

Standing before his long-time friend, Damon suddenly rested his right hand on Goldenbow's shoulder, "April Fools!"

After a bit of an awkward pause, Mira realized, "Shit! It *IS* April 1<sup>st</sup>, isn't it?!" Mira looked at Damon like he was a total freak'n genius. "That's *so* fucking wrong!"

Goldenbow didn't get the April Fools part, but he knew Damon was fucking with him, as he eyed Damon back—wickedly so. "Ha. Ha." It wasn't much of a retort, but not much of one was required given the look he was giving Damon. Damon would *pay* for that one.

Carefully measuring Goldenbow's reply and his entire handling of the initial request, Damon de-escalated, "No, seriously I do have a problem, and it does require your skill set."

No reply from Goldenbow, just a serious look, listening with a small shift of his weight from one leg to the other. Sometimes that signaled him pulling out a weapon, as Damon had seen Goldenbow do before without hardly anyone, but the most careful and attentive, noticing.

Continuing, Damon offered, "Adena is a powerful witch on Perion, and becoming an even bigger nuisance for me. I know she's dispatched undead looking for me on Perion, and it's only a matter of time before they find their way to more sensitive areas." Damon could tell the conversation turning to the undead had already made Mira uncomfortable as she looked around the room, biting her lips, obviously trying not to intervene in the conversation.

"They're persistent bastards, and you know how I feel about dealing with undead," Damon concluded.

"Okay, why me? Couldn't you handle this problem?" It was certainly a valid question as Goldenbow still eyed Damon, more curious than ever. *Why does he really need my help?*



“Well, let me put it this way, which of the two problems would you rather deal with,” Damon showing a viewing window to Radin in the Abyss surrounded by three massive scorpions, crucified upside down on a wooden cross amidst a Hellish landscape of immortals walking about everywhere, defiling all manner of the living and the dead.

“I think I’ll take problem number one, thank you very much,” Goldenbow jibed, trying to erase the all-too-fresh sight from his mind’s eye. He’d seen a great deal in his very long life, extended by the likes of Kellen, Damon, and others, but Hell was where he drew the line. He’d never taken a job that involved The Abyss before, but if it meant helping Damon, he’d do it. It just wasn’t his first choice.

“I thought so,” Damon exhaled again, knowing what must be done. He was going to have to go visit Banthis—on her turf. He shuddered at the memory of the last time that had happened. At least, this time, his powers had grown exponentially, and he had a great deal more weaponry at his disposal. He’d be far more prepared this time around. “There’s more to Phase II, where I’ll need your help, but this is a start if you wouldn’t mind taking care of it for me. We’re reaching a point where we’re going to have to start dealing with problems in parallel or the timing of the plan is going to be out of sync. EVERYTHING depends on the timing, so I’d appreciate you helping me deal with these problems simultaneously.”

“Consider her piece removed from the board.” The million-watt smile returned, allowing Damon to focus on the bigger problem at hand.

“You two are going to want to leave for this part,” Damon warned, taking a seat at his desk, placing the *Staff of the Invoker* sidelong in his lap. Placing his signet ring—with his seal—on his right third finger so he still had a mechanism to link himself to this timeline if the worst happened and he lost the *Staff of the Invoker*, he concentrated. Damon’s jeans and T-shirt disappearing before their eyes, replaced with long, elegant, charcoal-blue, herringbone robes adorned with runes and embroidery of Kaleion and of his profession. Closing his eyes as he focused, calling out to his wife—to Banthis.



(The Abyss, Time Neutral)

The giant open-air structure, sat atop a ground-work pedestal of skulls, overlooked a large amount of the Abyss from its position closest to the Crown of the Dragon. The great misery that was the grey Gates of Hell with its massive curtain wall topped with pikes driven through decaying skulls of once great kings. Damon hadn’t visited Banthis since her promotion to the right hand of the Dragon, nor had he wanted to. Walking among the thirty-two grooved Roman-style columns supporting the rectangular roof structure reminded him of a Roman Temple, with its colonnade along the front allowing for two tall rectangular open doorways.

Intricate cornice work above and below runes he didn't fully recognize, but understood as angelic script, adorned an outer band of grey stone all the way around the structure. Beastly faces, raised on the uppermost cornice ribbon above each column, seemed to cry out from the stone in anguish. Walking inside the open doorway to the right, estimating it was probably at least a hundred feet to the top of the casing, Damon moved toward the immense dais atop a staircase of sixty-six stone steps, a hundred yards wide at the starter step. He was roughly halfway up the steps before being greeted by a magnificently beautiful blonde having the appearance of an eighteen-year-old Human female, wearing a loose, color-shifting toga, revealing beautiful and seductive flesh hither and thither. Smiling at him, she said nothing but offered her delicate, girlish hand to guide him, which Damon cautiously accepted. Something felt familiar about her the moment her flesh touched his—maybe something in her crystal blue eyes. It was rare to see anything here with blue eyes, indicating she might be among the very few living creatures here, unless she was obfuscating her real eyes. Anybody could be anything here if they knew how, but the truly living had telltale signs if you knew what to look for. You had to be utmost careful. Even still, you could almost never trust your eyes, and most certainly *never* trust your ears! Even now he heard the seeds of doubt being sewn into the deepest recesses of his mind. All the voices sounding like variations of his own.

*You'll never leave.*

*You belong here.*

*Remember what you've done.*

*Yeah, I know thee...*

*Have you come to witness your great many sins?*

*You're a monster...*

He couldn't shut the voices off, but he did his best to ignore them as he reached the top of the stairs, seeing familiar faces of Banthis and their many daughters. Spread out across the dais were a series of beds where all manner of debauchery, adultery, seduction, and casual sex—if one could call it sex—were in progress. It took a lot to get a raised eyebrow from Damon, especially when it came to sex, but Banthis earned one as she removed a stiff prosthetic appendage from her waist she had been using to defile a young girl he immediately recognized as Leslie. *So, this is where Banthis had taken her...*

"Darling Love," Banthis smiled from ear-to-ear, not having seen her wayward husband *here* in a *very* long time. Whatever brought him here must have been important. "What brings you to our little slice of—" she paused almost having to correct herself, "...well, you know." Again, with another big smile for her husband.

Freeing his right hand from the beautiful blonde who escorted him up to the dais, Damon waved, showing a viewing window of Radin crucified upside down and the Balak that held him captive. "What's his name?"

A frown from Banthis, realizing he wasn't here to visit his family. "Volor," a terse reply from his wife. She wasn't happy, and he knew it. A pissed off Banthis was a very dangerous Banthis. He needed to deflect. Fast!

"May I visit with my daughters?"

A smile immediately returned to Banthis' face. She could be whimsical to the point of insanity at times, but had a dangerously clever mind. Very dangerous. She showed, like Damon, plenty of elements of structure. She couldn't, and wouldn't have made it this far without it, but there was just something about Banthis that always left Damon...unsettled. He knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that *if* Banthis could experience love, she *did* love him. The question was: what did love *actually mean* to Banthis?

"Well, you were just holding hands with one of them." Banthis smiled at him knowingly. The beautiful blonde with the blue eyes smiled at him, admiring her father's good looks and the charcoal-blue aura of his radiant power against the dark misery of the night of Hell. Then it clicked for Damon—Leslie had been pregnant...from him. "They've just been calling me 'Daughter Number Seven' all this time. They wanted you to name me. Would you give me a name, Daddy?"

"Of course, My Love." Nothing like being put on the spot by a child of yours you've never met. Licking his lips in thought, knowing where he was, and who was in his presence, he considered taking a *big* chance. Looking at her, deep into her eyes, he took both her hands, pulling her to him lovingly where he gave her a full embrace, letting her nuzzle into his neck in a moment of comfort all but forbidden here. Pulling away, he looked deep into her blue eyes again. They were real. Those were hers—no doubt about it—a gift from himself and Leslie. In her eyes, he recognized a piece of himself from so long ago, before the torment of the daily beatings had begun. Inside us all, there was something unmistakable, unique, and yet still recognizable. Inside his beautiful new daughter of fair skin and high cheekbones, he saw love, torment, disappointment, seething anger, and in this very moment...joy. "I'm going to give you a forbidden name, My Love. Are you sure that is okay with you?"

Banthis started shaking her head in disapproval. She tried, but couldn't read his thoughts. He had done something, and she could sense the shell around him even though she couldn't see it. He had incredibly powerful protections up.

"I just want a name that comes from you, Daddy..." She paused, blinking at him, savoring his chiseled good looks, seeing what her mother saw in him. "Why is it a forbidden name, Daddy?"

Putting a finger to his lips, then waving her off, he proclaimed, "I name you 'Grace,' for your love may very well make me whole again." He knew it was a lie as soon as the words escaped his mouth. He was condemned, but if it lifted her spirits for a moment in Hell, he would give her that lie as a truth.

Seething from her dais, Banthis looked at her husband with far more than just disapproval. Her dank, ribbed wings stretched out, then cupped over her head, casting a great and gnarled shadow of her anger to creep between herself and Damon.

"Thank you, Daddy, for such a beautiful name." She turned to her siblings proclaiming, "You can call me by my name now. I'm Grace." Damon's daughters stared between him and Banthis, looking for approval, not knowing where this was about to go. Bakris, his oldest, and most magnificently beautiful daughter, knew right away, rising from her bed where she had been tormenting an adulterous Human male in his middle forties. Blood dripping from her acrid and rapidly growing nails, her perfect nude flesh and long, flowing blonde hair juxtaposed by her dank, black, leathery ribbed-wings. Regally, she moved towards Grace, spinning backward for the momentum she sought to decapitate Grace in one smooth motion of her extended fingernails—her severed head cascading down the steps past Damon. "Your name of filth has killed your daughter, Father," Bakris pontificated before them at the top of the dais, licking Grace's blood from her fingernails with her long, pointed tongue.

It took a moment for Grace's body to slump where it had stood. Bakris' motion had been so quick and so lethal; it had left Grace's body temporarily suspended.

First horrified, then relieved, Damon knew this trip would leave yet another scar on his soul, and there it was. Hopefully, he could find his way out of here with Radin before the next scar left its mark. But for Grace, he was grateful. She had a chance now, albeit perhaps a slim one. "Perhaps I should do what I came for and leave," Damon offered, "...I could visit another time."

Her shadow retreating underneath her still cupped-wings, Banthis offered a slight and dismissive bow.

Walking down the steps, he'd never be able to remove the image of his daughter's severed head bleeding out on the steps below him. There it was, the second scar.

A distant flash inside his thoughts—one not experienced in centuries—and he nearly stumbled down the stairs. His protections, as powerful as they were, couldn't stop the prayers he felt being offered. He couldn't be sure if that had been the cause of the great flash of light in his mind, or something much more akin to a painful memory, but it was so hard to trust his instincts here. Here such things became more intense, but for now he had to ignore them to focus or Grace would only be the first of a great many more deaths.

He felt as if something had come with these prayers, and he struggled to understand it. It was like a singing or a humming vibration just off in the distance of his thoughts. Whatever it was, it resonated inside him, and he needed to figure out how to either re-direct it or shut it off. He needed to be completely focused when he dealt with Voltor. Still not anywhere close to the edge of where the rivers Styx and Tsen crossed overhead then crossed again in deep chasms on the ground,

he could see the great scorpions guarding a naked body crucified upside-down in the far distance between himself and the great curtain wall of Hell.

\* \* \* \*

A higher-level demon, the Balak was going to be enough of a challenge on its own. Gripping the *Staff of the Invoker* tight in his right hand by one of its three symmetrically coiled helix rods, he prepared himself as his black leather boots crushed the bloodied and decayed landscape skulls leading away from Banthis' temple. Briefly looking back, he could see the far larger temple to the side of the one he just left, hoping she'd stay out of this.

Bloodied and broken skulls—half-buried by their own sins, quarter-buried by their tormentors—paved Damon's way to meet Radin...and Voltor! Skyward, the River Styx, in acrid, emerald hues dusted with embers of justice for acts, promised a literal cleansing to the bone to anyone unfortunate enough to come into contact. Crossing over Styx in mid-air, in helical skyward patterns, the River Tsen, in blood-amber hues of hatred dusted with embers of justice for intent, promised just enough healing to maintain a life of suffering. Together, they fell in the far background before him, one against the curtain wall, one against another long-ago-broken great temple of he who shall not be named. Crossing over one another again in a great chasm in the foreground creating a barrier between the landscape of crushed, buried, and bloodied skulls and the burning embers of well-stoked coals, he didn't see Voltor, and that made him nervous.

He could already feel the intolerable heat and could smell decaying flesh as he approached Voltor's domain, close to the Gates of Hell, marked by the likeness of the Dragon of Darkness protecting the great keyhole. Beyond the Gates of Hell, Mount Olympus stood guard between the fate of the damned, the selfish, and the righteous.

The crack of a skull breaking underneath his leather boot made him look down, causing him to back away—quick! That face—or what remained of it, only about a third of the right side remained—he knew that face...

*Focus, Damon! Focus or you're as good as dead here.*

In the distance, he could see the heavy wooden cross buried upside-down in the mound of decaying feces, bearing Radin's body upon it, guarded by the trio of massive black scorpions who now gathered in a semi-circle before Radin to greet Damon. Getting closer, he didn't see Voltor, but he could see the blood pouring out of a great wound in Radin's side and from his ankles—one crossed over the other so the rusted iron pike could pierce both simultaneously. Denied clothes of any kind, Radin's nude body had been defiled everywhere with defecation and other means, intended to infect and persecute his wounds.

Another step brought Damon within thirty feet of the base of the cross, causing the center scorpion to inch forward toward him—stinger fully readied. He

needed a quick and easy method to prosecute these venomous servants while drawing minimal attention to his location. Another bolt of lightning coursed from the gathering storm overhead. For a brief moment, he could have sworn he had seen the likeness of the Dragon of Darkness in the fork of lightning that just struck the ground behind Radin. In the hackles raised on the back of his neck, he could feel the electricity in the foul, stench air and sought to leverage it. Feeling the next massive bolt building in the gathering storm overhead, Damon waited for it, then directed the next strike as it bolted from cloud-to-cloud-to-ground, finding its landing point dead center the approaching scorpion—splitting it in half as its guts poured out on the ground of ashen coals before them.

The remaining scorpions quickly retreated—he knew not where, but they practically vanished before him, offering him the chance he needed.

Risking his Master Plan, and everything else to stand here before Radin, Damon breathed a thought aloud, “Got yourself in a fine mess didn’t you...”

Radin’s tears couldn’t clear the blood from his eyes, so he couldn’t be sure what or who he was seeing, but a shadowy, tall, familiar shape, carrying a mighty rod in his hands, was trying to communicate with him in a language he didn’t understand. All he could think of was to cry out, but the words didn’t come—only a muffled gargle as his vocal chords struggled with all the blood in his mouth. Suddenly, he felt the pikes removed and was freed from the cross, being uprighted somehow, but he was sure the tall figure wasn’t touching him. Released, but still suspended in air above the molten embers, Radin could feel the blood rushing from his head back into his extremities, though there was no way he could walk—let alone run.

“YOU?!” The only thing Damon heard was that foul guttural shout of familiarity, blasting fire right on the back of his neck, nearly piercing his protections with the first blast.

Spinning to face Voltor, Damon wasn’t in shock at the sight of him. It wasn’t his first time facing down a demon, but it *was* his first time on *their* turf, and he had to keep his wits about him. Wasting not a second, he cast *Damon’s Damnation*. Nothing. In his haste and unease, he’d forgotten one of the major tenants here. Almost no living things, thus virtually nothing sourced from arcane would work here. From here on out, he’d have to draw from Zero-Point, or his own raw power and artifacts.

A great belly laugh from Voltor, “Your feeble magic won’t work here, Warlock!” His viperous words crackled in the air, though his mouth didn’t move.

A crack of his great fire whip—some forty feet in length—and Damon was suddenly flying through the air ensnarled in its grip only to sling back toward Voltor’s mouth agape to swallow him whole. He had half a second before he’d be swallowed. Reaching out to Zero-Point, he cast *Damon’s Improved Shell 4*, creating a transparent sphere around him just as Voltor’s teeth and jaws clamped down on him. Watching

Voltor try to bite down on his shell in futility, Damon realized he'd only bought himself a few seconds at best.

Now in the mouth of the great Voltor, Damon shoved the *Staff of the Invoker* through his shell, piercing the roof of Voltor's mouth as he cast *Mind Blank* directly into its skull, simultaneously throwing great lightning bolt down his throat to give him something to choke on.

Stumbling, Voltor released Damon from his iron vice of a jaw, causing Damon to spill down upon the crushed and bloodied skulls beneath—what remained of his protections still intact. He'd struck a mighty blow to the beast, but he had to kill its immortal body, or it would come back for Radin...and for him. Looking skyward to the great rivers Styx and Tsen crossing helically overhead, Damon recognized the Dragon of Darkness in the distance—observing while in her Human female form from her temple. The magnificent brunette in revealing Roman robes seemed both simultaneously entertained and displeased.

Beside the Dragon of Darkness, Banthis and his daughters also watched; though no one interfered. Power struggles in Hell were nothing new, but an outsider coming here to meddle—that was entirely new.

Pointing the *Staff of the Invoker*, channeling as much Zero-Point as he could source here, Damon cast *Sijil's Selective Elimination*, causing a column of acid fifty yards wide to engulf the immortal shell of Voltor. Nothing. *SHIT!*

*Need a better plan*, he thought. *Mind Blank* had stunned Voltor, leaving him unaware of why he was in a fight, but the why didn't matter now. It was in the throes of combat and that's all it needed to understand. Its fight or flight instincts were just as strong as a Human's, if not more so! Reaching into the inner folds of his black robes, he disappeared his *Staff of the Invoker*, pulling out a longsword that glowed like a star in depths of The Abyss—*A Crucible of Will*.

A sudden blast of fire from Voltor's whip and his protections were gone in an instant. He was all but naked in Hell, his body spilling across the landscape of crushed skulls as his robes burned and charred about his body. With a thought, the fire was out. He still had *A Crucible of Will* in his right hand, and he meant to use it!

"VOLTOR!! Ego excindo tuus vim vitae!" '*I destroy your lifeforce*,' Damon shouted, reaching out to the harmonic energy he'd been denying since the prayers had begun, casting *A Crucible of Will* at Voltor.

Striking him dead in the chest, the great blow caused the chasm of Styx to widen with a cacophony of screams carried on mists of steam as Voltor's immortal shell collapsed down into the great crater of Styx—dead. Bursting out the back of Voltor's body as he fell into the chasm, a host of lifeforces escaped Voltor's *Throne of Souls*, heading directly for the Gates of Hell, save two.

Circling Radin's body one time, Damon faintly heard a female voice against the backdrop of the groans of Hell, "Forgive me," as the lifeforce trailed off out of sight past Olympus now beyond the Gates of Hell. The other led a scorched path

through the acerbic vapory air, heading straight for the great temple of the Dragon of Darkness.

Flamed eyes with reptilian, black slits acknowledged Voltor's death as the Dragon of Darkness took flight overhead, swallowing and consuming the life force that streaked to meet it mid-air.

Seeing Voltor's flesh being consumed by the acid of Styx, Damon used his Telekinesis to pull a *Crucible of Will* from Voltor's chest before Styx consumed the great weapon. Guiding it with his thoughts, he lifted *A Crucible of Will* out of the great chasm, hovering it over the crushed landscape toward him until it landed in the inner pocket of his robes where he pulled out the *Staff of the Invoker* to get him out of here!

*Need to go*, he urged himself, watching the shadow of the wings of the Dragon of Darkness creeping across the ground of skulls alongside his own shadow, Damon picked up Radin, tossing him over his shoulder. He tried to create a *Portal*. Nothing. Trying a *Gate* next. Nothing. *SHIT! Calm down*, he thought to himself, *very few living things here, therefore no arcane*. Reaching out again to the harmonic energy provided by the prayers of his believers, Damon walked through an immense *Portal* to Perion, dispelling it almost before finishing setting foot in Radin's War Room in Exeter.



Michelle, Brigance, Rowarc, and Talemar all came running at the sound of the horrific beastly screams echoing from the War Room where Radin's naked, beaten, stabbed, and bloody body lay on the floor next to Damon in his burned robes with blood and sweat dripping from his brow.

His vocal chords still caked with blood, Radin couldn't speak, though he moaned on the floor, bleeding profusely on the hardwood planks. Rushing back in a whirled blur, Michelle had Radin's body wrapped in a grey field blanket. Prying his eyelids open to check his pupils, Michelle nearly jumped back. Radin's eyes looked...evil, their blackish-red irises terrifying everyone in the room.

"Oh, Creator," offered from Brigance Fireheart with a motion of his right hand Michelle didn't immediately recognize.

"It might take him a while to recover from this," Damon suggested, not really sure if he ever would.

"What did they do to him?" Michelle stroked Radin's hair while checking his vitals and using his carotid artery to gather his pulse, which was coursing beyond any measure of control. If her count was right, it was nearly two hundred beats per minute.

"You don't want to know. Just get him cleaned up, and give him some space." Damon proposed, "A lot of space."



“He’ll never be the same again,” a crowned Talemar intoned, shaking his head in disbelief.

“No...” Damon paused, “He won’t.”

Wraith walked into the room late, taking in the scene before him. “I owe you something.” Reaching into his red, gold, and black robes, Wraith offered a piece of parchment to Damon.

Taking *Wraith’s Return* in his grip, Damon made a *Portal* home, walking through. He needed to recover as well, and he needed to understand his new power.



*The 'Unholy' Dragon of Darkness*

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