

The Darkness Within

Trials of Darkness - Book 1

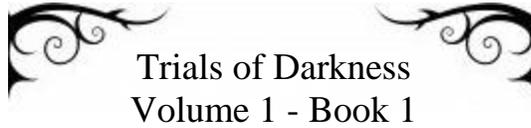
sample

sample



Philip & Amanda
Brooks

The Darkness Within



By Philip & Amanda Brooks

Copyright 2013 Philip and Amanda Brooks

The Darkness Within - Sample

All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

This is a free sample. The authors grant the right to freely distribute this sample for non-commercial purposes, provided that you make no change to the content.

Prologue

The Malign of Fire felt the now, all too familiar, rise in energy that heralded the approach of another elemental. "I will never get used to this, sensing when the others are near. Existing in this nothingness goes against the natural order." He muttered to himself with a resigned sigh. "Still, it has its uses."

Fire knew it was Air who came to him. Unlike when the others approached he always knew when it was her. He felt his hatred for her boiling over before she even said a single word. Of course these days all four elementals were spending far too much time in close contact with each other for his liking. It had been thousands of centuries since the open conflict between them had ended, just before the dawning of the sentient races. Yet even once those creatures spread across the world like a plague the relationship between them could hardly be called peaceful. Though they were united against Aomen and the mortals, and the world shook in terror before their glory, there was no true peace between them. Just a common goal.

Destruction.

That was long ago. Now here they are, exiled to the space between spaces. The vast nothingness where sight and sound and energy were one, and thoughts were not always hidden. Formless entities, this is what they were reduced to, mere thought without substance. Alone with their hatred and each other, and that was poor company no matter how you looked at it. Now they were forced to work together to find a way to return to their rightful home, the world that brought them into existence, Irion. When Fire focused he could feel the fire deep within the planet still calling to him, begging for his return.

"Your plan has failed Aomen. We will see your sacrifice reduced to nothing!" he raged. It felt good to vent to the nothingness. Fire remembered when his rage could blacken the sky and scorch the ground, now it seemed all he did was vent his frustration in impotence. That and wait for Air to complete her task. He could feel her very close now. Air's proximity always seemed to agitate Fire more than any other, it made these meetings... interesting. How many times had she manipulated him into doing her bidding without him even realizing it? Fire had lost count eons ago.

Not anymore, never again.

"What are you raving about now? Let me guess... that human minion of yours disobeyed you again, didn't he." Air purred seductively. "Mmmm, I miss the days when these mortals would cower before us," she sighed with remembered pleasure, "when we could end their miserable existences if they failed us or just because we wished it."

Bitch. "No. Kolec has kept low while we wait for you and *your*, plan."

"Too bad, I do *love* when he... enjoys himself. So much misery. I can still almost taste it, despite the damnable barrier." She tingled with ecstasy at the mere thought of violence.

"I don't care in the least for your pleasure..." In truth, Fire preferred Air to be lost in her joys, it kept her sedate and distracted her from meddling in his affairs. It simply did no good to allow her to think otherwise. "...we have all worked too hard and invested too much of our remaining power into the *Creature* and still here we wait! Why has it not delivered the souls to us? It is your task to ensure this."

Seconds passed in silence. Trying to get a direct answer out of Air was akin to getting Earth to reach a decision, both took far more patience than Fire possessed.

"Damn it, answer me!"

Air simply circled around Fire, she enjoyed seeing Fire so worked up. Even with the short lived openings in the barrier that separated them from direct contact with the planet, her chances to stir up trouble have been limited. "Relax. Our plan is proceeding just fine, the Creature will end its life soon and the souls it carries shall tear the barrier open permanently." She decided it was best not to push Fire too far, she still needed him. Especially with her appointed task, which she reminded herself that she must get back to, unfortunately, she could not spend too much time taunting him.

They both stopped suddenly as Earth's presence filled the space, using the tempus of energy the argument was generating to his advantage to catch the others by surprise. Not for any pleasure he received from it, simply to unnerve them and remind them to behave. There are no secrets in this place. "Even my patience is wearing thin Air, and that is not something easily done."

"Well, well, aren't you full of surprises, to think you could catch anyone unaware, what's next, Water sticks to a decision?" she said piling on the sarcasm. Air paused for a moment feeling herself uncomfortably outnumbered. "What brings you to this ever so productive discussion?" In this place they could do no direct harm to each other, yet still they could make things unpleasant.

"You know well what has brought me, what has brought us all. Your progress, or lack thereof."

Fire enjoyed the sensation of having Air outnumbered. Earth, as slow to act as he was, was the closest thing to an ally Fire had. Fire continued to compress her essence between them, knowing that she was unable to escape. They moved away suddenly as they felt the last element approach.

"Ahh, Water. You are finally here, now we can get started and I can get back to more entertaining pursuits." Air greeted Water with sincere gratitude.

"I see Fire is still here and not yelling at anyone, did I miss it or am I early?" Water giggled and looked around. "Seems like I came just when you needed me, I could come back?"

Silence.

No one was amused.

"Enough Water, I dislike feeling the proximity of you. *All of you*. I am ready to get started, NOW!" Earth, Air, and Water did not appreciate Fire's blunt impatience but kept silent as they all agreed with him, the quicker they finished the quicker they could all depart. "We must decide what to do if Air fails."

"I will not fail! The Creature is easily manipulated, despite having a soul of its own."

"Still, Fire is correct, we need to have a contingency plan." Water experienced actual pain to even admit that. "The lifespan of the creature may be short but if it does not release the souls with its own blood all will be for naught!"

"Simple, if the Creature does not fulfill its purpose we will draw the energy out. Each of you will need to draw out your share, one at a time." Air paused to take in their surprise, of course she was prepared for their demands of a contingency plan. She spent the decades since it was discovered that the Creature had a soul planning out this contingency. She always has a plan, several in fact. "We must lure him..."

"Don't you mean YOU must lure him?" interrupted Fire, losing his patience. Again.

"I can do only so much, the barrier is weak but still I only have short bursts of contact. When I call on you, each of you, to do your part you and your minions must act." Air knew Fire

would act, probably well before she called for, or wanted, it. Water and Earth would be problematic, of course. One thing at a time....

Fire was only vaguely listening to Air's plans. He had known she would have one, he also knew it would be overly convoluted with layers and layers of 'ifs' and 'in cases'.

She could go on for ages, let those two fools humor her, I'm done listening to that manipulative bitch. Her plan might have merit, but wait for it to bear fruit, pfffft, I don't think so. I'll take care of things my way!

He focused his thoughts and searched for an opening.

Kolec. Kolec. I have a task for you.

Chapter 1

Screaming. Blood. Cries for Mercy.

Borlin's deep red eyes snapped open and stared up at the tree canopy above him. The lack of clouds allowed the harsh winter's sun to penetrate in glaring rays, causing his sleep-crusted eyes to blur with tears that immediately froze to his leathery face in the cold air. For more than ten years the dwarf had slept above ground. Still, each morning on the rare occasions when he actually slept, the sun blinded him as though it were his first day on the surface.

Damn it. He thought blinking the tears from his eyes. *Should just learn to sleep face down.*

I tried that, I still woke up... *wait.*

The dwarf sat up on his elbows and shook his head trying to clear the cobwebs from his muddled mind. Thick wet earthen debris remained tangled in his snarled, thick beard and few remaining patches of muddy brown hair.

I slept? Or, did I just pass out again? He thought with a raise of a bushy eyebrow.

How? I haven't had any drink in days. Not since... he shuddered.

Shut up. I don't want to think about that.

Borlin slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position and let the stiffness of sleep melt away while he tried to orient himself. He rolled his shoulders around to loosen them up a bit, which allowed the remaining metal plates that formed the outer layer of his armor to shift comfortably back into place. It felt as though he had been laying in the exact same spot for days rather than just over night. Borlin brought his hands up to wipe the tears from his eyes and clear his vision. Suddenly he stopped and stared at his grubby fingers. He was horrified to see that they were covered in blood... again.

What the...? No. That was a dream... wasn't it? Please let it be a dream!

When has it ever been just a dream?

Come on think damn it! Couldn't have done it again so soon... could I?

Of course I could have, that is always the problem.

Shit!

Borlin shook his head, closed his eyes, and let out a long billowing breath into the icy air. Dropping his hands slowly to the frost covered ground, his fingers searching for the reassuring leather wrapped handle of his axe. It was never far from his reach, life alone in the north woods depended on that fact. Sure enough, it was mere inches from him. His ancient battle-axe was the closest thing to a friend Borlin had ever had, or ever wanted. It never ran screaming from him, never looked upon him with fear and loathing, never pleaded with him not to hurt it, and it was

always there for him whenever he needed it. He lifted the cold dead weight of it and he knew without even opening his eyes that the blades would be covered in gore. Still, he refused to look.

How many was it this time? He wondered with a sigh, while shaking his head. *Damn, let it be just an animal!*

Just look fool.

Get it over with. If it's an animal, I can at least eat it.

Refusing to look is not going to change what has already been done.

Borlin sat there continuing to shake his head. His eyes remained closed for many minutes before he dared to confirm his fears. How many times had he done this? How many times had he awoken in a strange place covered in blood? He had lost count; or rather, he refused to remember. Despite how hard his conscious mind tried to block out the images of death his dreams, and most of his waking hours, were always filled with the screams of the dying. In his years of exile he stopped being able to tell dreams from reality. At times, he would watch himself brutalize some hapless traveler as though he were a disconnected observer. Other times he simply blacked out and when he awoke, there was carnage. Worse still, were the times he remembered every single drop of blood he had spilt.

Look at it, Look at it!

The moment he gave in he regretted it, he always did. The blades were covered in blood and bits of still moist flesh. Staring at the mess that was slowly dripping onto his hands he tried to recall last night, or was it earlier this morning? He had trouble separating the two in his mind. Everything was a tangle of disconnected images with nothing firm to hold onto. Much like the blood that was oozing down the blades.

He tore his gaze away from the head of his axe and looked around at his surroundings for the first time trying to jog his memory. The dark forest around him seemed vaguely familiar.

Borlin furrowed his brow in concentration, *what was I doing? I was following something. Something... out of place. Wait... it was wagon tracks! Oh no... he thought with a sigh.*

I didn't... I didn't follow them did I? Slumping his shoulders as he came to the realization, of course I did, it's what I always do isn't it?

Glancing around in a panic, he could see no bodies or even the tracks he thought he had remembered. As far as he could see, there was nothing but the undisturbed forest before him. Borlin slowly stood up, not wanting to look behind him. He pulled his head right and left with the opposite hand to finish clearing the cricks in his neck. The familiar routine allowed him to buy himself a little more time before he had to turn around and face what he had done. The snapping and popping of his neck were the only sounds, no chirping of birds or digging of rodents, a bad sign.

Maybe it was a dream. He dared to hope.

Really? Think again.

Wait... what was that?

Borlin thought he could hear a faint sound. Something slow, sloppy, and rhythmic.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Borlin was unable to stop himself from turning around at the noise. His breath caught in his chest when he finally faced the carnage.

Oh...

Drip. Drip.

A whole fucking caravan?

Borlin clamped his eyes shut, but the image was still in his mind's eye, clear as day. Slowly he reopened them and took in the entire scene.

Drip.

A whole caravan. I wonder if there are any survivors.

And if there are?

What should I do with them?

Kill them of course...

Borlin let out a terrible scream, something between animal rage and utter despair. For a moment, even the dripping seemed to freeze in terror.

In a clearing, not twenty paces from where he stood shaking in anger, was a sight that would turn the stomach of even an emotionless Sentinel Inquisitor. A dozen bodies lay strewn around the wreckage of several small wagons near a burnt out campfire. A red-headed young man lay slumped over the side of a wagon with his throat torn out. The corpse was slowly dripping blood onto a shredded piece of canvas below it.

Drip.

Borlin finally registered the unmistakable coppery scent of blood, and other even less pleasant things. He was a little shocked at himself for not noticing the smell until that moment.

Looking around he let out a small sigh of relief. *At least there doesn't seem to be any children here.*

This time.

Borlin slowly approached the mess, reluctantly inspecting the carnage. They had been prepping evening feast and setting up camp from the looks of the over turned cook pots and half-erected tents. He tried to avoid looking at the mangled corpses as he stood in the center of the bloody scene. Instead, he checked the pots for anything edible, only to be greeted by a round, smiling face. A severed head, taken in one clean cut, floated among some carrots and bits of meat. He glanced over to the fire pit and as he had expected there sat a fat headless corpse, pudgy hands still holding a carrot and a small knife

He didn't even see me coming.

Would it have mattered?

"Hrmpf, Probably not. Bet`er you died quick," addressing the head as it bobbed in the stew in mock agreement. Borlin dropped the pot in disgust and gave it a solid kick. His anger rose at both the death and the waste of food. Survival in the harsh northern woods required a certain practicality.

"Bastard, you ruined the fuckn' stew!"

Borlin resigned himself to scavenging anything of use from the wreckage. He tossed the bodies into a pile and tried his best to ignore them, despite their constant stares of hatred and fear. He could tell any time his eyes passed over them that they all blamed him. *As they should.* Looking through the cargo Borlin discovered that they were transporting a variety of finished goods. He figured they were from Dubeck, a large human city located to the east near where the river Magnus formed.

What the hell where they doing out here?

Stupid fools! He thought scratching his head. *Don't they have enough sense to stay on, or at least near the road?*

Borlin's eye grew wide with the realization. *Wait! Is there a road nearby?*

If there's a Road... Damn it, I've gone too far south.

No help for that now.

Most of the goods were of little use to him: tents, hammocks, lanterns, glassware, and other equally useless tools of comfort. Borlin only needed a single tool to survive, his weapon. What he lacked was food. What he wanted was drink. He tossed the items around carelessly looking for anything worthwhile.

"Hey! Don't give me that look! This is all garbage. You tossed your life away carrying this?" He barked at a corpse nearby of a young skinny man whose eyes he could swear were following him... or was it a boy? Borlin couldn't really tell with humans. He waited for several minutes for an explanation.

It was my job!

"What kind'a job is hauling this crap around?" Borlin snapped back at the corpse quickly resuming his search.

"Ah ha! Now this is more like it! You were holding out on me!" he exclaimed as he popped open a crate containing several dark glass bottles of wine. Without hesitation, he snatched up a bottle, clamped his jagged teeth around the cork, and pulled it off. He sloshed the sweet liquid down his beard and onto the dirt-crusting plates of his armor as he slurped noisily. He drained most of the bottle in a single greedy pull.

After letting the wine calm his thoughts for a moment, he examined the other crates near him only to discover that there were several more cases of wine.

Maybe, tonight won't be so bad after all.

Several hours later Borlin sat around a roaring bonfire in a bloody mockery of a traditional pleasant evening around a campfire with friends. He had surrounded himself with several of the more intact bodies from the caravan. They were now propped up against crates, stumps, trees, and anything else Borlin could find to support them.

Borlin sat smiling among the bloody corpses. There were a half-dozen empty bottles strewn around him and he had a full bottle in each hand. He laughed to the group, "Heh heh, you know boys, yoush was rights. It's nish havin a nice warmpf fire for a change!" Borlin swayed back and forth, seconds from collapse. With each drink, he drooled more wine into the puddle at his feet than he managed to swallow. "And, with all thessh broken up crates jush laying around, I didn't even haff to goes gaffer the damn firewood."

Borlin blearily looked around at the rotting corpses, "Oh, don't look at me like that! I didn't break the crates... or did I? Ha ha ha." nearly falling over backwards as he roared in laughter.

"Hey, what's that yoush said?" Borlin leaned in towards the corpse of a blond man who was leaning against a crate of broken glassware on the opposite side of the fire. It sat there with its mouth open in mid-scream.

I said, you're hogging all the wine!

"You want anosser drink? Well, I don't know friend you loo like you'rsh about to fall over as it is. Whaf the hell, there's plentsy to go around. Eh? Besidsh... I guess I owes it to you."

Damn right you owe me.

With that, Borlin staggered unsteady to his feet and stumbled over towards the corpse. Barely halfway to the body his legs crumpled beneath him and he landed hard on the ground. He sat there staring around blankly for a moment. "How the hell didsh I get down here? Heh... bersst part of being a dwarf is not having far to fall!" He chuckled at his own cleverness. Borlin

carefully crawled the rest of the way to the corpse. He thrust the bottle of wine at it, jostling the body slightly, and causing it to lean precariously.

"Ha! I madeded it!" declared Borlin triumphantly as he looked up at the corpse. "Well you waned anosher drink. Here you go! Go on... take it!" and with that he forced the bottle into the dead man's hand, completely unbalancing the corpse and knocking it over backwards.

At seeing this Borlin howled with laughter. "Ha ha ha, see I told yous, yoush were too drunk! Yoush humanssss can't old your liquor!"

With that, Borlin leaned back and brought the wine bottle to his lips. He tilted it all the way up trying to slurp down the last drop. Instead, he fell over backwards and passed out on the bloody wine soaked earth.

No scavengers came for the corpses, except of course for the insects. Borlin's presence mattered little to the maggots and other carrion eating vermin that could devour a body in mere days. Larger scavengers however, were afraid of the loud drunken dwarf. He had an ill scent to him that scared them even more than the noise. They circled and paced waiting for him to leave, yet he stayed many days with the corpses talking, singing, and drinking with them. The animals bayed and howled into the night, but he would not leave and they would not dare approach.

Borlin had emptied the remaining cases in the days that followed. Being drunk was an easier and far safer state for him to be in. Being sober meant he would wander, which meant he might find other victims. Mercifully, he remembered very little when he drank and the last few days would soon pass from his memory. A good strong drink was an all too seldom relief for Borlin. A steady supply of it was the only thing he really missed from his adopted home, Dougrefell, a small dwarven village just beneath the mountainside fortress city of Bergunchrift.

By the fourth day, he had downed all the wine and eaten most of the food. Borlin had resolved to put the whole incident behind him, ignoring the now bloated corpses as he wandered off. There were far too many bodies to remember anyway.

The days had not yet started to warm into spring but the ground had dried which made travel easier. It also meant there would be more travelers on and near the roads. Despite his best efforts and plans, Borlin always found himself near well-travelled roads. He had left his home to try to keep others safe and yet, the corpses he left behind were piling up at an alarming rate.

Aimlessly he crossed the miles of thick forest between Ice Lake and the Magnus River, trying, with little success, to avoid the road he thought was nearby. His own thoughts mirrored the ominous clouds that were moving in from the south. He paid little attention to the growing threat of a storm; his dark thoughts left no room for such trivial matters. He had tried many times to end his own life, especially in the beginning. He had hoped that the cold of the north would end his misery quickly. Unfortunately, dwarves seemed to be made of sterner stuff and he had survived. How many times had he tried? How many times had he been unable to end his suffering? Each time he hesitated, each time he had been too weak. It was due to this weakness that others had paid with their lives, and he knew it.

Borlin stopped well past nightfall, not at any particularly safe or out of the way location, he just stopped. He wasn't even tired, but sleep meant he wasn't hurting anyone.

*Maybe I won't wake up. Maybe it'll be over. Maybe those men will be the last.
Maybe....*

He sat with these depressing thoughts running over and over again in his mind as he leaned against a large rock. He stared around at his surroundings, his dwarven eyes piercing the night as though it were no dimmer than a mid-day afternoon. Borlin found himself in a clearing at the top of a small hill that afforded him a view that stretched many miles in every direction. Something stood out in the distance. A line devoid of trees. The road leading between Dubeck and the human village he knew was somewhere along the shores of the Ice Lake. And... Smoke?

A campfire.

We had a campfire... before you came.

"Shut. UP!" He roared at the voice in his head.

He sat there staring at the column of smoke and ignoring the voice for many hours. All thoughts of sleep had vanished. He watched the smoke thin to almost nothing somewhere near midnight. He thought of the people down there, asleep, helpless.

Dreaming peacefully are you? Your dreams don't have rivers of blood flowing through them do they? Do they! Bastards!

Borlin's rising anger and resentment was replaced suddenly by curiosity. The campfire looked as though it had been stoked back to life. Fresh smoke had begun to rise. Then, less than an hour later, it was allowed to fade out again.

Lot's of activity down there. Still I think I'll head north in the morning, best to avoid them. Fucking storm, he thought as he stared up at the clouds shaking his head, if only it hadn't missed me, then maybe I wouldn't have even seen them.

They might have food.

There's still food from before.

They might have drink.

They're probably just innocent travelers.

Is anyone truly innocent?

The argument was always the same. He always found himself giving in. Sometimes he even managed to just look... but not often.

The story continues in **The Darkness Within.**

Available soon at all major eBook retailers.

Keep up with release dates, public appearances, and other news!

Visit: philipandamandabrooks.com