

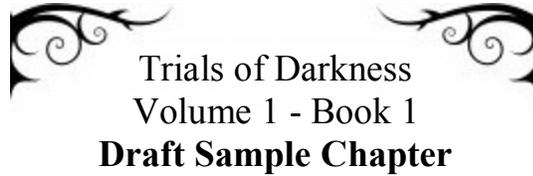
The Darkness Within
Trials of Darkness - Book 1

sample

Draft

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Brooks

The Darkness Within



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The Darkness Within - Sample

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Chapter 1

Screaming. Cries for mercy. Rivers of blood.

Borlin's deep red eyes snapped open and stared up at the tree canopy. The clear sky allowed the harsh winter's sun to penetrate in glaring rays. His vision blurred with tears that immediately froze to his leathery face. The dwarf had lost track of the number of years he had spent wandering in the forest. 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 as he squinted around at his unfamiliar surroundings. Should just sleep face down. Wait, I slept? Or, just blacked out again?

Borlin sat up on his elbows, shaking his head to clear his muddled mind. Wet earthen debris remained tangled in his snarled, thick beard and matted, muddy brown hair.

How? Haven't had drink in days.

Not since the last...

Shut up. Don't wanna think about that. He shuddered as the torrent of screams threatened to overwhelm his mind.

Borlin slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position allowing the stiffness of sleep to fade while he tried to orient himself. He rolled his shoulders around to loosen them up a bit, causing the remaining metal plates that formed the outer layer of his armor to shift comfortably back into place with deep metallic thuds. It felt as though he had been laying in the exact same spot for days rather than just a single night. Borlin brought his hands up to wipe his sleep-crusted eyes and clear his vision. He stopped, staring at his grubby fingers. He let out a strangled scream when his eyes focused enough to see that his hands were covered in blood... again.

What the...? No. That was a dream... wasn't it? Had to be.

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, that is what always happens.

Shit!

Borlin shook his head, closed his eyes, and let out a long billowing breath into the icy air. He dropped his hands to the frost covered ground, fingers searching for the reassuring leather-wrapped handle of his double bladed axe. It was never far from his reach, life alone in the north woods depended on that fact. 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, shaking his head with a sigh. *Damn, maybe it was just an animal.*

Just look fool.

If it's an animal, least I can eat it.

An unfamiliar voice rose above the din of endless voices in his head. Refusing to look is not going to change what you've done to us, murderer!

Borlin sat there continuing to shake his head, trying to quiet this newest voice. His eyes remained closed for many minutes.

How many times have you done this? Taunted the new voice.

Yes, how many others have you slaughtered? Echoed yet another new voice.

He had lost count; or rather, he refused to remember. Despite how hard his conscious mind tried to block out the images of death, most of his waking hours, and his dreams, were filled with the screams of the dying and the voices of the dead. In his years of exile his reality had become a fractured, disjointed nightmare. At times, he would watch himself brutalize some hapless traveler as though he were a detached 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 into the voices 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 sighed as he furrowed his brow. *What was I doing? Was I following something? Something, out of place. Wait... it was wagon tracks! Aw shit.*

I didn't... I didn't follow them did I? His shoulders slumped. Of course I did.

It is what always happens, is it not?

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. A sheet of fine frost covered a thick blanket of dead leaves and underbrush. Borlin slowly stood up, not wanting to look behind him. He closed his eyes and popped his neck with his free hand, oblivious to the gore it left in his already filthy hair. 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 he heard. 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 burned into his mind's eye. 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...

You already killed us all, you monster!

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. Blood slowly dripping onto a shredded piece of canvas below.

Drip.

Borlin finally registered the unmistakable coppery scent of blood mixed with the excrement from the disemboweled corpses. He was 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.

By the Father! You kill children?

Borlin slowly approached the mess, reluctantly inspecting the carnage. They had been prepping evening feast and setting up camp from the looks of the overturned 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, he had already done them enough damage.

Instead, he checked the pots for anything edible. Peering into the large cook pot he was 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. Better you died quick," He addressed 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 he had wrought.

"Bastard, you ruined the fuckn' stew! Well shit, what else ya got?"

He shrugged his shoulders and began to scavenge through the corpses for anything of use, trying his best to ignore their constant stares of hatred and fear before turning to sift through the wreckage. 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 south east near where the river Magnus formed.

What the hell were they doing out here? Stupid fools! He thought scratching his head. *Don't they have enough sense to stay by the road this early in the season?*

Borlin's eyes grew wide. *Wait! Is there a road nearby?*

Of course we were near the road. Everyone knows that there's a terrible monster lurking in these woods. I guess we found it.

Shut up. Fuck, I'm too far south. Again.

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. Human garbage, wrought by yer hands. How do ye' expect anything you make that way to last? 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.

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." He laughed, raising a bottle to the corpses.

Several hours later Borlin sat near 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, "You know boys, you was right. It's nice having a nice warm fire for a change!" Borlin swayed back and forth, slurring his words, mere seconds from collapse. With each drink, he drooled more wine into the puddle at his feet than he managed to swallow." And, with all these broken up crates just laying around, I didn't even have to go gather 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?" He nearly fell over backwards as he roared with laughter.

"Hey, what's that you 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.

"You want another drink? Well, I don't know friend you look like you're about to fall over as it is. What the hell, there's plenty to go around. Eh? Besides... I guess I owes it to you."

With that, Borlin staggered unsteadily 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 did I get down here? Heh... best 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, thrusting the bottle of wine at it. Jostling the body slightly, and causing it to lean precariously.

"Ha! I made it!" declared Borlin triumphantly as he looked up at the corpse. "Well you wanted another drink. Here you go! Go on... take it!" he forced the bottle into the dead man's hand, completely unbalancing the corpse, causing it to slump to the ground with a dull thud.

Borlin howled again with laughter. "See I told you, you were too drunk! You humans can't hold 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.

Days and nights blurred together, nothing disturbed the dwarf and his macabre party. The only scavengers that came were 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.

Being drunk was an easier and far safer state for Borlin 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 soon. Despite his best efforts and plans, Borlin always found himself near well-travelled areas. 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. 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 or the monsters wrought by the demons of old 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. The voices would never let him forget.

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

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

Maybe...but not likely.

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?

Hmpf, campfire. He thought with a shrug.

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 voices 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 sleeping. Helpless.

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

Borlin's rising anger and resentment was replaced suddenly by curiosity. Fresh smoke had begun to rise from the once dwindling campfire. Then, less than an hour later, it was allowed to die again.

Lots of activity down there. Should head north in the morning, avoid 'em. Fucking storm, he thought as he stared up at the clouds shaking his head, if only it hadn't missed me, then I wouldn't have seen 'em.

They might have food.

There's still food from before.

They might have drink.

They're 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.**

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