

DEAD GOD TRILOGY

FORSAKEN



SCARRED
LANDS

DEAD GOD TRILOGY 1: FORSAKEN

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Sample file

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For Greg

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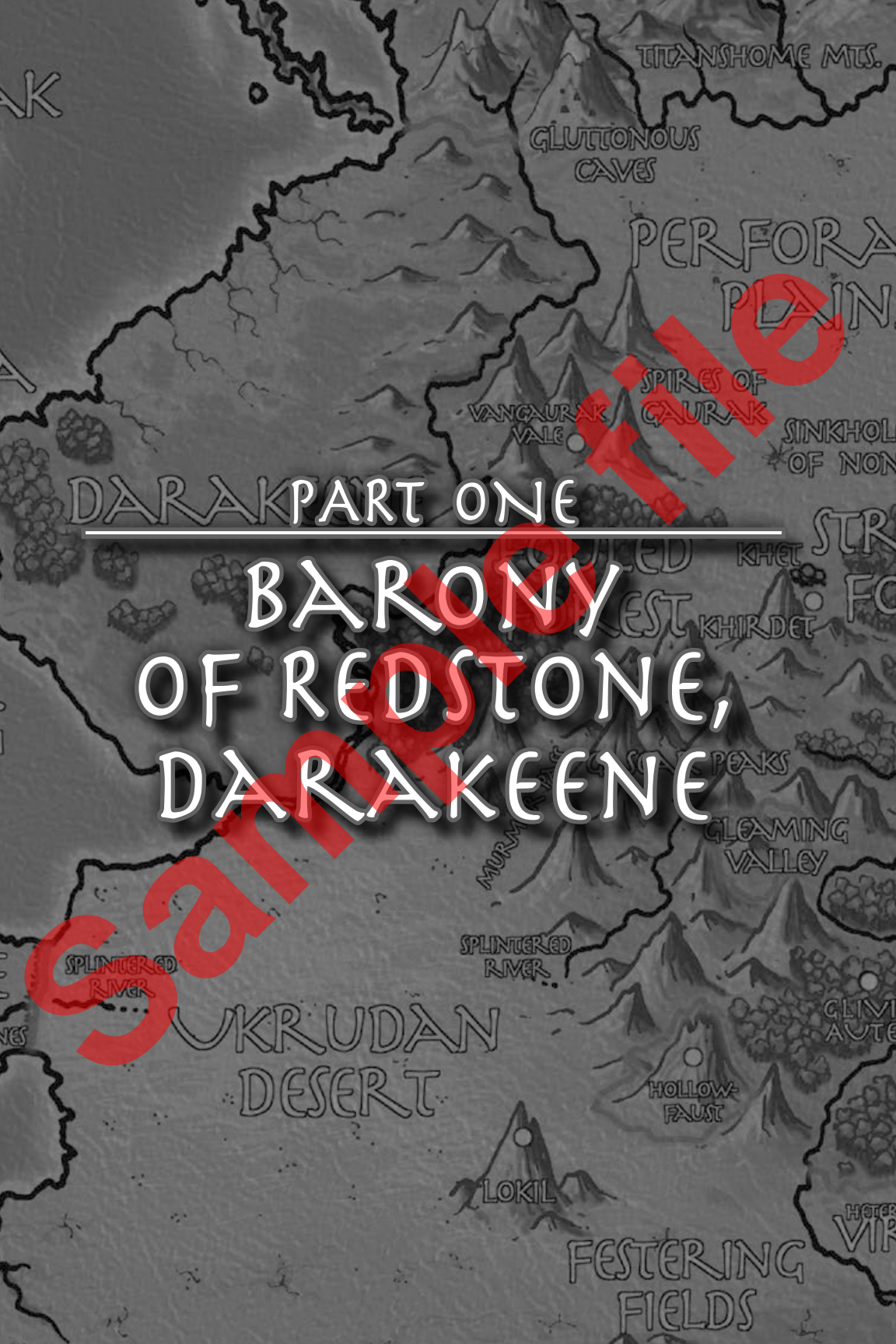
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DISTANCE SCALE IN MILES



BLOSSOMING SEA





DARAK PART ONE

BARONY OF REDSTONE, DARAKEENE



Chapter One

The fear had been creeping up on him for hours, until Vladawen abruptly realized he was certain. “They caught her.”

“How do you know?” asked Nindom. A wiry little man with a broken nose, he had a taste for fancy clothes that made him look like a dirk in a lace scabbard.

“Because, idiot,” said Opal, “otherwise she’d be back by now, wouldn’t she? It’s hard to break into a true wizard’s stronghold, and by all accounts, Redstone Castle is downright impossible.” Homely and rawboned, Opal had had the least trouble passing for a local in what was, despite the imposing castle on the rise, essentially a farm town.

“What an intelligent observation,” Nindom said. “It dazzles me to think how useful it might have been if you’d served it up a few hours ago, say before Lilly skulked off into the night.”

Vladawen rose from the edge of the straw mattress, unlatched the little round window, and looked out. A night breeze caressed his face. In other circumstances, it would have been a pleasant relief after the stale closeness of the tiny sleeping room. But now he barely noticed, because the night watch was headed toward the inn. Their lanterns glowed yellow, marking their progress through the dark and twisting streets.

“The town guards are coming.” He picked up his rapier and hung the baldric over his shoulder.

“Are you sure they’re coming for us?” Opal asked. She squirmed into her shapeless gown, pulling it down over her shift.

“No,” said Vladawen, arranging his other weapons about his person. “But if we wait to find out for sure, it’ll be too late. Besides, we know someone will come eventually.”

“Then do we fight?” Nindom asked.

Vladawen eyed the little man curiously. “What would we gain thereby?”

The warrior shrugged. “A few more unbelievers dead? It wouldn’t be that hard, would it, if it’s just the watch. You are the Titanslayer.”

“That was a long time ago, and Sendrian is quite possibly the most powerful mage in all Darakeene. He must be strong, to accomplish what he has.” Vladawen turned to Opal for confirmation.

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“Yes,” she said, her tone a little grudging. “We don’t want to be here if he comes looking for us himself. But ever since we crossed the border, all we’ve done is sneak and pretend.”

Vladawen switched to his high priest voice, dripping with wisdom and serenity: “When you’d rather fight. I understand. But That Which Abides wants us to serve the cause, not throw our lives away.” That seemed to persuade them.

As the cleric swung his lightweight summer cloak on his shoulders, he marveled at the sheer ferocity of the Wexlanders, and not just these two, all of them. They fought for a deity of whom they’d never even heard a year ago, and who had yet to work any miracles on their behalf. Outnumbered eight to one, they endured one bitter defeat after another. Still, no one spoke of surrender. Each setback made the beleaguered folk more resolute, more avid to shed the enemy’s blood. Vladawen couldn’t understand it, but he gave thanks every day that it was so.

He knotted his cloth-of-silver fillet about his head. No one ever wondered that he wore such a thing. He looked as if he needed it to keep his long hair out of his face. But its actual purpose was considerably different.

In the nine provinces of Darakeene in the western lands of the continent of Ghelspad, ordinary elves with their pointed ears and spindly frames were no great rarity, but the “forsaken” elves of distant Termans were a different matter. As far as Vladawen knew, he was the only specimen of his doomed race for thousands of miles in any direction, with his distinctive eyes, all black save for the brilliant silver rings of the irises. This made the Wexlanders’ fervor all the more impressive, since they now fought against the eight other provinces in the forgotten name of Termans’s deity, simply called That Which Abides. The god had died long ago in the Divine War and Vladawen was determined to revive him and his faith. He was not in Wexland, now, however, and needed a disguise to pass unnoticed among his enemies. Thus the magical fillet, which shrouded his eyes in a petty glamour that made them appear like everybody else’s.

He looked about. “Ready?”

“Just waiting for you,” Nindom said, adjusting the folds of his mantle. The garment did a good job of concealing the fact that, for someone endeavoring to pass for a common burgher, the small man was exceedingly well armed.

The three companions headed downstairs. The somewhat rickety steps creaked repeatedly, but without waking any of the snoring folk packed into the darkened common room. No doubt many had bellies full of beer.

Guided by the dying red light of the hearth, Vladawen picked his way through the sleepers. Some lay on the benches and tabletops, while others sprawled on the floor. Judging by the eye-watering smell, a fair number needed a bath. The elf almost turned up his nose at the dirty humans before recalling that he’d spent a century and a half sulking in a ruined temple after the Divine War, his personal hygiene less than impeccable.

He reached to unbar the door, and then someone pounded on the other side.

Vladawen turned on his heel and hurried back the way he’d come, this time not much caring which slumbering soul he kicked or trod upon. Fortunately, the inn had a rear exit. He knew because Opal had scouted the place the day they arrived.

The innkeeper, clad in his nightshirt, slippers and cap, came bustling through the door that led to his personal apartments. Nindom threw a knife. The blade thunked into the woodwork a scant inch from the man's head, and he froze, no longer so interested in answering the knock.

Then, however, wood squeaked on wood. Vladawen looked back. Crawling with points of azure light, the door was unbarring and unlatching itself, as if ghosts were doing the work.

The elf shot Opal an inquiring glance. She shook her head, telling him she couldn't counter the spell. He supposed he couldn't fault her, because he couldn't negate it, either. Once, perhaps, when That Which Abides had been a living force on Termana. These days his prayers could invoke only a few petty miracles, none of which would serve to hold the door shut.

But he thought it would be all right. He and his comrades would still escape out the back. Then a barrel-shaped man with a pointed beard reared up from the floor. Roused by all the commotion and conceivably still as drunk as when he'd lain down, the fellow pulled back his arm and threw a punch. With all that windup, anyone could have avoided the blow, but only if she saw it coming. Opal was looking in the wrong direction. The punch smacked her on the ear and knocked her down, on top of a sleeping youth who was using his boots for a pillow.

In the blink of an eye, Nindom sprang at the burly man and put him down, with a thrust of a blade or his empty hand, Vladawen couldn't tell which. Then the warrior strained to hoist the dazed Opal, who likely outweighed him by forty pounds, to her feet, while the lad on whom she'd toppled squirmed ineffectually beneath her.

Nindom couldn't manage Opal, but Vladawen could, thanks to the preternatural strength his god had bestowed on him in the first days of the Divine War. He hurried forward to take her, and then the door flew open. The watch started to bustle through, nicely turned out with their brigandines, spears and broadswords. But then they would be, wouldn't they? By all accounts, Sendrian liked anything even vaguely martial. He'd even spent a month in the thick of the war, bedeviling the Wexlander army with his battle magic.

For a moment, Vladawen wondered if he and his comrades might be able to bluff their way past the guards. Alas, no. The watch oriented on him and his allies immediately, while the other folk in the common room, wakeful now, scurried to clear a path between the officers and their quarry. Meanwhile, the elf slipped his hand inside his cloak.

"Stand right there!" boomed the watch captain, a sour-looking man whose sash proclaimed his rank. "They caught your friend—"

Vladawen swung his hand out of concealment and pulled the trigger of his miniature crossbow. The venomous dart flew over the captain's shoulder to pierce the stubbly chin of the mage behind him, whom the elf reckoned likely represented a graver threat than any of the men-at-arms. The magician's eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed.

Without a pause, Vladawen snatched the long braided whip from his belt, while Nindom scrambled up to stand beside him. The human carried a cutlass in either hand, the brutal cleaverlike weapons giving the lie to his gentlemanly attire.