

DAEMON RISING

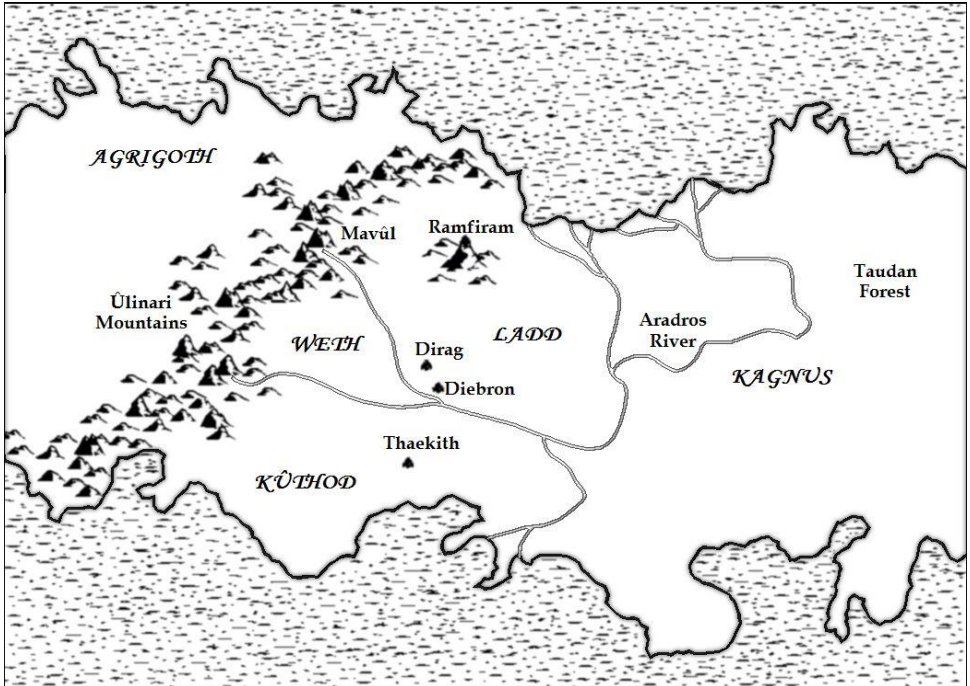
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RAMFIRAM

DAEMON RISING, BOOK ONE



Prologue

For ages now it had tugged, growing ever stronger, at what used to be his mind. *Ages, years, days, hours...* his only indication of time was the schooling luminescent fish that made this black trench their lair. He hovered just off the murky bottom – watching, slowly revolving – with ghostly arms crossed about his naked, wispy frame. Hundreds of fathoms above, the myriad lights grouped and danced as a single entity, oblivious of his unblinking stare, perfecting a new variation in an endless evolution of darting, often explosive patterns. It was a dark beauty, this sanctuary of utter calm. A peace unknown to the world above.

Once there had been others with him. They'd formed a school of their own, each individual spirit drowned in the sea of collective consciousness: a pool of water heavy enough to stifle the *draw of life*. Those who could no longer feel that tug were lost, dispersed by the icy currents to which they took hold; yet his own throb had intensified with their departures, kicking and scratching a way free of the smothering veil. Lost memories started to return, features of his hazy form began to gather detail, and a steady fabrication of *weight* drew him down, closer and closer with every passing, until...

His feet touched the trench floor. He was the last of them all.

Thus he would roam the depths once more. He'd done so at first, aimlessly so, but each time found himself back at this place. The draw had been weaker then. No more than a nagging ache. A thing to fill the void left by the fleeing senses of his last life. Yet now it had become a pulsating beacon, summoning at fever pitch, and he moved forward to answer the call.

Eventually he escaped the submarine canyon and climbed onto the abyssal plains. Bottom feeders scuttled at the steps of his slow, gliding drudge, then turned back on him like insects attracted to light, threatening to swarm. Could they sense the draw, or was it his own aura that snared them? Shimmering eels slithered about like scouting vipers, grazing his smooth gray ankles. Crab steeds and anemone riders marched in single file behind – an army of glowing tentacles above shadowed claws – and wraithlike jellies formed a vanguard overhead. League upon league conjured thousands more, bolstering ranks and replacing deserters. *Hours, days, weeks...* they came and went untold in the blackness.

When next there came a change, it was a sense of rising...then his feet were treading over gravel instead of mired in silt...and finally he discerned, however faintly, some forms that didn't emit their own light. His maturing eyes adjusted to the hint almost at once, amplifying it a hundredfold, unlocking a sweeping panorama before him – and for a moment this thwarted his rigid advance, such was the unexpected wonder of the scene. Here too was a profusion of life: the multicolored coral fields below, teeming with endless tiny acts of symbiosis and

predator taking prey, and the sleek, circling rays and roping schools above. But it was neither these nor the captivating probes of light blinking in and out about them that had immobilized him. It was the unmistakable walls and spires of a drowned city in the distance, skirting the farthest ridge.

Resuming his tireless stride, he veered towards the site and before long was passing between its toppled, mussel-laden gates. Long dark hair streamed about his head now, interfering with his sight, yet he could easily make out the familiar architecture of standing columns, portals, flights of steps, and crumbling arches. A paved road lay hidden beneath the sediment, he guessed – or remembered? – and he continued down it largely in solitude. His amassed creatural following shunned the ruins. Their legion was dispersed. Often a stray school looped past, or he nearly trampled a shuffling scavenger or shelled walker, but otherwise he was alone.

Or am I? he thought, craning his neck. A voice had tickled his consciousness. Reaching out with his mind, he spoke: *Come to me, child. I can free you of the ache!*

There was no response to this, so he pressed on beneath bridges connecting conical towers, over a ridge, through breaches in the rime-covered walls. *Whose city was this?* he struggled to recall. Images flashed: bronze-clad males patrolling battlements with long spears in hand; young females reclined in shaded grass, talking and giggling; children frolicking around a marble fountain. Theirs had been a proud race, he knew, ever strong until the catastrophic end. But with the forms came no faces. No names. A debris field of shattered brick and massive foundation stones lay at the heart of the place. All that remained of a once-lofty fortress. *Was I here when it fell?* he fought again to recall, pausing for the second time since his climb from the trench...

Then they were upon him.

You? sent one. *No, not you...* fired another, its tone oozing sarcasm. A third projected only insatiable hunger: a mind-rending sensation beyond words. Others bombarded him all at once, forcing him to raise the shield in his mind. Would he need to lift the sword as well?

A score, at least, penned him from all sides. Some appeared little different from the creatures they'd possessed, having been situated within plain sight of the intruder without drawing a second look. The nearest were two morays and an octopus with strangely human eyes. Still, he knew them less from the slight distortions of their forms than from the emotions hurled at his skull. The rest seemed to be something else. But they weren't. They were simply *advanced*. These had flung not only feelings – rage, sadness, wonder, desire – but clear thoughts as they slipped from behind the stones and into view. And these also displayed more than subtle human traits, with the proportion increasing by degrees up to one whose form was not far alien from his own.

The leader. Her slender limbs were humanoid, to be sure, yet longer than those sprouting from him and both finned along the calves and forearms and webbed at the fingers and toes. Coarse jade skin covered her entire frame, its tone lightening a shade about her tight stomach and pert breasts. She wore a motley garb of shells, corroded metal, and bones secured to belts of hide and clutched an impressive staff behind her back: the decorated tusk of a narwhale. Agitated by the resistance to their psychic lances, her pack began to circle and close. Yet, with one hand raised, she swam into their midst and subdued them all. And so he allowed her into his mind.

Welcome, Father, she said, coming to a halt within his reach. Her nose was broad and flat; lacking nostrils, it opened instead into a circular mouth beneath. Otherwise he found the face oddly pleasing to behold, especially its searching, sparkling eyes. Flowing black hair covered all but the tips of her finned ears, allowing only fleeting glimpses of the gills at her neck.

I'm not here by chance, he realized. *You have something I need.*

The key? She raised a hand to his cheek. A light touch to satisfy her guess. *But you're cold. Dead.*

As are you. None of us live. Not yet.

The hand withdrew, and her webbed feet propelled her back and away. *Nor is your task mine! But do you not wonder how I know of it? How I've become warden of the door? Do not fear...I won't keep the tool from you. I only ask this: why revive what shall surely fail again?*

He responded at once. *The seas are vast. The wayward innumerable. Yet though you dredged each and every league, making vassals of them all, you could not withhold the key. You are merely one who held on to her memories. I see now the face you wore before – but you hold no power here.*

The minion to the warden's left was a gray-scaled hybrid with hollow eyes and churning white locks extending from its scalp to a length twice its body's height. It must've read the arrival's thoughts in its mistress' mind, for no sooner had his reply ended than the creature lashed out. Its fists unfurled as groping claws, and its mouth gaped to reveal row after row of putrid, daggerlike teeth. It jetted within paces of the Father before the warden checked its attack. Snatching a handful of trailing hair as it lunged, she pulled and sent the monster's bulk crashing down. *It's no use, my pet. He says true...at least of the first.* She found the Father's eyes again and held them, attempting to mask her thoughts. Then, lowering her head, she connected. *Can you show it to me? My face? The one of old?*

Yes, he admitted. *But I won't. Much time remains to you in this place. Let go of memory. Do not seek to recall your name. Slough off this false skin and lose yourself – else you shall come to rue it.*

I have come to rue it, she said, projecting a true, deep sorrow. The servant

she'd cast down, now back at her side, and many of the others mirrored her sentiment. She ceased treading water and sunk to her knees before him, her hands absently clawing the seabed. *I once reigned here, did I not? I knew it the moment I entered, so very long ago. And I found the key!...but we no longer feel the draw. You've stolen that from us all!* Gripping her staff tightly, she pointed it at him and cried: *Take the key as well...and leave this place!*

You shall walk dry land again, my sister, he proclaimed. In time...

She turned her face aside and entered her servants' minds. *Fetch me the ring!*

White spray crashed above the climbing terrace like ever-shifting clouds in a sky of magnificent cyan. The end of his dark oceanic trek. Alone once more, he gazed at the spectacle and yearned to find it reflected in the firmament beyond. Each step took him closer to the divide between water and air, and he could feel an absence of the latter substance as kindled flames in his chest. The undertow threatened to sweep him away, back to his watery grave. Yet he marched on.

Between the roll of one wave and the next he pierced the surface, spewing seawater and gasping for breath, and gloriously blinding light filled his eyes. The next wave lifted him, and in that instant he knew the moment of his first life's birth. The sandglass of mankind had become inverted. Its epoch was beginning anew. For a moment more he lingered, bobbing with the surf, eyes transfixed on a sight inland of the shore. Then his arms flailed and pulled his body forward. Soon his feet would drink the warmth of dry sand.

The stark-white tower rose amidst a pristine green of endless salt marsh, its pinnacle lost somewhere high in the ivory-clouded azure heavens. Crystal blue streams carved paths here and there through the rushes, and multitudes of screaming birds soared and swooped in flocks out to the farthest horizon. *The Earth is healed*, he thought. *And my haven stands.*

There were no eyes to observe the dripping, naked man emerging from the waves. There were no ears to hear his footfalls on the beach. He met the crest, started over dunes, and soon crossed into marsh grasses and cattails taller than his ample height, walking at times and wading at others. A colony of brown pelicans ceased squawking long enough to gawk from perches in an isolated stand of mangroves. An osprey lit down nearby, clutching a fresh kill. He left them behind.

The tower rose larger with each step – until at last he could make out the individual mortared stones that fashioned its four sides. All unblemished. All smooth, solid, and radiant as the day they were laid. At the base he found the structure's single entrance: its only portal save the windows he knew waited far above. The dimensions were scarcely enough to walk upright through, had the door stood open. But it was closed. There were no hinges nor bars. Only a thick

slab of red-gold metal.

On the ring finger of his left hand was the key: a snake forged of the same material as the door, its head circling around to sink fangs in its own tail. *The end nourishes the beginning. The beginning births the end.* Coming within a step of the barrier, he hesitated, the warden's question swimming back to the forefront of his thoughts. *Why revive what shall surely fail again?*

But which is the true failure? *A collapse of bloodlines or a defeat of will?* The first would come indeed, this time as it had the last. And as it would the next. But as for the second... *Maybe this time will be different.* He raised his palm and placed it flat against the door.

What was another hour compared to the ages of his wait and the months of his journey? Yet now he felt time's passing as would his children to come. To them, each and every day would be precious. One moment wasted would be a thing forever lost, and the next could be the last. With each step on the spiral stair, another visage entered his mind. Faces of his firstborn. Those who once lived and might soon breathe again. He heard their voices in every touch of his hand on the unseen, guiding rail. He mouthed the words...then intoned them; and soon the tower's hollow belly echoed with a repeated song. At times it swam soft, almost a whisper. At others it dove deep to baritone. And between those bars it broke the chant to thrash wildly in a higher range, seething with emotion.

On and on he climbed in darkness until at last he reached the door overhead. It slid open easily, and once more he winced as light broke through the opening to attack his dilated eyes. Not two strides from his ascending form, positioned exactly at the center of the otherwise bare chamber, two objects sat in stillness: a waist-high rounded stone pedestal with a top carved to the likeness of a human hand and a tiny strongbox resting in its upturned palm. A sunbeam from one window fell on the support, illuminating its prize while leaving the rest of the room to shadows. The *draw of life* emanated from that spot—the beacon of his mystic lighthouse—yet he didn't go to it immediately. He had arrived. The throbbing in his mind had ceased, and nothing would start without him.

Framed by the northern window, the Father looked out over the waters from whence he'd come. He felt the wind on his face and smelled the salty air. He heard gulls screaming and waves roaring and the sounds of fish darting close to his head. He saw the warden passing through the tumbled city gates: ivory staff in hand, leaving her minions behind. He drank the chasm's deadly cold, caught a glimpse of dancing lights overhead...and quickly pulled away.

From the eastern window he saw the marsh, a great river, and the edge of a forest beyond. *The river Aradros.* His eyes scanned deep and came upon a lone deer emerging from a bramble thicket. He watched it pause, raise its head, and

cautiously survey the trees for an enemy. He tasted the water it licked from a clear, icy stream. He smiled at the blue wildflowers about its hooves and at the red and golden butterflies fluttering in the canopy above. The woods stretched unbroken ridge after ridge, past gullies and tangles and creeks and outcroppings, seemingly without end.

The southern portal revealed much the same lay of land; except now the river ran parallel to the seashore, cutting a path many leagues beyond it through the forest. A fog crept in and wrapped its misty tendrils about titanic trunks of oak and elm, hovering thickest just off the leaf-strewn floor as evening came on. Venomous spiders sat patiently in their webs amid branches that cluttered his mind's eye. The sight and faint sound of moisture dripping from a fern leaf, forming a little pool below, summoned to him an image alike yet discordant in its essence: hot blood trickling over a jutting rock to fall, strike, and soak deep, staining a widening crimson circle in the snow and ice below. *A loss endured and long forgotten...or a tragedy yet to come?* Whichever it was, the scene belonged to another place. *It's the West calling...*

The osprey he'd spied below greeted him at the final window, studying the Father with its keen, dark eyes between spurts of preening. Storm clouds were brewing outside. The bird made way for the view by clutching his arm tightly with its bloody talons, and he pulled it round so both of them could see. Away in the distance, beyond reach of the coming rain, past the great river's branches and tributaries and the unyielding wall of mountains, a serpent slid through the sea of sand that choked the plains of Agrigoth. The sun was set, the day's stored heat rapidly escaping, yet still he felt it burning through the snake's thin scales. The osprey screeched. *What part shall that land play, my friend?* It turned an eye on him and cocked its head to one side — as if considering the question — before gazing back at the night. Lightning flashed nearby, for an instant illuminating the marsh, and his sight withdrew from afar. A deafening boom followed. The bird screeched again.

Reaching out once more, closer now, he swept over hill and vale. Remote plumes of smoke drew near, a taste of sulfur permeated the air...and the fiery Womb came under his scrutiny. *You stir, Mother*, he projected, *...and so I come again.* Then he cut his eyes to his arm, spoke aloud: "Wait for me there!" — and hurled the osprey into the tumult.

An instant later he saw the bird aloft: an image caught in a flash of lightning. Satisfied, he backed away, turned, and walked to the pedestal. Thunder roared, and shadows danced about the chamber. He took in and let out a deep breath, reached for the undying hand of stone with a hand of immortal flesh...

And opened the box.