

DESCENT™

LEGENDS OF THE DARK



GALADEN

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

"This way."

Mathis paused, looking at the patch of undergrowth, before glancing at Galaden.

"Are you sure?"

As he spoke, he watched the elf's eyes focus in on his lips, reading each word. He seemed to consider their merit for a second, then nodded, once.

"Yes."

He turned before Mathis could respond, moving off again, deeper into the woodland. Mathis swore softly before hurrying to catch up.

"Don't curse," Galaden murmured as Mathis fell in alongside him, not looking at him.

"How did you know I swore?" Mathis demanded.

"People are predictable."

Mathis did his best to ignore the spike of embarrassment. He was still getting used to the elf's strange company. They'd been on the hunt together since Mathis's ranger captain had assigned him to assist the Far Ranger. The elf had arrived at their outpost alone, invoking the ancient code of the frontier to call upon the humans to aid him in tracking an Uthuk Y'llan war party that had been on the rampage since their invasion of Kell was scattered. The captain had honored the code by sending a single ranger – Mathis – to accompany Galaden.

A part of him had been excited by his selection. The Far Rangers were near-mythical to the humans of the southern baronies. According to the stories, their expeditions took them well beyond the borderlands of the Latari, where they hunted and slew the feral Uthuk tribes before their raids could reach more settled lands.

Up close, Mathis was less convinced about the advantages of Galaden's lack of hearing. The human ranger caught a snapping sound, off to the right, and had an arrow nocked in a moment, his senses straining as he sought out whatever had disturbed the forest. Galaden, however, seemed unconcerned – he carried on, seemingly oblivious to the noise that had been caught by his fellow ranger. Mathis stood for a second longer, eyes scanning the surrounding greenery, before again moving after his companion with a frown.

He had heard stories about Galaden too, relayed around the campfire between the human rangers the night the gaunt figure had appeared at the gate. For years he had served as a liaison between his family, the Evenarilam, and the other peoples of Latari, including the human ranger companies that patrolled the borders of southern and eastern Terrinoth. That had been before the power of the Uthuk had surged, before they'd put so many of the Far Rangers to the sword. Galaden had given up diplomacy after that, dedicating himself to hounding the killers of his kinfolk.

Mathis had asked him about it on the first night. The elf had looked at him for a while, his eyes uncom-



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fortably discerning in the firelight, before speaking in his low rasp.

"Others died that I might live. I will not waste that sacrifice. Every Uthuk death gives my existence purpose."

Mathis had wondered about those words in the days since, about the raw desire for vengeance laid bare. Galaden had refused to be drawn by any further questions about his past. In fact, he barely spoke at all since then, and only when he wanted to relay information about the hunt.

There was another crack. Mathis stopped again. This time he was sure he caught movement to the right, flitting between the trees.

"Galaden," he hissed as the elf kept walking, reaching out a hand and snatching onto his shoulder.

"Stop!"

Galaden finally halted and looked back at Mathis.

"They're here," he mouthed at the elf, who frowned slightly. Mathis found himself mentally cursing the captain for sending him out with him. In the stories the Far Rangers had been preternatural hunters, their deafness no impediment, but Galaden seemed oblivious to the danger closing in around them. He appeared practically useless.

Then the elf moved.

Mathis prided himself on the speed of his draw. He could have an arrow on the string and on its way to a target in two heartbeats. But even though he was looking right at Galaden, he wasn't aware of the elf slipping an arrow from his quiver, nocking it, and loosing it until the fletched ashenwood shaft was actually zipping past his face.

For a horrifying moment he thought the elf had been aiming for him, until he heard the familiar thud of an arrow hitting flesh, followed by a shriek of pain. He spun round, his green ranger cape flaring, instinctively snatching an arrow from his own quiver. Behind him, lying in the undergrowth, was a tattooed, semi-naked Uthuk berserker, clutching at Galaden's arrow, buried deep in his chest. His throat rattled as he died, like a diamondfang serpent.

That was the start of it. A howl went up around them as figures burst from the foliage, all scarred flesh and crude, wicked blades. It was an ambush, and they'd managed to walk right into the middle of it.

Mathis loosed an arrow at the first snarling Uthuk to come at him, sinking the barbed shaft into his face. The brute went down with a roar, clutching the deadly wound as the ranger tried to free a second arrow.

Too slow. One of the demon-worshippers was on him, a notched axe raised. Mathis caught an impression of manic, bloodshot eyes, teeth sharpened to points and breath like a butcher's shop.

Rather than bring the axe hacking down, the Uthuk slammed into him, driving him back against the bark of a tree and almost snapping his bow between them. Mathis grappled with the berserker's stinking bulk, before realizing one of Galaden's arrows was protruding from his flank. The Uthuk slumped against him.

He threw him off and drew the long, curved steel of his hunting dagger. Abruptly, however, there was no one else for him to face. Their attackers, a dozen of them, lay scattered throughout the trampled undergrowth around them, all but the one he had hit, stuck through with white-fletched allows. The ranger looked to Galaden, wide-eyed.

The elf did not return his gaze. He was looking at the surrounding forest, poised with arrow nocked, looking for all Mennara like a statue of Kurnos in his form as the huntsman.

Mathis tried to follow his gaze, but saw nothing. The forest had gone as still and silent as it had been



before the ambush. The entire clash couldn't have lasted more than thirty seconds.

"Galaden," he hissed, waving in an attempt at gaining the elf's attention. He looked at Mathis and, slowly, raised a single finger to his lips.

Quiet.

Mathis had barely understood the gesture before a terrible scream ripped through the forest. He cried out in agony, dropping his bow and clamping his hands to his head. The shriek was like a dagger to the skull, threatening to rupture his ear drums. He found himself on his knees among the Uthuk dead, moaning in pain.

Mercifully, the noise cut off, though it left his ears ringing. He tried to pick up his bow, cringing at the pain in his head, before sensing a presence advancing towards him between the trees. He managed to look up, and froze with fear.

An Uthuk woman was stalking towards him, tall and grey-skinned, clad in rough leathers and pelts. The bared parts of her body were daubed with markings written in blood, her lean, cruel face painted to resemble a leering skull. Her head was crowned by a pair of horns that curled from her brow like a ram's.

It was a bloodwitch, a priestess of the Ynfernaël, a consort of demons.

He managed to grasp his bow, trembling fingers reaching for an arrow. The bloodwitch screamed again. This time, Mathis lost all hearing. The agony was so intense he almost blacked out. The demon-infused howl pushed his senses to breaking point. He realized there was blood on his fingers where he was clutching his ears.

The Uthuk stood above him, sliding a wicked, curved dagger from her pelts. She had stopped screaming, though it made little difference anymore – Mathis's hearing was gone. He tried to resist, raising a single hand weakly, but his thoughts were sluggish and dazed.

He didn't hear what happened next, though he saw it. An arrow, white-fletched, slammed into the Uthuk. She twisted away at the last second, so that rather than piercing her breast it lanced into her shoulder. A look of fury transfixed her bloodied face, just as something hit Mathis from the side, knocking him down.

It was Galaden. The Far Ranger, unaffected by the bloodwitch's screaming, surged in with two drawn mirror blades. The Uthuk parried the first and second with her dagger, her speed almost a match for the elf's. She opened her mouth again, and the ringing in Mathis's ears redoubled, right before one of Galaden's knives took her throat.

Blood sprayed out over the surrounding leaves. The Uthuk, her scream cut short, stared in apparent shock at her killer, before dropping to the ground.

Mathis moaned, trying to rise. Galaden knelt before him, gently reaching out and pulling his bloodied hands from his ears. He looked up at the elf, and realized his lips were moving.

He tried to follow the words being spoken, but found he could not. Galaden seemed to realize the look of incomprehension on his face, and instead signed something to him. It meant nothing to Mathis. He managed to shake his head.

Galaden helped him to his feet, before moving off to inspect the Uthuk bodies. He removed the arrows from them, one by one, leaving only the broken ones.

Mathis steadied himself against the blood-spattered bark of a tree. Slowly, the ringing in his ears began to die, though they continued to ache. He realized he could hear the chittering of a swiftfeather, somewhere in the canopy above them.

Galaden looked up at him from where he was crouched over the body of the bloodwitch, extricating his last arrow.

"You can hear?" he asked. His voice was muffled, but audible – Mathis felt as though he'd had rags



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stuffed into his ears.

"Yes," he managed to say, clearing his throat. "Thank you... for saving me."

Galaden said nothing, wiping the arrow clean on a leaf and slotting it back into his quiver.

"They nearly had us," Mathis went on, looking ruefully at the slain bloodwitch.

"Incorrect," Galaden said as he stood up. "I was aware of their presence. I simply wished them to believe the opposite. It is easier to kill them when they think they have the upper hand."

"So, you were using me as bait?" Mathis asked slowly, frowning.

"I was using both of us as bait. It worked. Now that the war party are slain, my task in this region is complete."

Mathis quelled his anger, bending down carefully to retrieve his fallen bow, his balance unsteady. As he untied the string, he found himself remembering the moments after the bloodwitch's death.

"How can you understand what I'm saying so flawlessly just by reading my lips?" he asked, recalling how he'd been unable to understand a single word Galaden had been saying when the roles had been reversed.

"Practice," the elf replied tersely.

Mathis grunted, looking out into the forest for a moment.

"I couldn't do the same," he said, pondering the desperate skirmish and the differences between himself and the Far Ranger. "Hearing is essential. I'll never be able to understand how a ranger can operate without it."

He heard no reply. Wondering if his ears had gone again, he turned, frowning. As he moved, he heard a twig snap beneath him. Of the elf though, there was no sign, only the bodies of the slain Uthuk he'd left behind. Galaden was gone.



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