

DESCENT™

LEGENDS OF THE DARK



KEHLI
ROBBIE MACNIVEN

The elf looked down at Kehli with narrow eyes, and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve spoken to my companions, and we just don’t think you’d be the right fit for our party.”

She grinned up at him, hands planted on her hips.

“And why’s that?” she asked. The elf’s expression turned impassive, a sure sign that he was going to fob her off with some generic excuse.

“My companions and I know each other,” he said. “We have been on a number of expeditions together.”

“I doubt he has,” Kehli said, pointing past the lugubrious elf at the two wagons and the people loading them. The nearest was a scrawny, pox-faced youth dressed in dark brown robes several sizes too big for him. As the elf glanced back, he dropped a barrel he’d been manhandling up onto one of the wagons and let out a yelp of pain as it landed squarely on his foot.

“Master Landon is enrolled at the University of Greyhaven,” the elf said tersely, moving so he was blocking Kehli’s view of the boy while he weakly attempted to lift the barrel once more.

“You mean he’s a skinny little student who can’t handle his ale?” Kehli asked.

“He has a runestone,” the elf hissed. Kehli threw up her arms in pretend shock, unimpressed at the concept of an extrinsic source of magic, one that anyone could pick up and use.

“Forgive me, I had no idea your party had secured the services of a master sorcerer,” she exclaimed. “Be careful he doesn’t blow you all to the Ynfernaël with it!”

The elf scoffed, his expression hardening further.

“The main caravan to Vynelvale is leaving in three days’ time,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone in the Free City willing to hire you.”



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“But not someone who’s headed for Sudanya,” Kehli pointed out.

“That isn’t my problem,” the elf said. “I bid you good day, Dunwarr.”

The elf’s name was Nebulan, apparently. His companions were an orc named Korren, a woman named Frenela, and the unfortunate Master Landon. Korren was clearly the muscle of the group, a bear-like warrior in old chainmail and a battered hauberk that bore the crest of the barony of Telor on its breast. Frenela, Kehli would have initially mistaken for an elf, had she not been so short of frame and lacked any wicked ears. She wasn’t sure what she offered to the party yet, beyond the lute strapped to her back, and the fact she’d noticed her staring dreamily at Nebulan a number of times.

All of this Kehli had discerned since coming across the small caravan gathered in the bustling heart of Morwind town center. A trading hub on the borders of eastern Terrinoth, the place fancied itself a Free City in the making, and attracted all sorts of rogues and ne’er-do-wells from the eastern baronies.

Kehli had gone there looking for employment, and for trouble. She fancied they were often one and the same thing. Her situation had been growing even more heated than usual in Hadranhold – being a member of both the Alchemist and the Forge Smith’s Guilds was very much forbidden in dwarf society, and Kehli had found herself on the cusp of being discovered by both sides of her respective trades. She’d decided, at least initially, that the best way to guarantee her station was simply to win enough renown and riches to ensure she wouldn’t be challenged, and so she had packed her hammer, her shield, and her crossbow, and she’d set off for pastures new.

She had possessed had the urge to roam for as long as she could recall. Her father had been a Thelgrim saga-teller. By day he had taught others in the Hall of the Ancestors, imparting the ancient history of the Dunwarrs to those who came to listen and learn, but by night he had cradled his only daughter in his arms and told her his own tales. They had been replete with iron-clad champions and terrifying dragons, scheming necromancers and wise runesmiths, cat-folk rogues and Ynfarnael monsters. She had met them all before sleep had taken her, and travelled with them to far off deserts, to perspiring jungles and blizzard-capped peaks, exploring towering, stony citadels and the pixie-haunted groves of the Aymhelin.

Kehli had resolved to see them all someday, and more. It had seemed like a dream growing up, weighed down by the mounting concerns of reality, but when her father had gone away she’d resolved to act on the stories she’d memorized. She’d been travelling almost ever since.

Sudanya was one place she had missed out on. The lost city had featured several times in her father’s tales, a spider-haunted realm of broken stone and treasure-filled crypts. After leaving Hadranhold, she decided that now was as good a time as ever.



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It was unfortunate that Nebulan didn't seem to want her. Adventurers could be like that sometimes, in her experience. She wasn't sure just what had put them off – perhaps she was just too cheerful for the sour elf. Regardless, she'd be travelling to Sudanya with them, whether they knew it or not.

It wasn't difficult getting into the larger of their two wagons. Nebulan got into an argument with Landon after the youth dropped yet another barrel. Kehli took her chance, and was up and inside before anyone had noticed, concealing herself behind a chest at the back of the transport.

She'd always wanted to be part of an adventure party. It seemed like today was going to be her lucky day.

"Are you sure this is the best place to stop?" Landon asked nervously, not taking his eyes off the surrounding trees.

"Absolutely," Nebulan responded, his voice terse. "We're half a day's journey from Sudanya, and we don't want to arrive at the city after dark. We rest here tonight, and carry on tomorrow."

Landon made some further complaint, but Nebulan ignored him. The boy had done nothing but whine and snivel since they'd set out from Morwind. He had only accepted him into the party on Frenela's belief that they needed a sorcerer with them, and he was very much beginning to doubt if there was even an ounce of magic in the Greyhaven student's repertoire.

Besides, Nebulan didn't want to admit that they were lost. He wasn't sure exactly when it had happened, but he didn't recall their current surroundings from the stories he'd heard of Sudanya's crumbling ruins. They had been promised ancient temples and palaces littered with dusty treasure. Instead they'd strayed into a dead, dry forest, a place of dust and bristling wood, brittle as bone. The only comfort was that they hadn't lost the track they were following.

"Get a fire started," he ordered Korren, who just grunted. Frenela headed to the rear of the baggage wagon, dragging a sack of oats and a clutch of apples from one of the barrels inside. Landon had initially been in charge of preparing the party's meals, but Nebulan was convinced he was stealing food, so he'd put Frenela in charge of the supplies instead.

"Did you hear that?" Landon asked abruptly. He'd been feeding an apple to the pony drawing the front wagon, but had let out a little yelp and was now gazing at the surrounding trees wide-eyed. Nebulan sighed audibly.

"Hear what?"

"I don't know," the youth said pathetically. "It sounded like something was moving, over there."

He pointed at a nearby stand of trees, their boughs twisted and cracked. Nebulan sighed, drew his dagger, and approached them, tapping the elven steel on the nearest withered branch.



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“There’s nothing here, Landon,” he said, looking back at the group. “This forest is long dead. Korren, are you going to get firewood or not?”

The orc grunted again and finally moved off toward the other side of the track, heading in among the barren trees there.

He wasn’t gone for long. There was a shriek that Nebulan first took to be some small prey-animal in distress, followed by the sound of snapping wood and scraping armor. Korren came bursting back through the trees, shrieking.

“Spider!”

Nebulan laughed despite himself.

“Spider?” he repeated. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little —”

He didn’t get a chance to finish. With a crash of splintering, brittle wood, a nightmarish shape surged from the tree line and onto the track. It was an arachnid of titanic proportions, larger than Korren, its thick limbs bristling with hair and its eye-clusters glittering above a maw filled with drooling pincers.

Nebulan let out a shriek of his own and scrambled back, fumbling for his bow. Korren had kept on running past the wagons. Frenela was screaming. Only Landon didn’t react. He stayed rooted to the spot, eyes wide, frozen as the creature lunged at him.

It bore him down, pincers sinking in, biting past his baggy robes. Nebulan was trying to string his bow, his fingers trembling. A part of him didn’t want to see what the horror was doing to Landon.

Before he could tear his eyes away, something slammed into the creature, impaling it through one of its eye-clusters. It shrieked and began to writhe on top of Landon. Nebulan realized it had been struck by a crossbow quarrel. He turned in sheer amazement, in time to see the dwarf he had turned away back in Morwind — Kehli — tossing aside her crossbow and leaping down from the back of the wagon she was perched upon.

“Get back,” the dwarf bellowed as she freed a heavy-looking, double-headed hammer. She charged up to the writhing monstrosity and delivering one, two, three pounding blows to its face. It finally went limp, though its limbs continued to twitch grotesquely.

“Evening everybody,” Kehli exclaimed, grinning up at the stunned party and wiping spider ichor from her cheek.

“Where did you come from?” Frenela asked slowly, aghast.



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“Well, Valeheim, same as you,” Kehli said with a shrug, as though stowing away in a wagon for two days was a perfectly normal thing to do.

She approached the dead spider and planted a boot on its bulbous flank, heaving it up off Landon. After a moment’s hesitation Nebulan joined her, looking down at the fallen student. He appeared to have gone pale and stiff – at first Nebulan thought he was dead, until he realized his eyes were focused on him.

“What did it do to him?” he asked Kehli.

“Arachyura’s curse,” the dwarf said with what sounded like relish. “It’s said to be magical in nature. I’ve seen it before. It can paralyze the weak-willed without exerting physical force. Unless he can overcome it mentally, he won’t be moving for a few hours.”

“Why are you here?” Nebulan demanded, turning his attention on Kehli. “I... I told you that you couldn’t join us!”

“Well, you’re going to be glad I did,” Kehli replied, raising a finger as though for silence. Nebulan frowned, then realized what she had heard.

The surrounding forest had started to groan. With it came a rising susurration, accompanied by the cracking of twigs and the snapping of dry boughs. It grew in volume all around them.

“More arachyura,” Kehli murmured, the words sending a surge of fear through the elf. A part of him didn’t want to believe the strange intruder, but she seemed deadly serious. “A whole swarm. You’ve stopped right on the edge of their hunting ground.”

“Oh gods,” Frenela stammered, clutching Nebulan’s forearm. “We need to go back, Neb! They’ll eat us all!”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” Kehli said. “Not with darkness falling. Best thing to do is sit tight and get a fire going.”

Frenela looked up at Nebulan, who it turn looked for Korren, spotting him cowering under one of the wagons like a terrified child. He pursed his lips, and nodded.

“Fine. But we still need that firewood.”

They gathered up the closest timber as quickly as possible. The sound of the approaching swarm made Nebulan’s skin crawl, but he did his best not to think about it as he followed Kehli’s directives, laying out small clusters of twigs and branches in a circle around the wagons.



For her own part, the strange Dunwarr seemed more excited than afraid. Nebulan found her mindset hard to comprehend. She stopped Frenela, who was desperately trying to strike a spark over one of the broken boughs of deadwood with some flint.

"I've got something better than that," she said, reaching into one of her pockets and drawing out a vial filled with clear liquid and several small pouches. As Nebulan, Frenela and the cowering Korren looked on, she mixed powder from the pouches into the vial, shook it, and poured a careful drop of the purplish concoction onto the timber.

It ignited immediately, giving off purple-tinted flames that spread across the whole bough.

"That should stay lit all night," Kehli said, moving to the next pile. "It burns brighter and slower than normal flames."

"I thought you were just some cutthroat dwarf vagabond," Nebulan admitted as he watched Kehli ignite the piles around the wagons. Kehli grinned back at him infectiously, her features underlit by the arcane flames.

"Oh, I am! But I'm also a member of the Alchemists' League, among other things. You'd be amazed what can be achieved with a few choice tinctures."

The shadows had grown long while they worked. The hissing, crackling sounds coming from the surrounding forest became louder and louder. Nebulan caught scuttling movement in the darkness beyond the fires. He pulled Frenela close. If he was to die here, he'd do so at her side. The thought put a little steel into his quailing soul.

"We're safe, as long as we stay within the fires," Kehli said, sounding almost jovial. "Why don't you prop the student up against that wheel, and gather round. I've got a story or two I can share to make the night pass quicker."


Dawn came on slowly, a gray light bleeding into the surrounding forest, driving the shadows back deeper under the boughs.

It arrived just in time. Kehli's purple fires had grown low, though they still smoldered, casting fitful illumination over the tired band.

At some point, Kehli had realized that her stories had taken effect – the worst of the fear that had gripped the small band had worn off. Frenela had actually fallen asleep briefly against Nebulan's shoulder as she finished her last tale, while Korren had even been tempted out from under the wagon. Landon appeared to be getting some movement back in his arms and legs too, though he still hadn't spoken.



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Kehli got up and stretched her limbs before settling her crossbow over her backpack. The sinister noises that had almost overwhelmed them the night before had disappeared, leaving the dead forest around them in silence.

She glanced briefly at the weary band. They really weren't up to much after all. She should have realized that was the case before they had set out. Still, it had been an interesting evening, and had added another tale to her repertoire. She began to walk down the track, past the fires, along the way they came yesterday. Nothing stirred among the trees on either side.

"Where are you going?" Nebulan asked, seemingly surprised at the direction the dwarf was taking. She glanced back and gave him her infectious grin.

"Back to Valeheim," she said, as though it was the most obvious thing in all Mennara.

"But Sudanya is just ahead," Nebulan said. "Probably. Don't you want to join us?"

Kehli gave a little shrug.

"Well, I'm looking for a group of adventurers I can join, yes," she admitted. "But, no offense, you four don't really seem anything like the heroes in the stories. Maybe some other time."



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