

# DESCENT™

## LEGENDS OF THE DARK



### BRYNN

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This place had been a home once. Now it was ashes, and the charred stumps of timber foundations, smoking lazily in the dawn light.

Brynn crouched and ran the curved flat of her sword across the ragged clothing of the Uthuk warrior at her feet, wiping it clean. A vertical blow to the right shoulder had cleaved halfway through the demon-worshiper's chest felling him instantly.

He was one of seven bodies that lay scattered around Brynn, at the heart of what had once been a farming hamlet on the edge of the barony border between Kell and Dhernas. She had caught them amidst the smoking ruins, erecting a pole surmounted with a sheep's skull bearing one of the vile symbols of the Locust Swarm, daubed in blood.

They were only stragglers. The main war party had passed through the night before, moving on before the sun rose.

Brynn had been hunting them for the past two weeks. She had spoken to enough survivors left in the wake of their rampage to know who led them: Willem Morant, former seneschal at the Citadel, a champion of Kell and a famed Marshal. Now he was Morant the traitor, Morant the kin-killer, Morant the demon-worshiper, his crimes exposed when the Citadel had fallen.

Brynn stood and sheathed her sword, taking in the terrible stillness surrounding her. Not one of the dozen homesteads, barns and outhouses still stood. The livestock had been slaughtered in their pens and left to rot. There was little evidence of the people who had called the village home, though Brynn could smell them. Their charred bones were as one with the ashes now.

She had seen the same scene played out too many times recently. Torched towns and villages, their populations wiped out, either burned alive, or ritually massacred, or simply cut down and torn apart in the welter of bloodshed the Uthuk and their demonic masters fed off. Each time, Brynn had arrived too late. Each time she had sworn to avenge the innocent dead. And each time it had reminded her of the Citadel.

The Uthuk had fallen upon the great fortress at Archaut without warning, the Marshals and Brynn's fellow students caught wholly unprepared. They'd been betrayed, by Morant and by others—proud, long-standing defenders of Terrinoth turned to evil and bloodshed by hungry lies whispered in dark places.

The alarm bell had tolled, far too late. Brynn had been the first from her bed, the first to the door of her barracks. Ironically, she would have been the first to die, had not the sorcerous blast that tore open the entrance left her trapped and helpless beneath the rubble. She had watched, weeping hot tears of rage, as cackling Uthuk bloodwitches had cut down her friends.

Morant had aided the slaughter. Brynn had seen him kill her bunk-partner, Floren, with his own sword,



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the once-proud steel running with the blood of those he was supposed to protect and nurture.

By the time she had finally freed herself, it was over. The same terrible stillness, the same morbid silence, that she now experienced lying across the village's torched remnants had settled throughout the Citadel. She had wandered the halls and passageways where she had spent her happiest years, alone, picking her way between bloodied bodies and finding in every last one a friend, a mentor or a tutor.

Not all of the Marshals had been at the Citadel when it had fallen. Those who were able to, abandoned their duties leading Terrinoth's defenses against the Uthuk gathered once more at the great fortress. Brynn had only stayed to help with the funerary rites. The words of Alys Rayne kept returning to her. More so than any of the other Marshal Wardens, she was as much a friend as a mentor, offering her advice freely when she had first enrolled at the Citadel.

"Remember what I taught you and the other initiates on your first day," Alys had said. "The Marshals protect Terrinoth. We are the shield of the people. We do not seek vengeance for vengeance's sake."

She had struggled with that advice, struggled to square it with the desire to bring Morant to justice, until she had realized that everyone whom Alys had taught that lesson to on that day was now dead. Regardless of her mentor's words, it was her duty to avenge them.

She had ridden out, tracking the Uthuk. They had separated into different war parties after the atrocity, so she had chosen the one that was driving north towards her home barony, Forthyn. She'd been gaining on them ever since.

A sound stirred Brynn from her thoughts. Hoof beats. She turned sharply in the ruins of the village square, her blade whispering once more from its scabbard.

There were riders approaching. They had crested the nearest hill and were cantering towards the hamlet, kicking up dust. She raised a hand to shield her eyes against the morning glare.

There were four of them. One was carrying a pennant that streamed brilliantly in the sun, a ripple of color amidst the charred wood and coiling smoke. She picked out the crest – a golden alerion on an azure field. It was the heraldic symbol of her aunt, Adelynn, the Baroness of Forthyn.

The sword stayed in her fist.

The riders swept into the village and pulled up sharply ahead of her, steeds snorting and beating at the dirt, kicking up clouds of ash. The foremost rider stared at her. He was rotund and flushed with exertion, clad in a red jacket with a gold-embroidered cape over one shoulder. Brynn recognized him. His name was Gerold, and he was one of Adelynn's court advisors.

A sense of foreboding began to creep over her.

"Lady Brynn," Gerold said as he recognized her, a look of pure relief replacing his guarded expression. He'd always addressed her as "lady," despite the number of times she had told him that she sought no title other than that of Marshal.

"I feared we would never catch you," he went on, dismounting with some difficulty and throwing the reins to one of his companions. "They said at the Citadel that you were on the road, hunting Uthuk Y'llan."

"Why have you been seeking me, Gerold?" she asked as he approached. "Kell is no longer a safe place to be abroad in, even for the representatives of my aunt."

"So it would seem," Gerold responded, casting a worried glance over the village ruins. "Kellos knows, I haven't left Highmont in years, but the need couldn't be more urgent, and Baroness Adelynn would entrust this task to no one else."





"What's happened?" Brynn demanded, her fears redoubling. Gerold pursed his lips, as though choosing his words carefully.

"Your cousin, Lady Kathryn, is dead," he said.

"That cannot be," Brynn replied, wondering if she had misheard. Dismay overcame all other thoughts, her mind refusing to accept what Gerold said as true.

"The details of it have been hidden from the people, to spare them any further woe," Gerold went on, his ruddy expression grave. "But Upper Forthyn has been attacked by dark forces. Your cousin was killed in the act of repelling them."

"The Uthuk?" Brynn asked sharply, her heart racing. She couldn't believe this was happening, not after all she had already endured over the past weeks.

"It would seem not. Reports are still incomplete, but there are rumors of necromancy."

"How can this be?" Brynn demanded, anger and sorrow at war within her. She had known Kathryn from her visits to Highmont, the seat of her aunt's power. The two of them had played together as children, Kathryn always suggesting imaginary quests through the flowerbeds and corridors of Highmont's citadel. When Brynn had last seen her, several years before, Kathryn had been preparing to undertake her first duties as a noblewoman of Forthyn, assuming control of the barony's upper region. She had been nervous and excited in equal measure.

"I can't believe she's dead," Brynn murmured, shaking her head. "My aunt must be distraught."

"The whole barony mourns, my lady," Gerold said, his tone growing increasingly urgent. "But in times like these, action is also badly required. Now that Lady Kathryn has passed on, the baroness is eager to secure the line of succession."

Brynn had feared as much since laying eyes on the Forthyn heraldry. Her mother had been an adventurer who had brought Brynn up on the cold, wild streets of Frostgate, where clansfolk and rogues had been their closest friends, but the man she had loved, Brynn's father, had been the younger brother to Baroness Adelynn. Though he had preferred the life of a clanswoman's spouse to that of Highmont's court, his connections had still provided his daughter with a link to the rulers of Forthyn.

"I will not come with you," she told Gerold. "I am a Marshal of the Citadel, not a member of my aunt's court. I thought she understood this."

"You were always third in line to the barony, my lady," Gerold said. "Now that we have lost your cousin, you are Adelynn's direct inheritor. The line of succession is clear."

"I've taken the Marshal's vows," Brynn repeated tersely, gesturing at the bodies of the Uthuk and trying not to think about just how those vows had been administered. When she had first enrolled at the Citadel she had imagined her swearing-in ceremony would be conducted like all the others, among her classmates in the echoing glory of the great chapel, their words of faith and duty ringing back from its stained glass windows and vaulted ceiling. Instead she had knelt, alone, before a figure standing in for the Grand Warden and spoken the required phrases, while behind her bodies were still being carried out and blood mopped from the flagstones.

"I've been tracking these animals ever since the massacre at the Citadel," she pressed on. "They've been leaving a trail of devastation right across Kell. How many more lives will be lost if I don't catch up with them?"

Gerold sighed, glanced back at the other horsemen, then looked back up at Brynn.

"If you won't do it for the sake of the barony, do it for your aunt. She is assailed with difficulties. To lose your only, beloved child is bad enough, but now more than ever she bears the weight of the barony's future upon her shoulders. Forthyn cannot afford a succession crisis in times such as these."





"You're telling me that it's my duty?" Brynn said. "That accepting my place as my aunt's heir would be for the greater good? That abandoning this hunt is somehow the righteous choice?"

"I'm asking you to come to Highmont and at least discuss such matters," Gerold said. "We are on the precipice, Lady Brynn. If the barony loses its leader and falls, thousands will perish."

Brynn looked away, her face set as she struggled with her thoughts. She remembered the screams that had rang through the citadel, the smell of blood, the laughter of the Uthuk. She remembered Morant, lost in a dark frenzy, his once-noble face a grimace of fury and bloodlust. Who would be able to punish him for his crimes if not her? Who more fitting to administer justice than the one who had survived the massacre he had helped to orchestrate?

"I cannot help but notice, my lady," Gerold said slowly. "That you still have your sword drawn."

Brynn looked down, surprised, and realized the advisor was right. Her grip on the curved steel was so firm it had started to shake. She felt a sudden, unexpected pang of shame as another of Alys' lessons came back to her.

"The sword and the shield are your tools, each worthy in their own right," the Warden had said to the class, as sunlight had beamed in through the high, open windows of the Citadel's scriptorium, catching dust motes drifting in the warm summer air. "You may favor something else over the former. A warhammer, a mace, a falchion, or any number of deadly tools, but all are much alike in their purpose. They are forged to kill. Whatever weapon you wield, do so with honor, but learn to honor your shield even more so... All swords sing for death, but the shield, it stands for life. It protects, it defends. The sword is necessary, but the shield is righteous. Do not forget that."

Brynn glanced from the weapon in her hand to the shield strapped to her other arm. She realized that, during the melee where she had fallen upon the Uthuk stragglers, full of vengeful fury, she had not used it once. Only the sword.

She sheathed the weapon, took a breath, and looked down at Gerold.

"I make no promises yet," she said, her tone firm. "But I am suspending this hunt. A raw quest for vengeance is a path that has no good end. I see that now. I am going to seek my former tutor, Alys, and formally offer my resignation from the Marshals. Then I will journey to Highmont, and speak with my aunt. Gods willing, we will be able to resolve this. But whatever happens, Gerold, I will do my duty. That much, I swear to you."



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