## Shadows of Illyria:

Draken Slayer

JM VanZuiden

AARDEN PRESS

304 S. Jones BLVD

Suite # 1315

Las Vegas, NV 89107

[www.aardenpress.com](http://www.aardenpress.com/)

Copyright © 2017 J.M. VanZuiden All rights reserved,

Including the right of reproduction In whole or in part in any form.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events are products of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

VanZuiden, J.M.

Shadows of Illyria: Tales from the Realm, Draken Slayer

1. Tales from the Realm, Draken Slayer
2. Shadows of Illyria ISBN-13: 978-1370052745

ISBN-10: 1370052745

## About the Author



J.M. van Zuiden was born and raised in the upper Midwest in a small farm town. After two years attending a local community college, J.M. joined the US Army at age 21 being stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. He deployed with the US Army’s 1st Cavalry Division to Iraq in 2004 for Operation Iraqi Freedom, where he experienced combat first-hand. J.M. resides in Illinois with his wife of fifteen years and four children.

## Author’s Notes



### Context of This Tale

The Draken Slayer is taken from my full- length fantasy novel; Shadows of Illyria:

Phantoms of War, being published June 5, 2017.

Within this novel, the following story exists as a single chapter in the manuscript (Over 450 pages).

In the novel, one of the lead characters is a grizzled veteran of war and currently a Captain in the Imperial Legion. Throughout the book, events happening in the present, trigger flashbacks told as short dreams. The dreams not only weave a tale and are relevant to the events happening in this fantasy world, but also express the very real and dark feelings that combat vets suffer from in the real world. Draken Slayer is by far the longest of those dreams, also taking place farther back in his memory than the others. It is a critical event in his life, being the first time Aldric experiences

the loss of a friend in combat, and entirely unique from the other nightmares, making it a fitting candidate as a short story on its own merit.

### Inspiration Behind the Story

The Shadows of Illyria series began in a truly bizarre way. I am an Iraq War combat veteran and had begun receiving treatment for PTSD at the VA's Vet Center. One day, my Therapist suggested finding something I enjoy that I could do when I found myself dealing with the haunting memories of war. I have written for years and always found joy in doing so, especially as a means of expressing my thoughts more clearly. I combined these ideas into a project to express the feelings that myself and so many others experience both during the fight, and the lasting effects afterward. From this simple concept, I began writing the first novel and was amazed at how therapeutic it proved to be and how easily the story developed as I wrote, despite being a work of fiction and having never storyboarded any of it.

After showing my wonderful wife the first five chapters, I was surprised by her

response, being a very critical reader and having a dislike of fantasy fiction. Her reaction encouraged me to continue, and the idea began to form of publishing this work as a creative platform to provide regular people with insight into the mind of us damaged warriors. On the surface, Shadows of Illyria is a gritty fantasy world, where not given the context, one might simply describe it as that. I believe this is where the beauty of the series lays; on one hand, you can read it for the insight into the real effects of war on both the individual and those around him, on the other hand, you can simply enjoy it for the fantasy

story.

From whatever perspective, you choose to read this story, I sincerely hope you enjoy it and will consider buying the novel.

# Phantoms of War



he tale of a warrior is often the ink on the parchment of scribes, the grand tale of storytellers, the riveting song of

the bard, and the inspiration of the young man who packs his belongings, hugs his mother, and sets out on his own grand adventure to become a hero.

T

As is frequently the nature of men, war often follows on the heels of one man’s selfish ambitions. With the lust for power comes war, and the death of many of these young men, leaving behind a trail of tears of those who loved them.

A quill dipped in blood scribes the great stories yet again, while songs are sung of the grand battles that were fought, and the conqueror celebrates the great victory they have won by the lives of the fallen.

For the forgotten mothers, the regretful fathers, and the mourning widows, there is no celebration. They suffer in silence, weeping tears for the soldier that will never return.

When the broken bodies of war return to the dust from whence they came, not even a trace will mark the sacrifice they once made. These soldiers will fade into the shadows of time, soon forsaken.

For the storied few that are remembered, they will become the fabled warriors. They are the ones who have survived march after march, skirmish after skirmish, and battle after battle.

They continue pushing on, bearing the scars of war, yearning for the innocence they have lost.

War comes again. Another generation, enticed by the tales of the fabled warriors regaled by their Fathers, pick-up the mantle of their forefathers, as they head into the fray, casualties once again, in the never-ending drumbeat of war.

The heroes they speak of, they weave a very different tapestry than that in the glorious tales that are told. The threads they sew are of pain and loss, regret and sorrow, fear and anger. The blanket they lay upon, is stitched in the blood of the innocent and the sacrifice of the dead.

In the quiet corners of pubs and sleepy forgotten villages, the broken men of story tell somber tales. Some languish over the souls they have taken. Others dwell on the brothers they have lost.

Many of these heroes find themselves lost in the disorder of their own minds. Becoming trapped in the madness of a battle that will

never end, they occasionally whisper of the darkness of the soul.

When these legends of men find, the hour has drawn near, their mind still lingering in the void of despair,

they will sometimes… just sometimes…

tell tales of the Phantoms of War.

## Shadows of Illyria:

# Draken Slayer

A



s you drift into the darkness of your mind, the pull of madness grows with every passing moment. Your instinct is

to fight, and for a time, you battle against the supernatural draw of the void. Inevitably, as it always seems to be, the clash with your subconscious is lost, sending you suddenly

plummeting, torn from all rational thought, toward the abyss of despair. A maddening cyclone of lights and sound pass around you, seeming to tear at your very soul, until the blue of the sky begins to merge with the torrent of colors, finally solidifying into an image your broken mind can process.

Crashing to the ground, your mind is mated to a body that feels almost foreign, yet somehow familiar. The physique is that of a young and virile soldier. Years of campaigning and the injuries that accompany such a chosen profession, have yet to take a toll on this fledgling Ranger.

A long-forgotten voice fills your consciousness, "Corporal Veersdorf, you are on point."

"Aye, Lieutenant," you reply.

The youth of your voice is shocking at first as reality settles on where you are and whose body you occupy. At twenty-two, you are still an idealistic and energetic young Corporal with the Rangers. This mission you are beginning would ultimately be your last assignment for the Order.

Scanning the surroundings, you find only warm sunshine illuminating bright, green

grass. Flowers blanket the landscape and birds sing cheery songs as they fly about. Small hills and valleys, dotted with bushes and a variety of trees accent the idyllic scenery. The scent of spring air fills your lungs with an invigorating bouquet of aromas.

You are in the northwest corner of the Empire, near a city called New Hyllande. Your unit was dispatched to hunt a group of draken which migrated from beyond the mountains and taken up residence in the hills east of the town. The beasts had already killed dozens of livestock and seriously injured a farmer who was fortunate to escape with his life. The entire event had caused quite a stir in the Province as draken sightings within Imperial borders are rare, with many years passing between such events.

"Move out," your Lieutenant orders.

As your platoon ambles forward on their horses, you reminisce about the faces of these men with much fondness. This unit was the first group of legionnaires you had served which earned a special place within your memories. Lieutenant Ostten, Sergeant Millen, and Rangers Loft, Herrick and Ustley. Danvin Ustley was an Initiate in your Ranger class, and

you knew him well, in fact, the two of you were quite a duo, spending most of your off-duty time together, terrorizing whatever bars happened to be near.

Snapping your reins, your mount comes to life, putting distance between you and your comrades. Scouting was always an exciting, albeit dangerous affair, but at twenty-two and part of the elite Order of Rangers, you felt invincible back then.

You were apprehensive that day as the beasts you pursued were legendary monsters. Everyone had heard the tales; intelligent, fast, and elusive, the draken were renowned for their group tactics, making them an apex predator. A full-grown adult is three times the length of a horse, though about the same height Typically, they would hunt livestock and other large game, however on rare occasion they are known to attack humans, and it is said that once a pack had overcome the fear of man, they would actively pursue him as prey.

Draken by themselves were not the real issue, it was their use as vehicles of war that made their very existence forbidden in the Empire. Too many wars had been fought on

the backs of these reptiles, and the last Dragoon Regiment was disbanded over four hundred years ago when these ancient apex predators were hunted to extinction on most of the continent. Were it not for the wild lands north of the mountains being out of reach of the Crown, these impressive reptiles would likely no longer exist on Illyria.

Your journey is peaceful for several hours as you continue scouting ahead, finding no sign of your quarry. Around noon, you stumble upon a recently slaughtered elk which had been torn apart, only the neck and head remaining. The rest of the body evidently carried off by whatever killed it. An untrained individual might assume the culprit was a mountain lion, wolf, or aachen, but you are able to deduce the distinctive draken kill from sketches in a book you studied before departing on the mission, not to mention the lack of any nearby tracks other than elk.

Scanning your surround anxiously, there is no sign of a draken pack, but you note a large rock outcropping jutting from a hill in the distance. You decide to target this as a potential nest site but hold for the time to allow your unit to arrive.

After a short wait, your squad comes into view, led by your Lieutenant. They pick-up the pace when the notice you, assuming you have news to report.

"What do we have, Corporal?" he inquires upon arrival.

"Draken kill, sir. I believe that is where we should start," you respond, pointing towards the hill.

Your leader pauses, inspecting the elk remains from the seat of his mount before responding, "Sounds good. Make it happen, Corporal."

With a salute, you reply, "Aye, sir."

Immediately setting off, the journey to the distant hill takes about an hour. You move expeditiously, but stay cautious as you approach your target. Upon reaching the base of the hill, you locate a little group of trees near a small mound and dismount. Tying-off your stallion concealed in the trees, you make way to the tree nearest the suspected den and conceal yourself in the brush.

Time ticks by slowly as you wait in silence behind cover. The intensity of your search strains your eyes and your patience. It is now about mid-afternoon, and you resolve to shake

things up and waste no more daylight on a potentially empty site.

Grasping a stone from the ground, you step away from the tree and launch the missile toward the cove above. Several thuds break the silence as your stone hits the rocks and bounces around the cavern. Much to your surprise, a draken alert rings out, but the sound is weak and high-pitched. A second replies, also in the same puny voice. They bicker back and forth for a few moments before becoming quiet.

Must be two juveniles.

Young draken are about the size of a horse foal when born and no more a threat than a wild dog. However, the adults of the pack are a different story and garner much reason for concern.

The book on draken reported that the beasts live in groups dominated by one or two males, the rest being female. According to the old text, around six females would round-out the family-group, though twelve had been documented. Reports from locals indicated the pack was as large as ten and as few as two. Your Lieutenant had said, divide the largest figure by the smaller and you will find a more accurate answer.

After investigating ambush positions, you return to your horse and head towards your waiting team. After a short distance, you locate the group in a fair-sized cluster of trees, that is also well laid with bushes making it ideal for a camp. They are dismounted, most of them taking advantage of the downtime by napping.

"What word have you, Aldric?" asks Danvin who stands watch.

"I have located the nest, two juveniles are present, but I believe the adults are out hunting."

Your Sergeant, a seasoned veteran, and a light sleeper, sits at the sound of your voice and shakes the Lieutenants shoulder who lays nearby.

"Sir, our scout has returned, and in one piece," he cracks with a sideways smile.

Clearing his voice, the Lieutenant rises as he inquires, "Report, Corporal."

"Aye, sir," you acknowledge as you dismount your stallion. "The nest has at least two juveniles, but I was unable to observe any adults. I believe they must be on the hunt. According to my research, we should expect them at dusk."

"Very, good, Corporal, I concur."

The others have woken and now listen intently to your report. Your officer stares toward the den, calculating his strategy. After several moments of silence, he addresses your squad.

"Okay, Rangers here is the plan," he pauses, looking around at every man to confirm they are paying attention. "Corporal, yourself and Ranger Ustley will stay here and guard the horses. Those damn draken love the taste of horse-flesh and gods knows this old soldier will not be walking back to New Hyllande!" After a brief laugh with the Sergeant, he continues, "Loft, you will be with me; we will assume over-watch. Sergeant, you and Herrick will enter the lair and slay the juveniles before concealing yourselves within. We shall wait until the pack lands and hit as many as possible with draken arrows before advancing on foot. Sergeant, you will launch spears before attacking on foot. Everyone is to equip shields. Corporal, when I sound the alarm, you and Ustley mount-up and make haste to join us."

"Aye, sir," replies a chorus of voices.

Pausing with his arms crossed, the Lieutenant looks over every face again, searching for uncertainty.

"Any questions?"

The Sergeant answers for everyone, "No, sir. I think your orders are clear."

"Very good. We depart in ten for our positions. Corporal, come give me the layout."

"Aye, sir."

You both walk a short distance while you detail the terrain of the nest. After your brief discussion, the Lieutenant returns to the camp to equip his gear. You join Danvin, chatting quietly until the group departs a few moments later. Once they are out of sight, you both find opposing positions and good seats to settle in for a potentially long watch.

Time ticks by slowly until the sun has fallen into the horizon, illuminating the distant hills in a soft orange glow. From your position at the edge of the camp, you sit at ease with your back against a tree. Your eyes are fixed on the sky, casually observing the birds fluttering about, looking for night perches. The cheerful songs of the little fliers fill the dusk air with their avian exploits of the day. Suddenly, they all scatter and become silent. Usually, this

means a large eagle is on the approach, but given the circumstances, you suspect something much larger spooks them.

"Draken!" Ustley reports from across the cluster of trees in a loud whisper.

Without thinking, you swing behind a tree and begin searching the skies intensely. Only a few seconds later, three draken come into distant view, heading toward the den. Your heart races at the site of the majestic beasts, followed by concern for your comrades who are hiding in ambush, as the reptiles arrive at their home and begin circling above. The mere sight of the legendary animals brings memories of your boyhood dreams of flying as a member of the dragoons of old.

They continue circling like vultures in the fading light, never breaking formation. After this continues for a while, you become nervous they have discovered the waiting ambush below. Just when it seems the tension will break your resolve, one of the draken abruptly departs off into the distance, though the other two remain. Slowly the lingering two merge into the encroaching darkness, eventually disappearing from view altogether.

Frozen behind the tree, you remain anxious and alert, while the last evidence of the sun evaporates into the horizon. Shadows have turned into darkness, preventing you from seeing the predators even if they were to come close. Being unable to view them only increases your apprehension, adding a burning knot in your stomach.

"Did you hear that?!" Danvin suddenly questions in a low voice from across the camp.

"No... what did you hear?"

You peak your ears, desperately searching for the sound he is referencing, but discover nothing but spring crickets.

"There it is again!"

This time you discern it; A whoosh close- by... too close. Then a ghostly blur flash before you in the dark, a splash of air striking you in its passing, sending a chill trickling down your spine.

Panicked, you retreat to the center of the trees near the horses and frantically begin striking your flint at the kindling the others prepared earlier.

A heavy sound suddenly impacts the ground close by. Spinning to your right towards the noise, you search in desperation for the source,

but cannot see anything in the darkened foliage.

Then another whoosh comes from your left followed by the snapping of twigs and crushing of grass. Terror grips your mind as you feel hopeless and alone, your body beginning to feel as if ice had entered your veins. A jolt in your mind kicks you back to life, and you begin to strike at the kindling as if your life depended on it. Just as a small flame finally ignites, a single word that will haunt you until your dying breath is heard.

"Aldric--"

Stopping mid-breath, Danvin's final word in this life echoes in your mind while the hairs on your arms stand and your heart pounds like it will burst. Every sense heightens beyond anything you have ever felt. You want to run, but your training tells you to draw your sword and face death. Gritting your teeth, you position yourself toward the sound of falling feet, preparing yourself to join your friend.

Suddenly, as if by Jovan Himself, the fire leaps into the air as the kindling catches the twigs in a burst of color. In that ephemeral moment, like a viper striking from unseen cover, a reptilian head with teeth rippling like

flames as they reflect the erupting fire, illuminates your vision. Everything around you is frozen in time as a numbness creeps over your body. Death feels imminent and unavoidable, leaving your mind scrambling for a response.

Then a screech tears through the silence, only to stop as quickly as it had begun. You blink to reality as warm blood sprays onto your face, causing you to shutter. Only then, do you realize you have severed the head from your aggressor, the body lays convulsing on the ground, thrashing wildly around. Your senses scream to life as you begin moving with speed and certainty you never imagined possible. Every sound becomes crystal clear, every image intensified. You dart through the thicket, slashing and blocking at the assaulting reptiles. Everything turns into a blur of steel upon flesh as you attack like you are possessed, detached from your very mind.

When the carnage ends, the flames have transformed your surroundings from darkness to a hazy green of flickering color. Stunned and suddenly exhausted beyond all reason, you stumble over to the fire and stare blankly into the depths of the blaze. The orange and red

dance in reflection upon your blade that remains in a fierce grip. Trickles of blood slowly form together into a single stream, seemingly penetrating through the rolling flames as it travels to the tip. Your gaze locks onto the drop, fixing on the slowly stretching fluid of life.

Finally, the drop breaks-free, falling to the ground, snapping your mind back to reality. Scanning around, you discover the corpses of three draken as if seeing them for the first time. Just then, a human form, slumped at the edge of the trees grabs your attention.

"Danvin!" you exclaim as you run to his position. Your heart sinks as you fall to your knees by his corpse.

"By the gods, no!"

The rush of emotions still filling your veins from the combat before only serves to amplify the intensity of your reaction. A tear rolls involuntarily down your cheek, followed by a surge of warmth rushing through your body, and then nothing.

Returning to cognition, you are laying on the ground by your fallen comrade. Still numb all over, you struggle to rise and stagger over to the glowing beacon at the center of the camp.

Haphazardly you fall to the grass as you drive your sword into the soil before the fire. Your mind is blank as you stare into the white of the flames for what seems like hours.

The voice of your Lieutenant suddenly breaks the silence, "Corporal!"

You remain in complete stillness, barely registering his speech. Then you realize a hand is upon your armored shoulder.

"Corporal. Can you hear me?"

Slowly you look up at him, still disoriented, and reply reflexively, "Danvin is dead, sir. I killed three draken."

The Lieutenant scans the surrounding carnage as he strolls about, looking over the corpses. Returning to your side when he has finished, he kneels next to you, replacing his hand on your shoulder.

"By the gods... you killed three draken, Corporal!"

"Ranger Danvin is dead, sir."

"I am sorry, Corporal. Ustley was a good Ranger."

Your leader offers support, but your mind is lost in a haze, and you cannot hear what he is saying through the ringing in your head. The rest of the evening turns into a foggy

memory. When you eventually lay down, staring vacantly into the trees above you, glimpsing the few stars that peak through the branches. Finally, exhaustion overcomes your shattered thoughts, and you drift off into the dark.

### End.



Join Aldric on an epic adventure in

Shadows of Illyria: Phantoms of War

Featuring over 450 pages in Book One of this ground-breaking new trilogy.

To Learn more about the series or buy the book at: [www.illyriabook.com](http://www.illyriabook.com/)

Follow the books series on social media: [www.facebook.com/illyriabook](http://www.facebook.com/illyriabook) [www.twitter.com/illyriabook](http://www.twitter.com/illyriabook) [www.pinterest.com/illyriabook](http://www.pinterest.com/illyriabook) [www.illyriabook.tumbler.com](http://www.illyriabook.tumbler.com/) [www.illyriabook.devientart.com](http://www.illyriabook.devientart.com/)