

Delver Magic

Book X

Search and Discover

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Slow Fall: Counting Down

Humor:

Counterproductive Man

Important Note

This is the Free Edition which only includes the first four chapters of the book. If you wish to purchase the entire book, please visit my web site at www.sitelane.com.

Search and Discover is the tenth book in the *Delver Magic* series. While it is a complete novel, it is recommended that the series be read in order.

Information about *Delver Magic* can be obtained from the author's web page at <http://www.sitelane.com>.

Thank you.

To Joan, for helping me discover what's important!

Prologue

The spirit of Sy Fenden appeared just outside the wall surrounding Burbon, the town Sy vowed to protect when he was alive and the place he returned to after his death. There was no substance to his form, but his ethereal features radiated with unmistakable clarity. He was greater than a whisper of history, more than a ghost wandering aimlessly over familiar ground. He retained the memories of his past and held to the convictions which shaped his actions. These aspects of his mortal life anchored his soul to a town grasping for order within a land overwhelmed by mystic energy.

As captain of Burbon's guard, he had led both the soldiers and the citizens of the town. He had guided the people through the return of magic and monsters. His fierce determination to overcome desperate odds offered hope to nearly every resident. His stoic acceptance of the most unnerving circumstances nourished Burbon's desire for stability, even during times of ultimate turmoil.

After his death, many wondered if the town could survive. As it turned out, the citizens wouldn't have to struggle without him. Burbon's captain passed back through the veil between life and death and returned as a warrior spirit to protect the town from seemingly invincible foes. Though restricted to the borders of the only home he knew, Sy Fenden wielded a power born from a sanctuary's promise.

On a clear crisp morning at the onset of the dormant season, the ghost captain stood at Burbon's southwestern edge. He peered out over the empty hills. Rather than focusing on Dark Spruce Forest—thick woods to the west which served as a haven for both elves and dark creatures—the spirit warrior seemed fixated upon small clouds drifting toward the eastern light of dawn.

At that same moment, Ryson Acumen—a purebred delver also devoted to the protection of Burbon—broke from the edge of Dark Spruce. He stood on the opposite side of the river which flowed down a jagged path near Burbon's borders. Ryson had just completed a predawn scout and happily discovered no trace of dark creatures prowling about the woods. He had journeyed deep enough into the forest to exchange information with elf guards on patrol, and both delver and elf cheerfully reported a peaceful calm.

When Ryson cleared the trees, he raced up a nearby hill to signal the guards in the nearest watchtower of his findings. Rather than entering the town, he had planned to continue his scout to the north. Farm fields which had already been cleared of any crops during the harvest season offered potential nesting grounds for giant rock beetles and bloat spiders. The delver wished to ensure the fields remained empty of any such threats, but that plan dissolved when his keen eyes spotted the apparition.

Like a sudden gust of wind, Ryson darted down the slope of the hill and over the southern bridge which spanned the river. He raced with breathless anticipation to the ghostly form of his friend. He hoped to reach the spirit warrior before Sy vanished, which the apparition often did without warning.

To the delver's great joy, Sy remained in his place and continued to monitor the morning clouds floating across the sky.

Ryson had countless questions for his friend, but before he could begin to satisfy his own nearly endless curiosity, he needed to ensure the safety of Burbon. His intense senses revealed no trace of danger in the region, but the ghost captain maintained an

awareness of events on a different level and often appeared when the security of Burbon reached a critical state.

"Sy?" Ryson questioned as he came to a stop next to the spirit. "Is anything wrong?"

At first, the apparition failed to respond. Sy continued to scan the skies as if he had not noticed the arrival of his friend. Even as the delver's breath—vapor visible in the cold morning air—mixed with his ethereal form, the spirit captain kept his focus upon the sky. It appeared as if he wished to join the clouds, let loose the anchors which held him, and soar toward the heavens.

Eventually, his ghostly gaze drifted from left to right and then finally dropped down to the delver's face. Sy shook his head, but said nothing.

The spirit's response relieved the delver, and with Burbon safe, Ryson could consider more personal matters. The delver had yearned for a chance to speak at length with the ghost captain, but he had not yet achieved any such opportunity. Standing alone with the warrior spirit offered Ryson a chance he could not dismiss. Any further concern over Sy's seemingly unwarranted appearance was overwhelmed by a desire to ask questions of a far more intricate nature.

His anticipation for answers of considerable significance was so great that he didn't even bother to preface his initial question with any direction or clarification. His delver mind immediately focused on the critical moments which led to Sy's current condition... the captain's death at the hands of a goblin army. The stark images which were burned into the delver's memory were painful, and he wondered if Sy retained recollections equally unpleasant.

"How much do you remember of what happened to you here?" Ryson blurted out.

Sy looked to the delver with a quizzical expression.

"When you died," Ryson quickly explained, impatient for answers he believed the apparition could offer. "I don't want to dwell on difficult memories, but I was there. I saw the goblins kill you. Do you remember what happened?"

Sy simply nodded.

"What was it like?" the delver wondered.

Sy offered only another questioning expression, so Ryson pressed for more precise details.

"I'm not talking about the goblin swords," the delver explained. "I want to know about the moment of change. Your death... how extreme was the transition? Did you feel your spirit leave your body? Was it painful?"

Sy's lips did not move, he did not make a sound, but his voice was projected into Ryson's mind.

"Life is painful."

The answer, however, left Ryson confused.

"So there's no pain in death?"

Sy frowned, but gave no further clarification.

"What was it like when you crossed over?" Ryson persisted. "What did you feel and see when you changed into a spirit... into what you are now?"

"Words are inadequate."

Ryson could not accept such a response. The familiar voice which represented Sy's willingness to communicate was a direct link to another existence, an existence which ignited the delver's ever-expanding curiosity.

"They can't be completely inadequate. There has to be something you can describe. If you didn't feel pain, did you feel something else? What did you see? What did you hear?"

"It's beyond seeing, beyond hearing."

"Alright, I understand that. But there has to be some way to describe it. You may not have a physical presence, like having actual eyes and ears, but you can still see me and hear what I have to say. You have something that allows you to understand what's going on around you. I don't know what to call it, but it has to..."

"Awareness."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. You have an awareness. Your senses may not be the same as mine, but you have some kind of ability to comprehend your surroundings. You know what's happening in Burbon. You've showed up when the town was in danger. And you've reacted to things which have happened here since you died, so you must know what's going on here."

"I know Burbon."

"You've always known Burbon, but that's not what I'm talking about. You came back. It's obvious there's a strong connection between you and this town, there always has been, but you're different now."

Sy simply nodded.

Ryson paused. He wasn't sure how to proceed, but his curiosity continued to spur him forward.

"You died. I saw it. Your body's gone. The goblins fed it to some beasts."

Sy nodded again. If the memory caused him anguish, it was not apparent. He appeared as detached from the incident as his spirit was detached from the body which had been devoured by monsters.

"The awareness you talked about," Ryson continued, "it must allow you some kind of comprehension of what's beyond this life. I mean, even when you're here, you're not stuck here. You've told us that you're restricted in where you can go in Uton. You may not be able to leave Burbon, but that's the physical world. You're not the same as the rest of us. You can disappear. Where do you go?"

"To another place."

"That's what I want to know about. Tell me what it's like."

"Different. It's all different."

Ryson could never be satisfied by such a vague response.

"Different in what way? Is it light? Is it dark? Is there music... or is it totally peaceful?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Then why don't you help me?" Ryson demanded in obvious frustration.

Sy offered nothing in response, not even a change in expression.

"So you won't help?" the delver wondered. "This isn't right. I know I'm only the second person you've been able to communicate with, but you don't talk to me like you do with Captain Klusac. You have long discussions with him. Godson, you basically talk his ear off sometimes. For me, you only give me four or five words at a time. I think I got seven out of you one time and I almost couldn't believe it."

"Klusac understands."

"What? What does he understand?"

"Why I'm here."

"I thought you were here to help and protect Burbon."

"Exactly."

"Then why can't you answer my questions? I'm part of Burbon."

"Your focus is wrong."

"Why? Because I'm focusing on your current condition? How can I not? You're not just some stranger. You're my friend. We've been through so much together. We've been to other lands, lands not just beyond Uton, but beyond anything we could imagine. We fought against monsters and demons. Why is this so different?"

"Because it is."

"Because it's the line between life and death? If anything, that makes it even more important. I can't change my focus about that. You know that. And it's not just me. All of Burbon wants to know why you came back... how you were *able* to come back."

"It was necessary."

"Necessary? Necessary for you... for the town... or for something else?"

"Yes."

"So it was necessary for all those things, but what's the real key? What's allowing you to be here when so many others have died and they can't return?"

"I am not the only one!"

Ryson realized Sy's forceful declaration was very true. The delver had encountered other spirits, spoken with them during times of considerable peril. When Ingar's sphere broke free from Sanctum Mountain, the elf sorceress Shayed returned as a spirit to help save all of Uton from the corrupt magic. Another close friend of Ryson's, the elf Lief Woodson, also returned to assist Ryson against the slink ghoul Baannat.

Still, Ryson's experiences with others who were able to cross back from the veil of death were very different from his encounters with Sy Fenden. He explained as much as he continued to pursue answers for questions which tugged at his delver instincts.

"No, you're not the only one," the delver agreed, "but the other spirits which came here did so for a specific reason. Something drew them back here, and when they achieved their purpose, they moved on. You're still here."

"Burbon drew me back."

"That can't be all there is to it. Other soldiers have died defending this town. They didn't come back."

"It's not just the town."

"And that's one of the things I'm trying to understand. What else is it?"

"You're asking many questions."

"Of course I am. I want to know what the other side is like. I want to know why you could come back. I want to know about the connection you have to Uton... and to Burbon." Ryson paused, but then dug even deeper. "I want to know if you've seen others. Can you see those we've lost? What about Reader Matthew from Connel, or all of the soldiers who died fighting against the goblins, or even the dwarves? What about Lief Woodson? Have you seen..."

Ryson couldn't continue. The memory of his friend forced him to swallow hard. The delver quickly composed himself and allowed the pressing desires of his curiosity to spur him onward.

"Why are you here?" he finally asked firmly.

"It's necessary."

"You've said that, but you won't explain why it's necessary."

Sy did not respond further and Ryson was forced to try a different approach.

"If you can't tell me that, can you at least tell me how long you'll be staying?"

Sy appeared to struggle for a response, but then quickly returned to his stoic and silent demeanor.

"Is it that you want to tell me and can't?"

"Partially."

"Then why don't you give me a partial answer?"

"It would be insufficient."

"Why don't you let me decide on that? Maybe a hint is all I need. I work with hints all the time. That's what I do. I'm just looking for bits of information to lead me in the right direction."

"What if you're wrong?" Sy actually challenged the delver.

"Wrong about what?"

"The direction."

"I don't have a direction. That's what I'm looking for."

"You're looking in the wrong place."

"I'm looking to you."

"And that's the mistake."

"How can that be a mistake? You know things no one else knows."

"Your focus is blurred."

"Blurred?"

Sy nodded.

"I'm focused on you," Ryson admitted.

"You shouldn't be."

"How can I not be? And even if my focus is blurred, that's exactly what I'm trying to adjust. I'm trying to understand everything I've seen. It's like you said, you're not the only one to return here. And it goes beyond other spirits. What I see of you now, I've even seen of myself. I saw what was inside of me. It was more than just a reflection of the past. I saw my soul. That's the focus I have now. How can I ignore what you are and what it might mean to my own future?"

"Ask a different question."

"Do you mean I should just rephrase the questions I've asked or do I have to ask entirely new questions from a completely different perspective?"

Sy just stared at him.

"Or are you saying you can't... or maybe you *won't* answer me?"

Sy continued to respond with silence.

"See, this is exactly what I'm talking about," Ryson complained. "I'm not sure what you mean and you won't explain. You just stand there and stare at me. I can't just forget about these questions. I'm a delver. You're more than some mystery. You've stepped into an entirely new existence... one we all have to face."

"Ask a different question," the apparition offered.

Ryson's frustration grew. He believed that once he had broken through the barrier which kept him and Sy from communicating he would be able to obtain information previously beyond his reach. Even as he could hear Sy's voice in his head, the responses remained stunted and abstract, vague and confusing.

He wasn't simply trying to satisfy his curiosity over a topic which normally stirred varied emotions, he was trying to take another step forward. He had, in fact, witnessed his own soul when he had ventured into the breeding grounds for demons. His grasp of that vision, as well as its significance, had been strengthened through additional ordeals, but certain aspects remained confusing.

Knowing he had to alter his direction once more, Ryson attempted to explain his dilemma.

"I'm trying to tie all of this together," the delver admitted. "You returned from the dead, but not completely. You're still dead. That might be a harsh way to put it, but it's the truth."

Sy nodded in acceptance of his extraordinary existence.

"Right after you came back," Ryson continued, "I saw something inside a reflection of myself... something which appeared exactly as you appear to me now. It didn't end there. I realized that it was inside all of us. There's a connection. You can't deny that."

"That is not my intention."

"But you keep telling me to ask another question."

"... to change your focus."

"Change it to what?"

"To the proper path."

"What's the proper path?"

"Understanding is not acceptance."

"What?"

"Understanding is not acceptance," Sy repeated.

"That doesn't make sense. If you understand something, you accept it to be true."

Sy shook his head.

"Are you saying I haven't accepted what I've seen?"

"Partially."

"Do you think I don't accept that you're really here?"

"Partially."

"I'm really starting to hate that word."

Sy just stared back at the delver.

"I don't know what you're trying to tell me," Ryson admitted. "It doesn't even make sense. I've seen what you can do here. You're not an illusion. I've accepted that. And I know that what I see of you now is inside all of us. I've accepted that too. What's left?"

"Acceptance leads to patience."

"You're saying I'm impatient? I'm just asking questions. I'm a delver. How can I not ask questions? I want to know what it's like. Even humans want to know what you've been through and why you can come back. Are you saying I have to stop questioning things?"

"No!"

"Then what am I being impatient about?"

"The answers."

"So I have to wait for them?"

Before Sy could respond, his attention was pulled from Ryson and placed back upon the sky. His ghostly eyes scanned the horizon in every direction.

Ryson could not dismiss the alarm evident in the ghost warrior's reaction to some unseen event.

"What is it?" the delver demanded, as he too began to search for some threat in the distance.

"A demon has come."

"To Burbon?"

"To Uton."

"Is it close?"

"No, but it's powerful."

Ryson thought of the most powerful of all demons, the ruler of Demonsheol.

"Is it Rul Saattan?"

"No, it's a primeval."

Ryson knew the primevals acted as Rul Saattan's disciplinarians. They might not have been as powerful as Rul, but they were almost as dangerous.

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know what it wants?"

"To stay."

"In Uton?"

"Yes."

"That's not good."

Sy returned his gaze to the face of the delver and offered one last piece of advice in a singularly important if not somewhat vague word.

"Discover."

The spirit of Sy Fenden faded from sight, leaving Ryson with more questions and no clear direction in which to find the answers.

Chapter 1

"I am not comfortable with this," the elf captain revealed.

"You are comfortable with very little when it comes to me," the elf elder stated.

"I am concerned for your safety," Birk Grund, captain of the elf guard, admitted. "It is my duty."

Shantree Wispon tilted her head slightly as she considered Birk's assessment of the matter.

"Is it your duty to question my decisions?"

"When it comes to your safety, yes," the elf soldier responded almost defiantly, but retaining the necessary respect when addressing the unquestionable leader of the elf camp.

"Safety?" the elder emphasized. "That is a very broad stance. You could argue that danger is inherent in every choice I make."

"Only if I was being irrational. In this particular case, I do not believe I'm being unreasonable."

"You are if you can not define the risks you believe I face. The wizard has examined my magical core in the past. Doing so allowed him to locate the sorcerer Anas. Jure's assistance did not end with simply finding the sorcerer. He battled Anas' spell-casting minions and helped to defeat the sorcerer. You can not possibly believe Jure intends to do me any harm, do you?"

"I do not doubt the wizard's intentions, but I do not understand what is to be gained by this... procedure."

Jure, the wizard in question, tried to alleviate the elf captain's apprehension.

"By inspecting Shantree's core, I hope to gain a greater understanding of how she maintained separation between her magic and that of Anas."

"What is to understand?" the elf captain challenged. "Anas' magic was pure ebony energy. He boasted of the claim himself. Even I can see that Shantree's magical core is of substantially different substance."

"But the sorcerer's magic was placed, and then contained, within her core. Even as it was available for her to use through spells which she cast, it never mixed with her own magic. That in itself is worth additional study."

"Why?"

"Because the transference of energy has taken on a new meaning... with new consequences. We simply can't ignore what has happened in the past."

"I have no intention of ignoring it. I have constantly adapted to the changes we face."

"And that's exactly what I'm trying to do now," Jure offered. "I've been told that you're training your elf guards to identify new threats. You've also been developing new methods to deal with them. I'd like to help with that."

"I appreciate your willingness to help train the magic casters of this camp, if that is your ultimate intention, but you cast magic in a white circle. None of my elves have achieved such proficiency. Your tactics and incantations may be beyond their capabilities."

"But I'm not talking about training magic casters in spells. I want to examine the camp elder's core in order to understand a specific threat."

"Which threat?"

"The sharing of magical cores created certain conditions which have already led to more than one crisis," Jure explained. "Spell casters can now become linked in a far more substantial way. These links allow for more than just alliances. They've already opened the door for extreme manipulation, barriers have been broken."

"The manipulations of which you speak had little to do with our elder."

"And that's the reason I wish to do this. I'm attuned to such magical connections, as well as certain energy flows. I'm hoping to analyze Shantree's core in order to isolate certain properties which allowed for a full cleansing of her magical essence."

"Cleansing? I do not understand. Her magic was never removed, or even altered."

"No, but Ansas' magic was placed within her and then discharged, and it was done in such a way that it didn't leave your leader vulnerable. Others weren't so fortunate."

"Are you concerned that she may be vulnerable in the future?"

"Actually, no."

"But it sounds as if you wish to examine traces of the sorcerer's mark upon Shantree."

"That's not completely accurate," Jure corrected the elf captain. "I don't believe there are any remnants of Ansas' magic within her, not even the shadow of a stain. If there was such a mark, she would have been vulnerable to Rul Saattan, and I doubt the spirit of Sy Fenden would have allowed her to keep her core."

The thought horrified the captain of the elf guard.

"If the ghost warrior took her core, she would have ceased being an elf."

"True, and it seems he didn't have to. That in itself is an interesting aspect of the energy transfer. Shantree believes it was the fashion in which the magic was forced upon her which allowed her to keep her core. She never consciously chose to accept Ansas' magic. I agree with that assumption. I believe she's free from any residual effects."

"Then why do you wish to probe her magical energies now? What is it you're looking for?"

"Protection."

The word intrigued the elf captain, and while his anxieties over the elf elder's safety persisted, he finally found a reason to be more than skeptical about the wizard's plan.

"What kind of protection?" Birk asked.

"A means of magical separation. I believe the basis is there, inside the elder's core. There's a foundation for constructing a barrier against certain threats that we can't ignore. It would be something more than just a shield of deflection, but a technique to isolate and contain potentially dangerous energy."

Birk might not have been a skilled spell caster, but he was an elf. He knew enough about magic to question Jure's assumptions.

"Magic in its base form is neither dangerous nor beneficial," the elf captain stated.

"The energy becomes helpful or destructive based on the influence from a spell caster."

"Very true, and while there are already enough dark creatures present in Uton to use the energy for malicious purposes, we now face an even more dangerous prospect. The barrier which once kept demons from entering our world has been broken. Demons can enter Uton at will. That isn't a bright prospect for humans or elves."

"And you think Shantree's core offers a possible defense?"

"Don't you?"

"Your understanding of magic surpasses my own."

"Maybe, but you still have to see the logic of my assertion. Rul Saattan came into existence when the demon lord Reiculf merged with Ansas and the slink ghouls Baannat. That means Ansas' magic is a part of Rul Saattan as well. Rul is, in my estimation, the greatest threat we face."

"And all of Uton is now open to Rul Saattan's power," Shantree added.

"Well, Ryson Acumen put his own restrictions on Rul," Jure admitted. "The delver warned him to stay away, but that might not be enough. One day Rul may wish to try his luck again. I don't want to be defenseless against him."

"But what defenses can be gained by an examination of Shantree's magical core?" the captain demanded.

"I'm not sure, but there was a purging of Ansas' magic from her essence, and that purging must have been complete."

"If the shadow of Ansas' magic is gone, then what can you examine?"

"The echoes of Shantree's own influence. Ansas' magic was forced into her, but it never took hold of her core. It couldn't have. Still, she managed to utilize the energy to assist your camp when you were imprisoned by the sorcerer. Even as she crafted spells with Ansas' ebony power, she never allowed it to mix with her own essence. In a way, she created a barrier of her own, even if it was an unconscious act. Ansas' magic may be gone from her, but the echoes of the influence which protected her should still be there."

Shantree nodded in agreement as she saw the path Jure wished to travel. It was something she hoped to understand in greater detail as well.

"The idea holds great merit," the elder acknowledged. "Birk, I am curious about this myself, and there is much which can be gained. I do not know how I was able to block Ansas' magic from taking a permanent hold of my core. If Jure can offer some insight, I might be able to instruct others on how to build defenses against certain magical onslaughts. Perhaps we can even determine a way to contain a good portion of Rul Saattan's power. That in itself would be worth any risk to my core."

"And I don't really think there are any risks," Jure added. "I'll just be probing Shantree's core as I've done before. Previously, I was looking at Ansas' magic and trying to find a path back to the sorcerer. This time I'll be looking at her core itself and the echoes of past magic. I believe there is a natural barrier within her. I don't want to break it. I just want to inspect it."

"Very well," the elf captain relented, "but I will still insist on certain precautions for the elder's safety."

"What type of precautions?" Shantree questioned.

"Haven Wellseed. Her proficiency in golden magic will allow her to keep watch over the process."

"That's an excellent idea," Jure agreed. "I can even link her yellow energy to mine and allow the light of her magic to brighten any passages within the elder's core. I can remain focused on searching for past magical strands while Haven enables a more stable link to Shantree's magical essence."

Realizing he was getting ahead of himself and perhaps overstepping his bounds, Jure immediately submitted to the elf elder's authority.

"That's only if it meets with your approval," the wizard stated almost apologetically as he looked to Shantree.

"It is an acceptable provision," the elf leader allowed.

"I will summon Haven," Birk announced, and the elf captain quickly signaled nearby guards to send for the elf sorceress.

As Haven approached, the golden glow of her own magical essence chased away the deeper shadows of the surrounding forest. The power of the yellow magic within her was so strong that the sorceress could never be submerged in complete darkness. The golden aura brightened her features, making her appear almost angelic in nature.

Birk instructed Haven on what he expected of the sorceress. He wanted to ensure the safety of the elf elder, and he insisted the light of her magic serve as a sentinel.

Haven accepted the burden but offered her own insight into the endeavor.

"If the elder's influence was capable of protecting itself from Ansa's powerful ebony magic, why would she need the limited power of my energy as a safeguard?"

"I wouldn't consider your power limited," Jure offered.

"In comparison to yours, it is extremely limited. You cast in a white circle. My magic is limited to the light of my essence."

"I've seen what you can do. The light of your core is nearly boundless."

"But your command over all hues allows you to cast in yellow magic with as much proficiency as any other color."

"I found yellow to be the most difficult magic to refine," Jure confessed. "I still don't believe I've come close to grasping its potential, let alone its full radiance. Your gift over the energy is a natural talent. And you cast in a perfect triangle."

"Your circle reveals greater control."

"And the symmetry of your triangle is proof of a greater comprehension of the energy itself."

Haven did not wish to dwell upon the strength of her magic. She was willing to aid the wizard, and protect the elder with her life, but she remained slightly confused over the extent of any possible contribution.

"Of course I will assist," Haven agreed, "but if the shadows of Ansa's magic have been removed from the elder's essence, there will be little need for the defenses I can offer."

"You are there to monitor as much as to defend," Birk reminded the elf sorceress. "Let your magic reveal any risks before they materialize."

"I will do what I can."

"That is all we ask of you," Shantree stated with a reassuring smile. She then turned to Jure. "And what will you need of me?"

"Don't fight me."

"I have no intention of doing so. I have always been at ease around you."

The sincere compliment warmed the heart of the aging wizard, but he could not allow personal emotions to interfere with his task. Despite his admiration, and feelings for the elder, he needed to remain as completely neutral to Shantree's essence as possible. In turn, he would require Shantree to be more than simply ambivalent to his efforts.

"Actually, I need you to be a little more open than that. If I'm right about your core, there's a natural defense against outside influences. I think that's what saved you against Ansa. I can't have those defenses block me out, so I'll need you to view my magic as something like an invited guest."

"I do not understand," Birk interrupted. "If you are looking for possible protection against Rul Saattan, why not allow Shantree's defenses to rise against your magic? That way you will be able to analyze them."

"Only from the outside," Jure responded. "It would be like looking at one side of a wall, and that might not be good enough. I have to be able to inspect the barrier from both sides, all angles."

"But if she allows you into her core, there will be no wall to inspect."

"Not a current one, but that shouldn't be a problem. I'll be looking for past echoes. And that's really what I need to find. I need to examine the defenses which allowed her to utilize Ansa's magic without being contaminated by it. A defense which rises against me could be totally different in nature."

"I understand what you are searching for," Shantree acknowledged. "I have no reservations about your intentions. I will allow you to search wherever you deem necessary, and I have sufficient control over the magic within me to place it in a state of compliance."

"That's exactly what I need. With Haven's additional help, I'm fairly certain I'll be able to find any remaining threads which link back to Ansa's invasion into your core. The light of her essence will offer an outstanding contrast to the shadows of past conflict. Shall we begin?"

"I see no reason not to," Shantree responded.

She held out her hand for the human wizard. Such contact was not necessary for Jure to release his energy, but he viewed it as a sign of her openness. He took hold of Shantree's hand and allowed for the gesture to initiate the endeavor.

Before he linked his own magic to the light of Haven's energy or pressed it into Shantree's magical core, he let his own essence flow freely through his body. He could feel the power of magic press outward as it raced down his arm and into the palm of his hand. Strands of vibrant magic quivered through his fingers but did not race beyond the edges of his fingertips. The magic waited almost humbly for permission to move forward.

Jure looked to Haven.

"Send your light into the elder's essence," the wizard declared. "Your energy will enter first. I will link my energy to yours and my perception will follow through the channels your light creates."

Haven nodded and lifted both arms upward, but kept them bent at the elbows. She turned her palms toward the leader of the elf camp but made no physical contact. A triangle of three perfectly equal sides appeared between her hands.

Within Haven's grasp of her magic, she knew that the three segments represented the body, the spirit, and the magical energies which radiated within her. She allowed the triangle, which also symbolized her control over the magic, to widen. The sides remained equal, but the light within the center began to intensify. Instantly, every shadow of the surrounding forest was erased by a golden brilliance.

At first, the light showered upon the elf camp as a whole, but it quickly found purpose. The illumination became more focused as it surrounded the three forms of Haven, Jure, and Shantree. A new triangle of light formed and connected the three individuals. Once the three points were linked, the radiance turned directly toward the elf elder.

With Haven's light forging a path into Shantree's core, Jure allowed his own magic to move beyond his own hand. Ever so briefly, it waited in the smallest of spaces between Jure and Shantree's palms. Only when the elf elder's fingers tightened slightly around Jure's hand did the energy pass into Shantree's body.

Following Haven's light, Jure's white magic entered Shantree's magical core. The golden energy created several passages, and Jure directed his probing power methodically down each path.

With painstaking care, he examined the flows of energy pulsating through the elder's core. By using his own magic, he could sense the attributes of various energy pulses. He could identify threads of past spells and inspect remnants of influence. The echoes of previous manipulations vibrated back into his own core. Faint messages, like the calls of birds in the distance, flowed up into his consciousness.

He had an idea of what he was looking for, but he wasn't quite sure of how to find it. Shantree Wispon was not a magic caster. Her personality, calm demeanor, and strength of character formed the foundation for her leadership skills. She directed her camp, not with magical insight, but with a genuine desire to enrich the elves under her care.

Jure knew the pulses within Shantree's core would contain only minimal remnants of spells. She had been most active with incantations when she utilized Ansas' magic to ensure the survival of her camp. The remnants of those spells were removed with the sorcerer's ebony magic, but Jure believed there would be gaps within Shantree's magical walls.

The light from Haven's yellow magic lit up several channels through the elder's essence. The winding tunnels formed natural passages for the flow of magic which moved with almost impatient expectations. Such energy did not remain stagnant for long, and movement within any core created a churning effect which tended to fill any lingering hollows.

The wizard pressed deeper into the elder's essence. He continued to reach for an emptiness he would not be able to define until he actually found it. As he searched, he considered the circumstances under which the elder contained the pure ebony power.

Ansas had forced his black magic into the elf leader. Shantree never embraced the energy beyond utilizing it with a desire to save others. The unusual conditions of such incantations should have been enough to create a whisper of distinction within the remnants of past spells.

While Haven's golden power brought light to the darkest corners of the elder's core, it would not necessarily reveal echoes of spells which might have been banished completely with the dark magic itself. In the elder's essence, Jure had hoped to find gaps within her core which would be similar to repressed memories. Unfortunately, he could find no such crevices within the pulsating mass of magic.

Unable to make any progress, Jure decided to elicit assistance from the elder herself. He placed a greater portion of his consciousness into the magical flows, and he reached out to Shantree.

"Can you sense my voice?" he questioned through the link.

"I can," the elder elf responded through a thought.

"Excellent. You may be able to assist me."

"What must I do?"

Initially, Jure hesitated. In order to find echoes of the past within the elder's magic, he needed to make a connection to unsettling events. He realized the sorcerer had done more than use the elf elder as a simple container for his ebony power. Ansas had violated Shantree's core with the intention of marking her as a trophy for his superiority. Jure did not wish to invoke memories of such a monstrous act, but he maintained a belief that

Shantree's natural barriers were vital in developing defenses against Rul Saattan. Hoping the elf leader would understand, he decided to press forward.

"Can you recall the time you used Ansas' magic?"

"I can," Shantree responded without apparent distress.

"What spells did you cast?"

The elf recounted the event with surprising clarity. As she recalled the imprisonment of her camp under a canopy of dark magic, she described her initial fears and how she ultimately fought for the survival of every elf.

"The entire camp was trapped in the dark lands," she explained, "placed under a dome of pure ebony magic. While Birk and his elf guards sought to construct defenses, I focused on survival. I directed every elf to concentrate upon fortitude as well as patience. Our magic casters attempted to purify the putrid water and coax food from the barren grounds. Their success was limited, and hope began to dwindle. I could sense it dying... and our camp along with it. I used the ebony power to strengthen their efforts and spark the fading embers of hope. Together, we cleansed the water and obtained sufficient food."

"Did you feed your magic casters with Ansas' energy or did you construct spells of your own?"

"I cast my own spells. I did not want to take a chance of infecting other elves with Ansas' power and placing them in greater danger."

"Can you recall the formation of those spells? How did you mold the energy? Did it mix in any way with your own?"

There was a slight pause, but Shantree responded with absolute certainty.

"No, it did not, and it was as much by the ebony energy's intention as my own. Ansas' magic did not wish to mix with the energy of my core. I recall it clearly now. The dark energy within me reacted with near disgust to my manipulation. It bent to my will, but only for certain incantations, and it would not allow itself to be tainted by anything beyond pure black magic."

"If that's the case," Jure replied as he considered the new information, "then Ansas placed a desire for purity within the energy itself. The magic would have retained certain safeguards to avoid any contamination from outside influence."

Haven, linked to both the elder and the wizard through the light of her spell, entered the conversation with a theory of her own.

"Would that not mean that the separation was due to Ansas' influence and not any defense mechanism within the camp elder?" the elf sorceress asked.

"You believe I'm looking for something which might not exist?" Jure asked of the sorceress.

"Essentially, yes."

The wizard suspended his search. The forward flow of his probing magic came to a dead halt as he considered the possibility.

Shantree, however, would not allow him to withdraw. She believed the essence of her core was as responsible for saving her as was Ansas' unwavering thirst for purity. The ebony magic may have rejected the energy within her, but her essence was equally abhorrent of Ansas' intrusion.

"It is not that simple," the elf leader insisted. "Ansas' magic could have taken greater hold of my core without mixing with my magic. It was the sorcerer's intention to use me

and mark me. You knew of his arrogance. He would have wanted to overpower me, force me into becoming his puppet. While he wanted me to use his magic to keep the elves alive for his purposes, he could not force me to do so."

"But he didn't have to," Jure offered. "He knew you would do so on your own."

"But the choice was still mine. Ansas had very clear plans for the elves. Do you really think he would leave the ultimate outcome in the hands of an elf elder?"

"I'm not certain he ever did. He set the stage, placed you in a situation where there was no choice. As I said, he knew you would have given your own life to save your camp."

"Which is why I ordered Birk Grund to kill me if I appeared to place the camp in jeopardy. That was a direction Ansas would have prevented me from taking if he could take control of my essence, but he could not."

"Very well," Jure relented, "but if you wish for me to continue my search, I'll need you to recall the sensation of utilizing Ansas' magic. Haven's light offers an obvious contrast, but I need something similar which I can recognize. Ansas' power might not have mixed with your core, but you certainly placed your influence within the ebony flow of his magic."

"I remember it clearly," Shantree confessed. "It was a power I could never forget."

"You need to do more than just consider the memory. You have to place the thought of that intense ebony energy within the confines of your own core. You have to press it back into your magical essence in such a way that I can sense the vibration just as I hear your voice through the waves of magic."

"I can do even more than that."

"More?" Jure questioned, suddenly alarmed by the elder's unspoken intentions. "What do you mean?"

"I cannot recreate Ansas' magic within my own core, but I can reconstruct the spells I used to invoke the energy. I remember them as clearly as I remember Ansas' magic. They were absolutely unique, almost foreign to me. It was as if the ebony energy placed the designs within my mind. Even without Ansas' magic within me, I can still recreate the spells."

Shantree knew she couldn't explain further, but she could illustrate the concept by recalling one of the spells which purified water in the dark lands. The construction of the spell remained crisp in her mind, as if she had just cast it only a few moments ago. Its framework was based on a magic that was beyond her grasp, and so it remained an aberration forever burned into her memory.

She chose the spell which utilized the greatest potential of the ebony magic. She remembered the putrid water of the dark realm and the need to purify it for elf consumption. The black energy was in itself free of even the slightest imperfections, and Shantree recalled how easy it was to shape the magic into a spell meant for purification.

Placing her full focus on that particular spell, she forced the clear memory of the incantation down into her magical core. She knew the spell would not be cast, for there was no pure ebony energy within her to power it, but she hoped it would stir the echoes of her own influence which shielded her core from the black magic.

Jure remained connected to Shantree's core, as did Haven. He did not anticipate the elder elf's decision, but her intentions became evident the moment her conscious desires attempted to stimulate the magic of her essence. Both the human wizard and the elf

sorceress could sense the intricate construction of Shantree's memory which was quickly becoming more than a recollection of a past event.

Shantree's summoning of a past spell turned rapidly into an immediate construct of magical influence. It rushed through the waves of energy within the elder's core like lightning branching across the sky. It quickly developed a singular purpose of its own. It wished to be fed, but only by the proper source of magic. Since there was no pure ebony energy to power the spell, the casting became an incessant cycle of manipulation searching for an outlet.

Jure sensed the rolling incantation expand through Shantree's essence. He felt a surging hunger ride through the elder's core, and he knew it could not be satisfied. He also understood that if it wasn't stopped, the swelling tide of desire would lead to disaster.

"No!" he actually shouted with both his voice and his mind. "Retract the incantation!"

For the first time, Birk Grund heard a portion of the conversation which was shared within Shantree's essence. He saw the expression of absolute alarm erupt upon the wizard's face.

"What is happening?!" the elf captain demanded.

None of those bound together by the tendrils of magic heard Birk's call. Shantree's essence churned violently and overwhelmed her senses. Jure's attention remained locked upon the elder's magical core, and the elf sorceress immediately attempted to restrain the growing swell.

Haven, recognizing the peril faced by the elder, attempted to use the flows of her golden magic to redirect the mounting surge out of Shantree's core. The rush of unfulfilled influence, however, had almost instantly raged from a small flame into a rampant fire. Even as Haven's magic attempted to pull one edge of the fierce impulse out from the core, opposing ends pressed deeper into the elder's essence frantically searching for pure ebony energy to fulfill its purpose.

Jure could not dismiss the implications. The design of the spell demanded pure ebony energy and it was constructed in such a fashion that it would expand through Shantree's core until it found the power it sought. The incantation itself might have originated in the elder's mind, but there was no doubt it was influenced by the existence of black magic which no longer dwelled within the elf leader's essence.

The wizard continued his attempts to reach the elf elder.

"You have to pull it back!" he yelled.

Shantree felt the incantation rage through her core but she had lost her grip over the spell. Its elaborate design gave it a level of separation from the elder's consciousness. Once it was unleashed, it became independent of the elf's influence. It was essentially placed in an ever-expanding loop, and it had quickly grown beyond her power to control.

"I cannot!" she cried out.

Jure noted Haven's attempt to pull the incantation from the elder's essence, and he reached out with his own magical power to assist. He cast spell after spell into Shantree's essence to create borders within her core. Each time he managed to block off a section of the spell, it pressed outward from another corner. It was like pressing down upon a large mound of heated jelly. When one section was closed off, it would squirt out from some other edge.

Worse, the incantation itself was beginning to recognize the external attempts to seize its influence. It began to spread out even further as a defensive measure.

Haven realized further attempts to redirect the expanding spell were futile. She had her own beliefs over what would occur, but she needed to confirm her fears before acting further.

"What if we let it run its course?" she asked of the human wizard. "There is no suitable magic within the elder for it to fulfill its purpose. If it is not fed, will it not eventually die?"

"Eventually, yes," Jure responded with obvious distress, "but it won't starve fast enough. Once it expands beyond the core, it will search through every part of Shantree's body, as well as her essence."

"What will happen to the elder?"

"I don't think she can survive. Look at what it's doing to her core. It may not be using the magic within her, but it's destroying Shantree's energy. It's burning through her like a fire."

"She will die?"

"She will if we don't stop it."

Haven never hesitated. She used the light of her magic to beckon the unfulfilled spell. She allowed her light to embrace it even as she opened a direct link into her own core. She was willing to sacrifice herself, for she knew there was no ebony energy within her own essence to satisfy the incantation. She was willing to die for the elder, but her sacrifice was not accepted.

The construct of influence ignored the open passage into another magical being, even one of far greater energy. It sensed only golden energy in the broad waves of magic. There was a purity within the essence, but not the kind the spell desired. The yellow magic exuded a striking sense of virtue. The light brought comprehension and a sense of loyalty. The incantation craved the opposite.

Ansas' pure ebony magic was the absolute essence of alteration. The spell might have been born out of a desire to purify water, but it was constructed as a vehicle of change. It would turn the putrid into the cleansed, but it was the influence of Ansas which allowed Shantree to utilize the ebony energy. The spell could only be powered by untainted black magic and it recoiled against Haven's offering.

Haven's willingness to sacrifice herself inspired the human wizard, but he also understood the failure of her attempt. Jure cast in white magic, and thus, he had equal control over all the hues. He could cast in black, and with that ability, he saw a potential solution.

He did not attempt to coax the raging incantation into his own core. He knew such an effort would meet with equal failure. The existence of all hues within his essence would form its own barrier, and the purification spell would resist leaving its point of origin until it was fulfilled. And that was the possible key.

Jure turned his focus away from the destructive spell and into his own core. He maintained his link with Shantree, but he began to pick through the magical flows within his own essence. Desperately, he found the purest strains of ebony energy within the shadows of his magical essence.

Once he bundled them together, he directed them into Shantree's core without hesitation, he placed no influence within the magic. He intended to provide enough energy to satisfy the spell burning through the elder's core. He hoped that with sufficient energy the incantation would finally unleash itself.

The raging spell, however, detected the tiniest of imperfections in the ebony magic. It rejected not only the impurities, but the entire flow of energy. It flushed it back toward Jure in a wave of disgust.

Both Haven and Jure became desperate as the constructed spell began to rip through the outer walls of Shantree's core.

"Haven!" Jure shouted. "Try to contain the spell. Don't let it splinter."

The elf sorceress pulled her golden power from the interior of Shantree's magical essence and attempted to surround the roaring incantation with a barrier of yellow magic. Briefly, the casing of energy held, and the runaway spell was forced back completely into the elf leader's core.

Jure added his own power to the covering, fed it with every hue available to him. He placed layer after layer around Haven's wall of light. The barrier of magic which surrounded Shantree's core became thick and unyielding.

"How long can you hold?" Jure asked of Haven.

"As long as I must," the elf sorceress responded, ignoring the pressure building up against her spell.

"If we can keep the magic within her contained," Jure continued, "then we have a..."

Jure never finished. The very concept of his strategy was flawed. It was a simple fact of existence which both he and Haven could not deny. The magic of an elf was not simply contained in the core. The magic spread throughout an elf's entire essence, and once the runaway spell found the proper channels, it would roam freely through Shantree's body.

As if to confirm this frightening realization, the raging incantation branched outward from Shantree's core in one massive burst. It did not break through Haven and Jure's containment. It simply rode the waves of Shantree's essence out into the very borders of her being. Once free, it became a burning surge of unfulfilled desire. Seeking pure ebony magic to fuel its purpose, it wreaked havoc throughout the body of the elf elder. It tore apart nearly every internal organ as it searched desperately for the energy to unleash itself.

There was, however, no pure ebony energy for the construct. As it exhausted its search through the elder's body, the influence of the unchecked spell dwindled down into an unfulfilled wish. Just as Shantree collapsed to the ground, the incantation faded from the depths of her corpse.

Chapter 2

Several elf guards dropped from the trees and formed a defensive perimeter around the fallen elf leader. Additional elf guards moved inward from their outer posts and took elevated positions upon sturdy limbs with bows at the ready.

Birk Grund coordinated their movements as he took absolute command. With the immediate surroundings secure, he called for healers before he even questioned Jure and Haven. Once he gave his orders, he turned to the two magic casters.

"What has happened?" the elf captain demanded.

The elf sorceress simply stared at the fallen elder, unable to speak, unable to cope with the tragedy which had just occurred.

Jure was just as shocked, but he was able to admit a painful truth.

"Healers won't help her," the wizard gasped. "She's dead."

The revelation stunned Birk, but he would not allow the magnitude of Jure's statement to keep him from acting. He would not accept there was nothing he could do, that death was the final word, but he was operating under a shroud of mystery.

"You were supposed to only probe her core. What did you find?"

"It wasn't what we found, it was what she did. It went out of control. We couldn't stop it."

"What? What went out of control?"

"She... she placed a memory of a spell in her core, but it was more than just a recollection. She reconstructed the spell itself, but she didn't cast it. I think she only pushed it into her core to see how her magic would respond. Her core didn't have the proper energy. The spell could only be fed with pure black magic. It raged out of control, ripped her up inside."

Birk finally realized it was the swell of an incantation which injured the elf elder, and he believed the effects of such energy could be undone.

"You cast in white magic!" he reminded the human wizard. "Reverse the outcome of the spell. Revive her!"

"You don't understand. It's not just the damage to her body. It tore through her magic, all of it, not just what was in her core. It raged through everything that made her an elf. Inside, there's nothing left of her."

"There must be something you can do!"

Jure struggled with his own understanding of what had been unleashed within the elf leader. He found it difficult to comprehend how the spell could have become so powerful. There was no ebony energy within the elder to offer any initial spark of influence. The construction of the spell was based solely on Shantree's memory of a past incantation. Even with a vivid recollection of the spell's design, the construct itself should have never amounted into anything more than an echo of a past intention.

While Haven had pulled back her golden magic from Shantree's corpse, Jure kept his link to the elder's broken core intact. He could see that nothing remained of Shantree's essence or of the reconstructed spell. Once the runaway incantation exhausted its search through the elf leader's essence, it faded away with every spark of Shantree's life.

The wizard searched desperately within the elder for some small flicker of residual energy, something of which he could take hold and possibly use as an anchor. If there

was even a hint of Shantree's essence, it was possible his magic—along with the aid of elf healers—might be able to produce a miracle, but there was no such ember remaining.

"There is nothing left within her to save," Jure painfully admitted to the elf captain.

Birk, still unsure of what had happened, would not give up all hope. As elf healers quickly arrived, he instructed them to work any and all of their magic upon their leader. Every possible method of restoration needed to be exhausted.

As several elves trained in different methods of renewal worked furiously upon their leader, Birk moved toward Haven. Jure's explanation left too many questions unanswered. He needed the perspective of an elf.

"How was this possible?" he demanded as he pulled upon the elf sorceress' upper arm.

Haven remained confused and emotionally crushed. She found the strength to speak, but she could not take her eyes off the fallen elder.

"I am not certain. The chain of events should have never reached a critical point. But it was like an avalanche, one massive wave, as if her memory instantly became an uncontrollable force."

"But what actually ignited the event?" Birk pressed. "A flood of energy such as you describe does not just suddenly appear!"

"She recreated a spell, one of the spells she used to purify water in the dark lands. She did not cast it. She constructed it from her own memories and then forced it down into her core."

"A purification spell led to this?"

"No, it was not the intention within the spell, but rather its construction. It sought pure ebony magic. There was none within her. It continued to expand until it broke from her core. It surged through every spark of magic within her, not caring for the destruction it left in its path."

"Her own spell damaged her? How is that possible?"

"I do not know," the elf sorceress admitted.

"Neither do I," Jure insisted. "It shouldn't have been possible. There was nothing to power it, but it kept growing. No matter how hard we tried, no matter what we did to contain it, it kept expanding."

"We *did* try!" the sorceress cried to the elf captain. "We did everything we could!"

Birk did not doubt the sorceress' efforts, but he remained steadfast in finding a source for the assault. He believed the elder had been attacked, and he needed to know from where... and by whom.

"But how did it happen? If Shantree made no attempt to actually cast the spell, there should have been no reaction. Something must have acted as a spark. Was there an external source?"

"There was no outside force involved," Haven insisted. "I kept watch over the elder's entire essence. There was no invading energy, no influence from another source. The spell came from the elder's mind and then it took on a will of its own."

"Are you sure? Think clearly. There is much at stake, not just the defense of this camp. If this was an attack from another spell caster, we might be able to counter the assault, neutralize the attacking energy and find some way to reverse the effects."

Jure replied with absolute certainty.

"There is nothing left to neutralize," the human wizard offered, still overwhelmed by the absolute anguish of the incident. "The energy which destroyed her has faded away."

"Where did it go? If it can be analyzed..."

"There is nothing to analyze!" Jure interrupted harshly. It was difficult enough for him to accept what had happened. The elf captain's insistence on looking for answers to irrelevant questions only served to frustrate the wizard further. "The spell is gone! It faded from her when her essence expired. There was no external attack. There's no spell caster hidden in the forest. The incantation was constructed from Shantree's own memory!"

"She killed herself with a recollection?" Birk questioned, unwilling to accept such a notion.

"It wasn't her intention. She wanted to help me. She recalled the previous spell and placed it in her core so that it might highlight certain aspects of her magic."

"Something must have altered the spell when it entered her essence," Haven offered. "It must have turned from a memory into an active influence."

"But such a transformation should be impossible," Jure maintained. "There was no actual casting. An alteration of that magnitude would require..."

The wizard stopped in mid-sentence. He looked to Haven with growing apprehension.

"Is that what caused it?" the wizard wondered aloud, growing even more appalled at the thought.

"What?" the sorceress questioned.

"A transformation within her own memory," the wizard answered, suddenly aghast by the prospect. "Her memory was based on more than just the casting of a spell. It was also based on how she could use Ansa's magic. When the sorcerer's magic was inside of her, he made it clear what he wished her to do. He wanted her to keep the elves alive, and so he inserted his own magic into her core to give her the necessary power."

"All of Ansa's magic has been purged from the elder," Birk contradicted the wizard's consideration. "You said so yourself."

"And it was," Jure admitted, but he continued to follow the undeniable truth of the accident. "It wasn't in the magic; it was hidden in Shantree's own memory! Pure ebony magic is the essence of change. Even the memory of a spell which contained a mere whisper of Ansa's influence would alter its direction once it was constructed, even if it was never meant to be cast. Don't you see? Shantree would have recalled a spell that was naturally inclined to transform. It would change its form based on its own structure rather than on any energy which it might use as a source of power. It became active through its natural inclination for alteration. The incantation itself served as the source of the assault."

Birk growled with discontent. His understanding of magic was greater than that of most humans. He utilized it to help defend the elf camp, instructed the spell casters on how to employ their efforts in concert with his guards, but he was no sorcerer. His comprehension of incantations did not come from first hand experience. Still, the explanations offered by Haven and Jure left him dissatisfied.

"If what you say is true," the captain countered, "then your own understanding of the situation is deficient. You may be wrong about what can be done to save her."

"I wish I was wrong! I wish I could do something, anything, to help her, but I saw how the magic moved within her. It was... savage."

Birk looked to the healers for additional information.

"Report!" he ordered.

"The internal damage is extensive," one healer advised, "beyond repair."

"Nothing is beyond repair," the captain insisted.

"Her essence has already left her body," a second healer claimed.

Birk looked about with growing anger. The area was secure, but nearly all the elves of the camp were congregating around them. He couldn't allow the discussion to continue in the open, but he would not risk doing further damage to the elf elder.

"Can she be moved?"

"It will not make a difference," one of the healers responded.

Birk signaled to several nearby guards.

"Take her to a shelter and restrict the area," he commanded, and then issued additional orders to the healers. "Continue to repair whatever damage has been done. This is not the end."

This is not the end.

The words echoed through Jure's mind, for he knew differently. It was the end for Shantree. There was no way for the elder to be saved. Her essence had already passed out of her body and through the veil between life and death.

Shantree was an elf. Magic had coursed through her entire body, as it did through all elves. That magic had been shredded by an insatiable spell, a spell transformed from a memory into a raging blast of hunger... and Jure should have known such a tragedy was a distinct possibility from the outset.

The shock and confusion which kept his other emotions in check quickly dissolved. The reality of the moment fell down upon him like a hammer. He watched in growing distress as the elf guards lifted Shantree's limp body.

She was dead... and he was responsible.

He looked about at the other elves. For the moment, they ignored him. Their attention remained fixed on the lifeless body of their leader. They stood dazed, gripped by the same shock which had initially kept Jure from collapsing, but for him, that burst of mental trauma slowly loosened its hold over his body. As full realization broke through, he dropped to his knees.

His undoing caught the other elves off guard. They looked upon him at first with confusion and then a hint of doubt. Even as their collective concern remained firmly upon the elf elder, they could not dismiss the sudden collapse of the powerful human wizard.

Jure sensed their confusion and even detected murmurs of suspicion. He didn't care if they blamed him. He blamed himself.

"I caused this," he admitted to every elf around him.

"No!" Haven responded almost violently. "You could not have known! You were only looking to find..."

"I should have known!" Jure insisted through an anguished shout. "I should have spent more time in preparation. I was impatient, so certain there was something within her. There was, but it wasn't going to help us, and it ended up destroying her."

The absolute finality of Shantree's fate beat him down even further into the dirt. He dropped his head into his hands as he realized what he had done... and what he had lost.

Shantree meant more to him than he could ever imagine. He had found more than just intriguing conversation and a hint of companionship when he visited the elf elder. There was a shared level of comfort which allowed him to grow beyond his anxieties.

Jure was an aging spell caster, a man past his physical prime but growing in magical prowess. Casting in a circle of white magic, he was one of the most powerful individuals in all of Uton, and yet the two forces of time and magic seemed to pull him in opposing directions. His muscles and joints often ached from over exertion and his mind yearned for tranquility. The magic, however, energized his soul and strengthened his body.

As the magic grew within him, he allowed solitude to serve as a source of protection. Even as he joined with others to fight against dark creatures, demons, and malicious sorcerers, there was always a wall around him, a self-made barrier meant to keep him safe.

That wall seemed to diminish whenever he spent time with Shantree Wispon. The elf elder always appeared at ease around him, and they spoke of life and magic. Their lively discussions never fed any potential conflict within the wizard. He found no need to shield himself from her probing questions or even boast of his abilities. He spoke, he listened, he learned, and he taught. He was content.

In that one miscalculation, any chance of future serenity evaporated. The wall around him instantly grew taller... wider. He was completely and totally alone, and he blamed no one else but himself for the loss.

In a display of both humiliation and self-admonishment, Jure struggled weakly to his feet. He swayed upon his legs, misery sapping his strength. He looked across the multitude of elves. He did not hide his shame from their questioning glances. He embraced it.

"You're right to look at me that way. I'm guilty."

"No," Haven attempted to intervene, but the human wizard wouldn't allow it.

"Yes! It was my fault, my idea. But it was an excuse. I sought a reason to be with you today. Rather than admit the truth, I reached for a justification. I had no right to place her in such jeopardy."

"But she agreed to..."

"Stop it! She was humoring an old man... a foolish old man. She was too kind to do anything else."

Most of the elves standing in the forest clearing looked to the human spell caster with confusion. They remained overwhelmed by the tragedy of their loss. There was no warning for the cataclysm which left them stunned and uncertain of their future. There had been no assault—no goblin raid and no river rogue incursion—and yet, their leader had fallen.

They had been preparing for the dormant season, collecting resources and securing their camp from potential raids. They were readying their bodies and minds for a long rest, adjusting to days of limited sunlight and extended cold. They would limit their movements, use the period of dormancy to recharge.

The shadows lengthened across the forest floor as the sun hung low in a bright blue sky. The brisk air seemed to weigh heavy upon their shoulders as their attention remained divided between the inconceivable confessions of the human wizard and the limp body of their camp elder.

A few of the elves began to murmur accusations of their own. There had been only one outsider to the camp, only one possible assassin. More than one pair of eyes glanced upon the wizard with growing suspicion.

Jure did not waver from the sparse number of condemning expressions. He reached out to those elves. He took hold of their blame and hostility.

"You're right to be angry. I caused this. I wanted to believe there was something to gain. I talked about protection, but whom did I protect? No one, and that's not why I came here."

He looked down at the ground in total shame.

"I came here for her, and now she's gone. My carelessness took her away from you. I don't blame you for hating me. I feel the same way."

He raised his head to look back into their faces. There were a few more expressions of bitterness, but they remained overwhelmed by doubt and confusion. He believed that too many of the elves would try to minimize his mistake, attempt to remove the responsibility from his shoulders, or worse, forgive him. He didn't want to be forgiven, and he would not place his punishment in the hands of elves who might take pity on him. He didn't deserve pity.

"Don't worry, you don't have to punish me," Jure claimed. "I will take care of that. I bear full responsibility for what has happened here, and I will accept the full measure of the cost."

He would say no more, and would not allow for debate. Before any elf could interfere, he lifted his arms and turned his palms inward to face his body. A white circle of power encircled him and a spell of teleportation whisked him away.

Chapter 3

Based on the circumstances, Ryson knew he couldn't find a primeval on his own, let alone face one. He had been given no direction from the spirit of Sy Fenden. He had no idea where to begin his search, and the ghost captain had not rematerialized to propose further guidance.

Discover.

That was the only instruction Sy had offered. Ryson believed the spirit warrior wanted him to search the lands and reveal the demon before it could unleash havoc and destruction, but despite his incomparable senses, delvers were not the best trackers. Discovering where a primeval might be hiding in all of Uton left him any number of paths to explore. At the very least, Ryson needed a clue, some small hint for his senses to seize and follow.

With nowhere else to start, Ryson left Burbon for Connel and made his way to the home of Enin, a friend once capable of casting white magic in two perfect circles. Sy Fenden had removed Enin's core to save the land from the demon lord, so Ryson knew the coreless wizard would not be able to cast a powerful spell to uncover the monster. Still, Enin retained a great understanding of magic, and the mysterious energy might be able to point to the demon in other ways.

Ryson traveled on foot to the large city. He enjoyed racing across the farmlands. All the crops had been harvested, and several early morning frosts had prevented tall weeds from taking dominant hold of the fields. The cold air and a stiff breeze from the northwest kept the ground hard for his delver legs. He could see for great distances as he raced eastward, especially when he ventured to the top of a tall hill.

He passed several farmers and merchants heading toward the city. He slowed to speak to a few, but he kept moving at the same pace of the horses drawing a cart or wagon. As he moved alongside, he asked for news or even rumors.

Most of those he questioned showed little to no alarm. They knew he was a delver from his startling speed and endurance, and many had heard of the name and deeds of Ryson Acumen, the purebred delver who helped protect the lands around Burbon and neighboring Connel. They were willing to answer any questions and freely gave the delver as much information as they could.

When asked about the status of outlying towns and lands, the merchants spoke of burgeoning trade and construction in Pinesway. The dwarves continued to assist the people of that settlement, just as they had helped with the reconstruction and expansion of Connel. Pinesway was actually becoming far more than an outpost on the border of Dark Spruce Forest.

Humans and dwarves had worked together to devise a series of tunnels. They designed a path underneath the forest which separated the wide plains in the east from the port cities on the western coast. Pinesway served as an entrance point for the underground passages, and news of the safer trading route spread fast.

Traveling merchants could now steer clear of the most dangerous regions within the vast forest, avoiding goblin raiding parties and monstrous shags. Pinesway was becoming a hub of transportation, an almost necessary destination for any trader hoping to move goods between the east and west.

As for the farmers, they spoke of an excellent harvest. Conditions had been almost perfect during the growing and harvest seasons. Their barns and silos were well stocked and many were seeking to fill Connel's storehouses with excess grains. When asked about any sightings of dark creatures, most complained only of razor crows and a few wayward hook hawks.

The farmers and the merchants said nothing of more distressing sightings. Even when pressed by Ryson to consider any mysterious events or fanciful tales, each traveler offered little news of any suspicious activities in the surrounding lands.

Such information only convinced the delver he needed additional assistance. There were no unsettling rumors of an evil menace too horrifying to describe. There were no fantastic stories of people suffering from an unknown plague. And there were no distressing tales of crop fields withering by a spreading pestilence.

If there had been a subtle clue within anything he had heard, Ryson probably would have altered his plans to investigate further. Connel might have been his intended destination, but he was always willing to adapt his plans to satisfy his instincts. Delver's lived to follow their senses, to race down new paths, and to solve mysteries.

To discover the location and intent of a primeval was not necessarily a burden for Ryson. It was a challenge which could fulfill his inner desires. Unfortunately, he needed a starting point—a scent in the wind, a distant echo across some canyon, or the scant markings of an old trail—but he remained totally directionless. Obtaining Enin's insight remained the delver's best hope.

As he closed upon Connel's outer limits, he stopped only briefly to identify himself to the city's patrols. Most of Connel's soldiers recognized Ryson on sight, and they viewed him as an ally. The outer guards acknowledged the delver and willingly offered status reports of the city and the surrounding lands. They revealed little in the way of possible threats or odd occurrences. They noted that much of the city had been calm and peaceful after the celebration of the Harvest Festival.

Deciding not to concern the soldiers with speculation, Ryson said nothing of his intentions or the warning he received from the ghost captain. Instead, he rushed into the heart of the city, passed many new buildings and monuments of dwarf construction, and stepped up to the front door of Enin's home.

He was met at the entrance by Holli Brances, an elf who served as Enin's guard and apprentice. She guided the delver into Enin's study where the ex-wizard was discussing certain elements of spatial manipulation with Vraya, a sorceress capable of casting black magic in a perfect circle.

Ryson had hoped Vraya would not be present. He remained uncomfortable around the magic caster and somewhat unsure of her powers and intentions. He wanted to keep such distractions to a minimum, but just as demons had found a way to enter Uton, it seemed as if the sorceress traveled paths which kept her close to certain aspects of the delver's life as well.

"Hello, Ryson," the sorceress offered with a smile.

"Hello, Vraya," the delver replied politely, but then his delver curiosity spurred him to question the sorceress' attention toward his activities.

"You didn't know I was coming?" he asked as he watched her reaction carefully.

"I promised I wouldn't watch your movements without your consent," she responded without apparent insult. "I intend to keep to that promise."

Ryson nodded with appreciation, but he was not completely satisfied.

"But you still have a connection to my sword, yes?"

"Your blade has an enchantment that's difficult to ignore. I've told you that its alteration was a beacon to me, but I've learned to place that beacon out of my consciousness. Your visit here is as a surprise to me as it is to Enin."

Vraya then turned to the coreless wizard.

"I assume it is a surprise," she noted. "You didn't appear to be expecting him."

"I wasn't," Enin confessed. "I imagined he would be patrolling the regions around Burbon. With the first snows approaching, goblin raids become more likely."

"Burbon's guard, and certainly Sy, can handle any goblin raid," Ryson explained. "I'm here for something else, something worse."

Holli noted both the tone of Ryson's voice and the concerned expression on his face. As a trained elf guard, it was her duty to recognize far more subtle signs of impending danger. It was also her obligation to identify any threats and deal with them accordingly.

"Many things are worse than a goblin raiding party," Holli offered, "but few can bring Ryson Acumen away from protecting his wife and his dog."

"They'll be okay, as long as they stay home," the delver answered as he considered why he had left Burbon. He believed Linda and Stomps would be protected under Sy's watchful care, but he wasn't about to allow them to become prisoners forced to hide behind the walls of the small town. "Burbon's probably the only safe place to be right now, but the rest of Uton isn't so lucky."

"What is it?" Enin asked.

Ryson didn't hesitate in responding.

"A primeval... here in Uton."

"You've seen it?"

"No, Sy sensed it. He told me it had come. I don't think anyone here is going to doubt Sy's word about something like that. He didn't tell me where it was, so we have to find it."

The immediate response to what Ryson believed should have been disturbing news was a simple but surprising question.

"Why?" Vraya challenged.

"Excuse me?" the delver replied.

"Why do we have to find it?"

"Why? You need to know why?"

"Yes, I do."

"It's a primeval," Ryson responded with astonishment. "It's dangerous."

"Look around you, Ryson. All of Uton is dangerous. There are dark creatures in every corner of the land."

"This is a demon! More than just a demon, it's a primeval."

"True, and I don't doubt the word of a spirit, but things have changed. The barrier between Demonsheol and Uton is broken. What did you expect would happen? What did any one of us expect?"

"So you want to ignore it?"

"Define ignore? There are shags in the hills, river rogues in the swamps, goblins in the forest, and hook hawks sailing across the skies over the mountains. Aren't you ignoring them? Or will you chase after each one?"

"You're comparing a primeval to a shag or a hook hawk?"

"I'm comparing the danger. I realize a primeval is far more powerful than any of the creatures I've just mentioned, but that doesn't alter the question. Why do we need to find it?"

Holli decided to answer. She considered the sorceress' question a legitimate one which required a legitimate response.

"You do not simply ignore a fox in a hen house and wait for it to start eating the chickens before you act."

Vraya responded with a noticeable hint of animosity toward the elf guard, a tone certainly more harsh than she had used with Ryson.

"True, but what of the foxes in the forest? Do you hunt them all down because they might one day get too near a farmhouse?"

"Your analogy might be flawed," the elf guard replied. "What do you consider the forest and what do you consider the farmhouse? If the primeval remained in Demonsheol, I would have paid it no mind, just as I would dismiss a fox in the forest. A primeval in Uton has taken obvious steps toward the farmhouse. Where exactly do we draw the line?"

"Why must we draw a line at all? Maybe we should just let things play out before we interfere with events which may not involve us."

"I believe I have heard this argument before," Holli noted as she looked to the coreless wizard for guidance.

"Indeed you have," Enin admitted. "From me. I have always been careful in interfering in the lives of others."

"And do you think we should ignore this problem?" Holli questioned.

"Ignore? No. But it does require cautious consideration. We need to be certain of what we're doing before we go on some pointless hunt."

"You think Sy was wrong?" Ryson questioned almost harshly.

"Absolutely not," Enin answered defensively. "If he told you a primeval is here, I'm sure there's one prowling about. The question is, what should we do about it?"

"Sy told me to find it."

Vraya noted something in the delver's words, a slight alteration in his tone. Her magic was based on change, and it was natural for her to notice it.

"Is that what he actually told you?"

Ryson hesitated, but then revealed the truth.

"He said, 'discover.' He doesn't talk to anyone else but Captain Klusac and me, so if he says something, it's important."

"Discover? That's it? Discover what?"

"He just said that one word. He doesn't say a great deal to me at once. I'm not sure why. Mostly only two or three words at a time."

"And why do you think he wants you to go searching for this primeval?"

"It was all part of one conversation," Ryson answered with a hint of frustration becoming apparent.

"So he just appeared and warned you a primeval had entered Uton?"

"No, he was outside the wall when I first saw him. We were talking about something else when he sensed the primeval."

"What were you talking about?"

"I had questions for him about... that's not important. It was just my curiosity, but he stopped in the middle of it all and told me about the demon. If you were there, you'd know he was serious about it."

"Did he give you any specific details about the demon?" Holli asked, still attempting to define the scope of the threat.

"I asked him if it was close. He told me it wasn't, but he didn't say anything else about its location. I asked him what it wanted. He said it wanted to stay in Uton. Then right after that, that's when he said, 'discover.' So I don't have to discover what it wants. Sy already knew. I asked if it was Rul Saattan, because Sy said it was powerful. He said it wasn't Rul, but rather a primeval. So he also knows what kind of demon it is. The only thing left to consider is where it's at. What else is there to discover?"

"A primeval wishes to stay in Uton?" Enin questioned, obviously surprised by the news.

"That's what Sy said."

"Just because we know it wants to stay doesn't mean we have to hunt it down," Vraya maintained. "Maybe Sy wants you to think about what you should really do. Maybe you need to *discover* whether or not you should even get involved."

"That doesn't make sense. Why would he say 'discover' if he didn't want me to pursue the demon? If he didn't want me involved, he wouldn't even have told me about it. No, he wants me to be active in this, not stand around and wait for it to show up on someone's doorstep."

"I have to agree," Holli concurred.

"That's not a surprise," Vraya replied with a frown.

"You are displeased that I see the reasoning behind Ryson's concern?"

"No, I'm just not surprised that you would completely discount my opinion."

"I discount nothing. I consider all options."

"But mine certainly doesn't count as much."

"I thought we were done with this type of bickering?" Enin intervened.

"We're not bickering," Vraya shot back. "I'm just revealing how I feel."

The coreless wizard saw an opportunity to reduce the tension and address the situation in a more practical manner. He could also allow the sorceress to offer her opinions without creating further conflict.

"And how do you feel about the situation we face?" Enin asked. "Ryson comes to my door, tells us a primeval has appeared in Uton, but you appear reluctant to obtain additional information on the matter."

Vraya remained somewhat combative.

"You're questioning me now too?"

"Absolutely, but 'questioning' is the appropriate word. I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm curious about your opinion. Imagine Sy came to you instead of Ryson. What would you do?"

"I thought I already made it clear. I don't think I would do anything. I admit that Sy's suggestion to *discover* is unsettling, but it's also vague. I would take it as advice to consider the situation as a whole. He tells us a demon—a primeval—has come to Uton. That's certainly not the best news to hear, but I don't think it's a surprise either. I've certainly been expecting it."

"But Ryson warned Rul Saattan to stay out of Uton," Enin reminded the sorceress. "This is somewhat unexpected."

"Actually, Ryson told Rul not to threaten him or his wife. He also warned him not to start a war. That was all directed against Rul, not the other demons. The barrier has fallen for them all, not just Rul."

"So you expected this?"

"I expect change. It's part of my energy."

"And I realize the basis of that energy requires you to embrace sweeping changes."

"You think I'm happy a primeval is in Uton?"

"Happy? Not at all, but I do believe you would be the most willing to accept it."

Vraya considered the charge and she could not disagree.

"You're probably right, but that's also somewhat immaterial. I still believe it may be a mistake to go charging off to locate a primeval without giving it some consideration."

"Then we agree on that point," Enin allowed. "Even when the barrier between Demonspawn and Uton existed, demons were still able to cross into our realm. It wasn't easy. It required strong desire, a great deal of magic, and consequences if the demon ever attempted to return to its breeding grounds, but it still happened. We didn't chase down every demon until one created a known danger to the land."

"A primeval requires additional care," Holli offered.

"I agree with that as well," Enin acknowledged.

"And Sy warned me about this primeval," Ryson reminded the coreless wizard. "We can't discount that either."

"I haven't," Enin responded.

"Can't we show care and consider ways to discover what the primeval is up to without actually trying to locate it?" Vraya suggested.

"Possibly, we can listen for news and consider certain rumors more seriously."

"I've already talked to some farmers and merchants," Ryson interrupted. "I also spoke with the town guard. There's nothing going on. I haven't even heard about anything unusual from the elves in Dark Spruce."

"That's a start," Enin noted.

"It's not a start," Ryson objected. "It doesn't lead anywhere."

"It tells us the primeval is initially being careful," Holli countered. "Word spreads fast these days. The magic allows for that."

"The demon may just be sleeping in a cave somewhere," Vraya proposed.

"Even if that's so," Ryson stated, "we still need to be sure. I don't want to wait around to hear that a town was destroyed when we could have prevented it, do you?"

"Congratulations," Vraya responded unhappily. "You've now managed to put the blame for anything this primeval does completely on my shoulders. What am I supposed to say now? If you follow my advice and do nothing, it'll be my fault if even one person is harmed."

"No, it'll be my fault," Ryson countered. "I'm the one who talked to Sy. What happens next is up to me."

"Placing blame will not help solve the problem," Holli advised. She then fixed her attention on the delver. "You came to us for a reason. What was it you hoped to accomplish here?"

"I was hoping Enin could help direct me, use the magic and find some clue about where the primeval might be or what it might be planning. I think I have to *discover* at least that much."

"But my magic is gone," the coreless wizard replied. "You know that."

"But you understand the energy more than anyone else. The primeval might already be casting spells. What Holli said is true. The magic allows for news to travel fast. It also may help us get the information we need."

"But without a core, it would be difficult for me to assist you."

"What about Jure?" Ryson proposed. "He's been pretty efficient in tracking magic. Maybe he could help us. With your advice and his magic, that might be all we need."

"Jure's not here," Vraya informed the delver. "He went to the elf camp in Dark Spruce. He wants to explore some theories he has on creating natural barriers against demons. I wanted to go with him, but he felt it was better if he went alone. He wasn't sure how much the elves would trust me. I'm used to that, so I understood. Still, I think his idea was a good one, a worthwhile course to pursue. If we discover how to contain demons here in Uton, we won't have to worry about whether they're here or not."

"But we would still have to find them in order to contain them," Ryson argued, holding to the belief that he needed to be more active in the hunt.

"Actually, I think Vraya would be better at finding this particular demon than Jure," Enin offered as he finally saw a path which might satisfy everyone's concerns.

"And why is that?" Vraya asked, interested in hearing Enin's ideas.

"A primeval entering Uton is no small event. Primevals serve as overlords in Demonsheol, something like vassals to a king. All demons might ultimately submit to Rul Saattan, but Rul allows the primevals to handle the more menial tasks of maintaining discipline in his realm. The barrier between realms may have indeed fallen, but a primeval moving from Demonsheol to Uton would indicate a significant alteration in terms of the influential structure among demons."

"You think I would be able to notice such a change?"

"Notice is not the best word. I don't think you would just sense a vibration of alteration from Demonsheol rushing through the magic here, but I think you would be the most capable of seizing a structural deviation."

"Structural deviation? How would I focus on such a thing?"

"Recall the power of Rul Saattan as well as the flows of influence within Demonsheol. You stood with Ryson in the demon lord's realm. You should remember the pulses of his influence. His control over primevals is substantial. It would have to be. If a primeval has created a space of separation across realms, I suspect the structural link would have to be altered in order to compensate for such spatial differences, somewhat like the spatial manipulation we discussed earlier."

"I see, but I couldn't just cast a spell to seek out such a manipulation."

"No, not a casting, more of a reaching out with your awareness for alteration."

"Reaching into Demonsheol is not something I find enticing."

"I'm happy to hear that, but you won't be reaching into Demonsheol. That would be inadvisable. The best place to search is in the undefined borders between realms."

"If they're undefined, how can I search them?"

Enin rubbed his forehead with his fingers in an obvious display of frustration, then finally smiled as he looked back to Vraya with an amused expression.

"Have you always been so... particular about words?"

"What can I say, I tend to notice discrepancies."

"Indeed, well, perhaps undefined is not the best description, but the space between realms is not easy to describe. It's not like traveling across a river or a sea from one land mass to another. Realms such as the dark lands and Uton, and now even Demonsheol, can be connected with portals. The thin veil which separates two realms when a portal is created is the space I'm talking about."

"So you want me to create a portal to Demonsheol?"

"Absolutely not! That could be disastrous. It's bad enough some demons can now create their own, let's not help them with that."

"But then how do I reach the space between realms without creating a portal?"

"Creating a portal is just a means of compressing space into a usable connection, a tunnel if you will. The space that is compressed in such a casting can be examined without actually casting a spell. You just have to reach for it with your own magic. Think of the mechanics of a portal spell, its ultimate purpose, then consider how the spell interacts with the realms it connects. Those aspects are what you have to examine."

"That's inspired."

"Not really. It's just an understanding of more than what a spell can do. It's appreciating how it works."

Vraya took a moment to consider the implications, but then was forced to ask another question.

"I understand what you're saying. I believe I can even accomplish what you ask, but how do I find the primeval in this manner?"

"You won't be looking for the actual demon. You'll only be inspecting a connection, a link between the primeval and Rul Saattan. In this, we might find a clue as to what the primeval is really up to."

"But you already said demons have crossed into different realms even before the barrier was broken. There may be hundreds of connections, thousands, even more."

"That's where your affinity for alteration comes into play. I cannot imagine a primeval venturing out of Demonsheol. It would be like an arm leaving the body and trying to exist on its own. That is the deviation in structure which you should be able to find."

"I suppose I can try," the sorceress offered.

"You're going to do it now?" Ryson questioned, surprised by the sudden turn of events.

"You're the one who came here hoping to find the primeval. You seem sure Sy's spirit wants you to *discover* what the demon is up to. You're a delver, why wait?"

Ryson didn't mind moving fast—it was how he was accustomed to travel—but he felt hesitant in tying his objectives to Vraya's abilities.

"Maybe we should wait until Jure gets back."

"As I said before," Enin interrupted, "Vraya is more suited for this procedure than Jure."

"But he could assist. It wouldn't hurt to have two magic casters work on this. Wouldn't it actually be more efficient?"

"Actually, no," the coreless wizard replied. "Jure is very adept at finding magical flows and connections, but that's not exactly what we're looking for here. We're looking for a deviation, and that's Vraya's specialty. Jure's white magic might interfere."

"I also believe we should not wait," Holli added. "A primeval in Uton is no insignificant matter. It needs to be addressed without delay."

Vraya was surprised that Holli didn't voice further skepticism. She believed the elf was going to agree with Ryson and suggest Jure's presence would allow for greater safety. With Ryson as the lone dissenter, she decided to ease his concerns.

"Don't worry, Ryson. I'm not doing this just for you. I want to see if I can follow Enin's instructions on this. It's a chance to enhance my understanding of ebony energy. You won't owe me anything."

"I wasn't worried about that," Ryson disputed.

"Something is clearly bothering you. A delver usually doesn't like to wait."

"I also follow my instincts."

"And what do your instincts tell you about this?"

Ryson remained silent as he contemplated the question. Vraya was right. Delvers didn't like to wait. They rushed off to explore distant lands at the slightest beckoning scent in the wind. They also often looked for what others might miss, and he began to realize that the search for a primeval was as much a gift as it was a challenge. He decided to take hold of the opportunity and view it as a chance to expand his own knowledge of the world.

"My instincts tell me we need to find this demon," Ryson admitted, "even if I have to depend on you to point me in the right direction. Give me something to work with, and whether you agree with me or not in what I have to do, I'll find this primeval."

Chapter 4

Through the force of will, Vraya gathered the energy of her essence but did not shape it into a spell. Instead, she allowed the magic of her core to strengthen her awareness as she reached out beyond the physical realm in which she stood. Placing her consciousness into the stream of magic, she prepared her spirit to slip out of her body.

She thought of a portal spell, considered how it was constructed. Spell casters would create rifts in different fashions, usually depending on the hue of their essence. A wizard using the crimson energy of the land might turn the surrounding grounds into a tunnel, while a sorceress utilizing the violet magic of a storm would mold the wind into a swirling vortex. Gateways between realms could vary greatly in foundational design, but one constant remained; every portal focused on bridging the gap between two points.

Enin referred to the borders between realms as undefined space. It was a clear contradiction. In order to exist, borders needed to be defined. They set limits, separated lands, and divided realms.

The boundaries themselves, however, had no actual size. A border was an abstract line of separation. It was the edge of a shadow with no depth, or a beam of light with no substance.

For Vraya, finding the proper boundary was similar to facing the unforgiving truth when approaching a pool of water. Either she broke through the surface, or she didn't. Either she got wet, or she stayed dry. There was no in-between.

But Enin was right about Vraya's magic. Ebony energy was the essence of alteration. In the transformation from one condition to another, a boundary between states of existence was crossed. If focused properly, her black magic would allow her to enter the gap between realms, even if no such space existed in a measured fashion.

As she considered the parameters of a portal spell, she focused her magic on the undefined space which would separate two realms at the very heart of a gateway. It was a bridge without substance, and she needed to direct her spirit toward that connection. Once there, she had to hold herself within the confines of the bridge and refrain from reaching a set point in any connecting reality.

The essence of her magic carried her awareness out of her body, out of Uton, and out of the physical world. It was difficult to describe what she felt, even as that was the only sensation available to her consciousness. She could not see, hear, or smell anything in the rolling blankness which encompassed her perception, but she could touch the swaying winds of change, feel them pressing against the flow of her magic.

Within those shifting streams, she immediately felt the death of an elderly man. She could not identify him, but she felt him passing through the undefined space as he went from one existence to the next. In the following instant, she felt a young but sick woman move across the threshold between physical and spiritual reality.

In the space her magical awareness occupied, Vraya could feel the deaths of others as well. She sensed the passing of dozens in a single heartbeat. No matter where they lived on Uton, they all crossed through the veil at the same point. They all called to her spirit, but she made the deliberate decision to separate out the first two individuals she encountered.

The sensation was actually invigorating for the sorceress. She could sense the depth of change in each individual. She knew the man had been old and the woman sick by the immediate alteration in their essence. At the veil between life and death, age and disease were left at the doorstep to a spiritual existence. They were cast aside into the emptiness of the abyss, and any impairment disintegrated in the sea of transformation.

As she moved past the initial two deaths and began to appreciate the scope of transformation as a whole, the significance of the experience became even greater. The exaltation within her spirit roared so brilliantly, the sorceress almost forgot her intended purpose. The radiance of transformation bolstered her magical essence. The joy of sensing an intense conversion brought serenity to her soul.

Just as Ryson had once seen his own soul in Demonspawn, Vraya previously witnessed the essence of her spirit with a spell which altered her understanding of life and death. She had used Ryson's experience as a guide for the incantation.

The spell had allowed her to see beyond her magical core and gain an appreciation for the very essence of her life. Seeing beyond her mortal body had brought her great hope for the future, but she could never truly realize the extent of its magnitude until she stood at the doorway to what could only be described as heaven.

Initially, she believed she could remain within that curtain for an eternity. The vastness of joy she felt could not be measured by any means defined by man or magic. As one spirit after another shed their pains and frustrations, her own essence bubbled with an enthusiasm which was beyond intoxicating, it was sheer euphoria.

She could not, however, keep her attention fixed upon the endless number of spirits passing through the veil. There was an overwhelming attraction to what waited beyond the border. It beckoned to her with such strength, she realized remaining at the threshold was insufficient. Despite the joy within sensing the transformation of others, she felt an overwhelming desire to move forward herself.

Caught up within the hopeful current swirling around the transformational edge, Vraya attempted to push her own essence further into the splendor which called to her spirit. The thought of finding the primeval became a distant echo. She became almost obsessed with pressing further beyond the border.

To her great dismay, she could not move past a certain point. An unseen wall blocked her path. The more she pushed forward, the firmer the barrier became. She might have been able to move into the gap between realms and take shelter in the limitless space between life and death, but she could not break completely through the border.

Considerably disheartened, the sorceress reached out with her consciousness to those able to make the full transformation. She could not speak with them, but she could gather a level of comprehension. Every individual entitled to cross had fulfilled his or her commitment to a physical presence. While it was not so much an aspect of earning their passage into the next existence, they all had acknowledged the necessary acceptance of their condition. In the swirling tide of expanded awareness, it became very apparent to Vraya that it was not yet her time.

Monumentally difficult, the sorceress turned from that particular veil and reached out to other variations. She placed her entire attention on the space within the void. While most souls she encountered made the transition from life to death in an instant, she discovered a meager few listlessly suspended in a state of nothingness.

Specs of light floated in a murky haze. She watched them briefly as she hoped to expand her understanding of the transitional process. The souls she inspected appeared unwilling or unable to complete the conversion. She did not find any indication of an anchor or obstruction which interfered with the process, except for one individual point of light. In the distance, she noted the essence of one bright soul apparently trapped within the twisted echoes of smoldering magical debris, as if the unfortunate spirit had been placed in a cage. The others, however, just seemed to drift through the void as if they were bewildered by their surroundings.

Vraya could not understand why these ghosts had wandered from the path and found themselves lost in transition. They appeared more confused than misguided. It was as if indecision had caught them, or perhaps they had merely stumbled and required a brief moment to regain their direction.

While that deviation lacked any true joy, it did not reach the level of desolation Vraya believed would indicate the presence of her objective. To find the primeval, she knew she needed to search a far more desperate state of existence. With a mind toward the fundamental nature of demons, she allowed the ebony energy within her to seek out the greatest variation from the peace she first encountered.

In a moment of spirit-wrenching horror, the blankness which had engulfed her vision dissipated, and a clear but sickening image came into her consciousness. With just a glimpse of absolute malevolence, she saw into the swirling mist of a decidedly unpleasant alternative.

She had moved closer to the border which divided Demonsheol from Uton, but she was not yet within grasp of the links between demons and their breeding grounds. She was, however, able to glance into the hollows of an emptiness where demons roamed freely and fervently.

She could sense their hunger, feel the violence of their insatiable cravings. The sensation tore at her essence, but the pain did not end there. While she was blocked from seeing into the blissful salvation of a restored afterlife, no such blinding screen saved her from a view of endless torment. A vision of depravity arose in her perception, and she actually saw the malice of demonic intentions. Hate, envy, greed, and rage gurgled out of crazed monsters trying to trap errant souls. Images of cruelty filled her consciousness and she felt a sickness spread through her awareness.

Initially, the monsters attempted to embrace the sorceress. Several demons beckoned her, tempted her with a false promise of security, even ecstasy. They reached out with long arms and sharp claws, but as they made contact with her essence, they turned away in disgust. They knew her spirit remained anchored to her body in the physical world, and they would not waste their efforts on fruitless hunts. They turned their attention back to wayward spirits drifting aimlessly through the expanse.

As the shifting mass of demonic longing passed beyond her, she finally reached her objective. She found the dividing line between Demonsheol and Uton, the undefined space which allowed for certain connections.

With the proper spell, a portal could take substance and allow for travel between realms, but even without a spell, certain links became apparent. Demons which had crossed to other lands remained connected to their master, Rul Saattan. Rul remained at the center of Demonsheol and his command over every demon sent ripples into the divide.

Vraya noted hundreds upon hundreds of thin lines spreading out from Demonsheol. For the most part, they all appeared the same, and she had no idea how to distinguish between them. She then recalled Enin's advice and realized she didn't have to search through connections which appeared similar. She needed to find the one which stood out among the rest.

The instant she focused on such a task, all of the threads faded from her awareness, save one. The strand was clearly different from the others. It was, in fact, severed and broken, and the loose end wriggled back and forth as if desperately searching for something. It moved like a worm on the ground trying to avoid being seized by the fingers of a young boy.

Vraya focused upon the long, squirming shaft and followed it from its broken end back to its origin. She sensed it reaching out from the center of Demonsheol, directly from Rul Saattan.

As the sorceress' consciousness followed the shifting stem, a swell of powerful magic raced through the strand and took notice of her intentions... and her magic. Spearing outward almost as fast as a delver could run, the twisting strand wrapped aggressively around Vraya's essence. It took firm hold and seemed greatly attracted to her ebony energy. It wrapped tightly around her awareness and attempted to harness the power, pull it into its own substance.

Vraya could feel the desire of the strand. She knew it craved her magic, but despite its efforts, it could not steal the energy from her essence. The magic around her formed a protective shield and would not allow itself to be drained away.

Failing to absorb the ebony power, the long broken stalk attempted to dislodge the sorceress from the emptiness of the border. It tried to pull her into the region of its own origin, but once again, it failed. Her essence remained anchored to her body back in Uton. Without an actual portal to connect the two realms, Vraya's consciousness could not be abducted.

Unable to steal her magic or pull the sorceress into Demonsheol, the stem altered its purpose. It continued to confine her, but it also became a line of communication back to its master. It sent a callous message into her thoughts.

"Do not interfere!"

Vraya immediately recognized the voice of Rul Saattan. Not willing to face the demon lord under such circumstances, she finally fought against the confinement of the strand. She flung the withering stem away from her essence. She considered refocusing on her physical being and returning her awareness to Uton, but she decided not to cower before such a threat.

Remaining within the boundaries between realms, she used her magic to conceal herself from Rul's perception. She realized the broken stem was important to her search, but she had discovered the wrong end. She didn't need to find a link back to Demonsheol; she needed to find the opposing portion which led to Uton.

If Sy's spirit was correct—and she had no reason to doubt the ghost captain—the primeval had already passed through the border between realms. The snapped line was obviously a significant discovery, and if it was the structural deviation Enin described, it revealed more than just an alteration. The rupture indicated a complete severing of the link between a primeval and its master.

Free of the broken strand, Vraya decided to search more carefully for the other end, the half which would possibly lead to the primeval. She descended deeper into the abyss of the surrounding emptiness. It was as if her consciousness swam through dark waters.

She could no longer see anything. The images of the demons and their connections to Rul Saattan faded from her awareness. She continued to feel the pulse of change and the flow of her own magic, but both became more subdued. She felt as if she was slowly falling through an eternal void.

With one last effort, she focused on shifting her concentration. She had already located the obvious deviation within the countless overlapping threads. She discovered the broken link, but she had found the end which thrashed violently against the split. She wondered if the opposing side shared a similar inclination to reconnect, or if instead, it hoped to remain divided.

Once again, the very moment her consciousness bore down upon locating the divergence, she seized upon her objective. She sensed the opposite end of the broken link lurking deep in a blanket of fog.

Swimming carefully through the void so the wake of her movements would not leave a trail, she pushed deeper into the emptiness until she knew she was completely free of Rul Saattan's perception. She reached out to the hidden strand as she hoped to determine its origin.

When she ultimately made contact, a billowing mass of smoke filled her thoughts. It threatened to engulf her consciousness and smother her awareness. She feared she would drown in a cloud of smoldering ash. She attempted to scream out with a storm of magic, hoping the release of energy would clear her senses.

In the void, she could not find her voice and the magic which carried her consciousness began to drift from her grasp. It was not being pulled from her, but rather diluted. The smoke was engulfing everything that she was, both her magic and her spirit.

She made one last attempt to use her fading magic. In an effort to clear the smoke from her essence, she focused on allowing the ebony energy to become a sweeping force of change, a gust of wind that would blow the smoke back to its point of origin.

Unfortunately, her energy could not make contact with the all-encompassing haze. As the wave of black magic poured into the smoke, it passed through without its intended influence.

It did, however, latch onto the other half of the broken strand and race down the length of its shaft. For one brief moment, Vraya could see a particular section of Uton stretch out before her, but before she could define the actual existence of a primeval in that location, her magic was shaken free and sent back to her.

As her magic reformed within her essence, she finally noticed the echo of another presence. There was no message, no voice pushed into her awareness, but she could not dismiss the existence of a great power. It was nowhere near the sheer rage of Rul Saattan, but it made a definite imprint in her consciousness.

As she tried to examine it further, the smoke grew thicker around her essence. It poured deeper into her perception and threatened to erase her every memory. If it succeeded, she would be unable to recall her own existence. Her essence would remain in the void forever. Sinking deeper into the haze, she realized retreat was her only option.

She recoiled from both the smothering smoke and the boundaries she had hoped to explore. Her eyes fluttered open as she found herself on the floor in Enin's study with Ryson, Holli, and Enin huddled around her and attempting to revive her.

A Final Note from the Author

Search and Discover does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many on-line ebook stores. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit www.sitelane.com.

If you have a comment or question about any of the *Delver Magic* books, please feel free to send me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. Please consider my other novels, including *Soul View*, *Soul Chase*, *Detached Lives*, *Slow Fall*, *Counterproductive Man*, *When Do I See God?* and *Alien Cradle*.

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