

Delver Magic

Book XI

Emptiness Filled

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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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.

Emptiness Filled is the eleventh 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 filling the emptiness!

Prologue

"You are dismissing me?" Holli Brances questioned her mentor, her voice impassive, her expression vacant.

Despite the composure of the elf's demeanor, Enin felt the sting of a rebuke. Holli's question turned his complex considerations into a single and blunt accusation. He was, in fact, asking the elf guard to leave his side, perhaps permanently.

He had struggled with the decision before making the request, but he believed deeply in the merits of the proposal. He was a wizard without a magical core, and the services of an elf guard for his protection had become unjustifiable. It was like having an armed guard stand watch over a small bin of kindling wood during the dry season. He understood the logic, and even the necessity of sending the elf guard to the city of Portsans, and yet, the bluntness of Holli's question put him immediately on the defensive.

"That sounds rather harsh," Enin objected.

"It is a question of fact... and of your intention."

"But it sounds cold, like I'm throwing you out."

"You wish to send me away," the elf guard noted. "You just said so."

Enin grimaced. The words hurt.

"No, I do not *wish* to send you away."

"Then why do you want me to go to Portsans?"

"Jure will need your assistance."

Holli recalled their last encounter with the elder wizard. Jure had left for the coast after the death of Shantree Wispon, the leader of the elves in Dark Spruce Forest. Though the talented spell caster remained in mourning over the loss, Jure had managed to move beyond the overwhelming despair which impaired his judgment. He had sought out isolation in order to ponder his own fate, and Holli pointed out the inconsistency in Enin's claim.

"When Jure left," the elf reminded her teacher, "you stated he needed time by himself, time to reflect on the changes he faces."

"And he does."

"Then why send me after him now? It has only been a few days since he left for the coast. If I offer my services to him, as you suggest, he will not be alone."

"Because you have the ability to allow him the space he needs while offering him the assistance he is bound to require."

"Do you think he is in danger and needs protection?"

"Only to a degree. He can protect himself against most threats, but I'm not sure if he can handle the internal struggle he's about to face."

"Are you concerned he might purposely forge a path toward his own destruction, as he nearly did before?" she questioned.

"No, I think he's past that, but he might actually be facing a larger problem. By now he's realizing the extent of the alteration within him. The elf essence he absorbed is taking its hold."

"I doubt that would surprise him."

"I agree. It will not be a surprise, but he still needs to make a decision regarding the consequences. Elf essence is not something that will willingly remain isolated. It will

begin to spread beyond the boundaries of his magical core. It will wish to become a larger part of him. He may try to contain it."

As an elf, Holli understood the aspects of an elf's magical essence, but Enin seemed to reveal additional concerns about the transfer of magical energy.

"Do you think he should?" Holli wondered, curious about Enin's opinion on the matter. "Do you think there is a benefit to him by isolating the elf magic within him?"

Enin did not offer a clear answer. He appeared to evade the thrust of the question by focusing on the aspects of the magic and Jure's previous actions.

"I'm not sure if he has a choice. He made his decision when he absorbed Shantree's magical energies. I don't know if he will ever be able to completely contain it."

The name of the elf elder provoked a slight shadow of sorrow across Holli's otherwise stoic demeanor. The death of an elf camp leader lingered over the spirits of all its members, and even though Holli had been banished from her camp, she remained concerned with the security and welfare of the elves.

She would not, however, allow Enin to avoid the significance of her question.

"I did not ask you if Jure *could* contain Shantree's essence. I asked if you thought he *should*."

"That's a very difficult question, and one he should not face alone. That is the reason I believe you should go to Portsans."

"We will get to that in a moment," Holli persisted. "But if I am to understand the logic behind your request, I must first consider your judgment on the matter. Do *you* believe Jure should attempt to contain the elf essence which now resides within him?"

The coreless wizard finally answered directly, and he did so without hesitation.

"No."

Holli almost accepted the simple answer, but she realized she needed more, and if Enin was going to send her away, she would insist on greater detail.

"Please explain why."

Enin exhaled heavily. It was difficult enough for him to acknowledge a change in their relationship, to actually send Holli away, but it was just as complex to explain his own intricate understanding of magical energies.

"You're not making this any easier for me," he stated through a sigh.

"You are the one issuing the directive," Holli noted. "It is a serious request, one that will significantly alter our relationship. It should be explained."

In a moment of weakness, Enin tried to make light of the matter, but he immediately regretted it.

"I thought elf guards were supposed to take orders without question," he offered with a slight grin briefly twisting his lips.

"And is that how you think of me... a simple guard to be dismissed upon a whim? Am I to remain silent regarding this unexpected order?"

Enin was not surprised by Holli's reaction, and his repentance was both genuine and immediate.

"No, I'm sorry I said that. I'm just trying to avoid certain things, trying to make this as quick as possible."

Holli sensed the coreless wizard's remorse and offered him a reprieve from his hasty comment, but not from her question.

"Avoidance will not resolve the uncertainty of the issue at hand. You have requested I leave your side. You wish me to watch over Jure. I realize he faces challenging times, but I still must know the extent of your wishes. In order to understand them, I need to know the basis for your concerns. You stated Jure might try to contain the elf essence he obtained from Shantree Wispon. You said he should not make such an attempt. Why?"

Enin nodded in appreciation of the elf guard's forgiveness, as well as her tenacity.

"Because I believe it will allow Jure to expand his magical abilities in ways no one else can. Before I lost my core, I thought achieving greater control of the magic was the best way to expand our abilities. Tapping into greater pools of energy, molding the magic with better concentration, understanding the difference between the hues, and reaching beyond the inherent color of our cores; these are all aspects which can help spell casters enhance their understanding of everything around them. That hasn't changed. But this—Jure's absorption of elf essence—this enhancement is something else entirely."

"I believe that is obvious. Elf magic within a human is beyond any recorded history of my kind. There is no mention of anything even remotely similar in all of elflore."

"Which is why I don't think Jure should attempt to contain it. Elf magic is intrinsic, just as delver magic resides within all delvers. It's not a source which human magic casters can exploit with spells."

"But I have shared my magic with you, just as you have shared the magic which was once inside of you with me."

"That was energy which resided in our respective cores. It was magical energy, not elf essence."

"But I was able to cast out my elf essence when I attempted to free Shantree Wispon's spirit from the cage which imprisoned her."

"And you had to force it from your body by making a connection with the elf elder. You had to link yourself to her... elf to elf."

"But Jure was able to link to her essence as well, and he is human."

"True, but that was because he had shared a previous connection with the elf elder, a very rare link. Jure was able to use his magic to simulate Shantree's core. It was an extremely unique situation. I doubt such a condition could be recreated under different circumstances."

Holli could not refrain from taking the claim personally.

"You do not believe we could create similar conditions between us?"

Enin decided to answer once more without hesitation and with total honesty. The question was too personal, and any attempt at evasion would have left him disgusted with his own cowardice.

"It might have been possible before I lost my core. Honestly, I'm not sure about that. But it is impossible now. The magical connection we once shared was very strong... echoes of the link still linger. With the right amount of magic available to me, I know I could reestablish a link to your essence, but a link is not the same as transference. Without my core, I could never simulate the conditions needed for you to transfer your elf essence into my being."

"I see."

Holli could not argue the point. They had once shared a constant link, but that connection was fed by Enin's massive magical powers. When he lost his core, the removal of his magic also severed their magical bond. She did not wish to dwell on the

broken link between them, but she remained confused about certain limitations regarding the energy.

"So you believe Jure's condition is absolutely unique?"

Enin did not go that far.

"I have learned that very few things are absolute," the coreless wizard admitted. "The truth is, I once was able to use delver essence in a fashion I would have deemed impossible, but again, the circumstances were extremely distinct. Ryson Acumen, his wife, and I were all trapped in a realm of non-existence. We were separated from our bodies. I couldn't use my magic, as my consciousness had been separated from my magical core, but Ryson retained the magical essence which was part of his delver identity. He offered it to me in such a way that I was able to cast certain spells. But again, I cannot see how such a situation could be duplicated."

Holli realized they had drifted away from the basis of Enin's initial request, and she remained uncertain whether she should honor it.

"So you believe Jure should take advantage of this unique situation and expand his abilities. I can understand that. What I do not understand is why you do not seek him out and help guide him yourself."

"I am not an elf."

"But you have an understanding of magic which no else possesses."

"That is not what he needs at this moment."

"You believe my knowledge is superior to yours in this regard?"

"I would choose to say you have greater wisdom. Wisdom comes from experience. And I have no experience in being an elf."

"Jure is still a human."

"That is not his dilemma. The magic within his core is now being influenced by elf essence, and this is a very complex alteration. It's not as if he was born with one human parent and one elf parent. This is a completely different type of mix. And he is not under some type of enchantment or even a spell-induced delusion. There is a physical component which cannot be ignored. He has actually absorbed essence which is unique to elves. His body will retain certain human qualities, but his identity might drift toward the elf essence. There is potential confusion there which could cause him great harm. I cannot help him in that regard, but I believe you can."

Holli paused to consider Enin's words. She realized her mentor was correct. Jure would face issues foreign to any other human. The elf essence would certainly manifest itself in ways Jure might not expect. Guidance would be helpful, perhaps even crucial. Jure's power and potential as a magic caster were vast, and if he became confused, it could lead to terrible consequences.

Despite the apparent importance of Enin's request, Holli needed to address other concerns.

"I understand now why you want me to go, but what if Jure refuses my services?"

"He won't."

"You are sure?"

"Actually, I am."

"Why is that?"

"Because he'll realize what is happening to him. He'll seek out other elves, and in Portsans, he'll find them. The port city has always been far more welcoming to elves than

the smaller towns and villages across the farmlands. And the elves have a fascination with the sea."

"Then why not let him seek out the wisdom of elves residing in Portsans?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Because they will question his circumstances," Holli acknowledged. "They will wonder how he obtained the elf essence, and the explanation will force Jure to relive the tragedy of Shantree's death."

"Exactly, and that is not a path he will wish to take, if he can avoid it."

"And he can avoid it if I am available to assist him."

"Now you understand."

"To a degree," Holli admitted. "I see the wisdom in your suggestion, but there remains more which needs to be discussed. You could still accompany me to Portsans. I could remain your guard, and your apprentice, and still be available to support Jure."

"No, I can't go with you. That would be a mistake. Your priorities would be split and uneven. You would be more concerned with protecting me in a strange city than with assisting Jure."

"I could adjust my objectives."

Enin wondered if she could, but he did not want to question her and add additional strain to the discussion.

"Even if you could, I would be a distraction for Jure. If I'm there, he might remain too focused on the magical energies within his core and not upon the elf essence expanding throughout his body. The last thing he needs at this moment is a coreless wizard far too focused on magic. As I said, he needs an elf."

"And how long am I supposed to remain with Jure?"

"Until he is comfortable with what he has become."

"That may never occur."

"Possible, but doubtful. This was his choice. He took hold of Shantree's essence."

"He did so to free her from her prison."

"And that is what you will help him see. He didn't do this for himself. He did it to help another. That is another reason why you have to go alone. You are a wonderful example of selflessness. I am not."

"You have helped many."

Enin shook his head.

"And I lost my core because of my shortsightedness. I could have helped more. Jure doesn't need me for an example."

And just as Enin spoke of selflessness, Holli considered her own desires... her own needs.

"I am not as selfless as you might believe. I have my own concerns. What about me? This city, Connel, has become my home."

"Yes it has, but you're still an elf, and elves have always understood the importance of moving their camp when the need arose."

"It is not simply the city which keeps me here. We may never wish to admit it openly, but there is more between us than that."

"Yes, there is, but we have also been very careful not to cross certain... boundaries. You are an elf guard. You have your duty. You are also my student. We have both respected those aspects of our relationship."

"True, my duty is to protect you, but it is also to protect those around you. Though I have been banished from my camp, I have come to serve several individuals."

"Jure is one of those individuals," Enin reminded the elf.

"I acknowledge that, but so is Ryson Acumen."

"Ryson has always been fine on his own. You know that."

"And what of Vraya?"

Enin raised an eyebrow in obvious surprise.

"If we are to be honest with each other, I must say that I find it hard to accept you are worried about Vraya's well being. The two of you were never close."

"A guard does not have to like someone in order to protect her."

"I suppose that's true, but I believe you're reaching for excuses."

"No, I am not. I will also admit I do not trust her completely."

"I think she has earned our trust."

Holli shook her head slightly.

"That is not what I mean. She has proven herself several times. I cannot deny that, but I will also not blind myself to what she is. With her control over ebony magic, she thrives on alteration... and transformation. She may be honorable, but her desire for change and her magical ability make her a potential danger."

"Only if the change she creates is inherently evil."

"Sometimes what is deemed evil by one may be considered good by another. Judgment is an important ingredient, as is perception."

"Fair enough, but why are you worried about Vraya? She's gone to the Great Valleys. She wishes to monitor the changes in Demonsheol. With the rebellion Rul Saattan faces, Vraya will be occupied for quite some time."

"And if Rul manages to crush the rebellion? What happens then? Vraya will return to Connel and seek your instruction."

"Maybe, but that's quite an assumption on your part. And I won't be in Connel."

"You are leaving here?"

Enin nodded.

"Where are you going?" Holli asked.

"Home. My original home. Burbon."

"Why?"

"This city no longer needs me. Connel is protected by human guards and dwarf warriors. And without a core, there is little I can do to help them. I am more of a burden than an asset."

"That is hardly an accurate assessment of your skills. You still possess vast knowledge of magic."

"And what good does it do me?" Enin pointed to one of Holli's weapons resting in a corner. "Without my core, I am a bow without an arrow. And word has spread. Other spell casters no longer seek my advice. No one comes to our door any more. Not even threats. I no longer need protection, not from anyone willing to do me harm, and not from the curious seeking to expand their own skills."

Holli connected Enin's self-appraisal with his surprising request.

"So the city no longer needs you, and you no longer need me."

"I never said that, but I will say that Jure needs you. And you know that's true. He needs someone he can trust... an *elf* he can trust. And consider one last thing; what if he ends up following the advice of an elf with poor judgment? We know they exist."

"You make a compelling argument, but I still must remind you, I pledged to guard you as I once guarded my own camp. Even if you send me away, it will not relieve me of that burden. If anything happens to you while I am assisting Jure, I will see it as a failure in my duty."

"Don't worry. I'll be safe. The dogs and I will go to Burbon. Ryson and Linda are there. More importantly, Sy Fenden protects the town. He's the one who took my core. He won't let anything happen to me because it would be as much his fault as anyone else's."

"You will stay in Burbon?"

"That is my intention. Now, before this gets too emotional, why don't you use your magic and teleport the dogs and me to Burbon's borders?"

Chapter 1

Under normal conditions, spell casters need anchors to cast sight spells. They can place magical objects high in the sky and use them to see great distances, but there are limits and complications on how far such creative manipulations can carry their awareness. They cannot simply open a magical window to peer into some distant land or create some enchanted spyscope to observe a separate realm.

While they can create portals which connect far away destinations, these devices compress time and space for physical travel. Attempts to utilize such gateways for surveillance face numerous restrictions. Opening a portal creates a direct passage to the spell caster's position, creating an obvious vulnerability when hoping to spy on some enemy camp. Keeping it open for an extended duration leads to visual distortions within the rift itself and seriously minimizes the reliability of any information obtained.

Vraya, however, used the unique elements of her inherent energy to offset such restrictions. The ebony magic flowing inside her core allowed her to follow events of substantial change back to their origin. The pulsing vibrations of significant alterations created their own lines of sight, and the sorceress utilized them to monitor places beyond the limits of her spells.

In such a fashion, she was able to view certain areas within the demon breeding grounds of Demonsheol while remaining in the land of Uton. Demonsheol itself had already been the subject of immense change. The barriers which had isolated the realm from other lands had fallen when the breeding grounds merged with a plane of nonexistence. The region had been transformed into a mix of malevolence and emptiness. The void of nonexistence stretched across the skies even as the churning abomination of demon lust flooded the grounds.

The realm's master was also a source of extreme alteration. Rul Saattan, the lord of all demons, was actually a creature of recent conception. The latest manifestation of the demon lord came into existence when the original demon ruler, Reiculf, engulfed the essence of the human sorcerer Ansas and the slink ghouls Baannat. The demon master's insatiable hunger for cruelty twisted the three separate entities into a new body which contained the worst aspects of each individual.

The waves of transformation surging from the region were strengthened even further by the events rolling across Rul's domain. Revolution raged across the realm, and the devastating strife created distinct pulses which raced across dimensional veils.

Vraya did not have to struggle to seize the tremors of change. She heard them call to her in a whisper, a faint murmur of cataclysmic transformation reaching far beyond their origin. As she allowed her magical perception to follow the waves of disturbance back to their source, she could see across great lengths of the breeding grounds. The detail of the aggression captured by her awareness nearly sickened her.

Even without the defiant conflict, Demonsheol was a cruel and twisted realm, a land of pain and suffering. Witnessing the endeavors of demons was like falling into the blistering despair of a wretched nightmare. When the brutality of monsters was accented by the shrieks of rebellion, the violence swelled. The dissension ripping across the region influenced the despicable creatures into inconceivable acts of brutality.

As difficult as it was to witness the horrors exploding across Demonsheol, Vraya could not remove her magical gaze from the desolate land. Even as she stood within an entirely different realm, the churning waves of anarchy gripped the very foundation of her transformative magic. The sweeping encounters of chaos demanded her attention.

Back in Uton, the sorceress paced across a snow covered hilltop just outside a small human village nestled in a fertile region known as the Alundt Basin. She had left the city of Connel in order to monitor the events transpiring across Demonsheol.

She had traveled to the Great Valleys in hopes of utilizing the strong waves of ebony magic which surged through that region. She hoped to augment her reach, but she also needed a strong foundation to keep her grounded in reality.

She knew there would be great turmoil in Demonsheol, but she believed the vast waves of transformative energy in the valleys of Uton would stabilize her core. She hoped flows of ebony magic surging across the Alundt Basin would preserve her judgment.

Unfortunately, the dormant season had taken firm hold of the lands across Uton. Cold air and deep snows had placed the region at rest. The amount of ebony energy within the basin seemed meager in comparison to the constant surges of black magic radiating out of the demon breeding grounds.

As she watched the chaos rage over Demonsheol, the sorceress felt an overpowering need to experience the turmoil directly. It was more than simple curiosity. Her core of pulsing alteration seemed to yearn for the mayhem.

Without concern for the potential consequences, Vraya opened a portal into Rul's realm. Surprisingly, she targeted the center of the breeding grounds as her destination. She concentrated on the vast crater which served as Rul Saattan's sanctuary.

It was not foolishness or madness which molded her decision. It was necessity. The rebellion had become more than an oddity. It appeared to threaten the prevailing structure of reality. Though she would always embrace change, such a drastic transformation created certain discrepancies, and she had questions which only the realm's ruler could answer.

Rul's haven was a wide and dismal pit filled with nothing more than gray dust, billowing hate, and grim hopelessness. Vraya could sense the void in the skies above the crater. There was no light in the heavens, just a vast barren space without a sun, clouds, or stars. The dim light of Demonsheol radiated from the raging fury inherent within the land itself, and it offered just enough intensity to stretch across the desolate trench.

The sorceress could feel the despair drifting across the region, and it swelled at the heart of the crater. It was the home to the greatest of all evils, and yet when her portal was complete, she leapt without hesitation into the heart of the rift.

Rul Saattan stood at the center of the depression. His magic gripped the entire realm, just as his fury reached to the very edges of his domain. He monitored the growing disorder with seething annoyance, but also a hint of pleasure. Basking in the sheer brutality, he seemed almost elated with the challenge to his rule.

Vraya emerged through the portal a mere dozen paces away from the demon lord. After quickly closing the gateway, she held her ground in the face of pure malevolence, but she made no further advance. She might not have feared the monster at that particular moment, but she still respected his power.

Even with the distance between them, Rul towered over the diminutive sorceress like a gray wave of hate about to crash down on some child's lonely sand castle. His massive body twitched with frustration even as the malleable flesh at the center of his chest swirled with disgust.

He looked upon the sorceress with little surprise, mild disgust, and obvious contempt. He retained the arrogance of the human sorcerer in his expression, but the rage of a demon twisted his cat-like muzzle into a hateful sneer.

"You should have continued to watch from your own pathetic realm," the beast snarled. "You had no need to come here."

"You knew I was monitoring your realm?" Vraya questioned. "How? I cast no spell."

"Everything which flows from this domain answers to me," the demon lord growled.

"But once the ebony waves of alteration leave your realm, they are free from your corruption. I did not reach back into Demonsheol with my magic. I simply used the turmoil from your land as a means to peer through the veils, like gazing into a reflection."

Rul did not feel it was necessary to explain anything to the sorceress, but he actually welcomed the momentary distraction. He sensed he could toy with the human, and it would serve as a suitable diversion, if only for a few moments.

"You forget who I am," the beast grunted. "I am not simply a demon of strength and magical power. I am the first of my kind, and as such, I have taken hold of the greatest vulnerability of all creatures. Demonsheol is not my only realm. The past is also my domain, and it is the source of power which fortifies me beyond any other creature within this land."

"So you knew I was watching because it was part of my past?"

"You make it sound so meaningless, as if I am some misguided miscreant flipping through the pages of a pathetic diary. You have no concept of how your own history strengthens me."

"I am aware of your hold on history. I can see the vibrations of your essence. I sense the inconsistency of your being in relation to time. In many ways, you are a blur because you are anchored more upon the past than the present. Still, the past is nothing more than an echo, a shadow of things that were."

Rul snarled at the sorceress, disappointed in her lack of clarity.

"You may have great control over the energy of alteration, but you fail to comprehend the true essence of transformation. It has two parts, and they are not equal. There is that which *was* and that which *is*. The difference between them is the power of alteration, and you are focused on the space caught within those two aspects. I, however, hold a stronger connection to the greater of the two distinct parts. I hold to that which was."

"But that's the part which no longer exists. It is the change which is important."

"Spoken by a foolish human with limited awareness of her own potential. The transformation into something new does not exist without something old. Change is simply a concept bound by time, and the passage of time proves the power of history. The future diminishes with each passing moment while the past grows. The concept can be seen quite easily in any collection of the dead."

"Death is the very essence of change, the transition from one state of being into another," Vraya argued.

"Perhaps to you, but not to me. Death is the final stamp on every mortal body, and the number of dead swells with the passage of time."

"As do the number of transitions into a new and greater existence."

"And that is where you fail to recognize the imbalance between the future and the past. You may wish to focus upon those who have found the means to release the chains of their mortal existence, but not all mortals are willing to accept deliverance. It is in their history that I find an unyielding truth. A collection of remorse and misery tightens around the arrogance of their misconceptions. Past misdeeds become justifications and excuses. It is the vast consequences of these misguided beliefs which always find their way back to me."

"As I have said, I'm aware of your hold on history," Vraya admitted. "The totality of past injustice adds to your strength, but what does that have to do with me?"

"Are you going to state your history is without indiscretion?" Rul challenged.

"Of course not. I've made my mistakes."

"And your errors in judgment, your conceit and your selfishness; they will always link your past to me. You have interfered in the matters of demons, and you desire to see greater change in my lands. Do you deny it?"

"Of course not."

"Then it should be obvious to you how I knew you were watching me. You have placed yourself within the very folds of Demonsheol's conversion, and that is the height of arrogance."

"It's not arrogance," Vraya disputed. "I was called here."

"Believe what you will, but I still knew you were watching. I am the lord of all demons... those that remain here, and even those that have ventured beyond these breeding grounds."

"I was careful in that regard," Vraya responded quickly. "There were no demons in Uton following my..."

"I do not need their assistance!" Rul cut the sorceress off with a snarl. "Just as you can follow the waves of transformative magic, I can follow the links of Demonsheol, but I am more than the sum of my minions."

"Perhaps you once were, but I don't think that's true any longer," the sorceress dared to defy the beast. "When you merged with a human and a slink ghoul, your power was diminished."

"You question my word?"

"Of course. You are the very essence of deceit."

Rul actually laughed. He would not deny the claim. He accepted it willingly.

"Then it is for you to determine for yourself what is true and what is false, but I have given you the only answer I will offer. It is time for you to answer me. Why do you risk your existence by entering my realm? If it was my desire, I could destroy you."

"The risk to me is not that great," Vraya stated cautiously, but with a hint of confidence.

"You believe you could match me in battle?"

"No. This is your realm, and even with the deep flows of ebony magic running through this crater, I could not equal your ferocity."

"Then you should fear for your existence."

"But I don't because I see the larger picture. You may have tremendous power, but can you afford to battle me? I have seen what is happening here. Demons are questioning your rule. There is rebellion across your lands and demons are opportunistic. They will

sense any fight between us, and they would use it to their advantage. I might weaken you just enough to leave you vulnerable."

"There is not another demon capable of matching my power, even if you proved to be a worthy foe, which you are not."

"What about the demon hunter who defied you?" Vraya asked, recalling the events which incited the rebellion in Demonsheol. "Dasck is out there. He knows he needs to destroy you if he's going to survive."

"Dasck is not my concern."

"He isn't?"

"No, as an individual, he is a minor disturbance. I could annihilate him in an instant."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because he serves me."

"Serves you? He's the one responsible for the rebellion in your realm. He has openly defied you. His return against your wishes has allowed other demons to question your control."

"Let those who dare defy me question all they wish."

"And so they have, for Dasck was not only a demon, he was a primeval. He was responsible for maintaining discipline across much of your lands. The loss of a primeval, a taskmaster in your service, is another reason why insurgency swells across your domain."

"I have other primevals, other ways to keep my minions subjugated."

"Subjugated? There is open rebellion here. I have witnessed it."

"You have no idea what you have seen."

"Are you denying the rebellion?" Vraya demanded, hoping to satisfy her own concerns.

She could not imagine why Rul would allow for such chaos, and she wondered if the demon lord was attempting to inflict his twisted violence into the swells of ebony magic.

"Of course not, but this turmoil is exactly what serves me," the beast revealed. "Dasck has sparked it, even encourages it, and that is why I have allowed the demon hunter to remain in my domain."

"I don't believe any of that. You're a tyrant. You never allow dissension."

"I never have before, and that is why it is needed now."

"Why? To fill some barbaric need for violence?"

"Violence has always been a part of my realm. I can create it myself whenever I need it, but this is something I could not do on my own."

The confession shocked the sorceress.

"You're actually admitting to a weakness?"

Rul's snarl deepened and thicker lines of fury creased his already contorted muzzle. If Vraya was closer, he would have struck her in a fit of rage. He almost sent a pulse of magic to batter her for her insolence, but the sorceress was partially correct. Rul did not wish to waste his magic on some impudent human.

"It is not weakness," the beast growled. "It is a restraint I have placed upon myself."

"You have no restraint."

"I take that as a compliment, but it is as misguided as your other conceptions. Restraint is nothing more than a choice, and we all make choices. I could use you as an example."

"Me?" Vraya questioned. "I'm not like you."

"No, clearly you are not," Rul scoffed, "but you are still an example of restraint. You have a powerful core of ebony energy. Your control over the magic is strong enough to enable you to cast spells of great destruction. You could rule over many of the humans in your land. You could declare yourself a queen and take whatever you want."

"I would never do such a thing."

"A choice you make, a limitation you place on yourself. It does not mean you *cannot* do it. It means you are *unwilling* to do it."

"But that's me, and I admit I have restraint. How have you restrained yourself? You cast spells of destruction without regard to the innocent, and until this moment, you have ruled over all of Demonsheol with an iron fist."

"Restraint works in both directions. You refrain from doing what you naively consider evil. I refuse to utilize my power for what you would foolishly consider good. You are unwilling to utilize your magic to rule over the weak, just as I am unwilling to contemplate the pleas of the helpless. I could save every creature that languishes here endlessly. I could alleviate their pain if I so desired, but I *choose* not to."

"So you want this rebellion to continue because you do not want to reduce suffering in your realm?" Vraya wondered, hoping to unravel the secrets within the demon lord's words. "I realize you are a twisted creature, but even that explanation is contorted beyond reason."

"You are so narrow in your awareness," the beast grunted. "You need to look past my participation, for this rebellion is not of my making. I would never enable a demon to rise up against me, for I will not create any impression of weakness. I am a ruthless ruler. I will not reward loyalty, nor will I allow for dissension."

"But you *are* allowing for dissension."

"No, I have done nothing to stir this rebellion. It will run its course because it is time for me to consolidate my forces. I must weed out those unwilling to follow my orders. I must remove any hint of treachery. And that is the challenge which has always lingered just beyond my grasp... until now. Now I have my answer. This is my domain, and my merest thought is law, but I have always known that this is a realm of demons, and demons cannot be trusted."

Vraya finally began to see what the monster hoped to gain.

"You're setting a trap, aren't you?"

"A trap? No. A trap would imply my involvement, that it was by my plan... my decree. And that is not the case. I did not set this stage. Events have allowed for it. I have simply decided to let these circumstances fulfill my objectives."

"How can a rebellion help you?"

"By allowing for a purging. You called me a tyrant. I have no concern over such labels, but I am the ruler of this realm. And while it is a breeding ground for demons, it is also a region of great power. Unfortunately, I have always faced two distinct disadvantages. My domain was separated from the rest of existence by barriers which kept me from extending my reach into other realms, and I could never trust my soldiers."

"But the barriers have fallen."

"Yes, they have," Rul agreed with a twisted grin. "I am no longer prevented from extending my reach. That leaves me with only one obstacle to overcome, and the means to remove this final hindrance has been provided for me"

Vraya was not prepared to concede that the events transpiring across Demonsheol worked to Rul's advantage.

"You make it sound like everything has been for your benefit. That's not true. The barriers kept demons under your rule from escaping. Losing them has already cost you."

"Demons which question my authority are of no use to me," Rul grunted.

"And that's exactly what has hurt you. Without the walls, you lost control. Dasck was able to defy you and return to Demonsheol. There were no barriers to stop him. There are no barriers to stop any of the demons."

"And that is why I now need this purging. I must remove all those demons not prepared to bow before my desires. I may not be able to trust demons, but now they must prove themselves. I was never willing to waste time or effort on such an endeavor. I will let them do it among themselves. By fighting each other, I see which demons respect the structure of power and which beasts hope to escape my rule. Every rebel will be revealed."

Vraya saw only fleeting logic to Rul's claim, and several contradictions. Tyrants simply did not allow for rebellion, and a creature such as the demon lord would never let circumstances dictate his actions.

"I don't believe you. I can sense your displeasure with this chaos."

"I am always displeased," the beast admitted. "My discontent is as constant as my desire to inflict misery."

"So you will allow those who are supposed to serve you to question your authority? You will let them rampage across your realm just so you can test their devotion?"

"You are confusing loyalty with respect. Demons are by nature disloyal, even disobedient, but they are not disrespectful of power. They do not devote themselves to me out of affection. They do so because they understand my will reigns supreme. That is why I do not have to reward them to earn their obedience. They recognize my power is absolute, and they should realize joining any rebellion is futile. Those who join this pointless insurgence are beyond foolish, and they are useless to me."

"An interesting outlook," the sorceress allowed, "but one that might be flawed."

"How so?" the demon lord challenged, more out of a desire to argue than any real willingness to consider opposing viewpoints.

"Whether you wish to admit it or not, you are allowing this rebellion to continue, and you can't deny that there are certain risks. Rebellion is a volatile event. You may have great confidence in your power, but you have to give some credit to the strength of other demons. Are you really more powerful than every other demon combined? You may believe it's impossible for enough demons to combine into one unified force, but if they do, I don't think you can survive. What if that happens? What if you lose?"

Rul actually pondered the question for a brief moment, but then gave a very surprising yet honest response.

"If I lose, I deserve to fail. But I will not lose. You may utilize the transformation within ebony magic, but I have complete control over my realm. I appreciate the role of chaos and turmoil. I know what open rebellion in my realm can bring, where it will lead and where it will end. As does everything else in my domain, this rebellion will serve me. You need not concern yourself with what might happen if I fail. The question you should ask yourself is, what happens when I succeed?"

"I assume you will have reduced the number of demons within your realm."

"And what will I have left? Demons devoted to the structure of power... demons willing to fight for my desires without question or hesitation. Any demon which chooses to rebel will either be defeated and consumed or forced to flee this realm. Only those demons that have no doubts of my rule will remain here. Think of that, sorceress."

Vraya considered the outcome, and the implications. She had come to Demonsheol to witness transformation on a grand scale. She had thought she might see the crumbling of Rul's oppressive regime, a profound event never before seen and previously unimaginable. She believed she might even witness the diminishment of evil, but she suddenly realized the reverse was actually possible. The evil once bound within Demonsheol might obtain the means to break free through the consolidation of power within the hands of Rul Saattan.

"You begin to understand," the demon offered with a nod. "You see it now, don't you? This is the change which brought you here. This is the transformation you could not resist. You wanted to believe it would be my demise, but it won't be. It will signal my final rise to ultimate power."

"No, this rebellion was not meant to strengthen you," Vraya insisted, unwilling to accept Rul's claim.

"You wish to believe that, because you acknowledge your own hand in the matter. You helped to defeat Dasck when the hunter was in your land. You assisted the cursed delver Ryson Acumen in his battle against the demon hunter. You thought you were doing it all to weaken me, but in truth, it will only bring me greater power."

"It did weaken you!" the sorceress insisted. "Dasck failed, and in doing so, added to your own failure. Dasck no longer serves you."

"What worth is a taskmaster incapable of defeating a delver?"

"But Dasck still stalks through your lands. The hunter is building its own army."

"An army of rebels... demons which need to be purged from my realm. That is the true purpose of this rebellion. And the most amusing part of it all... it was meant to be. Everything which has come to pass is bringing me to my destiny."

"What destiny?" Vraya demanded, horrified by the monster's claim.

"To break free from Demonsheol; that is my undeniable future. The barriers are gone, the disloyal demons will be removed, and I will have everything I need. I will force my rule upon every creature in all of existence, and nothing will stop me."

"No. You've been stopped before."

"Yes, the history of my own failure," Rul sneered. "I admit it has chained me, but chains are meant to be broken. Destiny is now on my side, for I have tied my fate to the actions of those who have risen against me. That is the key to my final victory."

"That makes no sense. If you are linking yourself to those who oppose you, you cannot win."

"Or I cannot lose. That is the point of my contention. That is why this rebellion will serve my purpose. I am finally unleashing my greatest advantage over the likes of you."

"You are creating nothing more than a paradox. I say you can't win, you say you can't lose. If both are true, you will only be caught in the middle, stuck within a stalemate which will leave you even weaker than you are now."

"I am not concerned with whether you believe me or not, but I take pleasure in making you see how you have helped bring about this change. You once wanted to diminish evil."

"I admit it. I still do."

"And yet, you have helped to spread it."

"I've done no such thing."

"You don't even know what evil is."

"I could say that you are evil, but that would be too easy," Vraya responded confidently. "Evil is more than selfishness or even hate. Evil is beyond a desire to harm others. As you yourself have said, evil is the justification for all these things, the excuse to act with disregard for compassion."

"You use words like every other human. I've heard it all before. You say compassion while others say kindness or consideration. Meaningless nonsense."

"Maybe to you, but not to me. I have no desire to disregard compassion, kindness, or consideration. You claim I've helped to spread evil. I know that's not true, because I see what's happened to you. You have already been diminished."

"Diminished? In what way? I am at the threshold of expanding my reach into lands once walled off from my grasp. It's a change you can sense. That is why you are here. You have always known that Demonsheol had not completed its transformation. You have felt the change sweeping across my realm, and that same alteration rises within me as well. There is a larger change coming, to both the land and my very existence. Deny it if you will."

But Vraya could not deny it. She had felt it from the outset, from the very moment Demonsheol came into being. The merging of the breeding grounds with a great void of nonexistence broke the balance of reality. It forced a great swell of corruption into a massive empty hole, and she knew the resulting backlash could not be contained indefinitely. The unsettled winds coursing through the ebony magic hinted at an even more cataclysmic event in the future.

She would not, however, give up all hope, and she would not believe she helped doom all of existence.

"The destiny of Demonsheol does not exist in isolation," the sorceress finally stated. "The fate of other realms and of other individuals will always work against you. You want to shape the changes which have already occurred into an advantage, but you have always lost. You could not defeat Ryson Acumen and you would not risk a war with the spirits willing to come to his aid. Even when every demon followed your command, you still could not stand against more virtuous powers."

"And despite all of that, there is a clear path for me now, one I could not have created on my own. You, Ryson Acumen, and others have dared to interfere in the affairs of demons. You have placed your own lands in peril, a peril that cannot be avoided."

"Now you're speaking of the future," Vraya argued. "And we both know that is not your domain."

"But it will be when it becomes the past. That is what I have said all along. I may not be able to shape fate, but I can feed off what has happened. I can turn fate into my own gain when enough mistakes are made."

"Even your explanations are twisted. A mistake is not destiny. And yes, I see more changes coming to Demonsheol, but they won't strengthen you. I say this because I can also see the past. You are less than you were, you can't deny that. You once cast colorless magic in three circles. No one could have stood against you."

"And no one can stand against me now. I could crush this rebellion if I so desired, but why would I destroy that which serves me?"

"Then what about me? I'm standing here. I'm a trespasser to your realm. You never would have allowed for such a thing in the past. If you're destined to rule all of existence, then why don't you attack me?"

"Because you are right in one regard. I do not wish to waste my power. I must not be weakened at any time. When the right moment comes, I will be ready. My ascension is all that matters. And besides, I do not have to waste my power when there are still many demons that remain dedicated to me."

Vraya had been so focused on the demon lord that she never saw the swirl of violet magic until it descended upon her. A dark purple cloak of energy wrapped around the sorceress and pulled tight around her. It dropped her to the ground and rolled her across the gray dust.

Vraya could not lift her arms to cast a defensive spell, and soon, she was spinning so fast across the crater she lost all sense of direction. A cloud of fine debris rose up and clung to her face. She could taste the rage in the dust, and it added to her confusion. She could barely see, and the small amount of grim light which broke through the cloud seemed to spin in opposition to her movement. She quickly became disoriented and almost passed out.

Slamming her eyes shut, she attempted to cut off the swirling mayhem around her. She forced the turmoil from her mind as she took hold of the ebony energy which surged deep within the folds of Demonsheol. She could not focus upon a single incantation to free herself from the violet strands, but she was at least able to stabilize her consciousness within the rolling madness of the attack.

Even as she blocked out the spinning assault on her senses, she still felt her body roll up the edges of the crater. She could sense the magic lift her up from the dusty ground and pull her across vacant air. She found it more and more difficult to breathe as she rose higher into the emptiness of Demonsheol's void.

As the nothingness surrounded her, she realized the spinning motion had diminished. She risked opening her eyes as she hoped to assess her situation.

She was not as high in the void over Demonsheol's barren grounds as she had feared, barely three lengths of her own rather diminutive body. Being separated from the ground, however, placed her completely in the emptiness of the void. Ebony energy still managed to flow around her, but not with the same strength as it did deeper within the dusty rock below.

Thankfully, the spinning motion had ceased, and though she remained bound by the magical shroud, she could finally search for her attacker. When she turned her head, Vraya saw the shadow of a demon witch. She knew she was in the clutches of a declyst, a brewer of hate-filled storms. Already wrapped within the violet streams of such powerful and violent magic, she finally began to fear for her life.

Chapter 2

Ryson Acumen met Enin at the northeastern edge of Burbon. The coreless wizard's old house was fairly close to Burbon's surrounding wall and a good distance from the town center. When Ryson heard Enin had returned, he raced over to meet his friend. He, in turn, was immediately greeted by several dogs thrilled to see the delver.

The dogs surrounded their visitor, circling about and looking for any opening to sniff or nudge Ryson's hands. Their collective tails wagged fiercely, adding a festive exuberance to the joyous frolic. It seemed as if every inch of space around the delver was filled with wet noses, ruffled fur, and dusty paws.

Ryson couldn't be happier with such a cheerful greeting. After he acknowledged each animal, he called out to Enin. Some of the dogs raced through the open front door looking for their master, while others either rushed around to the back of the house or ambled about the front lawn.

Enin stepped out of his home and smiled deeply.

"I thought I heard some commotion out here," the coreless wizard announced. "I figured the dogs were just getting reacquainted with my old neighbors, or some of my newer ones were saying hello for the first time."

"No, just me," Ryson announced, "but I'm sure all of your neighbors will be happy to see you've brought your friends along. Dogs are always welcome in Burbon. You know that."

"I do indeed. Nothing can smell out a goblin raiding party like the nose of a mutt, and I have enough dogs here to scare off a whole horde of the little monsters."

At the mention of goblins, several of the dogs looked toward the protective wall which surrounded the town. A few actually sniffed the air, as if they had understood Enin's words. Sensing nothing in the fields beyond the barrier, they turned their attention back to their guest.

"Yes, you have quite an army here," Ryson agreed with a nod to the pack of canines. The delver walked up to his friend and extended his hand. "I heard you had returned. I also heard you're planning on staying for a while."

"That's what I told the guards. I already met with Captain Klusac. He knows my plans, and he didn't have a problem with me returning."

"I didn't expect he would. Are you staying for long, or just a few days to check on your house?"

"I'm staying for good," Enin announced quickly.

The admission startled the delver.

"For good? You mean you're not going back to Connel?"

"No, not much I can do there now. If anything, I'm just in the way. I'll go back to visit, and retrieve some of the things I didn't want to bring today, but I won't be living there anymore. It's better if I stay here."

Ryson wondered if there was something more to the coreless wizard's decision, if there might be a more pressing reason for Enin to suddenly return to Burbon permanently.

"Is there something going on I should know about? Are you here because you're worried about something, maybe some kind of an attack?"

"No, that's not it at all. And I wouldn't be much help if it was. If there's not much I can do for Connel, then there's even less I can do around here. You're here to keep watch, as is our spirit friend. No, Burbon doesn't need any special protection from me. I just thought I would find it easier to get used to my new life here than it would be in Connel."

"Really? This small town? I thought you enjoyed the city."

"I enjoyed some of it, but I don't think I was ever completely comfortable there. It's difficult to constantly adjust to your surroundings, and Connel doesn't stay the same for long. It's always moving, always growing, and it's always changing. Actually, maybe Vraya could get used to it. She likes change. Me, I don't mind it, but I also like a bit of stability."

Ryson considered Connel's growth and expansion, and he thought of the major contributors to that growth.

"What about the dwarves? They're the ones responsible for most of the new construction in Connel. They trusted you, and you always made sure the people of Connel appreciated and respected them. You've always had an excellent relationship with all the dwarves."

"The dwarves have been getting along fine with humans for quite some time now. They don't need me to act as some intermediary. Look at what they've done in Pinesway. They built a system of underground passages connecting human outposts that lead right to Dunop. Those tunnels go under Dark Spruce Forest and lead to the coast. I didn't help with that at all. No, the dwarves and humans figured out how to work together completely on their own. They didn't need me. Relations are strong between them."

"I still have to say I'm surprised," Ryson admitted.

"What? Are you sorry I'm back?" Enin offered with a sly smile.

"Of course not, but I thought you made Connel your home."

Enin looked back on his house, and then at the dogs wandering around his yard.

"This is my real home... and I have to say, I missed it."

"I believe you're going to miss Connel, don't you think?"

"There are some things I'll miss," Enin confessed with a hint of sadness. "There was a lot more activity in Connel... and not as much structure. I'll admit, I'm going to have to get used to the demand for order here, but without my magic, I'm not the disturbance I once was."

"You weren't a disturbance," Ryson objected.

"Not a disturbance? With some of the spells I cast? I think I disturbed quite a few people."

"But you did that to defend Burbon. You helped save this town on more than one occasion."

"Come now, Ryson. Even you have to admit the people here never felt completely comfortable with the power I once possessed."

"But you could control it. It wasn't like you were casting out fireballs or creating storms over the town for no good reason."

"That's true, but my attention always seemed to drift. The magic was always pulling at me, making me see things other people would miss. Someone would ask me about the weather, and I would immediately consider how a storm spell might interact with the current conditions of the day. It was hard for me to hold a conversation, and most people

had no idea what I was talking about. I'd start muttering to myself and people would just walk away. Most times, I didn't even notice them leave."

"But your magic also made them feel safe."

"Only when there was an obvious threat nearby. Otherwise, I was more like a covered pot of boiling liquid in the middle of a fire, just a container of very powerful energy that could unleash havoc in an instant. People here don't like that. They like stability, and I was an oddity."

The words struck home with the delver. He knew what it was like to be different, and he knew how the people of Bourbon appreciated consistency. Ryson looked down one of the straight roads of the town. He saw the houses built evenly in long rows. He understood the need for order in nearly every corner of the town. Even the taverns offered havens of dependability. Bourbon was the essence of structure.

"Yeah," Ryson allowed with a nod. "I know the feeling. I know they all accept me, but I also know I'm the uneven line in a town that appreciates four exact corners... no more and no less."

"And I was two circles," Enin offered. "That might have just been too much for them. You might move a bit too fast for their comfort, but you can slow down whenever you want."

"Well, you didn't have to cast spells."

"No, that wouldn't have worked. The magic in me needed to be used, just like you need to move at speed. The difference is that you can leave and scout the grounds around Bourbon to help defend the town. People here believe you can control that speed of yours. I don't think they were ever really sure about the magic inside of me. I guess, in the end, they were right about that. That's why Sy took my core away."

Enin felt a deep pang of regret when he thought of the hollowness at the center of his essence, the spot which was once filled with overwhelming magical energy. He didn't want to dwell upon the loss, and so he attempted to change the subject.

"Speaking of Sy, has he appeared lately?"

"I saw him once a few days after Jure left for the coast," Ryson explained. "We talked for a bit. He actually spoke to me more than he ever has before, but then he just vanished and I haven't seen him since. I know he's still watching over the town. I can almost feel when he's close by. It's strange."

"A spirit walking among the living is extraordinary," the coreless wizard agreed. "Your delver senses are probably finally recognizing the deviations between spiritual awareness and physical existence."

"Maybe, but I'm not quite sure if I even understand what that means."

"It means that we have to acknowledge there's more to each of us than meets the eye."

"I've already accepted that."

"Maybe that acceptance is adding to your awareness. It's actually something I'm hoping to achieve myself. It's my understanding that Sy's voice can only be heard by you and Captain Klusac. Is that still true?"

"As far as I know."

"I'm hoping to join that group. I think it would be helpful if others could communicate with Sy. A guardian spirit is a powerful protector, but it helps to know what he wants and what he thinks we should do. Having only two people who can hear his voice limits the protection he can offer."

Ryson didn't feel threatened by Enin's ambition. If anything, the delver agreed it would be helpful if Sy could be heard by everyone in the town. Unfortunately, there was no clear path to make communication possible, no spiritual language to learn or cosmic hand signals to memorize.

"Well, I hope you can too, but I'll be honest with you; I have no idea what you need to do. I'm not sure what I did to start hearing his voice. And Sy's not very helpful about that either. He doesn't offer a lot regarding his condition and why people can't hear him."

"His condition is somewhat unique. I understand that. He's not a ghost haunting Burbon, but he is limited in where he can travel. That's another reason I'm here. I might have lost my magic, but I still understand the connections between the spiritual plane and physical existence. Observing Sy might allow me to expand my knowledge of spirits locked to certain regions."

"That's another thing he doesn't like to talk about. I've asked him about his limitations on more than one occasion, but he doesn't give me any real answer. I just know he has a deep connection to Burbon. I think it was so strong it allowed him to return. In fact, it was deep enough that it once allowed me to save him. I carried pieces of sod from Burbon to Demonsheol, remember?"

"I do. It was an inspired maneuver."

"I don't know about inspired, but it was necessary. It created enough of a link so Sy could travel back and forth from here to Demonsheol. It freed him, but even though he has a link to the demon breeding grounds, his real connection remains to the center of Burbon."

"Studying such connections can take a lifetime," Enin admitted, "but I have time. I can't cast spells any more, so it's not like I'm going to be concerned about keeping my incantations sharp."

In considering the coreless wizard's free time, Ryson realized that he had not yet seen Enin's guard.

"Speaking of keeping things sharp, when's Holli coming? I'm surprised she let you come here on your own. She's been very protective of you lately."

"Yes, she has. Perhaps too protective. She believed losing my magic left me vulnerable, but that's not really true. As time goes by, less people care about me. Magic casters don't show up at my door anymore seeking advice, and there's no curious thrill seekers hoping they might see me cast some powerful spell. There really isn't anything out there threatening me."

"Maybe that's true, but she's still an elf guard. I know she cares about keeping you safe. I don't know if I've ever seen anyone so dedicated. Is she still gathering up your things back in Connel?"

"No, I already have everything I need here." Enin stated quickly. He paused and considered changing the topic once more, but he knew he couldn't avoid admitting the truth. "Holli's not coming."

"She's not?" Ryson questioned, more startled at that confession than by anything else previously said. "Why not?"

"I sent her to Portsans. I want her to help Jure."

"Is he in trouble?" Ryson asked, immediately concerned about the elder wizard's welfare.

"Not the kind of trouble you're probably worried about. I think he's handling the grief of Shantree's death, but he has to come to grips with what's happening inside of him."

"You mean capturing Shantree's essence? You said he was becoming part elf. Is that what you're talking about?"

"Exactly, and there's no one else more capable of assisting him than Holli."

"How long do you think she'll be gone?"

"I don't think she's ever going to be able to leave him. It's not a process that's going to end for Jure."

"So you're never going to see her again?"

"No, I'll see her. Jure promised to check in with me periodically before he left for the coast. He'll keep that promise. Holli will ensure it. She knows I'll want to see his progress, and she'll want to check on me... and the dogs."

"But why didn't you just go with her... you and the dogs?"

Enin sighed and shook his head.

"She asked me the same question," he explained, "and I have to admit, I'm getting tired of explaining myself."

"I didn't hear your explanation," Ryson defended himself.

"No, you didn't, but you should be able to figure it out on your own. Jure is a human wizard who is now dealing with the magical essence of an elf spreading throughout his core. He's different than he was, and if he learns to accept it, he'll be more powerful than he can imagine, maybe even more powerful than I was."

"Then I would think he would need your guidance."

"No, that would be a mistake. I'm a human, not an elf. What can I tell him that he doesn't already know about being a human? And it goes beyond that. I lost my power. I'm less than I was. He's becoming more. We are on completely opposite paths. Don't you see that?"

Ryson believed he did understand. He had seen how Enin struggled with the loss of his magic. He wondered if watching Jure grow in power would only remind the coreless wizard of all that was taken away from him. He wanted to ask Enin more about it. His delver instincts fed his curiosity, but he just nodded, agreeing with the wizard and accepting the somewhat limited answer. There was no apparent need to dwell on Enin's loss.

"So you decided to come home," Ryson acknowledged. "I guess it makes sense, but what are you going to do?"

"I'll take care of my dogs."

"That's good, but don't you need to do more?"

"I've already told you I want to speak to Sy."

"Sy isn't around a lot. I mean, I believe he's always watching over the town, but that doesn't mean he's available to us."

"I can be patient. I can wait as long as..."

Before Enin could finish, the spirit of Sy Fenden materialized directly in front of the coreless wizard.

Several of Enin's dogs rushed over to the spirit warrior, all wagging their tails happily as if a well-known relative had just arrived for an unannounced visit. A few of them barked, but only once or twice. For the most part, they remained quiet. After a few moments, they grew still and simply watched the spirit attentively.

Enin stood just as quiet, surprised by the sudden appearance of the ghost captain. He had seen the spirit before, but he didn't expect Sy to simply appear at his request.

The ghost stared at Enin for a moment or two, looked around at the dogs and smiled, and finally turned his attention to the delver. He offered a message that only Ryson could hear.

Ryson listened intently, grateful to be able to receive the words in his mind. In the past, the ghost warrior only offered a brief statement, usually no more than four or five words. In one recent conversation, Sy spoke at greater length, but the delver could not be certain such lengthy discussions would continue.

As Sy spoke, Ryson realized the bulk of the message was meant for Enin, and he focused on retaining every word. When Sy was finished, the delver relayed the information to his friend.

"I assume you couldn't hear him," Ryson began.

"No, I didn't hear a thing," Enin admitted. "What did he say?"

"He said he's glad you're here and that you did the right thing with Holli. Jure is going to need assistance, and Holli was an excellent choice. He said it was a selfless act, and it deserves to be acknowledged."

"Thank you," Enin said with a nod to the spirit as he interrupted Ryson. "But I don't know if it was completely selfless. It was hard for me to..."

Sy held up his ethereal hand, motioning the wizard to stop. He then pointed to Ryson.

"There's a little more you need to hear," the delver explained. "Sy said you can't make him the reason for your return to Burbon."

"I'm not," Enin defended himself, "not entirely. Like I said before, Burbon is my home, and I was feeling out of place in Connel."

"Why out of place?" Ryson asked, his curiosity spurred by the coreless wizard's response. He didn't wish to interrupt the discussion between Enin and the ghost captain, but he couldn't suppress his outlook on Enin's well-intentioned contributions. "You were an important part of Connel, a very important part."

"For a time, Connel needed my magic, and I was happy to serve," Enin admitted. "But I no longer have it. Connel has grown, and that in itself is difficult for me to watch."

"Why? I always thought you wanted the city to expand."

"I did, but I thought I would grow with it. That's no longer possible."

"So this is more about your loss of magic than Connel?"

Enin hesitated. He wasn't sure he wanted to explain, but then he looked at Sy. He needed the ghost to hear the truth.

"Ever since Sy took my core," Enin offered as he turned back to the delver, "I've felt empty inside. And it's not just the loss of magic. There's a disconnect inside of me. I understand magic in a way I can't explain. It's the same way you use your delver senses. You can hear particular sounds in the distance or catch a scent in the wind. I doubt you could explain exactly how you do it to those of us with normal senses, but imagine what life would be like for you if you suddenly couldn't hear, or if you lost your sense of smell."

"I doubt I'd be happy, but I think I could adjust."

Before he even finished speaking, Ryson instinctively brought his right hand up to the upper portion of his left arm. Unconsciously, he began to rub the area which had been

bitten by a demon hunter. Poison magic caused irreparable damage, and he had lost mobility and strength in his entire arm.

Enin saw the movement and considered Ryson's poorly healed wound in relation to his own loss.

"Maybe you do have an idea," he conceded, "at least a slight one. I know that arm won't move like it used to, but you can still use it. Me, I can't hold even a hint of magic within me anymore, but I can still feel it. I know what it can do. I appreciate its potential. I also know what it is meant to do and how certain energies can be abused. I always tried to treat magic with respect. But now, it's like smoke from a fire; I can feel the heat, but I can't take full hold of it. It just passes right through my fingers."

Ryson wasn't exactly sure what Enin meant. The delver started to believe the wizard was holding something back. He looked to Sy, and wondered if the spirit warrior had something to add, but the ghost stood silent and unmoving.

In an attempt to move forward, Ryson decided to ask the obvious question, even if it meant dwelling upon Enin's loss.

"So what are you saying? Is this really about your magic? You said you wanted to speak with Sy, to hear his voice. Is that the extent of it, or are you hoping to talk to him so you can convince him to give you your core back?"

"I don't know," Enin admitted with all honesty. "I hope that's not the case, but I don't know if I can completely discount that as part of my motivation. But I also know it's not what I really want. I've accepted it's not possible. I asked once before, remember?"

"Yes," Ryson replied with a nod.

"And Sy refused, said it was a bad idea," Enin added. "I understand that, and I really don't think that's going to change. Still, I think there's hope for me, and it's connected to Sy, linked to something beyond what happened to my core. Sy's a spirit. He's part of this world and the spiritual plane at the same time. When I had the magic inside of me, I could see those connections. I'd like to talk to him about that."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," Ryson offered. "I went down a path like that. I wanted to know what it was like to be..." Ryson paused as he looked to the spirit of his friend. Sy nodded for Ryson to continue, and so he did. "Well, dead. I think it could have been an obsession. I admit I'm still curious about certain things, but I've realized I need to be focused on the right questions."

Sy acknowledged the sentiment as he nodded once more in appreciation of the delver's words, but the spirit remained silent in regards to Enin. The ghost seemed to want the coreless wizard to admit to something before he would respond.

Ryson then turned back to Enin.

"If you get caught up in trying to get a glimpse of where we might be headed further down the road, you'll lose sight of where you're stepping right now. You're not a spirit yet, and hopefully you won't be one anytime soon."

"But I already understand a great deal about spiritual existence," Enin replied. "The magic revealed a great deal to me. It's not like I'm trying to pry secrets from him. It's more about finding someone else who can actually comprehend what I already know."

Enin then looked directly at Sy.

"And it's not only that," the coreless wizard continued. "I need to fill that emptiness inside of me, and I don't know how. I don't know if I've lost my purpose and want to find it again or if I'm just being pathetic. I hope it's not about some idea of self-importance. I

want it to be about being useful again, about not languishing in some memory of what I used to be."

"But you have been useful," Ryson countered. "You've helped a great deal since you lost your core. You've instructed Holli and Vraya, and even Jure. You taught them how to use the magic in ways they never considered. Hey, you were even able to cast spells that saved a lot of people, and that was without your core."

"Only when others knew how to prepare the magic and send it to me to be shaped by an external influence. It's not something I can do on my own, and very few people have the amount of energy I would need to cast the kind of spells I can construct."

"But how is talking to Sy going to help you become useful?" Ryson wondered.

"You're doing it now," Enin noted. "You're speaking to a spirit and communicating his knowledge to others who can't hear him. That in itself has helped other people, and it's helping me right now. I'm hoping I might be able to do something similar."

"I guess, but that's pretty limited in..."

Ryson stopped in mid-sentence as he received another message from Sy. The words formed in his mind and he repeated them to Enin.

"Sy just told me you're trying to hear the wrong voice."

Enin looked upon the face of the ghost captain. He attempted to gain greater clarity from the spirit's expression, but there was little emotion noticeable.

"Listening to you would be wrong?" Enin asked of the ghost.

Ryson heard Sy's response and relayed it to the coreless wizard.

"He said that's not what he meant. He also said you can find your purpose, but it won't be from listening to him. You need to hear something else."

Before Enin or Ryson could ask for a more detailed explanation, the spirit of Sy Fenden disappeared.

Enin looked about in near desperation, but he could find no sign of the ghost captain.

"Get used to that," Ryson warned Enin. "It's not the first time he's done that. He says something, doesn't give much of an explanation, and then just disappears."

"I understand," Enin replied, but he sounded far from content. "He's a spirit. He doesn't have the same concerns as us. Like I told you before, I have some understanding of what his existence is like. He certainly isn't going to be worried about hurting my feelings. And he won't feel like he has to prove something. He's motivated by substantially different matters."

"I think he's mostly concerned with protecting this town," Ryson added.

"Burbon is definitely part of his anchor to this existence, but I wonder if it's something else as well."

"You think something else is keeping him here? You don't think he's trapped here, do you?"

"I'm not sure. I would only be guessing and I don't want to question his motives."

"Do you think he would care? You just said he wasn't worried about hurting *your* feelings. I would think he would care even less if you said something about him that wasn't quite right. It might even give him something to laugh about."

"That's very perceptive of you," Enin offered. "You are indeed becoming more aware of spiritual existence."

"Speaking of being aware," Ryson stated as he altered the direction of the conversation, "I heard what you said before Sy cut you off when he first appeared. You

said sending Holli away wasn't completely selfless. You also said it was hard for you, but then Sy stopped you. Why wasn't it completely selfless, and what were you going to say that was hard for you?"

"Because it wasn't all that selfless," Enin admitted. "It's not like I did it just to help Jure, or that I did it for Holli either. I did it just as much for myself. It was getting harder and harder for me to have Holli always around looking after me. It's bad enough I lost my core. It was getting worse being treated like a toddler unable to cross a street."

"I know. I saw you struggle with that, but that's not all, is it?"

"No, but that's really the heart of it."

Even more than before, Ryson sensed Enin holding something back, and his own curiosity needed to be satisfied. He was able to suppress it the first time, but the delver couldn't restrain himself again. The urge to understand his friend was too great.

"Something still doesn't add up for me," Ryson admitted. "I still think you could have gone to Portsans with Holli. No matter what you say, you still know more about magic than anyone else."

"I thought I already explained that," Enin grumbled.

"You did, to a degree, but you also just admitted that letting Holli go wasn't totally a selfless act. You're also not really explaining why it was hard for you. I understand why it was difficult for you to have Holli constantly watching over you, but if that was all there was to it, it would have been easy to send Holli to Portsans."

"It wasn't easy because I'm going to miss her."

"That's obvious, but there's something else. You were going to tell Sy about it. You were about to, but then he interrupted you. Why can't you tell me now?"

"Because I wanted to make sure I was honest with Sy."

"And you don't want to be honest with me?"

"Of course I do, but you're not a spirit. It's different."

"I don't think so, and I would have heard what you were going say to Sy."

"Yes, I suppose you would have, but it's more difficult this way."

"Why?"

"Because it's difficult to admit just how selfish I can be when I'm talking to someone who doesn't completely understand what it's like to be free of those particular burdens. You might have heard what I was going to say, but I was still talking to a spirit. Spirits can see and hear things even a delver can't."

"So you're not going to tell me?"

Enin saw the disappointment on Ryson's face and realized he could not disregard his friend.

"I was afraid I was going to use her, and possibly Jure too, for my own needs," Enin finally confessed. "Holli was as much my student as she was my guard. I could have taught her how to shape her magic and send it to me. I could have used it to cast my spells, maybe fill some of this emptiness inside of me. It would have been difficult for her, but in time, she could have done it."

"Would that have been so bad?"

"No, because in all honesty, her magic probably wouldn't have been enough for me. It wouldn't have satisfied me, but Jure... well, he's another story. With Holli and Jure working together, I know I could have convinced them to feed me with substantial

energy. I would have advised Jure it was the best way for him to maintain control over his magic."

"Would that have been wrong if you were really helping him?"

"Yes, because I would have been abusing his trust. Holli's too."

"But you could have told them, like you just told me."

"And they still would have been willing to feed me with magic."

"So what's the problem?"

"It would be a mistake. My focus wouldn't be on Jure, and I would be using Holli for the wrong reasons. If I used the magic in that manner, I have no idea what it might have done to me, but I know it wouldn't have been good. If magic is going to be fed to me, it has to be for the right reasons. Bad choices lead to bad situations, and I didn't want to head down that road. Don't you see? I had to let Holli go alone so that I wouldn't be tempted by the kind of magic Jure is going to possess."

"So you did it to protect yourself," Ryson acknowledged.

"Exactly."

"That may be, but you still did it to help Jure, and even protect Holli. You didn't do it just for yourself."

"I can hope so. As for now, I'm not sure what to do. You heard what Sy said. He said I wasn't going to find my purpose from him."

Ryson considered everything Sy had revealed, and offered Enin a possible alternative.

"He also said you *could* find your purpose here. You just couldn't do it by listening to him. You have to listen to someone else, and that's what you have to do. You have to figure out what he meant and find the voice you're supposed to hear."

Chapter 3

With most of her body wrapped in powerful strands of violet energy, Vraya could not maintain the focus necessary to break free. She remained defenseless, held aloft in the emptiness of Demonsheol's void. The confining bands of purple magic kept her away from the ground, and she could not make contact with the dusty rock to gain any sense of balance or stability.

The flood of ebony magic which surged through Demonsheol remained deep within the realm. Minor currents twisted up into the void which hung over the land, but they were not strong enough to fortify the sorceress. Unable to immerse herself in the more powerful flows of black energy, Vraya had to rely on the power within her core.

Unfortunately, the magic of her essence was constrained by the same force which held her body. Any attempt to construct a spell met with complete failure. When she twisted her shoulders, the rival energy pulled her in the opposing direction. When she grew too still, the purple bonds shook her violently. If she attempted to release magic from her core, the strands around her sensed the surge and pulled tight around her neck, waist, and chest. The intense pain broke her concentration in an instant.

While Vraya could not focus long enough to use her magic, she was finally able to see somewhat clearly. The blanket of magic did not block her vision, but it was difficult for the sorceress to maintain any sense of direction. The shaking and twirling of her body kept her off balance and prevented her from finding a stable point of reference.

The ground stood out from the void, but the twisting motion caused by the attacking magic left Vraya dizzy and disoriented. She tried to use Rul's crater as a focal point, but the vast pit was too wide to offer the necessary stability. It simply appeared to her as a churning sea of gray, even as the ground itself was as still as a long dead corpse. Her entire surroundings became a vortex of confusion.

When she was first assaulted and pulled from the crater, the sorceress had seen the face of the declyst, but after that initial glance, she only managed to obtain quick glimpses of a shadowy figure circling around her. The creature deliberately moved in direct opposition to the twisting of the magic, intent on adding to the sorceress' confusion.

In desperation, Vraya shouted out to her attacker.

"You are wasting an opportunity!" the sorceress managed to yell.

The twirling turbulence did not halt. It even seemed to increase slightly. Vraya didn't know if she could speak again. Forcing those first few words out of her mouth brought a wave of sickness to her stomach. Her head began to pound and her sight grew dark around the edges, as if she was looking through two narrow tunnels. If she didn't break free from the demon witch soon, she knew she would die.

Forcing another few words from her mouth, she made her final plea, and she hoped it would be heard by the one demon with the power to force the declyst to suspend her attack.

"I'm part of the change here in Demonsheol!"

The darkness around the edges of Vraya's vision pressed inward. All she could see were two specks of dim light. Her chest tightened and she could not release the thin air

she pulled into her lungs. Just before she faded into unconsciousness, she felt her body drop to the cold ground.

The harsh contact with solid rock would have normally caused a sting of great pain, but it actually served to revive the sorceress into a greater state of consciousness. Her vision returned and her head began to clear. She was still wrapped in heavy strands of violet energy, but she was able to turn her head. She looked upon the stout figure to her right.

The creature made no attempt to mask her presence in a shroud of fog or a blanket of mist. The demon witch had already succeeded in capturing her prey, and despite the momentary reprieve she offered the sorceress, she had no intention of allowing Vraya to escape.

The declyst was even shorter than the diminutive sorceress, but the witch carried substantially more bulk. The demon appeared almost like a dwarf, but her face carried the features of a diseased shark.

She had a wide mouth with two rows of sharp, jagged teeth. She had no clear nose, just a round snout-like protrusion slightly above the mouth. The witch's eyes matched the stories of legends which described them as twin chasms of death, two dark hollows with not a hint of compassion.

The witch was prepared to use her storm magic to bring Vraya to a painful and violent death. The declyst saw an opportunity to experiment with knives of lightning and hammers of thunder. She wished to cut and pound the human spell caster relentlessly just to see how long she could keep her prey alive and still administer unyielding punishment.

If left to her own devices, the witch would have started the torture immediately, but her master commanded her to question the sorceress. In deference to Rul Saattan's wishes, the declyst kept a strong hold on Vraya, but allowed the human to speak.

"What is it you wish to say?" the witch demanded in a high-pitched but raspy voice.

Vraya took one deep breath in hopes of gaining a greater sense of consciousness, and then spoke quickly. She knew she had only one chance, and she needed to convince both the witch and the demon lord that she was still of some value.

"Rul was right," Vraya stated. "There is a destiny shaping Demonsheol, and I'm part of it. He can't deny that, and neither can you. You can kill me, but you need to consider how that might affect what happens here."

"You are not part of Demonsheol," the declyst shrieked.

"That's true. I'm not a demon, and I didn't say I was. I said I was part of the change. The ebony magic within me was part of several events which led to this rebellion. It's connected to events which occurred before the insurrection even began. My magic allowed me to witness the birth of this realm."

"Lies! The breeding grounds have been in existence for ages."

"That was Demonspawn. This is Demonsheol, and even you have to admit that this new realm only recently came into existence. I know because I was connected to the void when it happened. I had created a portal into the span of non-existence. I stood at the opening of that gateway when the entire void merged with Demonspawn. I was in contact with the emptiness when it was swept away, as was my magic."

"The abnormality which was non-existence has been eradicated," the demon witch screeched.

"Not completely. It may not be total non-existence, but the void still hangs over this new realm."

"So you have some loose link to the void when it became part of Demonsheol. How does that connect you to the changes spreading across this realm?"

"It shows that my magic was embedded in the void when it became part of this domain. That was the act which linked me to the birth of this place, and now I'm further connected by the uprising which is sweeping across this land."

"What do you have to do with the rebellion?"

"I helped create the spark which ignited it. Even Rul understands that. I was unwilling to believe him at first, but now it's obvious. I was with Ryson Acumen when the delver battled Dasck, and no one can deny that it was that fight which led to this rebellion. I created the gateway which allowed the demon hunter to return here. I opened the door for Dasck's revolt. No one can dispute that."

"I still fail to see how that makes you a significant part of the changes to this realm."

"Anyone who casts spells understands the potential of magical echoes."

"Do not speak in riddles to me, and do not attempt to waste time. Say what you mean!"

Vraya knew the witch wouldn't listen to her plea, but she believed Rul Saattan remained watchful over all things in his realm. The demon lord might have allowed the declyst to apply torture for pure pleasure, but he would be mindful of the smallest mistake. While she spoke directly to the storm witch, Vraya made certain her explanation was of greater interest to the ruler of the realm.

"Demonsheol is Rul's domain, and Rul is fed by the power of the past. My own past is now connected to Rul. He believes I helped shape certain events which have led to this rebellion."

"You confess what the master already knows."

"True, but by confessing it to you, I now make myself an even greater part of the change. My own history swells within the core of my magic, just as it swells within Demonsheol, but my magic is that of alteration."

"Is that a threat? Do you believe you can change your past?"

"Change it? No. I can't do that, but I can increase the significance of the echo, and that's something Rul shouldn't ignore. If you simply kill me now, which is obviously within your power, you will end my role in the transformation."

"And if I spare you, what will you do?" the declyst grunted in disgust. "Will you make some vain offer of assistance to the master? Do not humiliate yourself with such a useless trick."

"No, I would never do that," Vraya admitted, willing to accept a painful death before submitting to the will of the demon lord. "I wouldn't help Rul to save my own life. I would gain nothing and lose everything."

"Then there is nothing left to do but destroy you."

"No! There's a different path, one which will set the echoes of my magic even deeper into the fate of Demonsheol. You could fight me, pit your magic against me in a battle of spells."

Vraya did not believe she had much of a chance against the declyst, even if the witch released her current hold over the sorceress. Though there was a swell of ebony magic deep within the bowels of Demonsheol, Vraya still stood upon the breeding grounds for

demons. A declyst would be a difficult opponent even back in Uton, but within the realm which spawned hostility, the storm witch would be nearly invincible.

Unfortunately, it was the only option Vraya could muster, the only alternative which might appeal to the demon. And even if she didn't survive, at least she would perish struggling against evil. That was a death she could accept, but she still had to convince her foe to let her free, or at least convince a greater power that a conflict aided his twisted plans.

"Rul has spoken of destiny," Vraya continued, "but what is destiny other than the molding of history into some predetermined future event? If Rul wishes to connect my actions to his ascendancy, then the importance of my death is also connected to his fate."

"I already have you in my grasp. Why should I release you for some useless exercise?"

"Because in battle, I will release the magic within my core, and I will utilize the magic of this realm. Ebony energy from Demonsheol will rush through me and mix with the echoes of my past, strengthening the link between me and Rul Saattan's stated destiny."

"And why should such a thing matter?" the witch demanded.

"Because of the rebellion," Vraya responded confidently.

"The rebellion is why I was called to eliminate you. I am here to prove myself."

And with that, Vraya believed the demon had finally made a mistake.

"Prove yourself?" the sorceress questioned defiantly. "Do you think Rul is concerned with your loyalty?"

"It isn't about loyalty. It is about respect."

"Respect for what? The rules? For stability? This is Demonsheol. There are no rules. There is no stability. And as powerful as you may be, you're not important. There is only one opinion that matters. Your master believes I have aided him, that my actions have brought him closer to his destiny, and that is why you need to release me. That's why you need to defeat me in a true battle."

"A battle is not necessary."

"But it is. If you destroy me like some trapped insect, what does it offer Rul? Nothing. It's a pointless exercise to be ignored. But if my magic rages out through Demonsheol, my defeat will be recognized even by the demons rebelling against his rule. It is a simple concept. The greater the significance of the past, the greater the impact his destiny will have."

"Your request is laughably absurd."

"Is it?"

"You have no intention of fighting me," the demon witch accused. "You know you would lose. If I release you, you would only attempt to escape."

Believing the sorceress would say anything to survive, the demon pulled on the magical strands and lifted Vraya back off the ground. She did not spin her about as she had done previously, but she placed her high enough in the air so that there was no connection between the sorceress and the gray dust of Demonsheol's surface.

Vraya could feel the emptiness surge around her. It seemed as if the void wished to swallow her. She sensed a growing isolation wash over her entire being. She knew she was being separated from anything within a physical realm so that the pain of her death would be inflicted solely by the witch's magic. Dying in such emptiness only strengthened her resolve to force the witch into a battle of spells, even if Vraya could not hope to win such a fight.

"No, I wouldn't do that under these circumstances," Vraya stated. "That would be worse than my death. To escape, I would have to open a portal, and there are inherent risks that I can't ignore."

"What risk? Other than being obliterated."

"That's exactly what I cannot allow. Any portal I construct would be made with transformative energy. It would alter the space between realms. If you managed to destroy me before I could flee, the portal would be left unfulfilled in its purpose."

"What of it? Many spells are cast in the final moments of battle that are left without function or intention. The spell dissolves and the magical energy is released back into its natural flow."

"But a portal would be a construct with a defined purpose. It would sense my death and the spell would lose its anchor. It would ultimately close, but the energy used to create it would remain unstable. I have seen what unfulfilled magic can do. Spell constructs deteriorating in such an unbalanced form are highly unpredictable. The transformative energy could alter its own purpose. It might take hold of my essence, my very soul, and leave me trapped here forever. Even Rul knows that possibility exists."

Vraya had mentioned the demon lord's name once again in hopes of gaining Rul's full attention. She knew if the declyst decided her fate, she would already be dead. The sorceress realized it was Rul who had probably caused the storm witch to delay a final assault.

In a desperate gamble, she made one last plea.

"You could have destroyed me already if you doubted my word, and I can see that you do. But you also know you have to answer to Rul. You said you wanted to prove yourself, that you wanted to show the proper respect. This is Rul's realm. I know he's heard everything I've said. Why not let him decide if there's some merit to my words. Ask your master if I should be allowed to unleash my magic and entrench myself further into the fortunes of his realm."

The response was immediate and it thundered out from the center of the crater.

"Release the sorceress!" Rul Saattan roared. "Give her the chance to see just how futile it is to fight against my destiny."

Chapter 4

The declyst bowed her head toward the massive gray form in the center of the pit. The demon witch would not dare deny or question her master. Rul Saattan had commanded her to release the human spell caster, and so the declyst had no choice. In one forceful heave, she pulled upon the violet strands which held the sorceress and freed Vraya from the magical bonds.

Without the magic holding her aloft, Vraya dropped through the thin air and once again crashed to the ground. Fortunately, she had not been held high in the emptiness of Demonsheol. The impact stunned her momentarily, but it caused no significant injury.

As Vraya struggled to her feet, the declyst crouched low then leapt backward and to her left. The storm witch wanted to create space between her and her prey. The violence the demon was about to unleash was best cast from a distance.

Uncharacteristically, the demon witch did not aggressively attack. She allowed the violet magic to swirl about her like a small twister. She stood within the cone of twirling energy as she eyed the sorceress with uncharacteristic patience.

"You are going to rely on your defenses?" Vraya asked the witch demon, as she dug her heels into the ground. She could feel swells of ebony energy waiting within the gray dust, and she knew her only chance to survive meant channeling the dark magic of Demonsheol at her opponent.

"You asked for this fight," the witch shrieked, "and the master wishes to see your transformative energy flow across his realm. If I unleash the full power of my storm immediately, there will be no fight, and your magic will be crushed along with the whole of your body."

"And if I wait for you to make the first move?"

"Then everything you have said is nothing more than a foolish attempt to escape death. The master will then let me deal with you as I wish, and I will have no regard for you or your magic."

"True, but I'm not going to let you get a hold of me again," Vraya countered.

Without saying another word, the sorceress cast her first spell, but it was not an attack against the witch. She also did not attempt to flee. Instead, she cast a spell of alteration upon the ground beneath her feet.

The gray rock turned to a thick sludge. It rose up over her feet and covered her lower legs almost to her knees. Vraya became immobile, stuck in the gray mud of Demonsheol, but she had succeeded in creating a bond between herself and the ground which held vast amounts of ebony magic.

"You willingly restrict your movements?" the storm witch questioned.

"I told you I would link myself to Demonsheol."

"It will do you no good. You are no demon."

"You don't have to be a demon to utilize the ebony magic, not when you have a core like mine."

"But now you are nothing more than a rigid target."

"I told you I wasn't going to try to escape, and I'm not going to let you trap me again. I'm not helpless, and I don't intend to be. This will keep me connected to the power

within the ground. As long as I'm anchored, you can't wrap me up and lift me into the void. That's where your magic is the strongest and mine is the weakest."

"You may have sunk yourself into the ground," the declyst acknowledged, "but you have cast very little of your own magic, and nothing in the way of an attack. You said you wished for a chance to unleash your magic. That is what the master wishes to see, not some absurd attempt to bury yourself in muck."

"And what if I bury you as well?"

With a second spell she had prepared at the moment she cast her first incantation, Vraya refocused a swell of transformation at the feet of the stout witch. A ring of ebony magic flew from the palm of the sorceress' left hand and cut across the gray emptiness of Demonsheol. Rather than strike the demon, the dark circle sliced downward and into the rock directly underneath the declyst. The gray stone turned to a muck that was deeper than the sludge which held Vraya's legs.

At first, the ground appeared to sink low beneath the witch's feet, creating a small dip in the surrounding rock. The declyst descended right along with it. The witch managed to keep her heavy legs from sinking deep into the muck, but in one heartbeat, the thick sludge rose up like a tidal wave.

The power of Vraya's alteration magic turned the dry rock into a surging ripple of bubbling slush. Ebony energy filled the thick liquid with a hunger to blot out anything of great substance, and the wave cascaded upward to swallow the stout body of the demon.

The witch did not even need to cast a spell to neutralize the attacking globs of mud. She allowed the swirling purple magic which surrounded her to toss it aside as if it was nothing more than a light mist.

"You should at least make this interesting," the declyst admonished the sorceress. "Flinging sludge at me will do you no good. What did you hope to accomplish? Did you think you would cause any damage with such a spell? The master wishes you to release your magic. Do so or die."

"I do not follow your master," Vraya defied the witch.

"And yet he is the one who allowed you this chance. Do not waste it with minor spells."

"My magic is that of change. What you see as a minor incantation can transform itself into something much more."

The initial aspect of Vraya's spell was nothing more than a diversion. It was meant to cause an upheaval deep in the rock which would be dismissed by the demon witch as an inconsequential attack. The more substantial aspect of the assault, however, followed after the sludge had been tossed aside by the demon's defensive twister.

The ground broke apart underneath the declyst. A wide chasm opened up and a large mass of molten rock rose up out of the abyss. It glowed with a dull orange hue and bathed the gray stone with a brownish tint.

The demon easily jumped away from the hole and sneered at the large glowing rock with disgust. Again, she made no move to cast a defensive spell as she remained certain that the burning stone would fail to penetrate the violet magic swirling around her stout body.

To the witch's surprise, the giant rock did not simply fall upon the witch or smash against the purple twister of magic. Instead, it transformed from one massive boulder into

a red hot glowing hand. The fingers opened up from the thick palm. Free from any arm, it swooped through the air like a massive eagle soaring downward to catch its prey.

When the heavy fingers met the spinning energy surrounding the witch, portions of burning rock flew from the thick digits. Small glowing stones hurled outward and sparks erupted around the magical cyclone, but the fingers managed to break through the obstacle mostly intact, and they wrapped around the body of the demon.

The steaming rock seared the skin of the declyst, but the demon ignored the pain. Her wide mouth twisted into a maniacal smile as she seemed pleased by the new scars to her ravaged skin. Despite her apparent enjoyment, she would not allow herself to be contained by the massive hand for long.

She reached out with a free arm and took hold of the purple magic still racing around her body. Focusing her wrath on the cyclone which failed to protect her sufficiently, she turned the twisting magic into an angry storm of condensed power. One massive bolt of lightning exploded out of the tempest and struck the center of the attacking hand. The rock disintegrated into a flash of burning dust.

"You are somewhat creative," the witch allowed. "Your magic also has strength, and you can be aggressive, but you lack the viciousness necessary to give you any real chance."

"I still managed to hurt you," Vraya pointed out.

"Hurt me? I enjoy pain, and scars are my own link to the history of past deeds. They have their own way of adding to my strength."

The witch offered a demonstration as she used her sharp claws to gauge open the fresh wounds from the burning rock. Dark pus oozed out of the gash. It trickled down her side and over her hip. She placed her left hand in the thick liquid and then rubbed both palms together.

"Wounds have memories," the demon explained, "and Demonsheol is heavy with the past, even the recent past. Let me show you."

A single ring of purple magic formed around the declyst's body. It was an impressive display of control. Even as the energy seethed with hostility, the single circle maintained its perfect shape.

The demon witch reached out with both hands and took hold of the purple ring. The pus from her wound flowed from her palms and stained the magical circle. The violet hue turned darker, and the energy bubbled with a thirst for vengeance.

The demon looked high into to the sky. She snarled at the void. It lacked the substance she needed to unleash the full fury of her assault. She looked closer to the ground, first to her left, and then to her right. Ultimately, she found what she was searching for and flung the ring of energy at a cloud of smoke lingering near a pile of ash.

The smoke was actually a collection of darowks, lesser demons of no real significance. Darowks soared through the denser airs of Demonsheol searching for small sparks of flame. They used the heat to expand their own forms and ultimately breed additional demons of similar substance.

The witch's violet energy encircled the dense air and quickly formed a bubble of magic around the collection of lesser demons. With the proper element captured within its borders, the incantation unleashed the full influence of its casting into the core of every darowk trapped within the sphere of magic.

Layers of hot and cold rushed through the lesser demons. They tried to break from the ground and soar higher into the thin skies of Demonsheol. The emptiness of the void offered potential sanctuary against the violence of the spell, but they could not break through the barrier of magic which held them at ground level.

The trapped demons began to throb, and their smoky substance swirled with agitation. In a matter of moments, they began to merge together. Rather than dividing into additional darowks, the gaseous creatures became one condensed ball of raging desperation.

It was exactly that emotion the demon witch hoped to enhance. By trapping the lesser demons and forcing them to combine, she created a conflict which would negate certain aspects of transformation. The darowks were pressed into one tight ball of smoke. The purple magic surrounding them also shrunk in size as it continued to restrict their movements. At the instant the sphere of magic reached the size of the declyst's fist, the violet energy released the full scope of its power.

The ensnared darowks were fed by the rains of a typhoon and the wind swells of a hurricane. The patch of smoke remained the size of a small ball, but it carried the strength of a giant storm amplified by the anguish of the smoke demons.

"You have connected yourself to the ground in hopes of utilizing Demonsheol's energy," the witch hissed, "but once you are broken in half, the magic will pour out of your shattered core."

As Vraya watched the ball begin to roll towards her, she attempted to use her own magic to alter its path. Tossing a deep black circle of energy at the ground in front of the condensed mass of fury, she hoped to send it back at the declyst.

The ebony ring exploded in front of the compact smoke cloud, but the spell failed completely. The darowks themselves were already fighting against the will of the magic, and so there were two opposing intentions within the advancing cloud. Any additional attempt at alteration would only serve to increase the tension within the tempest.

Transformation spells worked well when a substantial change in intention or direction could be achieved through the magic, but when the target was already in conflict with itself, there was no clear alteration which could be achieved. Pushing against one side would mean pulling against the other and the alteration would actually work against itself.

As the ball of fury drew closer, Vraya made one last attempt at countering the attack before it reached her. Sensing the clash between the darowks and the declyst's incantation, Vraya cast a calming spell. She hoped to reduce the conflict within the small mass as well as ease the power of the tempest.

Once again, the spell failed. The calming effect momentarily reduced the resistance of the darowks, but that only served to strengthen the bond between the storm spell and the smoke demons. The fury of the storm increased which caused a greater divergence between the ball itself and Vraya's spell. The calming effect was quickly lost, and the darowks continued to rage against the magic used against them.

In a matter of moments, Vraya had cast two spells, expended large amounts of her energy, and failed to stop the witch demon's magical assault. She was already facing a great disadvantage in fighting the declyst in Demonsheol. By exhausting a large portion of her magic on ineffective spells, she had placed herself on a path toward absolute destruction.

With her feet anchored to the ground, Vraya could not avoid the rolling storm cloud. She could have broken her attachment to the gray rock, but that would have dashed any hope of using Demonsheol's ebony energy against the declyst, and she believed the thick flows of transformative magic remained her only chance of survival.

Before the violent ball of smoke struck her, the sorceress cast one last spell. It was not so much a shield as it was a siphon. Complete alteration had already failed, but she hoped a subtle spell of diminishment might save her.

She dropped a ring of black energy to the ground at her feet. It spun about in the gray dust directly in the path of the captured darowks. It made no attempt to block the attacking energy. Instead, it opened several paths of disbursement, small passages which led far up into the void above Demonsheol.

When the declyst's spell finally crashed into the legs of the sorceress, a storm of vengeance exploded from its core. The slime from the witch's wound instilled an angry wrath within the intention of the incantation. It placed a clear recollection of violation into the heart of the spell-driven storm. The agitated energy longed to unleash intense retribution against the sorceress.

The darowks caught within the vortex of the storm were obliterated by the initial blast. They had served their purpose. Their struggle against the witch's spell created the necessary conflict which negated Vraya's defenses. When the storm was released upon contact with the sorceress, they were no longer needed.

Only Vraya's siphon spell kept her from being instantly torn apart. The black ring absorbed great waves of force and directed them up to the empty sky. It seemed as if the void itself shook from the discharge.

"Impressive," the declyst acknowledged. "You countered the first wave, but you failed to comprehend the very essence of revenge. The bitterness does not diminish over time. It grows. That is why I placed the blood from my open wound within this assault. It holds to the recollection of how you attacked me, and it will only be satisfied when your own blood swirls through the force of my storm."

The winds battered the body of the sorceress. Compressed sheets of rain slashed at Vraya's arms, face, and chest. She could feel the tempest ripping and pulling. She felt tiny pieces of her skin tear away.

The assault did not end with an attack to her flesh. The raging storm of magic disrupted the ebony energy in the ground near the sorceress' feet. The flow of black energy into Vraya's core became unstable, and the interference threatened to end the incantation which protected her.

In a desperate attempt to survive, she bent low and pressed her hands against the gray rock at her feet. Her face dropped closer to the assaulting storm, but she ignored the pain. She tried to pull additional magic from the ground. She found thick flows of ebony power, and she fed them into the spell which continued to direct much of the storm's fury up into the sky.

But even as her own spell increased in power, the demon's desire to exact revenge offset the renewed surge. The venom of vengeance darkened the violet magic and poured its rage deeper into the furious storm. As that energy raced through the channels which siphoned the power up into the void, it condensed into a thick cloud directly above the sorceress.

"Do you see it?" the witch shrieked. "Over your head? You did not weaken my spell. You simply managed to divide it, but the thirst for vengeance circles back upon itself, especially over time."

The sorceress glanced upwards and realized the mistake of her actions. She managed to diminish the initial onslaught, but she failed to eliminate the power of the declyst's spell. She only succeeded in deflecting it into another potential threat. She barely had enough magic to continue her fight against the first assault.

A violent cloud of purple energy churned with rage just above Vraya's body. Flashes of lightning erupted throughout the vaporous mass, but the powerful blasts remained contained within the borders of the newly formed storm cloud.

The declyst constrained the bursts in order to increase the magnitude of the tempest. When the raging fury could no longer be contained, she would release it upon the sorceress in one massive strike. With the blunt winds and carving rains beating upon the sorceress from the ball of energy near the ground, the witch knew one intense release of magical lightning would obliterate her prey and end the struggle.

Looking across the barren ground at Vraya, the declyst snarled with disgust. There would be no great battle, no titanic struggle, no need for the witch to unleash the full potential of her magic. She would defeat her foe with one simple act of vengeance, a spell cast in response to a minor wound. The declyst wondered why she had even bothered to release the sorceress.

"So this is what you offer to Rul Saattan?" the demon witch questioned with a cackle. "Is this all you could muster? You are doomed."

"No," Vraya responded through several gasps of pain. "I would have been doomed if I didn't try, but I did try."

"A pointless effort, and the mixing of your magic with the energies of Demonsheol meant nothing."

"It meant I was true to my essence!" Vraya defied the witch. "I did not allow the ebony energy within this realm to corrupt me."

"Remaining true to your essence? Will that save you?"

"It was never about saving my life. It was about maintaining my legacy, and it was about proving Rul wrong. I am not part of his destiny. My actions were never meant to strengthen his rule or allow him to extend his reach beyond Demonsheol."

"So even now you admit to deceit. When you begged me to free you..."

"I never begged!"

The declyst ignored the sorceress.

"You stated your defeat would strengthen the link between you and the master's ultimate destiny. Now, when you face obliteration, you make the opposite claim. What is that if not corruption?"

"I only care about the corruption of my beliefs, not the twisting of words."

"And what is it that you believe you have accomplished? Beyond that, what was it you hoped to prove when you began this battle? Did you think some monumental effort against the master's forces would reveal some weakness? Did you think the magic within Demonsheol would transform within your core and burst across this realm with the sickening scent of righteousness?"

"No, but I believed the magic here would not alter my own essence, and it hasn't. Which means it didn't in the past as well." Vraya embraced that small victory, accepting

she never had a chance to defeat the dectyst. "I achieved exactly what I hoped to achieve. I proved that there is no definitive link between me and this place."

"And so you will die. You will be obliterated very much like the insect you claimed not to be. Even your stated intentions have failed to materialize. There was no grand battle, no epic struggle. Your pathetic attempts will not even affect the rebellion in any material fashion. If anything, you have confirmed the hopelessness of those who rise against the master. You have invalidated any belief that he could be defea..."

The demon witch's words ended in an instant as sharp claws whipped across her lower back and cut her in half.

A Final Note from the Author

Emptiness Filled 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*, and *Alien Cradle*.

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