

Delver Magic

Book XII

Essence of the Chase

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.

Essence of the Chase is the twelfth 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 letting me share my beliefs!

Prologue

"It is still the dormant season," Thom Burrbush, representative from the elf tribe of the Lower Cape, complained to the captain of the elf guard. "You should not have asked us to travel during this time, especially to meet here in Dark Spruce. It is as cold here as it is in the northern bogs."

"It is a bit more brisk than usual," Birk Grund conceded, "but I believe we would all be far more uncomfortable in the bogs. It is substantially colder there, and there is far less light."

"You call this light? In the shadows of these trees, there might as well be no sun."

"It is to be expected. It is late in the day."

"I doubt there would be substantially more sunlight at midday. I find no warmth at all in these meager rays."

The captain from Dark Spruce did not wish to insult the guest to his camp, but he could not hide his astonishment. Birk Grund commanded elf warriors and spell casters, elves who learned to endure harsh conditions, even to welcome them as a challenge. He realized the dormant season in Dark Spruce Forest was not as pleasant as the relatively mild climate of the southern peninsula, but he believed that all elves could inherently adjust to their environment.

"Do all the elves of the Lower Cape hate the cold with such intensity?" Birk wondered.

The elf envoy glared at the captain, but responded with total honesty.

"Yes, we do. Elves of the south do not crave long shadows and bitter winds. In fact, I would have rather met in the caves of Dunop. While I do not seek the company of dwarves or the constraints of enclosed places, dealing with both would have been far more pleasurable than suffering under these conditions."

Birk considered the idea and actually laughed. He imagined elves from every region of Uton gathered beneath the ground in some chamber surrounded by rock. He realized Thom Burrbush despised the cold, but he wondered if the elf envoy could adjust any better to the deep tunnels of Dunop. Birk doubted that very much.

"You find something amusing?" Burrbush questioned, clearly annoyed by the captain's lack of dignity.

"Forgive me. I just imagined what it would look like to have all the elves meeting in a dwarf cave."

"It is not that absurd. Could you have at least made the request?"

The elf captain then considered the dwarves... and the purpose of the gathering. It was a topic which was not meant for outsiders.

"No, that would have been extremely unwise," Birk Grund noted.

Another brisk wind cut across the center of the elf camp, as if it was called for by those who might argue with the captain's assertion. It reminded the elf representative of where he stood and how he longed for a much warmer climate. He might not have liked caves, or dwarves for that matter, but an escape from the icy wind had a price he was willing to pay.

"Unwise?" Thom Burrbush questioned. "How is it unwise to avoid such bleak conditions?"

"It would be just as dark underground," Birk explained, "if not more so."

"I can adjust to the dark, but these freezing winds are dreadful."

"While many of the elves here might agree with you in that regard, I doubt the dwarves would be pleased to host this particular gathering."

"I have heard reports that your camp was on good terms with the cave diggers."

"We are... and we wish to remain so."

"You believe the dwarves would object to this meeting? Why would they protest?"

"You will understand when you hear the reason why we have asked so many representatives to appear."

"And how long must I endure this abominable weather before my questions are finally addressed?"

"Actually," Birk responded with a growing sense of satisfaction, "you will not have to wait at all. All of the other representatives have already arrived. We did not wish to start until everyone was present, and you are the last."

"Our camp was not certain I should come at all," Thom Burrbush argued in hopes of defending his late arrival. "The elders of my tribe debated the issue for some time. I simply waited until I was instructed to go. If your messenger had been more clear with your concerns and intentions, I could have teleported here far sooner."

"Our intentions shall be explained by our camp elder, Standish Loftber. It is best if every representative hear the issue directly from his mouth."

"And is he ready to speak of this matter now?"

"If you are not in need of anything further..."

"What would I need, other than an explanation regarding the purpose of this gathering... and perhaps a great deal more sunlight?"

"While I can do nothing about the light, Loftber wished to make certain every representative was offered a meal and a chance to rest."

"I have already eaten and I am not tired. My elf guard cast the teleportation spell to bring me here. It is not as if I had to travel through these forsaken woods on foot."

"Very well. Then I will have you escorted to your place for the meeting. Loftber will inform you of his concerns and address any questions you might have."

Birk signaled to two elf guards patrolling the woods. The warriors from the camp of Dark Spruce guided Thom Burrbush to an open space within several pines. Along the edges of the clearing, sturdy limbs of numerous trees were bound together to create comfortable resting places for all the arriving representatives.

Standish Loftber was already standing in the center of the clearing when the last invited elf arrived. As he waited for Thom Burrbush to take his place, the camp elder moved about slowly, still appearing somewhat frail. He thought carefully of the words he would use as he gazed upon the elves who responded to his rather obscure request.

Loftber had not yet regained his full strength. His self-imposed banishment had left him somewhat undernourished. Though he could still move within the trees from branch to branch, he preferred the steady ground. He needed to ensure there was conviction in his voice, and he could not afford a single misstep. He intended to guide all the elves toward accepting his unwavering and rather dark conclusion.

With all the representatives finally present, he prepared to reveal his fears and to expose the threat of a growing menace. He released a heavy sigh before he began his address, and even asked for the long bow of a nearby guard. He didn't wish to appear

weak, but his legs simply would not cooperate. He placed one end of the bow firmly against the frozen ground and used the weapon as if it were a long staff to steady his movements.

"I realize many of you are uncomfortable with this setting," Loftber offered sincerely, even without enduring the complaints of Thom Burrbush and other elves that came from far warmer climates. "This, however, is where the issue must be addressed. I also realize that elf camps do not often unite in one cause. We have always respected the independence of our individual camps. Still, within the history of elflore, there have been times when all the elf tribes have banded together... whether during a time of war, the scourge of a plague, or to fight the rise of some oppressive force."

"We know the history of our kind," one impatient elf called out. "What is the purpose of this meeting?"

Loftber did not allow the interruption to influence him. He kept his voice steady and avoided a direct confrontation with the questioning elf. He continued to address the assembly as a whole.

"It is just as I had defined in my request for an audience of all the tribes. There is an irregularity we must acknowledge and address. It was not my intention to deceive any of you, but I believe the matter remains far too sensitive to reveal through messengers or emissaries."

Loftber decided to proclaim his concern without any initial details. He would state the crisis as if its very existence explained the need for action.

"A human wizard has obtained elf essence within his core," Loftber announced in a somber tone, as if war had been declared.

A few elves appeared almost dazed by the revelation. Others, however, discounted the announcement as nonsense.

"This is why you called us here?" Thom Burrbush questioned. "This is no irregularity. Humans and elves have come together to bear offspring in the past. There are even several references to half-elves within elflore itself. How can you call this an irregularity? It is not even a surprise to me. Elves are now routinely visiting human cities. With the return of magic, there are sure to be many more instances of humans and elves... mingling. This is a waste of our time."

"No!" Loftber tried to shout, but his voice remained somewhat strained. "I do not speak of a half-elf. This is not the offspring of an elf and a human. It is not even a infant, but a human of advanced age, a human born before the magic was released from Ingar's sphere. You must understand that. There is no elf blood, no elf history, no elf ancestry within the human spell caster."

"Then how is there elf essence within him?" an elf in the shadows of a tall white pine called out.

"He has captured the essence from the previous leader of this camp."

"You refer to Shantree Wispon?" a different elf questioned. "We heard of her passing—I offer my condolences to your camp in that regard—but her death was reported as an accident."

"I believe it was," Loftber admitted, "but the wizard was with her at her passing. It was his actions which led to her untimely death. The wizard did not wish to kill the elder. He was using his magic to examine her core when the remnants of a past possession exploded within her essence."

"You mean this wizard has taken possession of the elder?"

"No, there is no doubt Shantree Wispon is dead."

"Then a human wizard has taken possession of her spirit?"

"Again, no. It is difficult to comprehend, and that is the reason for this meeting. The human wizard has not gained possession of Shantree's spirit but only the essence of her elf heritage. It does not contain any of her identity... of that, I have been assured. However, it is beyond argument that the magical essence within all elves, and only elves, was removed from Shantree Wispon and placed within the core of a human wizard."

"How is this even possible?" another elf questioned.

"Through the culmination of several events," Loftber explained. "Another sorcerer capable of casting in a pure black circle previously forced his magic into Shantree Wispon during an earlier crisis. That magic was totally removed, but a whisper of its dark intention echoed within her core. There was no foreign energy within her, only the waiting spark of a memory."

"That tale is known to many. It was the sorcerer Ansas, was it not?"

"It was."

"But Ansas was consumed by the demon lord."

"That is my understanding as well, but it is not Ansas who has taken Shantree's essence. His despicable act merely set the stage for the crisis we now face. It was the echo of his influence which caused the death of the elder. When this memory was ignited with Shantree's own magical energy, it destroyed her body and scorched the very fibers of her magic."

"Such an event would not have caused the separation of elf essence from its original host," an elf well versed in the powers of magic revealed. "I understand elf essence well. It would require an extremely significant force to isolate it, withdraw it from an individual elf, and place it in a different host. I am not certain such a force could even exist."

"It was not force, but the careful manipulation of magic which allowed for the transfer," Loftber responded to the challenging claim. "When the human wizard examined Shantree's core, he obtained significant understanding of its composition. He created a replica of her magical foundation with pure white energy. The power of his magic was sufficient to beckon the elf essence away from the spirit of Shantree Wispon. He then absorbed the replicated core back into his own being, thus absorbing the elf essence as well."

The questioning elf stood from his resting place and walked toward Loftber in a display of clear rejection. The claim was indeed serious, but it was also highly questionable. The ability to remove elf essence and submerge it within the core of another race created numerous concerns, all of them ominous.

"A human did this? A human was able to replicate the magical core of an elf to such an extent that he was actually capable of stealing elf essence? This is not some small accusation."

"No, it is not," Loftber agreed. "That is why I have summoned you all here."

"And I am here to ensure we are not being led astray by some irrational assertion. I do not wish to cast doubt upon the elder of another tribe, but I maintain that such a claim is highly unlikely. Do you have any proof of this?"

Loftber was prepared for the demand, even hoped it would be placed upon him. He knew his planned response would leave little doubt regarding the credibility of his concerns.

"I do."

Loftber motioned for Haven Wellseed to come forward. The sorceress, a young elf blessed with the magic of golden light, lit up the long shadows with her presence alone. If she had simply nodded in agreement, every envoy witnessing her aura would have accepted her confirmation without any further explanation.

Haven, however, felt compelled to speak.

"I was there when Shantree Wispon died," the elf sorceress explained. "I was bound to her through a magical link which also included the human wizard. I witnessed the explosion of a spell which Shantree initiated but could not control. It burned through her essence and created charred strands of magic."

The young sorceress needed a moment to compose herself. The loss of an elder could devastate an entire camp. It was an event which altered the perspective of every member of the tribe. In an attempt to remove the pain of Shantree's death from her immediate consideration, she placed her attention on the magic caster who had initiated the devastating incident.

"The human wizard had been inspecting the details of Shantree's core at the time," the sorceress explained. "He had hoped to find a way to protect elves from foreign magic, but it was not his energy which created the wave of destruction within our elder."

"Then how was he able to steal the essence?" the doubtful elf demanded.

"He did not steal the essence. He did not even absorb it at that time. I am only explaining how he obtained the knowledge to replicate the elder's core."

"Then explain that."

"In an attempt to save Shantree, he made great efforts to constrain the destructive magic. Those efforts allowed him to probe into the depths of Shantree's essence. He sent his perception deep into the elder, and he obtained insight no other human has ever obtained. He has great control of white magic. With that power and the knowledge he achieved, it would not have been difficult for him to construct a duplicate of her core."

"That is all you need to say," Loftber instructed.

"But that is not all that has happened," Haven insisted. "It has been inferred that the wizard *stole* Shantree's essence."

"Not by me."

"But it has been presumed by this elf before us."

Loftber did not wish to argue over certain details which could not be sufficiently established.

"The manner in which the wizard obtained the essence is irrelevant," the elder explained.

"But the purpose behind the wizard's conduct is as important as his actions," the sorceress insisted.

Loftber grimaced. He did not wish to argue with the young elf in front of the other envoys.

"Did you witness the wizard take possession of the elf essence?" Loftber questioned.

"No, but..."

"Then all you can offer is what you have already said."

"But I clearly understood the wizard's intentions when he was trying to save our elder. There is no doubt regarding his devotion to our previous leader."

"That was at the time of Shantree's death. The human has changed drastically since that moment. His closest friends would admit to that, and thus, you should not speak in regard to events which you did not witness."

"I did not have to see the transference of essence to understand the wizards' feeling toward Shantree."

"Those feelings are no longer relevant. To all of our great sadness, Shantree is gone."

"Such emotions do not simply fade."

Loftber shook his head and placed a comforting hand on Haven's shoulder. He did not wish to dismiss the elf sorceress callously, but he understood the problems he faced. He needed full agreement from the tribes. Sentimental considerations which were beyond clear facts would only cloud the issue. He had no choice but to establish his authority over the sorceress.

"Will you defy the elder of your camp?"

Haven looked toward Loftber with obvious regret.

"No, I will not."

"Then you have said enough."

Haven bowed her head and walked out of the clearing, the aura of her essence lighting her path through the trees.

The envoy which had initially questioned Loftber's claim also turned away. As Loftber watched the doubtful elf return to his seat, he offered the remaining representatives a clear explanation.

"You now know how it is possible. Allow me to explain how it actually occurred. I was informed the elf essence was taken during a struggle with Rul Saattan. The demon lord captured Shantree's spirit before her transition into spiritual existence was complete. The elf essence was part of a magical cage created by the runaway spell which ended the elder's life. In order to free Shantree's confined spirit, the essence needed to be removed."

The explanation seemed reasonable, but the discussion between the sorceress and the camp elder created a small spark of suspicion among many of those gathered around the clearing. One of the elf representatives did not doubt the sincerity of Haven Wellseed, but he did question certain details.

"The sorceress has explained how this human wizard could have captured elf essence, but apparently she was not present at the moment of transference. I can accept such a transfer is possible. Based on accounts regarding Rul Saattan, I will even concede that a transference actually occurred, but I am not certain if it could be maintained. Have you any proof the essence remains in the wizard?"

"Not only does it remain within him," Loftber explained with greater certainty, "he has already utilized it in combat. I previously sent elf scouts capable of detecting magical echoes to an area where the wizard cast several spells. They sensed the elf essence in reflective tremors. There is no doubt the human retains the essence and is intent on using it."

"Echoes and tremors are not as reliable as direct discovery."

"Normally, I would agree with you. But in this case, the echoes are actually stronger proof."

"And how is that possible?"

"Because the echoes reside in Demonsheol," Loftber revealed, "and as it is written in elflore, Demonsheol is flush with history. The echoes of past events grow stronger in Rul's realm."

A greater hush fell upon the congregation of elves. Many had heard of the conflicts with Rul Saattan, lord of all demons. They understood the camp of Dark Spruce suffered through numerous struggles with a variety of demons. Many were grateful their own camps had never faced such hardships.

Standish Loftber decided to use their obvious unease to his advantage.

"The elves of my camp were directly engaged with the demon lord. Rul Saattan and his minions attempted to destroy us on several occasions, but he failed. If he succeeded, he would have turned his attention to other camps; to the elves of the coast, the elves of the valleys, the elves of the cape, even the elves of the eastern shores would not have been spared."

Loftber allowed that undeniable fact to settle within each elf in his audience before he continued, but he needed to direct the conversation back to the human wizard.

"It was during our last conflict with Rul Saattan when I learned that elf essence had been captured by the spell caster. The wizard came to our camp from a nearby human town. We were assaulted by demons during a rebellion in Demonsheol itself. Demons unable to attack each other turned their violence toward Dark Spruce. During that conflict, the revelation became undeniable."

"But I thought you said the echoes of elf essence were found in Demonsheol?" an elf standing high in the trees called out.

"They were," the elder responded as he looked toward the last rays of light highlighting the tops of the surrounding pine trees. "The human wizard desired to fight the demons. When he spoke with me, I could sense the anger within him. I told him to restrain from using the elf essence, but he defied me... within my own camp. He thirsted for conflict. He ventured to Demonsheol and used the elf essence within him as bait."

"Bait?"

"He goaded demons to attack him by offering up the essence of an elf. He confused the creatures into believing one of our own kind had invaded the breeding ground of demons. When they moved against him, they were confused to find only a human, and he used his own powerful pale magic to destroy many."

The explanation confused several elves, and more questions arose.

"How were the elves of your camp able to enter Demonsheol to analyze the echoes?" another elf asked of Loftber. "Word has spread that the barriers have returned. Entering and leaving the breeding grounds of demons is no simple matter, as it should be."

"I had been suspicious of the wizard," Loftber admitted. "When he returned to the outskirts of our camp, the battle with the demons and Rul Saattan had not yet been concluded. The barriers had not yet formed. It was at that moment when I asked several of my elves sensitive to magic to follow the human wizard's trail back to Demonsheol in order to analyze the breeding grounds. To them, the use of elf essence was undeniable. They sensed it immediately and saw that it had been used to enrage demons into an attack. They returned before the barriers reformed. When they informed me of what they discovered, I became even more concerned."

Loftber turned to the west. He could no longer see the sun, for it had sunk below the trees. He wished he could avoid the burden he felt, but he needed to speak clearly of the necessity for intervention. The issue could not be avoided.

"The human wizard fought to protect Dark Spruce. I cannot deny that truth. He fought demons to save elves, but he also endangered us all. That is another truth which cannot be denied. If he can sculpt his magic to mimic the core of an elf, if he can utilize elf essence to confuse demons, if he can use both together in a manner which defies our heritage, then he is more than just an oddity to the history of elflore. Powerful magic mixed with elf essence in the hands of a human wizard can lead to dreadful consequences."

Loftber lowered his gaze to the forest floor. He considered all that had happened to the elves of Dark Spruce since Sanctum Mountain was breached and the once captured magic was set free across the land. A clear image of the mountain formed in his mind.

Once it had represented safety to the elves, a fortress designed to hold an ancient evil, but the mountain eventually failed, and poison magic was released across Uton. The elves were eventually saved—saved by a purebred delver who brought new powers to a sword enchanted by elves—but there had been consequences.

As he pictured Sanctum, Loftber thought of Ryson Acumen. The delver had been connected to so many events. Acumen had been the one who ultimately saved every elf by entering the mountain and destroying Ingar's talisman, and yet he was the one who also seemed to bring so much hardship to the camp of Dark Spruce.

The connections could not be denied. The delver, the wizard, the magic, the elves; the danger was there.

"Must I remind any of you of the ancient wizard Ingar?" Loftber finally questioned the gathering of elves. "That human spell caster was also very powerful. He created a sphere of magic to steal all the energy of the land. That sphere included the skin of an elf... the essence of an elf! When the orb grew too powerful to control, it spewed poison across the land, poison that would have eradicated our race."

With as much strength as he could muster, Loftber lifted the long bow off the ground and then slammed it back down into the ice and snow.

"A human wizard now contains elf essence, not some talisman. It resides within the wizard himself. Do we need to wait until this human becomes so powerful that he can no longer control this energy which he should not have? What will we do when poison starts pouring out of a wizard capable of casting white magic in a perfect circle?"

"So what do you suggest we do?" more than one elf questioned almost simultaneously.

"Advise him to release the elf essence," the elder answered.

"How likely is he to simply agree?" a single elf wondered.

"Not likely," Loftber conceded.

"So we must do more than advise."

"I believe that is inevitable. I believe a conflict may be unavoidable, and the results will be dire indeed."

"Are you suggesting we kill him?"

Loftber released yet another heavy breath. He was tired. He lacked the stamina to face continued questioning, but he needed to complete the task. He believed that elf essence within a human wizard represented an inherent danger which could not be ignored. If he

was to lead a camp of elves, he needed to ensure their safety, but he also needed to convince the other elf camps to do their share.

"Only if it is absolutely necessary," the elf elder of Dark Spruce finally revealed. "I would rather he give up the essence willingly. That is the best way to ensure absolute separation."

"But you just said that he is unlikely to cooperate."

"That is why I have called so many here. The demand must be overwhelming in nature. The elf essence within him must feel the absolute rejection of every elf tribe. I believe if we reveal to him a united display of our intentions and demand his compliance, he will find it difficult to defy us. The elf essence will rebel against him if he refuses our demands. If he continues to resist, we will issue the ultimatum. He will release the elf essence willingly, or we will force it from him, even if it means that he will perish and cause the destruction of the town in which he resides."

"What is this wizard's name," Thom Burrbush questioned, "and where does he live?"

Loftber had resisted using the name of the spell caster until he had gained full approval for his plans. He did not wish to personify the problem, to give an identity to the threat. Though he had no personal attachment to the human wizard, even disliked him, the elf elder needed to ensure that the focus remained on the true peril. It was not the wizard himself who represented danger to every elf; it was the containment of elf essence within an unsuitable host.

As he looked at the elves around him, he knew he had gained their understanding, as well as their acceptance of the unquestionable danger. It was no longer necessary to divide the identity of the wizard from the captured elf essence.

"His name is Jure," Loftber revealed, "and he lives in the human town of Burbon."

Chapter 1

"What's going on out there?" Captain Klusac demanded of Ryson Acumen.

"I don't know," Ryson admitted. "They won't talk to me."

"Why not?"

"I have no idea," the delver responded. "They're acting very strange. It's not like they were ignoring me, but not one of them would answer any of my questions."

Burbon's captain of the guard glared out across the southern hills and the eastern farmlands in growing frustration. He stood upon the upper platform of Burbon's tallest watchtower. The fortification was constructed near the town's eastern gate. It had been recently renovated to extend its view to cover a new road built to connect Burbon with several farms to the southeast.

The passage served as a trade route extension for merchants coming up from the deep south. Enterprising individuals discovered a burgeoning market for unusual foods. Trade with the dwarves was producing wealth to those willing to bring far-off delicacies to the stout warriors. All they needed was access to the dwarf tunnels under Pinesway. The new road allowed for faster travel, and the number of wagons passing through Burbon had increased dramatically.

With increased merchant traffic, the barren lands bordering the road attracted far more goblins than in the past. The fallow hills to the south and southeast created blind spots that were not necessarily a danger for the people of Burbon, but created a hazard for many travelers.

Klusac's priority might have been the safety of the town and its citizens, but the captain also needed to address the concerns of outsiders. He couldn't allow Burbon to become a treacherous obstacle linked to goblin raids and cursed by angry merchants.

Rather than build a new fortification or attempt to patrol the road, Klusac ordered an elevated viewing post constructed above the original platform of the eastern tower. A tall ladder allowed access to the elevated stand, and the raised position allowed for staggering views beyond Burbon's borders; from the edge of Dark Spruce Forest in the west all the way to several large barns and farmhouses across the eastern lands.

"How many of them are out there?" the captain questioned, trying to assess the magnitude of the problem he faced, though he wasn't even sure it was a problem. He wasn't sure of anything. He only knew that Burbon had become the focal point for numerous elves.

"A lot," Ryson replied.

"That's a rather vague number."

"Look at them all," the delver defended his response.

"I can see them," Klusac grunted. "They've got us surrounded. Every road is blocked. They have both banks of the river covered. They're lined up back into the trees to the west, and they're in the hills to the south. How deep to they go?"

"Very deep. They have large groups far back into the forest, and they're all over the hills," the delver answered. "That's why I can't give you an accurate count. I don't even want to guess. They're moving in and out of the trees. They had guards following me every step I took. Even when I outran them, they kept adjusting their positions to conceal their numbers."

"Why would they conceal their numbers from us?"

"Maybe it's just what they normally do. They tend to follow certain procedures. They have a lot of structure in what they do. They're a lot like this town in that regard."

"Well that would be fine, if we knew what they were doing."

"All I can say is that they appear to be consolidating their position. They may have groups deep in the forest and back in the hills, but they're maintaining their focus on Burbon and reinforcing the area to the northeast of the town. If there's a weak spot in their lines, I couldn't find one."

"That doesn't sound friendly," the captain remarked.

"But they haven't shown any signs of hostility either."

"Other than surrounding us."

"But they're not attacking."

"Not yet."

"Why would they attack?" Ryson questioned, unwilling to accept that the elves had suddenly, and without reason, become the enemy.

"For the same reason they're surrounding us," the town captain answered. "Ryson, there are certain facts we can't ignore. They arrived right at sunrise in massive numbers. They moved very quickly to form a ring around the town. That kind of movement shows purpose. They won't send in an envoy to speak with us. They won't acknowledge our patrols, and they ignored you. You may want to believe they won't attack, but can you tell me why they're out there in the first place?"

"No, I can't. I don't know what they want. Like I said, they won't talk to me."

"That's not a good sign either. They're not talking, but they're trying to conceal their numbers from my best scout."

"Maybe they're not doing it on purpose."

"So you think they're just leaping around the trees and running across the hills for fun?"

"No, I don't," Ryson admitted, and unfortunately, he had to reveal other troubling news he knew he shouldn't withhold from the captain of Burbon's guard. "They're setting up temporary camps as well."

"Camps?" Klusac questioned, shocked by the news.

"Yes, more than one, and not just in the forest. They're actually setting up storage huts in the hills and in some of the dormant farm fields. It looks like they're already creating supply lines to bring in food from the forest."

"So this isn't a temporary situation. They're planning on being here for a while. You don't build camps and setup supply lines if you're only staying until nightfall."

"It looks that way."

Klusac grimaced. He tried to obtain at least an idea of what was going on right outside Burbon's walls, but the elves weren't offering the least bit of assistance. The information he received from Ryson didn't answer any of his questions. It created more. The only thing which couldn't be denied was that the elves wanted Burbon surrounded.

After he looked across the multitude of elves gathered around his town, Klusac turned his focus back to the delver.

"You don't have any idea what this could be about?" the captain asked.

"No, I really don't."

"Think, Ryson. You were the last one to have any contact with them. You scouted out Dark Spruce two days ago. You reported you met up with some of them, some of their guards, right?"

"I did, but there was no mention of this, not even a hint that anything was wrong."

"Are you sure? You've been to their camp. You know them. They don't usually come out of the forest, and to my knowledge, never like this."

"There are more elves here than just from the Dark Spruce camp," Ryson explained. "I know the guards from that camp... and their scouts. I recognized a few of them out there, so the Dark Spruce elves are part of this, but there are elves I've never seen before. And just from here, I can see that the number of elves out there far exceeds the entire population of the camp from the forest."

"So they've brought in outsiders?"

"I don't know who brought in whom," Ryson admitted. "I just know there are elves out there that can't possibly belong to the Dark Spruce camp. There's just too many of them."

"Still, what happened the last time you met with the elf guards?"

"Nothing. It was just a patrol of three elves. They were checking the trails, same as me. There was no goblin or river rogue activity in the area. We talked about how quiet it had been in the forest lately. They told me that the river rogues and shags were hibernating and that the goblins had probably moved south to find warmer weather. It was good news."

"They didn't say anything about Bourbon?"

"Not a word. They were only concerned with the forest. That makes sense to me. I always believed they'd help us if we asked, but we're not really their concern."

"They seem pretty concerned about us now."

"I know, but it doesn't make sense. They shouldn't even be this active."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Klusac questioned, unsure of the elves and their practices. "They look pretty active to me."

"I know, but they usually go dormant this time of year."

"Does that look dormant to you?" Klusac asked, as he pointed down the road to a blockade of elves.

"No."

"And does it look like they're here to help?"

"Like I said, I don't know why they're here."

Klusac rubbed his chin and then looked to the morning sky.

"At least there's no storm coming in," he remarked.

"No, it'll be dry for a while," the delver confirmed. "I can feel it. It's going to be cold today and even colder tonight, but there's no storm on the way, at least for a couple of days for sure, maybe longer."

Klusac knew to trust the delver's senses. Not only could Ryson spot a razor crow far in the distance, catch the scent of an encroaching shag, and hear the light rustle of a goblin thief sneaking through the snow; the delver could also feel beyond the cold of the air. He could sense the light twists in the wind and any moisture caught in the breeze.

Unfortunately, dry weather didn't offer any answers to the captain's immediate concerns.

"I was hoping they would send some delegation," Klusac explained to the delver. "There has to be a reason for this. You just don't surround a town because you have nothing better to do. If they're supposed to be resting this time of year, then they must want something pretty bad. Did you see any sign of leadership out there?"

"No, and that was also a bit strange. I was looking for some sign of Birk Grund, the captain of their guard. I'm sure he would explain this. I couldn't find him. I even asked some of the guards I recognized. They just ignored me."

"So it's just a large congregation of their guards?"

"Actually, it's more than that. The guards are their elite soldiers. If you watch them, you can pick them out fairly easily. They move in a certain way."

"So who else is out there?"

"What you would probably call their basic infantry; ordinary elf soldiers and archers. Don't underestimate them, they're well-trained, but they're not at the level of their elite guards."

"Are you telling me that this is some kind of elf army?"

"I guess, but they're not attacking us."

"Well, they're not out there defending anything either!"

"Let's not jump to any hasty conclusions."

"I have no intention of doing anything hasty," Klusac replied. "I've left the gates open, but I'm keeping everyone inside the wall. I'm not letting any of our citizens out there. I don't want to take a chance on this escalating until I know what's going on. I've even pulled the archers down from the parapets."

"They're still at the base of the wall," Ryson remarked.

"Because I may need them to get back in position in a hurry. The elves should have seen that I've withdrawn them from a position to fire. And those gates are open as an invitation. I *want* someone to come here and tell me what's going on. I'd even take a simple messenger at this point. In fact, I'm thinking of going out there myself."

Ryson considered the proposal. At first, it seemed reasonable. The elf guards might have ignored the delver's request for information, but Klusac was the leader of Burbon's guard. The elves honored leadership. Camp elders were well protected, and elf guards would sacrifice their own lives to keep them safe. It was possible the elves would respond more favorably to the human figure of authority.

Unfortunately, there were other considerations which led the delver to believe such a decision might be catastrophic.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Ryson warned.

"You're worried about something?" Klusac asked.

"I don't think they were thrilled when I was out there asking questions. If they see an armed contingent of soldiers approaching, they might view it as a potential threat. They didn't try to attack me, but they had to realize I was scouting their lines and trying to get information."

"That's all I want... information. I want someone out there to tell me what this is all about."

"You may not get the chance to ask them. It's like I said, if they see a group of soldiers moving out to meet them, they might react negatively."

"Then I'll just go alone."

Ryson quickly considered all that could go wrong. He knew Klusac wasn't prone to outbursts, but the captain was very protective of the town and its people. Klusac also lacked experience with elves. A simple misunderstanding could escalate quickly. Uncertain about the elves' intentions, Ryson believed a series of missteps could lead to disaster.

He did not, however, wish to simply dismiss the idea completely. They needed to know what was happening. The delver's curiosity was also blossoming. If the presence of authority could obtain greater clarity, the possibility needed to be explored. It just required a level of care.

"I could go with you," Ryson suggested. "If it's just you and me, we might be able to get somewhere. I can also help you with some of their customs. I don't think we want to risk insulting them."

"I'm not going out there to call them names."

"I know you're not, but they know me, at least some of them do. But you don't really have any experience with them."

"But they didn't talk to you, remember? Maybe they want to talk to the person in charge. You're a scout, and a delver. They look like they're focused on Burbon. For better or worse, I'm the one who makes the decisions around here."

"That's true," Ryson acknowledged, but he could not disregard the potential danger, "and that's what I'm really worried about. What happens if they take you prisoner?"

"You'd think they'd do that?"

"No, I don't, but this is all very strange. If something happens to you, then this gets ugly very fast. The soldiers here aren't going to just sit back and do nothing. Who's in charge here if you become a hostage, or maybe not a hostage but just not allowed to return here?"

"We have a chain of command. The guard won't just fall apart without me."

"No, they won't, but they'll want to act. What would you do if Sy Fenden was still alive? What if he was here, and he went out there and didn't return?"

Captain Klusac thought of the soldier he had replaced as captain of Burbon's guard. Sy Fenden had kept the town safe during the return of magic to the land. While shags and goblins were roaming through the forest and the hills, Captain Fenden kept order within the town. He built up Burbon's defenses, and gave the soldiers the confidence to battle unthinkable monsters.

Sy's death at the hands of a goblin raiding party was an enormous loss. Klusac still felt burdened in attempting to fill that gap. He hoped to lead by using his predecessor as an example, and he knew if Sy had been captured by elves, he would have risked anything to free him.

"I'm not Sy," Klusac responded, "but I see what you're saying."

"You may not be Sy, but the guards of this town have the same respect for you as they did for him. The people of this town look to you as well. If we make a mistake, this turns into a real mess."

"So what do you suggest? Do we just wait here?"

"Actually, I think there may be another solution."

"What's that?"

"Send out Holli Brances."

Chapter 2

Reed Trafersen wasn't worried about his seafood spoiling. The cold weather would keep it safe until he made it to Pinesway and the dwarf tunnels. He was, however, very concerned about his wagon.

The back axel had already snapped during the first leg of his trip. He wasn't happy with the delay, or the cost, especially the cost. He had used up most of his traveling funds for the repair.

Unfortunately, he was warned the front axel was also in bad shape and could break at any moment. The wagon master who made the initial repairs was willing to fix the front shaft as well, but he expected immediate payment from traveling merchants.

Reed couldn't blame the man, but he couldn't pay with money he didn't have. And he wasn't willing to part with any of his goods. The dwarves would pay far more, and usually in gold or gems. All he could do was hope to reach Pinesway before the axel gave. Once he obtained payment from the dwarves, he could have everything on the wagon fixed, or maybe he could even buy a new cart, a larger one to hold more food for the next trip.

The new road was a blessing. The two horses pulling his cart were able to keep a quick but steady pace. The wheels rolled easily over the flat ground. Most of the snow had been cleared away by previous merchants and by the wagon trains of settlers hoping to reach a new outpost close to the Colad Mountains.

Unfortunately, he had also heard that the new passage attracted a far more unsavory element. There were plenty of stories about goblin raiding parties, and he was warned to stay off the road at night.

He would have gladly heeded that advice, but that was before his back axel broke. He lost a considerable amount of time waiting for the repairs. He couldn't afford an inn, and so he decided to make up the lost time by traveling straight through until dawn.

Maybe it was foolish, but he thought he was due for some good luck. He also believed, perhaps irrationally, that the goblins would realize merchants avoided night travel. Why would they wait in the cold along a road with no potential victims?

It was when the sun rose that Reed became nervous. He had made it through the night without incident, but if he was right about the goblins, then their activity would most likely increase in the early morning hours. It only seemed logical that they would attempt an attack when their intended victims were lulled into carelessness by a false sense of security from a rising sun.

As he continued down the road, he began to recognize familiar landmarks. He had made the trip once before, and he knew Burbon was just ahead. If he could make it to the walled village, he could afford to have the axel greased and the bolts tightened. He believed it would be just enough maintenance necessary to finish his journey.

As the morning wore on, Reed thought his luck would hold. He only had to get around a few more hills and he'd be fine, but as he drew closer to Burbon, his horses began to show signs of nervousness. He noticed slight movement in the tall grasses peeking through the snow on several hilltops. It was probably nothing more than the wind, but Reed started to see unexplained shadows. He wondered if goblins burrowed under the snow and used the mounds to conceal their position.

He cursed under his breath and wondered how the little monsters might attempt to stop him. Would they shoot him from behind or would they try to corral his horses? He thought a barrage from several goblin crossbows was the most likely scenario, and he kept looking over his shoulder in hopes he would spot the foul creatures before he was struck down.

He was so concerned with being attacked from the rear, he almost fell off his cart when he first saw the legion stretched across the hills before him. They came into full view right after he directed his cart around the base of a wide hill. He might have been worried about goblins, but he never expected the elves.

As he completed the curve, he couldn't miss them. They were massed across the final hillsides near the borders of Burbon. It was an impressive sight.

They wore dark armor—which normally allowed them to blend into the shadows and the trees of the forest—but the grayish metal stood out against the snow covered hilltops. They carried swords and bows. It appeared they had encamped, but the individual elves did not stand about randomly. They remained in tight configurations and moved about constantly. It appeared almost as if they were on parade.

Reed Trafersen had seen armies of men—regimented soldiers trained to fight any enemy—but he had never before witnessed such disciplined behavior. The elves did not act as an unruly horde or as a like-minded collective. Instead, the entirety of the elf army appeared much like a perfectly created work of art with each piece placed precisely where it needed to be. Whether they stood guard along the road, patrolled some set path, or marched in formation, the elves did so with a mind toward a larger purpose.

Reed almost pulled his horses to a stop. He didn't wish to ride forward into some elaborate elf maneuver he knew nothing about, but his concern over his wagon kept him moving. The immediate road before him was clear enough to pass. He worried that if he stopped too abruptly, the stress would snap the damaged axle.

Luckily, the outer perimeter of elves let Reed pass. The elf soldiers at the rear decided to let the elf guards near the front lines decide what to do with the merchant. When the wagon reached the final hill and began moving toward the clearing which surrounded Burbon's wall, three elf warriors blocked the road.

Reed had slowed his wagon as he passed the first grouping of elves. When he pulled back full on the reins to bring his horses to a stop, he managed to keep his wagon in one piece.

He was thankful he avoided disaster, but he wasn't happy about the elves blocking his passage. He wanted to keep the wheels rolling right through the open gates ahead of him. He could see a few human guards waiting at Burbon's eastern wall and several in the towers, but he was too far away to ask for their assistance. He would have to deal with the elves himself.

"Is there a problem?" Reed asked of the elf closest to him.

"The town is closed," the warrior replied.

"Closed? What in Godson's name does that mean? It's not closed. The gate is open. Look behind you."

"Is Burbon your destination?" the elf questioned, ignoring the merchant's response.

"Yes... and no."

"Which is it?" a second guard demanded.

"I'm headed to Pinesway to sell food to the dwarves, but my cart needs some repairs."

"Go around."

"Go around what?"

"Burbon. If your destination is Pinesway, you do not need to stop here."

"I just told you, this cart needs some work. Look at the front axel."

The elves didn't bother to examine any part of the wagon. They saw it move on the road and believed it could make the final leg of the merchant's journey without incident.

"It is better if you go directly to Pinesway. The dwarves can fix it for you. They are better at such things than the humans. There are no dwarves in Burbon."

"But there's probably a wagon master right here."

One of the elves finally scanned the cart and shook his head.

"The cart can make it to Pinesway. Go around."

Reed looked upon the landscape around him. The only road in sight led directly into Burbon. To his left were hills he knew he could not cross, and to his right was a rough stretch of farmland. It was fairly level, but it wasn't smooth. There were plenty of rocks and ridges covered in ice and snow. If he tried going across the dormant field, he knew it would be a bumpy ride.

"You want me to go around the entire town?" Reed questioned in disbelief. "How? This road goes right through the gate up ahead."

The elf pointed to the dormant farm field.

"Turn that way. Head north through that field. Stay behind our lines. You can bypass the town completely. There's a road not far beyond the field that heads northeast to Connel."

"But I'm not going to Connel. I'm going to Pinesway."

The elves did not care much for open roads, but they made it their business to understand all the passages leading to Burbon. The elf offered directions from such preparations.

"That road connects with another passage which will take you west and right to Pinesway."

Reed looked once more at the farm field and considered the path suggested by the elf warrior. The ground was frozen, but there were several ruts. One bad turn and he believed the older axel would crack. He realized he was alone and surrounded by a multitude of elves, but he didn't see the need to bypass Burbon.

"Look, what's really going on here?" he demanded.

The elf refused to give an explanation.

"Go around."

"If I go across that ground, I'm not going to make it to Pinesway."

"You cannot enter Burbon. We will not allow it."

"Why not? What's going on in there?"

"Go around or turn back. Those are the only choices you have."

Reed actually contemplated snapping the reins and making a break for the gate. He didn't see any elves on horses, but he saw a large number of archers and realized they didn't need any horses. He had no desire to catch an elf arrow in his back anymore than he wanted to be hit by a goblin bolt.

He looked again to Burbon's eastern gate. He knew the human soldiers were watching him, but they weren't coming forward to offer any assistance. In fact, they looked as confused as he felt. He thought of calling out to them, but he wasn't sure if it was a good

idea to provoke the elves. All he could do was turn the horses off the road and hope for the best.

As was Reed's luck, he managed to achieve the worst possible results. The moment his cart was pulled off the smooth road, one of the wheels slammed into a sizable rock. It wasn't large enough to keep the wagon from moving, but the stone forced one corner of his wagon high up from the ground. The wheel on the opposing side caught the edge of a rut just as the contents of his cart shifted away from the center. The displacement caused enough stress to snap the front axel.

Reed pulled his horses to a halt and leapt down to inspect the damage. One jagged edge of the broken shaft jutted downward into the frozen ground. Even if he managed to remove the sharp edges from the rod and lift it clear of the ground, there was no way the wagon was going to move forward.

"I told you!" Reed shouted at the elves. "Now what am I going to do?"

The elf guards showed little sympathy.

"Unhitch the horses and go on your way to Pinesway."

"And leave the wagon here?"

"Nothing will happen to it."

"What about my goods?"

"Pack what you can on the horses."

"With what? I don't have that many saddle bags. I can't possibly carry all this on just my horses."

"Then obtain a new wagon from Pinesway and return to retrieve your goods. They will not be touched as long as we are here."

"What am I supposed to use to pay for this new wagon? I won't be able to bring enough goods with me to sell in Pinesway. Can I at least carry some of this food into Burbon and see if someone can help me there?"

"No, you can not enter the town."

"This is ridiculous," Reed complained.

As the merchant continued to argue with the elves, Captain Klusac watched the encounter from his perch on the eastern tower. Ryson had not yet returned with Holli Brances, and he didn't believe he could wait for the delver's arrival. If Ryson was with him, it was possible the delver could have tuned his acute hearing to the encounter down the eastern road. At least Klusac would have had an idea of what was being said.

Unfortunately, he had to base his decision solely on what he saw. The scene wasn't encouraging, and he decided he needed to act.

"Sergeant Watters!" the captain called out to a platoon leader waiting below. "Take six soldiers out through the eastern gate and assist that merchant with his cart. Take only swords and keep them sheathed unless you come under attack."

"No shields?" the sergeant asked. He didn't want to appear as if he was questioning his orders, but he needed to confirm the extent of the captain's wishes.

"No. I know you're worried about the archers, but we can't make this appear as if we're challenging the elves. You're lending assistance to the merchant, nothing else. You're not to confront the elves or question their intentions. Simply go out there and offer aid."

The sergeant nodded, and began to select six guards to accompany him.

Klusac understood the risk his soldiers faced. They still had no idea of what the elves wanted, but certain disturbing facts were coming to light. The elves had just stopped merchant traffic without warning or apparent cause. The captain didn't want to escalate the matter, but he couldn't leave the merchant to fend for himself. He also knew he needed to reassure those soldiers about to leave the town.

"Don't worry about the archers out there," Klusac called out. "If they were going to attack, they would have done so already. They have us seriously outnumbered, and they must know that. That's why I've left the gates open, to show no sign of hostility or concern. They'll realize you're just out there to lend a hand."

"And if we're stopped?" Sergeant Watters questioned, as he looked back up to the tower.

"Explain that it's your duty to assist travelers. Elf guards understand that. They can't deny that the wagon is damaged and unable to move. Don't try to argue with them. Just explain we need to keep this road open. If they continue to prevent you from assisting, don't try to force the issue. Return here and tell me everything that was said to you."

"Aye."

Watters finished selecting six guards, the quickest of his platoon. If they had to turn and run back to town, he wanted soldiers who would at least have a chance. He took the lead and had the others follow him in two tight rows of three.

There was a wide clearing of level ground which surrounded the town like a dry moat. It allowed soldiers on the battlements and towers an unobstructed view of anyone hoping to reach Burbon's wall. It extended outward for nearly sixty paces to the east.

The new road slightly curved to the southeast before it cleared the open ground and reached the edge of the first hill. The front line of elves stood just beyond the edge of the clearing. They created their own border surrounding the town. Several stood shoulder to shoulder across the road, and they stepped forward before Sergeant Watters reached the merchant and his disabled cart.

Watters didn't smile and didn't frown. He stopped in front of the line of elf guards. He offered an expressionless face to the elves blocking his path. He kept his voice just as impassive.

"Excuse us."

At first, the elves did not respond. They did not move and they said nothing.

Watters remained calm.

"We need to assist that man with his wagon," the sergeant offered. "He clearly needs help and we can't just leave him out here.

"We cannot let you pass," one of the elves finally stated firmly.

Watters wanted to ask for a reason. Actually, he wanted to demand an explanation, but he recalled his orders. He wasn't to question the elves, only explain his duty. He made one more attempt to clarify his position.

"Merchants travel through our town on a regular basis. If they run into trouble, it's our duty to offer whatever help we can."

"We understand, but we cannot allow this wagon of supplies to reach your town."

The sergeant didn't like the significance of the explanation. He knew he wasn't supposed to question the elves' intentions, but he needed more information regarding the merchant. He tried to frame his question in such a manner that it focused on the traveler and his cart.

"Did this man do something wrong? Are his goods stolen?"

"We do not know the man or the origin of his goods."

"But you won't let him through?"

"Not with supplies. They cannot enter your town. It has nothing to do with him."

"Is there something wrong with his goods?"

"Not to our knowledge. We are not concerned with the merchant or his wares, only that they are not permitted to pass our lines."

The elf had offered the information freely. Watters had not questioned the elves' intentions, but he decided to confirm the depth of their actions.

"Alright, I guess that means you're not going to let any wagons enter our town."

"That is correct."

There was nothing left to say, and Watters knew he needed to inform his captain of what he learned.

"Very well."

The sergeant turned around and motioned for his men to follow him back to Burbon's eastern gate. Unfortunately, the merchant wasn't pleased at his apparent abandonment.

"You're just going to leave me here?" Reed yelled to the human guards, and then started walking toward the soldiers.

Sergeant Watters stopped to look over his shoulder, and nodded to the throng of elves.

"They don't want to let your wagon through," the sergeant replied.

"And you're just going to let them stop you?"

"I don't want this to get out of hand."

"It's already out of hand!" Reed yelled. "Look at my wagon! It wouldn't be broken if they let me pass."

The sergeant realized the situation was growing more and more unstable, and the merchant wasn't helping. He looked to the elves and hoped to ease the growing tension.

"Can we bring him with us into town?" Watters asked the elf apparently in command.

"He can go with you, but the wagon stays here."

"I'm not leaving my horses out here," Reed immediately objected.

The elf was not happy about allowing horses into the town, but he too wished to reduce the strain of the confrontation.

"You can unhitch the horses and all of you can return to your town," the elf allowed.

"Thank you," Watters offered.

The elves allowed the soldiers to pass and reach the wagon. They watched as the guards from Burbon worked to unhitch the horses, but they objected when Reed began to pull some of his goods from the cart.

"Leave those," one of the elves commanded.

"You said I could take them," Reed argued.

"That was if you were going on to Pinesway. The food cannot enter Burbon."

"Why are you worried about the food?" Watters finally asked, too concerned about the implications to remain complacent.

The elf would not answer.

"Why not let him take his food?" the sergeant persisted. "With his horses and what we can carry, we can get most of it out of here. Then we can get him a new cart and send him on his way to Pinesway."

"We cannot allow you to bring supplies into the town."

Watters remembered his orders, and though an apparent embargo had been placed on Burbon, he needed to get his soldiers back behind the wall. It appeared as if the elves were intent on blockading Burbon, and that wasn't a good sign of things to come. The sergeant called over to the merchant.

"Leave the goods. Let's just get you and your horses back to town."

"I'm not leaving my things here. Do you know how much this stuff is worth to the dwarves?"

Reed didn't wait for an answer. He continued to take items from his cart. Before he could reach his horses, another elf grabbed him.

"Hey! Let go of me!"

Reed tried to pull away, but the elf would not release him. In a fit of anger, the merchant swung the package of seafood at the elf's head.

The elf guard ducked low and in the same movement knocked Reed's feet out from under him. The elf drew a sword and placed the point against the merchant's throat.

Fearing for the merchant's life, Sergeant Watters attempted to step between them. He was also grabbed. When several of his soldiers intervened, additional elves rushed forward. The soldiers from Burbon were vastly outnumbered and immediately disarmed.

It was exactly the kind of escalation Captain Klusac hoped to avoid. The captain watched the events from the tower and immediately recalled his archers to the ramparts of the eastern wall. He did not command them to draw their arrows, but he wanted their presence known.

The action was not lost upon the elves. In a series of precise and coordinated movements, long lines of elf archers pulled arrows from their quivers and strung them to their bows. They pulled back upon their bowstrings, took aim, but thankfully, did not fire.

Klusac ordered his guards to prepare to return fire, but only if fired upon. He knew he needed to avoid further hostilities, but he couldn't leave his guards in the hands of an elf army that would not reveal its intentions.

"Release my soldiers and allow them to return to town unharmed!" Klusac called out. "There's no need for this..."

Before he could finish, several elf sorcerers casting in red magic worked in concert to unleash a spell of impressive power. A wave of crimson energy flew off their hands and rushed about the borders of Burbon. It formed a ring around the town just beyond the base of Burbon's defensive wall.

Once the red magic completed its loop, it dove deep into the ground at the center of the clearing which encircled the human town. The snow and ice at the top instantly melted away and a wide band of dirt and rock rose up to form another wall around Burbon, but this wall was not meant to keep invaders out. It was meant to cut Burbon off from the rest of Uton.

The new wall of magically enhanced soil and rock rose up higher than the watch towers, and Captain Klusac could no longer see the elves surrounding his town, or the soldiers which had become captives. From his high position, he turned about and searched desperately for a break in the barrier, but there was none to be found.

He wondered what it would take to break through the obstruction. He had access to catapults which could hurl heavy stones, but he imagined any break in the wall could be quickly reconstructed with the same magic which created the barrier in the first place.

There were other issues as well. He didn't want to leave the captive soldiers isolated and in enemy hands—if that was indeed what the elves had become—but he could no longer see to the far edge of the clearing, and he didn't want to take blind shots with a catapult. If the stones broke through, they could land on elves gathered near the hills. Things would only get worse.

He decided doing nothing was the worst thing he could do. He needed to address the strength of the barrier without wasting too much effort or creating greater tension. He called to a Bowman standing on the rampart just below the tower platform.

"I want you to fire an arrow at that wall. Aim for the base, very low so that if it goes through from this angle it'll only hit the ground within the clearing. The elves weren't that close and I don't want to risk hitting anything we can't see. But it has to be high enough to actually hit the wall above the ground. We need to gauge the strength of that barrier."

"I understand," the Bowman replied.

The archer pulled back on the bowstring, and aimed directly at the barrier but at a downward angle. He angled the bow slightly to gain greater leverage. He wanted to ensure that the arrow would hit the target at a high velocity. He never released the string.

Just before the arrow flew, the spirit of Sy Fenden appeared directly at the center of the eastern gateway into Burbon. He looked upon the barrier with disdain. He did not appreciate having his town imprisoned by a magical wall.

He knew that the obstruction remained within the confines of the clearing, and thus, it stood within the borders of his influence. Though the ghost warrior could not venture beyond the far boundaries of Burbon, anything from the outer edge of the clearing to the center of the town was subject to his will. He would not allow the barrier to stand.

With the wave of one ghostly arm, the spirit captain eradicated the wall. He did not obliterate it into dust, or send large hunks of debris flying from the clearing. He simply used the power of his spiritual essence to clamp down on the soil which was part of Burbon... and thus under his protection.

The elf magic could not stand against the force of the protector's will. The ground the elves had used was part of the town's defenses. The spirit warrior maintained a deep connection with every part of Burbon, and the strength of his essence could easily overpower the manipulations of any invader.

Instantly, the wall sank back into the ground. It was as if it had never been constructed. The clearing was clean of debris, and the ground had been returned to a level state all around Burbon. The elf energy which had attempted to turn the soil into a wall of containment was forcibly removed and cast out into the far reaches of the sky.

Sy Fenden purposely kept the magic from returning to the elf sorcerers. He wished to make it clear he would not allow any magical attack to succeed against those he protected. Burbon was his domain and any assault upon the town would fail.

Unfortunately, the soldiers held by the elves were beyond the clearing and outside of Sy's protection. The ghost warrior could not take hold of them and bring them safely back into Burbon, and he could not disarm the elves standing upon the hills or waiting within the trees of Dark Spruce. The farmlands and roads outside of Burbon's borders were beyond his influence.

He could still, however, make his demands, and his displeasure, very clear to those around him. He pointed to the soldiers near the merchant's cart and then he waved back behind him to the town gate. His pale face, though airy, revealed a stern and angry

demeanor. He pointed to the guards once more with even greater emphasis, and as he did, a gust of wind howled across the skies over Burbon. The ground shook, enough so that even the leaves of the trees beyond Sy's reach trembled at his fury.

The display of power shocked the elves. They had never faced a warrior spirit of human heritage protecting his home. They could not imagine the depth of Sy's determination, but they could sense a shrill of defiance within the magic of their own bodies.

Spiritual essence held its own power and when fully unleashed it could bind even the lord of all demons.

Captain Klusac saw the momentary concern within the faces of the elves. He believed they remained uncertain of their safety. He doubted they knew of the restrictions to Sy Fenden's influence. They saw their wall of magic eradicated, but the elves had made the mistake of placing that wall within the confines of the clearing. The elves themselves stood in relative safety from the ghost warrior.

Hoping to capitalize on their confusion and alarm, Klusac shouted out to the soldiers still within the midst of the elves.

"Watters! Bring your soldiers back into town. We don't want to anger that ghost any further. Godson knows what he might do."

Watters pulled away from the grip of one of the elves. He also knew of Sy's limitations, but he was not about to reveal those restrictions to his potential captors.

"You best move aside," the sergeant warned the elves. "That's the ghost of Sy Fenden, and so far, he's been easy on you. We're going back into town and we're taking the merchant and his horses with us."

Despite everything that had happened, Reed remained more concerned with his wagon and his goods.

"What about my things?"

The sergeant had had enough of the merchant's complaining, but also showed a level of disregard to the elves' demands.

"Bring what's in your hands, but leave the rest."

"I'm not going to..."

"Then you can stay here with the elves," Watters interrupted. "I'm not about to disregard the ghost warrior's commands. He wants us back in town now, so that's where we're going."

Sergeant Watters motioned for his soldiers to follow with the horses and then turned his back on the elves. He marched briskly across the clearing, past the spiritual presence of Sy Fenden, and through Burbon's eastern gate.

The merchant decided to follow.

Chapter 3

While Sergeant Watters and his contingent of soldiers marched away from the elves and toward the eastern gate, Captain Klusac noticed Ryson had returned with Holli Brances. The delver was also accompanied by two other residents of Bourbon, and Klusac wasn't pleased that there would be additional spectators joining him on the eastern tower.

The captain wanted to speak to the elf alone. He knew of Holli Brances' dedication to those she vowed to protect. She would sacrifice her own life before she allowed harm to come to anyone under her care.

Captain Klusac didn't believe there was any immediate danger, especially with the spirit of Sy Fenden still floating outside the eastern gate, but he remained baffled by the elves' actions. He wanted information from the elf who chose to live in his town, and he didn't want her distracted. Klusac grumbled to himself as he watched them climb the tower ladder.

Ryson could not help but hear the captain's curses, even though they were whispered and not intended for anyone else's ears. The delver, however, was very focused on the captain. Ryson was curious about the events which had occurred during his short absence, and though he had seen the crimson wall rise and then fall, he wondered if the captain's concerns involved other aspects which weren't so apparent.

"What's wrong?" the delver asked.

"You said you were going to get Holli," Klusac replied. "I didn't expect an audience."

"I insisted," Enin offered before Ryson could explain. "I saw the magical barrier. That was an impressive spell. I thought you'd like to know more about it."

"It's gone. Sy destroyed it."

"So I gathered. Still, there are certain aspects I can reveal which you might find important."

"I thought you lost your magic?"

"I lost my core and the ability to contain magic," Enin explained, "but that doesn't mean I'm useless. I still know a great deal about the energy, as well as the composition of certain spells. I can even cast such spells; that's if someone else offers me the energy. That's why I think it's important you know certain details about that wall."

"What details? It appeared to be a barrier to separate some of my soldiers from the rest of the town."

"You sent out soldiers?" Ryson interrupted, still needing to know what had happened.

Klusac offered a quick summary of the confrontation between the elves and the merchant. Just as he finished, Sergeant Watters reached the upper platform and revealed the details of his encounter with the elves at the edge of the clearing. The news did little to reassure the captain.

"None of this is good," Klusac stated the obvious. "They didn't care about the merchant. They just didn't want him bringing supplies into the town. They seem intent on cutting us off."

"It does seem that way," Enin agreed, "but there's more you need to know about that barrier. The magic which created the wall contained influence beyond a desire for separation. There was another current within the spell. One that was sensed by Jure. He is

very perceptive to the flows of magic. He alerted me to the presence of a certain ambition within the energy."

"An ambition?"

"The persistence of influence. It's what a spell caster places within magical energy to create an incantation with a specific purpose. Such influence echoes within the magic and can be detected by individuals highly sensitive to the energy itself."

"There was a purpose beyond just creating a wall?" Klusac wondered. "What other purpose could there be? A wall is a wall, isn't it? Was it trying to be something else?"

"No, but there was an echo of a different purpose," Enin explained, "a desire not based upon the wall itself. It was caught within the background of the magic."

"Background? I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't expect you to, but that's why I'm here. The elves didn't plan on erecting that wall. It was a reactionary spell, something they threw together with little preparation. They were actually working on something else at the time."

"Another spell?" Klusac questioned, not pleased that the elves were planning on conjuring up something else to cast at his town.

"Yes, and it's something quite interesting. Jure sensed a notable level of coordination. That wall was created by more than one elf sorcerer. That was obvious. They pooled their energy and worked together. That's usually very difficult, but the elves were already working on some type of combined effort. Linking magical energy is possible, and with enough concentration, it can be used to create a spell that is extremely powerful."

"So that wall was a group effort?"

"Actually, it was, but that's not what has me concerned. A few elves with control over crimson energy erected that wall, but there was another echo in the magic which had a different purpose."

"Is that why you brought Jure here... to explain what he sensed?" Klusac asked, trying to make sense out of absolute confusion. "Not that I don't think his power might come in very useful right now, but I need Holli's appraisal of this situation, and I was hoping for her full attention."

"He can help explain many things. He can also offer a unique perspective regarding the elves."

"I can answer for myself," Jure nearly growled, clearly annoyed at Enin's words.

"You're right, I'm sorry," the coreless wizard immediately apologized. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Enin quickly attempted to rectify his error.

"He came of his own accord," the coreless wizard explained to the captain. "I couldn't have convinced him to accompany us if he didn't wish to come."

Klusac's curiosity was heightened. He knew Jure was perhaps the most powerful human in all of Uton. If the dominant wizard sensed something in the magic, the captain needed to know how it might affect the town.

"Why did you come?"

"It's like Enin said; I felt something in the magic, something in the background. The sorcerers who created the wall were working on something else at the time. I believe they couldn't clear it completely from their minds, so there was a shadow of a different intention within the incantation that made that barrier."

"What kind of intention?" Klusac demanded. "I need to know what they want."

"Have you tried asking them?" Holli Brances questioned.

"I did," Ryson responded. "They wouldn't talk to me."

"We'll get to that," Klusac stated, clearly annoyed his question was interrupted. "What kind of intention, Jure?"

"A mix of magic. I cast in white energy, so I can sense the subtle influence of each hue. The wall that was destroyed was created with red energy, but there was a hint of other colors flashing in the background, as if a larger portion of magic was being banded together. That's why I came. I want to see what they're up to."

Klusac looked back to Enin.

"You know about magic. What does this mean to us?"

"It means many of the elves were, and potentially still are, preparing to cast a spell, a spell that will invoke the full spectrum of colors."

"And is that dangerous?"

"It could be very dangerous," Enin explained, "or it could be nothing at all. This could be nothing more than a celebration."

"A celebration?" Klusac couldn't accept that possibility, and he waved his arm to the east. "Does this look like a celebration to you?"

No one answered, so the captain reminded them of the news they received from Sergeant Watters.

"They're not allowing supplies to get to us. That sounds like a blockade to me. Add it all together. They've got us surrounded, they tried to build a wall around us, and they don't want any food getting to us. So much for the theory about a celebration."

The captain looked across the clearing at the elves and then down at the ghostly apparition of Sy Fenden. He believed Sy's appearance had caught the elves off guard, but he wasn't sure the ghost warrior could solve his problem. If the elves remained just beyond the clearing, Sy could do nothing about their presence.

Still hoping to get answers, Klusac turned to Holli Brances.

"Now, you asked if I tried talking to them. I haven't personally. I sent Ryson out there. Since he knows many of the elves from Dark Spruce, I thought he was the best choice. They ignored him."

"They would not necessarily reveal information to a known scout," Holli explained.

"I thought the same thing. I was planning on going out there myself. I was hoping to talk to someone in charge, but Ryson thought it might lead to more problems. After what happened with the merchant, I'm glad I listened to him. Ryson also thought it was a good idea to get you. He initially believed it would be better if you tried to talk to them. It seemed like a possibility at the time, but now I'm not sure if anyone should go out there. I think it's probably better right now to just sit tight."

"I would agree with that strategy at this point," Holli replied.

"Okay, but where does that leave us? They didn't respond to Ryson, and things almost turned very bad with that merchant. All of this makes very little sense to me, and the elves aren't helping the situation. The problem is, I have no idea what they want. What do you think this is all about?"

"I do not know," Holli replied with a somber tone.

"You have no idea?" the captain questioned, clearly doubtful of the elf's answer.

"I am no longer a member of any elf camp. I was banished from Dark Spruce. Over the past several seasons, I have spent far more time with humans than I have with elves."

Klusac was not convinced Holli had nothing to offer.

"That may be, but you're still an elf. This is all foreign to me. I don't even know what they're trying to accomplish out there, but you should have some experience with this. Don't you even have a guess?"

Holli hesitated, enough for everyone on the tower platform to notice, but she held to her original answer.

"I do not know what they want."

"Then at least tell me what they're doing. I mean it's obvious they have us surrounded. What does that mean to you?"

"Very little. In all of my experience, I have never seen, or have been part of, an elf siege of a human town."

"So this looks like a siege to you? I wouldn't disagree based on what we've learned from Sergeant Watters, but that's not something I find very encouraging."

"Perhaps I used the wrong word. I do not wish to speculate."

Klusac reached the limit of his patience.

"Stop trying to be so careful with your words! I'm not asking for pure speculation. I'm looking for some ideas based on your experience. You're an elf guard, or at least you were. You were extensively trained. And there's a vast difference between careless speculation and situational assessment. There's also something bothering you about what you see out there. What is it?"

Holli responded as if she had been ordered to answer by a superior in the elf guard.

"There are elves I recognize, and many I do not," Holli responded, realizing Klusac was demanding information in order to protect his town. "Some are clearly from the camp in Dark Spruce, but there are others I recognize as well. They are not from the forest."

"I told you," Ryson exclaimed.

"Not now," the captain admonished the delver. "Let her finish. There's a lot more to this."

"You are correct," Holli confirmed. "It is extraordinarily uncommon for elves of different camps—from so many camps—to come together in such a fashion. In order to reach such participation, the elves must believe they face an extremely serious challenge."

"Do you have any idea of what that challenge might be?"

Holli did not answer.

"Do you?" Klusac pressed.

"I cannot say for certain, but it is possible it centers upon one, or more, of the individuals gathered on this platform."

Klusac did not allow for anyone else to interrupt. He wanted the elf to reveal exactly what she meant.

"Care to explain that?"

"The elves have never shown such attention to Burbon before," she explained, "so this must be related to recent activity. Considering past events, there are certain decisions and actions which cannot be ignored. These activities involve individuals with ties to the elves."

"Okay, but who?"

Holli paused. She avoided looking at anyone else on the platform other than Klusac. She did not wish to cast any accusations, so she immediately turned the attention upon herself.

"It is very possible they are here for me. I am an elf guard. Though I have been banished from my camp, I retain my training. I now live among humans. The elves might believe I am sharing certain training techniques with the soldiers of this town."

"I doubt they're worried about that," Enin objected. "You and I lived in Connel, a much larger human city, for some time. If they were concerned about you revealing some secret training method, they would have voiced their objections sooner."

"That is true, but circumstances change. Very recently, we altered our arrangements, and we now consider Burbon our home. We are now living in a town much closer to Dark Spruce and made up of a substantially smaller population. Their concerns could have become more prevalent under these circumstances. Connel is a large city with an army of soldiers. Elf guard training would not be as useful to them."

Klusac considered the explanation, but too many doubts shadowed the possibility.

"I don't know much about elf guards or their training," the captain admitted, "but I've seen enough of you to know something's very wrong with that theory. I think you would have already surrendered yourself to the elves out there if you believed that was the case."

"It is simply a consideration," Holli offered.

"That might be, but you're also considering other people up here. You said so yourself."

"I do not wish to cast suspicion on other individuals."

"I'm not going to blame anyone, if that's what you're worried about, so stop worrying about hurting someone's feeling and tell me what you think."

"There's me," Ryson offered, hoping to come to Holli's aid.

"You?" the captain responded, his doubt obvious.

"It wouldn't be that much of a surprise," Ryson admitted. "Standish Loftber once called me a potential threat to his camp. That was the last time I talked to him. He said I've brought tragedy to Dark Spruce in the past and that I'm likely to do it again. He said he knew it wasn't my intention, but intentions didn't matter. I don't know if I can argue with him anymore because the last time I got involved with his camp, I ended up putting them all in danger. Demons threatened to destroy all of Dark Spruce Forest."

"Do you think Ryson is the problem?" Klusac questioned Holli directly.

"It is possible," the elf responded with a hint of sadness, but unwilling to ignore the truth. "The delver has been at the center of many extraordinary events. Ever since the magic returned to Uton, Ryson has faced a number of challenges. Many of those trials were not isolated instances. One event has led to another and then another. The elves of Dark Spruce have suffered losses in relation to events centered upon the delver's activities. He was not at fault, and is not to be blamed, but no one can deny a connection."

"If Ryson was the problem, why didn't they just take him when they had the chance?"

"He is a delver, and they might have feared he was capable of escaping."

"I'm not sure I can accept that. Yes, he's fast, but so are the elves."

"No elf could match him."

"Maybe, but there's more than just one elf out there, and there was an opportunity they shouldn't have ignored."

"True, but there might already be a plan in place to capture him," Holli explained. "We know they are preparing a spell of significant power. That spell is not yet ready, and it may be critical to their plans."

"You think they're going to direct that spell at Ryson?"

"It is possible."

"What else is possible?"

Holli looked to the two humans she vowed to protect with her life.

"Go ahead," Enin encouraged the elf. "You have to tell him what you think."

"They might also be very concerned with either Enin... or Jure," Holli revealed. "Enin may have lost his core, but if given the proper amount of magical energy, he can still cast spells of unequalled power. In Dark Spruce, a large gathering of wolves offered him an enormous amount of energy, and he managed to defeat an army of demons. It is true he saved Dark Spruce and the elves, but the combination of wolf magic in a human wizard creates another concern for woodland elves."

"How so?"

"The wolves have an intimate knowledge of the forest, greater than that of the elves. Just as the elf elders might worry about what I could teach your soldiers, they are probably far more concerned with what the wolves could teach Enin."

"Have the wolves been teaching you anything?" Klusac asked of the coreless wizard.

"I wish they would," Enin confessed, "but they haven't contacted me since my battle with the demons."

"And what about Jure? Why would the elves be concerned about him?"

Neither Enin nor Holli chose to speak for the wizard. They decided it was best to let Jure determine how much to reveal to the captain of the guard.

"There's elf essence inside of me," Jure declared without hesitation. "The leader of the elf camp in Dark Spruce Forest wasn't too happy to hear that."

"He said that to you?"

"He made it very clear he believed it was a problem."

"Great, so it could be any of you... or all of you. They won't say anything, so all we can do is guess about their motivation. I can't do anything about that, but what I don't want to do is guess about their tactics."

Klusac turned his attention directly back to Holli.

"Like I said before, I don't want to send you out there to talk to them. It's too risky—especially if you're the one they're here for—but I need to get a better understanding of what we're up against. You said the elves wouldn't come together like this unless they faced a rather significant challenge. I want you to tell me what your instincts tell you about this."

Holli took a brief moment to survey her surroundings. She looked to the hills and then to the borders of the river. She turned and took a longer glance at Dark Spruce Forest to the west. She took one last moment to contemplate everything she knew as she put certain pieces in logical order.

"They want something from this town," Holli stated, "and it is very important to them. They have banded together in a fashion which makes that clear. They are concealing their numbers even as they set their supply lines. Based on their formations,

they have surveyed the land and identified strategic points of access. They are preparing for a long siege and they are determined to ensure nothing can get through their lines."

Klusac exhaled heavily.

"If they're just going to wait us out," he considered, "then we're not in any immediate danger. We have time to hopefully determine what they want. Maybe it's all some misunderstanding and we can find a solution. But that's only if they're planning on a long siege. Is that what you really see or will they attack us?"

Holli looked to the ghostly figure of Sy Fenden.

"It might have been their plan to attack us eventually, but I am sure they are now reassessing the situation. A ghost warrior is not a foe they would want to face."

"And what about that magic Jure felt? You said they were preparing a spell. Do you think..."

Before he could finish, Jure interrupted him.

"I don't believe it!" the wizard growled with obvious disgust.

No one else noticed anything, not at first. The spell was still being cast and it had not yet taken full shape, but Jure could not miss the enormous release of magic flowing over Burbon with its palpable intent.

"What?" Klusac demanded.

Jure did not answer immediately. From where they stood high above the wall, the wizard could see across the town. He looked toward the sky as he perceived the surge of energy.

"They're trapping us... all of us," Jure finally revealed.

"Looks like we're already surrounded," Klusac noted. "What else are they doing?"

"They're sealing us in magically. There's a wave of distortion flowing across the town."

"What kind of distortion?" Klusac demanded.

"Spatial."

Just as he said the word, the magic flowing across Burbon made its presence known. Some areas of the town brightened, while others grew substantially darker. Shadows shifted as if the sun had suddenly bolted across the sky. Shouts from the ground became muffled cries. Spoken words turned into broken sentences. Distances appeared skewed, and orderly streets suddenly seemed to curve into random chaos.

To many citizens at the center of the town, it felt as if the ground shifted below their feet, and it looked like solid buildings quivered. Those out in the open lost their sense of balance and several fell in confused heaps. Though there was no roar of upheaval or cloud of dust and debris, the overall effect was similar to a massive tremor passing just below the surface of the ground.

Within moments, the worst of the turmoil diminished.

"Is it over?" Klusac questioned Jure.

"It's just started," the elder wizard announced. "What we just felt was the initial effect to spatial disbursement."

"What does that even mean?"

Enin decided to explain in terms the soldier could understand.

"It means the spell is still active. What we experienced was only a momentary disturbance between the magic and physical existence."

"That doesn't help me understand what happened."

"It's like Jure said, the elves are sealing us in magically. In order to make sure that no one can escape, they needed to cut off all possible paths."

"I didn't see any openings in their lines before they cast this spell."

"There are ways spell casters can utilize magic to travel without riding down roads or crossing over farmlands."

"So what are you saying? Are the elves worried about us using magic to move the town away from here?"

"No, not the town itself, but the elves know we have at least two spell casters here capable of casting teleportation spells; Jure and Holli. Even if the elves surrounded us, either one of them could cast a spell to leave the town... and return again. They clearly don't want anyone to leave. Several elf spell casters, probably dozens or even more, have pooled their energies together to create a massive surge which would destabilize any attempt to magically compress space and time for the purposes of escape."

As if to emphasize the power of the spell, magical waves actually became visible, even to those unable to cast spells. Sheets of transparent energy of various colors raced across the skies. The bands of magic arose from positions beyond the borders of Burbon, but quickly sailed overhead.

"So now we really are trapped here?" Klusac questioned. "There's no way anyone can get in or out?"

"I'm afraid so," Enin admitted. "This is a drastic step. The elves are ensuring every path of escape is covered. Even if I still had my core and all of my magic, I wouldn't be able to fly out of here. There's too much magical interference."

"Well, this is no celebration," Klusac responded darkly. "This is a prelude to an attack."

Chapter 4

"Let us not make hasty assumptions," Holli warned.

"How am I being hasty?" Klusac demanded.

"I do not believe an attack is imminent. You previously asked my opinion about the composition, movement, and position of the elf guards. Though it is clear they do not want anyone to leave, it is also clear to me they are not ready to attack the town, at least not at this precise moment. The archers are in place to defend their own perimeter, not to begin an assault. The scouts are watching the gates and the surrounding lands. They are not in position to monitor the movement of your guards within the town itself."

"Alright, they just want to watch us for now, but how long would it take them to reposition their forces if they wanted to attack?"

"Not long," Holli confessed. "Their numbers are so great that they could overwhelm your soldiers quite quickly and with extremely limited casualties on their side."

"Then an attack is still very possible and it could still happen at any moment."

"I do not think so. If they wanted to simply destroy you, your town would already be gone."

"Then why so many of them, and why all the magic? You said they want something from us, but isn't this going overboard? What is it you think they're really doing?"

"They are sending a clear message."

"Really? And what message is that? Because I've been trying to figure out what they want since they arrived."

"I still cannot say what they want, but they are making it obvious that the entire race of elves is aligned for this purpose. The distortional magic is further proof of that."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I do not believe it is a single spell—not one as we originally thought—though Jure can confirm that for me."

"She's right," Jure responded after he took a moment to perceive the strings of magical energy coursing over the town. "This isn't just a pool of magic brought together into one incantation. This is a combination of individual efforts; something that has been planned carefully and designed for the greatest impact. I can feel it in the magic. Each sheet is an individual spell."

"Then it is clear the elves have not simply gathered together on a whim," Holli explained. "It is exactly as Jure has just described. They are maneuvering their forces without regard to the individual tribes. If all the elf spell casters are molding magic as individuals but allowing themselves to be guided by one overriding purpose, they are cooperating in a fashion which is historically significant. It is an effort based on elflore, based on legend."

"I'm not completely sure about the elf legends," Jure added, "but it's an ingenious way to extend the length of influence over magic."

"What does that mean?" Klusac demanded.

"It means it doesn't require a great deal of energy to maintain," Enin offered. "The elves aren't trying to pool their magic together. They are only linking their efforts. I believed at first they were creating one massive spell, but now that I see the results, it's

clear they've chosen a different tactic. They're sending out individual spells but working together to ensure the entire town is covered. They're also utilizing all of the hues."

Klusac felt as if everything was slipping away from him. Any plausible theory had just been swept aside in a wave of energy, energy he could not understand or even appreciate. He was a soldier. He understood a siege, but the coordination of spells left him grasping for answers.

"And why is that important?" he asked.

"Teleportation spells can vary based on the inherent color of the magic caster's core," Enin explained. "A spell based on blue magic can achieve the same results of travel through space and time as a crimson spell, but they would be constructed differently. Do you see the different shades in the sky? Those sheets of distortion cover every color."

"Why would they do that?" Klusac demanded. "We only have two magic casters in this town. Do you think they believe we have more? Could they be after someone we don't even know about? Maybe there's a serp hiding in the town. Serps can cast spells, can't they?"

"You are grasping at a false assumption," Holli advised. "There are no serps in this town. I would sense them and Jure would feel any magic they might use."

"Then why the different colors? Why cast that kind of net?"

"Because they know I can cast in white magic," Jure stated. "I can cast in any hue with equal efficiency. They have to cover all the possibilities."

"Alright, so they don't want you to leave, or to teleport someone else out of here. How long can they keep this up?"

"Almost indefinitely," Enin answered. "With so many elves casting individual spells, there is no great drain of energy."

Klusac looked back to Holli.

"You said something about elflore. What's this about a legend?"

"Elflore is the binding legacy of my race," Holli explained. "It encompasses significant historical events as well as prophecies. Though we are divided into separate camps, all the elves of Uton base their way of life on its content."

"Are you saying this event was foretold in one of your prophecies?"

"Not the event itself, at least not that I can tell, but the actions of those gathered here reveal a significant level of purpose. The elves are acting as a single group, not as a collection of camps. Within the context of elflore, this suggests they are motivated by more than the dictates of a single leader. They are here because they believe it is necessary, that the guiding assurance of elflore requires their presence."

"And what does that mean for us?" Klusac inquired.

"It means that they will be absolutely determined to achieve their intended objectives."

"And we have no idea what they want. Great."

Klusac considered the whole of his dilemma. They were surrounded both physically and magically. He knew he lacked sufficient strength to break through the lines of elf soldiers, but he wondered if the magical boundary was as impassable.

"Okay, maybe we can send them a signal of our own," he wondered. "What if we let them know we aren't thrilled about being trapped?"

"What do you suggest?" Holli wondered.

"Jure is one of the most powerful wizards in Uton. Can he blow a hole through this magical barrier?"

Once again, they all looked to Jure for a response, even though Enin already knew the answer.

"It's not one single barrier," Jure explained. "It's a series of incantations. Even if I blasted away a dozen of their spells, the others would just swing in and fill any holes."

"And you couldn't keep up?"

"Not against this number of spells."

Klusac then considered a power perhaps even greater than all of Jure's magic. They were obviously outnumbered, but there was one factor which the captain believed could change the odds. The spirit warrior remained at the eastern gate, and Sy Fenden had already revealed that his powers exceeded the magic of several elf sorcerers.

"Then what about Sy?" Klusac questioned. "He's still here, and he can't be happy about any of this. I know I'm not. Should I ask him to do something? I saw what he did with that other barrier. Maybe he could rip apart these individual spells as well."

"I don't think so," Enin answered directly. "You see, these spells are not really directed at the town. The magic is actually distorting transformational space."

"What in Godson's name is transformational space?"

"Think of it as the fibers of time; strings of the past, the present, and the future. It's the connection between existence and progression, whether backwards or forwards. We all exist in a moment of time, but moments are never stagnant. Our existence defines our presence, and time dictates the scope of our actions. Transformational space puts both in context, but it can be manipulated by magic. That's how Jure can cast a spell which can send him to another part of Uton in a single instant. He bends transformational space."

"What does that have to do with Sy?"

"Sy's influence is restricted to Burbon. These highly coordinated spells are not really in Burbon's space. Even though we can see those sheets of magic, they're really just reflections from shifting aspects in dimensional gateways."

Klusac just stared at Enin, trying to make sense of issues he could not comprehend. All he wanted were answers, but they seemed to elude him. He almost cursed in frustration when Ryson finally revealed welcome news.

"It's Loftber!" the delver exclaimed as he pointed to the far west border of Burbon and the edge of Dark Spruce Forest. "He's coming toward the western gate."

The delver realized Klusac would not be able to distinguish the elf from that distance, so he pulled out his spyscope and handed it to the captain.

"Take a look."

Klusac took one quick glimpse and then began giving orders.

"Signal the western tower," he called down to a flagman below. "Tell them to let the elves enter, but keep them near the gate. Inform the elves I am coming to meet them."

The captain realized he would have to walk across town to get to the elf leader, and he hoped to avoid any delays.

"Can you teleport us to the other side of town?" Klusac asked of Jure.

"I sincerely doubt it. The elves' spell would probably distort any attempt, and we may not end up where we want to be."

"Alright, let's not risk it."

Klusac then turned to Ryson.

"I don't want Loftber just standing around over there. You can get there the fastest, and I don't want you slowing down waiting for the rest of us. Get over there as quick as you can and tell Loftber that I'm on my way. If you think it will work to our advantage, you can tell him I'm accompanied by Holli Brances. I want her to hear what Loftber has to say. I may need her perspective on this."

"What about Enin and Jure?" Ryson asked.

"I want them to come too, but I don't want Loftber to know that ahead of time. I want that to be a surprise. Let's keep him a little off balance, basically what he's already done to me."

The delver almost rushed down off the tower, but Klusac bid him to wait for one more moment.

"Hold on, Ryson. When you get to Loftber, there are things I want you to avoid. Don't ask him why he's here or what he wants."

"But that's what you want to know," Ryson stated, though it was also what the delver wished to understand, and his curiosity was nearly boiling over.

"Exactly, and I want to hear it for myself. Still, I want you to keep Loftber occupied. Ask him about his camp. Ask him how things are in the forest. Make it appear as if you're much more interested in the elf camp than their arrival here."

"I don't understand."

"Look, I'll make this quick. These elves came here unannounced, surrounded us, and then cast a spell over this town. I want to know what it's about, but I also don't want them to think we're rattled. I want this Loftber character to believe we've been through this before... and that we're prepared for it."

Ryson offered the captain a doubtful expression, and Klusac decided to make a point.

"Think about it, Ryson. This isn't new to us, not really. These are elves and we don't know why they're here—I'll grant you that—but how many times in the past few seasons have we been surrounded and attacked... by goblins, walking corpses, giant demons, and Godson knows what else? We've survived each time. This is no different. Now go."

Ryson nodded, and then raced off to meet Standish Loftber at the western gate.

A Final Note from the Author

Essence of the Chase 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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