

Delver Magic

Book XIII

Concealed by Deceit

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

Fantasy:

Delver Magic Book I – Sanctum’s Breach
Delver Magic Book II – Throne of Vengeance
Delver Magic Book III – Balance of Fate
Delver Magic Book IV – Nightmare's Shadow
Delver Magic Book V – Chain of Bargains
Delver Magic Book VI – Pure Choice
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Delver Magic Book VIII – Spirit Past
Delver Magic Book IX – Joint Intentions
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Delver Magic Book XII – Essence of the Chase
Delver Magic Book XIII – Concealed by Deceit
Delver Magic Book XIV (Coming Soon)

Spiritual Thriller:

Soul View
Soul Chase
When Do I See God?

Science Fiction:

Alien Cradle
Detached Lives: Judgments

Science Fiction/Apocalyptic:

Slow Fall: Counting Down

Humor:

Counterproductive Man

Important Note

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

Concealed by Deceit is the thirteenth 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 watching over me!

26:26

Prologue

Jure pushed open one of the two massive oak doors which served as the entrance to the Church of Godson. He had used a simple teleportation spell to reach the city of Connel, but he had focused on a destination outside the city limits as opposed to appearing directly inside the sanctuary. He didn't mind the walk, even a lengthy one.

Though the borders of Connel kept expanding with its constant growth, the city maintained a well structured and disciplined design. The dwarves who helped build the city saw to that. Jure had reached the church in relatively good time, yet he still could not guess why his presence was requested. Once inside, the wizard gave the door another hard push to swing it closed.

Before he could move deeper into the sanctuary, he noticed the door had stopped in mid-swing. He saw nothing which blocked the entrance, but for some reason, the door refused to shut. Not wanting to leave it hanging open, he turned quickly around to offer another shove. The change in direction saved his life.

Jure had no reason to expect danger from within the Church of Godson. He had visited the building on previous occasions. He knew the church leader, Reader Rachael, and he had spoken with her numerous times in the past. The followers of Godson were peaceful, and the message he had received from the reader didn't indicate any level of concern. The reader only asked if he would come to Connel to discuss certain events which had recently occurred near the elf camp in Dark Spruce Forest.

Jure didn't know why Rachael was interested in the elves, but she had been helpful to him during some rather dark times in his life. He believed it was a simple request, and the elves were both an important and delicate matter. He never believed a sword would pierce him just below the shoulder when he entered the church.

Had he not turned, the blade would have cut him directly through his heart and he never would have had a chance to recover. Though the wound was still extremely serious, it was not immediately fatal.

As Jure slouched toward the back wall of the sanctuary, his uninjured shoulder pressed firmly against the center of the half-opened door. Whatever had previously stopped the immense door from closing seemed to come loose, and the hinges moved freely. As the door slammed shut from the injured wizard's weight, the abrupt shift of his body allowed his shoulder to slide free from the blade. Though he screamed in pain, he was further away from his attacker.

There was one man in front of Jure and no one else in the sanctuary. The assailant stood off to the side of the front door and was apparently waiting for his victim. The church was not brightly lit, but there were enough candles burning for the man's face to be revealed. He wore no mask, and other than the sword he carried, there was nothing else which might indicate he was a warrior or assassin of any kind. He appeared more like an ordinary citizen of Connel.

Jure did not recognize the man before him, and though he saw no anger in the face of his attacker, he could not deny the expression of determination. He knew the man was there to kill him, and with the sword free, he had the means to do so.

Jure did not have time to cast a defensive spell. He did not have one in mind when he entered the church. He didn't think there was a need. After the initial assault, the pain in

his shoulder was making it difficult to concentrate. He probably would have fallen to the ground had he not been leaning against the door. He believed he was about to die.

The man attempted to move forward for another strike. He knew Jure could not escape. The door was closed tight and there was no path for retreat. The attacker blocked the only way forward. All he had to do was thrust the sword back into the chest of the wizard and his task would be complete.

But just as the door had mysteriously stopped, the man appeared to stumble over something which was not there. He lost his balance and had to use his sword like a cane to steady himself. He managed to avoid falling to the floor, but he lost the ability to press his advantage. By the time he managed to regain his balance and lift the point of the sword up from the ground, his victim had spun away.

Jure saw the man stumble, and when the sword dropped low, the wizard used his good shoulder to push off the door. He twirled away from his attacker and scrambled to the far back corner of the sanctuary. With sufficient space between himself and his assailant, he believed he finally had time to act.

Closing his eyes, he shut out the pain throbbing in his wounded shoulder and quickly considered a very simple magical shield. He didn't need an extensive or complicated spell. All he had to do was create a barrier which would hold fast against sharpened metal. If he spent any more time on the composition of the incantation, he probably would not have been able to cast it in time.

He let the energy out of his core quickly. A white ring formed around his left hand as his right palm remained pressed against his wound. The pale magic quickly turned dark red, very similar to the blood rushing down his shirt, and then expanded into a hardened field of energy based on the strength of rock and stone. It formed a sturdy wall completely surrounding the wizard.

Jure was able to see through the shield, and he watched with apprehension as the man rushed forward with his sword raised high. The elder wizard was not completely sure that the field of energy would hold, as his own concentration remained somewhat distorted by his confusion and clouded by the pain in his shoulder. He considered casting a second spell to strengthen the shield, but decided against it. A sudden bolt of pain in mid-casting might cause an unexpected weakness in the field of magic as a whole. It was better to brace himself and prepare to dodge any strike if the energy crumbled.

The edge of the blade came down upon the top of the magical wall. The man wielding the long sword, however, was not accustomed to using such a weapon. He lacked the skill and experience to attack with grace and power. Instead of hitting the barrier with any real force, his actions brought about an uneven swing, and the blade glanced off the edge of the energy field. Once again, his awkward movements left him off balance, and he needed to brace himself against the side wall in order to keep from falling.

Jure realized his assailant was not a trained assassin. If anything, he appeared more like a common storekeeper or clerk who had never used anything beyond a simple dinner knife. The wizard remained confused about the man's motives, but the wound to his shoulder needed immediate attention. He couldn't tend to his injury if the man remained a persistent menace, so removing such a threat became the wizard's priority.

Placing greater focus on his next two spells, Jure created a large flash of white light which blinded the armed man. With his attacker temporarily confused and sightless, the wizard was able to alter his shield into stone chains. They were extremely sturdy but not

very flexible. Movement, however, was exactly what Jure wished to prevent, and he cast the chains outward. The links creaked and rattled as they wrapped around the arms and legs of the man before him.

As the chains tightened, the man's legs came together and his arms were pulled down to his sides. Unable to steady himself, the attacker dropped his sword and toppled over to the floor. He struggled violently against his shackles, but he could not break free.

Satisfied he was safe, Jure moved back to the large oak doors of the church. He considered leaving, but he remained confused and wanted answers. After another glance around, he saw no other threats, though he did hear movement coming toward him from a back corridor.

Deciding to stay, he wasted no further time in addressing his wound. He was extremely careful with his magic, and called on a variety of different hues to facilitate healing. He used green magic to restore life to his torn flesh and blue magic to clean the entire area. He called upon orange magic to offer warmth and to speed the healing process. Finally, he manipulated the transformative power of black energy to alter the damaged area back to its original state.

Before he was finished, he saw Reader Rachael appear at the end of the back hall.

As Rachael rushed deeper into the sanctuary, she saw a member of her church bound in dark red chains. The man had fallen to the ground and was unable to even roll about on the floor. He said nothing. Rachael then looked to Jure, who was finishing healing a very severe wound with his magic.

"What happened?" she asked, astounded by the scene before her.

"He attacked me," Jure responded. "He has a sword. It's on the ground behind him. Do you know what this is about?"

"I heard a scream," the reader explained, "and then I saw a flash of light. It lit up the hall to my office. I didn't know anyone was here."

"I'm the one who screamed. He skewered me with that blade of his, basically went right through me, right under my left shoulder. I used a light spell to blind him. It's only temporary, though somewhat painful, but I didn't have much of a choice."

"Are you alright?" Rachael asked, both her horror and her concern evident.

"I'm fine. Do you know who that is?" Jure demanded, as he pointed to the man on the floor.

Rachael moved in closer until she was finally able to see the attacker's face.

"Asher? Is that you?"

The man didn't respond. He tried to move his arms, but the weight of the stone chains kept him confined.

"You attacked Jure?" the reader persisted. "Why?"

"You know why," the man finally stated through a heavy grunt. "We can't let this happen."

"And you thought it was up to you to stop it?"

"I had to try."

"No, you didn't. It was foolish. It's not up to us."

"What are you talking about?" Jure challenged as he completed his healing spell. He examined his shoulder briefly, swung his arm about once, and then turned his full attention to Reader Rachael. "What's not up to him... or any of you? What did he want to stop?"

The reader looked about the sanctuary. She called to an assistant before answering Jure's questions, and a stocky man with a broad chest came down the same corridor from which Rachael had appeared.

"Victor," the reader spoke to her assistant, "take the sword. It's near Asher. Then, help him up."

The assistant complied and then Rachael turned back to Jure.

"You can remove the chains from him now. Victor won't let him do anything else to you."

"I'm ready for him now," Jure replied. "I don't need Victor."

With a wave of a hand, Jure cancelled the spell, and the magical chains disappeared from around his assailant.

Asher made no attempt to continue his attack. He knew he could not overcome the wizard without the aid of surprise. He had only succeeded in his first attack because the wizard never saw him.

"I'm very sorry about this," Rachael apologized. "I didn't know he was here. I wasn't even aware you were coming to the church."

"You sent a message to me."

"But you didn't send a response."

"It was quicker to just teleport here. But if you didn't know I was coming, how did Asher know? He was waiting for me."

"Asher?" Rachael questioned, clearly demanding an explanation.

At first, the man remained quiet, but he could not ignore the request of the church leader.

"I knew he would come when you said you would invite him to the church. I waited outside for the past two days. When I saw him, I came inside before he saw me. I waited for him."

"You let this man know I was coming?" Jure questioned.

"I told the entire church I would make the invitation," Rachael admitted, "but I didn't think it would lead to this."

"What is this all about?" Jure demanded and then pointed to Asher, "and what are we supposed to do about him?"

Rachael offered an immediate remedy.

"If you wish, I'll turn him over to the town guard. The soldiers have the authority to punish him for his crime. There's no doubt about his actions. I'll tell them exactly what happened. There won't be any question about his guilt, but you may wish to consider his true intentions. If you do, I believe you might be willing to forgive him."

"Consider his intentions? He intended on killing me. Beyond that, I have no idea what's going on. You're the one who sent for me, and I'm still waiting for an explanation. You haven't told me what any of this is about."

"It's somewhat difficult to explain, and I'd rather do it in the privacy of my office. It's the reason I asked you here. Will you hear me out?"

"Am I going to understand why he attacked me?"

"More than likely, but you may not like it."

"I don't like the fact I don't know what's going on. I didn't expect any of this."

Rachael exhaled deeply, trying to find the right words to explain what she already knew would be difficult for the wizard to accept.

"Expectations are what this is really about. It's about prophecies and signs. There are things I need to know as well. It may not seem like it, but it has to do with what happened in Dark Spruce Forest. It's about your magic. Again, it's not something I think we should talk about here, especially not in front of Asher, not after what he did."

"Alright, we'll go to your office, but make sure Victor stays with this man until I say otherwise. I'm not sure what I want done with him"

"Of course," Rachael agreed and then led Jure across the sanctuary and down the corridor to her small office.

She offered the wizard a seat and then took to the chair behind her desk. She had the Book of Godson opened to a page that had been previously marked. Rather than make any attempt to explain Asher's assault, she began with an unexpected question.

"Do you now cast in two circles of magic?"

Jure looked suspiciously at the reader, but admitted to nothing.

"Do you want to know why I'm asking?" the reader attempted to alleviate the wizard's obvious irritation.

"I want to know why I was attacked," Jure responded, hoping to keep the focus on his immediate concerns.

"I realize that, but the reason has to do with my question. There is talk that you were in a conflict with the elves of Dark Spruce."

"Are you serious?" Jure exclaimed. "Is this about the elf essence inside of me? Because if it is, that's already been settled."

"No, not really. It's about you casting in two circles of magic. I know you were capable of casting in one perfect circle of white magic, but there's word that an elf sorceress gave you a slice of her magical core."

Jure's suspicions doubled. Very few humans knew of the incident in Dark Spruce Forest, and he doubted that revealing additional details about his confrontation with the elves would help him with his own questions.

"I didn't come here to talk about that."

"But that's why I asked you here. It's a question that's very important to this church. If I can confirm certain things, it'll make things easier for both of us."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It may not make sense now, but it's all related. I know I'm asking a lot, especially after what just happened, but if you trust me, I can explain not only why you were attacked, but the significance of your experience with the elves. I don't wish to start with a false assumption, that's why I need to know about the elf sorceress. Did she really give you a slice of her magical essence?"

Jure decided he would trust the reader, at least enough to offer certain details which were already common knowledge among the elves of Dark Spruce Forest.

"She did. It's now a part of my own core. She did that to isolate the elf essence inside of me and appease the other elves. They thought I would be dangerous unless they created certain safeguards. But what does this have to do with the man who attacked me? He's not an elf."

"No, he's not. As I said before, his name is Asher, Asher Tinson, and he's a merchant. He lives in Connel and he's a member of this church."

"A member of your church has turned violent?" Jure questioned, somewhat astounded by the assertion.

"It's impossible for me to say what happened to you wasn't violent, but this wasn't about aggression. It has to do with a prophecy regarding a wizard capable of casting in two perfect circles, one white and one gold. We've heard that you now have that ability. Is that true?"

"Who did you hear this from?" Jure demanded, wanting to know the source of the reader's information before continuing.

"There are elves who follow Godson," Rachael admitted. "Some occasionally visit this church. The elf elders don't encourage such actions or beliefs, but they don't punish members of their camp for holding on to the truth either."

"A member of the Dark Spruce camp told you I could cast in two circles?"

"He's an elf guard. He said he saw it, and I have no reason to doubt him. He knew of the prophecy and he came here to ask for guidance."

"What kind of guidance? Are there others who think they need to kill me... and what is this prophecy?"

"I'll explain it all to you," Rachael promised, "but I need to know if it's true first. Do you cast in two circles... a gold one along with the white one?"

Jure considered not answering, but it was pointless. He knew that several elf guards had witnessed him casting a teleportation spell when he left Dark Spruce Forest. He was as surprised as everyone else when a second ring, a golden circle, appeared around his wrists.

"Yes, it's true, but I've got it under control now."

"Control? I thought a perfect circle already indicated great control."

"It does, and that's why I can restrain it."

"I don't understand," the reader admitted.

"The gold circle isn't me," Jure stated with obvious discomfort. "It's not my magic, not really. It's Haven Wellseed's. She's the elf who offered part of her core to me. It was the only solution the elves would accept. Otherwise they would have killed me. The natural hue of her core was a gold so pure I couldn't believe it. I opened a place in my own core to hold it, but her magic was so strong that it immediately began to soak up energy from any source of light."

"But it responds to your will, correct?"

"Yes, but the energy is still coming directly from that piece of Haven's core. After I returned home to Bourbon, I experimented with spells on my own, with no one around to watch, not even Enin."

"Wouldn't his expertise have been useful?"

"He wanted to help. He saw the second circle and he knew my magical powers could be expanded radically, but he had no idea what was going on inside of me. He couldn't. I don't think there's ever been an instance of something like this before."

"Based on what I know, I would agree with that," Rachael admitted.

"Are you talking about this prophecy again?"

"I am."

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"Absolutely, but I need to understand what's happening with the magic. Believe me, this is very important. I need to explain this to you properly, and we can't afford any mistakes. Asher already made a poor decision. I don't want to make another one."

"What else do you need to know?" Jure questioned impatiently.

Rachael placed the information she received from Jure in relation to what she knew of the prophecies. She believed everything fit as it should, but she needed to ensure there were no discrepancies.

"You said you experimented with the energy, and that you could restrain it. What does that mean?"

"It means I have the ability to keep the second circle, the golden one, under wraps. I can close off certain pathways to keep the energy enclosed in my core."

"Is that dangerous?"

"I don't think so. It's not building up into a critical mass if that's what you're wondering. It seems to reach a maximum level and then it stops absorbing any additional energy."

"So when you cast a spell, you're still casting in only one circle... the white circle?"

"As long as I'm careful."

"But the ability to cast in two rings is still there, and it will remain there as long as you have Haven's core inside of you, correct?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that. I've cast a few spells when I was alone. If I remove the restraints, I can sculpt some powerful light spells that I didn't think I could achieve. Now, I've told you everything I know. You need to explain what happened here."

"You're right, I do. So first, I want you to read something. This is the prophecy directly from the Book of Godson."

Rachael turned the book in front of her around so that it was facing Jure. She wanted to ensure he could read the text easily. As he scanned the page, the reader professed the verse from memory.

"A caster of magic shall find a second circle, and that circle will be one of gold. When added to the first pale ring, it shall usher in the day of trials. Its length will be determined by an act of reversal. A disbeliever of clear power shall deal with evil and free a spirit of malice. This creature will defy death and will return to lead the forces of mischief. The one of speed, an ally of the caster of gold and white, will have to decide his own destiny and then make an offer of trust. The caster's fate will rise to the stars, and in that, there will be hope."

"And that's supposed to explain why I was attacked?" Jure questioned after Rachael completed the verse.

"It will, once you hear the real meaning."

"Sounds pretty cryptic to me," Jure replied. "That could mean almost anything."

"You have to admit the first part seems pretty clear."

"You think it's talking about me?"

"Don't you?"

"It's possible, but there could be others who cast in white and gold circles."

"Do you really believe that? How many individuals can cast in a pure white circle alone... other than you?"

"I don't know."

"How many do you think? A dozen? Less? Just a few? Or maybe there's only you. That's what I've been told by some of the elves who are very astute in magic."

"They can't possibly know all the spell casters out there."

"You think there are several wizards capable of casting in a perfect white circle keeping their abilities a secret?" Rachael questioned with obvious disbelief.

"Maybe one or two."

"I doubt that. I don't think it would be possible. Not for so long. There are too many elves sensitive to magic, and they've been keeping track of humans capable of casting powerful spells. Still, even if it is true, what are the odds of one of those spell casters also casting in a second golden circle, an ability that he or she just discovered?"

"Maybe it's highly unlikely, but what about the verse itself? This could just be a coincidence, nothing more. It may have nothing to do with me. It probably doesn't. Those words were written ages ago. How could it have been known back then that I was going to end up with elf essence inside of me, or that Haven Wellseed was going to offer me a piece of her core? There are a lot of details that were dependent upon a lot of individual choices."

"Maybe those choices were influenced by something more," Rachael offered. "And there's more to it than that. Before Ingar's Sphere was destroyed on Sanctum Mountain, there was a man named Stephen Clarin. He understood the prophecies."

"I heard about him," Jure admitted. "Ryson told me Stephen helped form the group that entered Sanctum. He was critical in bringing everyone together. He was killed when the sphere was taken out of the mountain. Ryson was with him when he died."

"That's him. He offered a clear understanding of the prophecies, and he stated that this particular prophecy referred to a spell caster who would at first cast magic in a single white ring. He would be friends, or at least an ally, with a delver."

"Ryson Acumen?"

"He didn't reveal a name, but Ryson seems like the obvious choice. I want you to also keep in mind that though Stephen did not give us an exact time frame for each prophecy, he did give us an idea of the sequence of events. No one was sure when the magic caster casting in two circles would appear, but we knew it was the next important thing to occur."

"Does that mean you've been watching me?" Jure wondered.

"To a degree, yes. We know the ability to cast in a pure white circle is rare."

"So everyone knew about me, including Asher?"

"Yes, but remember, the prophecy didn't just end with you. Stephen also stated that there would be another magic caster, one who can cast in colorless magic."

"Colorless magic? I don't think that's possible, maybe for Rul Saattan, but not for a human wizard. The demon lord used to be able to cast in three colorless circles, but that's when he was Reiculf. When he became Rul Saattan, his power diminished. I don't think anyone is certain what color Rul casts now, but colorless magic is something even Enin couldn't attain."

"I realize that, but Stephen was insistent about that. He said that's what the clear power as stated in the prophecy meant. He also said this spell caster would make a deal with the demon lord and use a spirit captured in the demon breeding grounds to lead an army of evil creatures to terrorize Uton. Maybe this spell caster will learn how to cast in colorless magic from Rul."

"And this interpreter, this Stephen Clarin, got all this from that one prophecy? That's getting a lot of detail from something pretty vague."

"Stephen Clarin was right about everything else. It's also about faith in the Book of Godson. I can't deny the prophecies. They're written right there. You can read it for yourself."

"I don't want to get into a debate about that with you. You can believe what you want, but I still want to know what this has to do with Asher's attack."

Rachael was not proud of what she had to say next, but she knew it couldn't be avoided.

"He thought he could stop the trials. That was a recommendation that was considered by this church."

"You were all going to attack me?"

"No, it never reached that point. When I heard about your second circle of magic, I had a responsibility to inform all the members. I brought them together and revealed the news. A few members began to focus on a certain portion of the prophecy instead of looking at it as a whole. They began to worry about the trials and the creature who would return to terrorize Uton. They considered the text regarding an act of reversal. A few misguided members started to think they could outsmart the prophecy. They thought if you were sent to the stars quickly..."

Her voice trailed off as she allowed Jure to consider the connection, rather than making one directly.

"Sent to the stars? That means I'm going to die?"

"We're all going to die... at some point," Rachael counseled.

"But some members wanted to hasten my departure?"

"They thought it would bring the hope to the land before there was too much suffering. I told them it didn't work that way. Much of what we do is in Godson's hands."

"Apparently Asher didn't think so."

"I never thought he would have taken it so far. He wasn't one of the outspoken ones."

"How many more of the quiet ones, or even the outspoken ones, might decide to take another stab at me?"

"None."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Asher failed, and the rest will realize that it was Godson's will that he failed."

"I'm not certain that reassures me."

"I understand, but this will be viewed as a sign. Still, it's up to you what we do next. What do you wish to do about Asher, now that you know why he attacked you? I'll do exactly what I promised before. I'll turn him over to the soldiers. He will be punished severely. It's up to you."

Jure thought of Asher, and then he considered the other members of the church.

"No," the wizard responded. "Let him go, but before you do, let him know I'm aware of him now. He won't be able to sneak up on me, none of your members will. Haven's magic not only allows me to cast in a second ring of energy, it also enhances my sight, even when I restrain it."

"That didn't seem to help you when you entered the church."

"I thought it was a safe place. I fooled myself in that regard. I won't make that mistake again."

Rachael appeared nearly devastated by Jure's words, and she revealed her sincere regret.

"It should be a safe place, a safe place for everyone, but you're right. It wasn't safe for you. But please understand, what happened here is not the fault of Godson. And it's not

just Asher's fault. It's my fault too, as well as every member who considered the idea of harming you to save themselves. We are far from perfect, and we require His forgiveness, as well as yours."

"I can forgive you, but it was easy for me to heal myself. What happens if the next person to be attacked isn't so fortunate?"

"I'll do whatever is necessary to ensure that this is an isolated incident; unless you think I should resign my position. I said it was my fault, and I meant it. I'll step down if you think it's best."

Jure considered the proposal, but he realized it would be a mistake, and he explained why.

"No, you accepted blame and you were willing to turn Asher over for punishment without hesitation. Let your followers know what happened, and let them know what you were prepared to do. That should be enough."

"I pray that it will be."

With the matter of Asher decided, Jure wished to move on to other issues.

"So if you didn't set me up to be attacked, why did you send that message to me? Why did you want me to come to Connel?"

"Like I said before, I needed to confirm the information I had received from the elves."

"And now that you've confirmed it, what do you think needs to be done?"

"Done?"

"If you believe in this prophecy, it means we're headed for some difficult times. What do you think we should do about it, short of sending me to the stars?"

"Don't act like Asher," Rachael replied, "and I don't mean that as a joke. Asher tried to alter what couldn't be altered. He thought he could put himself above Godson's will."

"And do you know what Godson's will might be?"

"No, not completely, but I do know that Godson gives us a choice... all of us get to choose."

"So you brought me here to tell me I had a choice?"

"Not just you. There are other choices. The truth is, I thought you needed to know what's coming. The trials are part of the prophecy. I don't know if they'll happen tomorrow, next season, or many cycles of the season in the future, but they *are* coming. Trying to stop them will be a waste of effort."

"Trials are a part of life," Jure offered. "I learned that a long time ago."

"But there is also the issue with Ryson," Rachael noted.

"That's if that ancient prophecy is actually related to him. I'm not sure I'm willing to accept that."

"That's entirely up to you, but I will still offer this one piece of advice; don't try to save him from his fate. The choice has to be his. If you try to alter what happens to him, it will be a wasted effort. Maybe in that, there is some good in what Asher tried to do. Not because he attacked you, but he showed you what can happen when we misuse the prophecies."

"If you didn't want me to misuse the prophecy, why did you even tell me about it?"

"The Word of Godson is not meant to be hidden or confined. If it involves you, as I think it does, you needed to be informed. I'll let you decide for yourself whether or not it will give you further guidance."

"And what about Ryson? Shouldn't you tell him as well?"

Rachael grew very quiet, and then offered her answer.

"No, I don't believe I should. Ryson Acumen is a special individual. What he has already accomplished could not have been done without the blessings of Godson. Those blessings can guide him far better than anything I can tell him."

Chapter 1

"Do you *like* losing so much?"

"Careful, wizard. For the moment, you offer me a distraction. Irritate me and that distraction will come to a very abrupt and painful halt."

The warning was not an empty threat. Standing within the center of his realm, the demon lord could call on a number of different ways to destroy the trespasser. From a bolt of pure force to a legion of ravenous monsters, absolute destruction was only a nod away.

While the human magic caster understood his annihilation was a distinct possibility, he did not believe such a fate would fall upon him before he revealed his purpose. History offered the likelihood of more favorable outcomes, and Demonsheol was a place where the past hung heavily in the air. The wizard wished to make such considerations clear before the demon lord acted impulsively.

"It is not my intention to irritate you, and though I realize you care little about intentions, you cannot dispute the past. If you consider the history of this place, I am not the real irritant to you or your realm."

"The recent past can be as important as ancient history," Rul Saattan snarled. "Though your actions have not long been embedded into time, they are no less relevant to your existence. In these few moments which have passed, you appeared in my domain and spoke to me as if I owe you my attention. You have also cast a spell which shadows our words. I have already indulged you far more than I should."

"The spell is only meant to prevent others from hearing our conversation. I wasn't trying to test your patience. I only wanted to ensure a level of... privacy."

"I am not concerned with such matters. How I deal with trespassers is at my pleasure and my pleasure alone."

"I appreciate that, but I did it more for my benefit than yours," the wizard confessed.

"So you admit to taking liberties in my realm without my permission. You even asked me if I would indulge a request. You tell me it will be equally to my benefit, as if any human could offer me anything of value. When I question such ill-placed self-importance, you respond by asking if I enjoy losing."

"Are you saying you've never lost?"

"If I had, I would no longer be the master of this realm. That is an undeniable fact."

"It's also an undeniable fact that your plans have been hindered. If you don't want to call it losing, I can live with that, but you can't deny your current circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

"Yes, the conditions of your existence. You're trapped in Demonsheol. The barriers around this realm have reformed. You had other plans; you wanted to extend your influence beyond these breeding grounds. You had that opportunity, but now it's lost. You can't tell me that didn't happen."

"You speak of things with the limited awareness of an individual bound to a mortal life. My influence does not only extend across space, it also spans time, and I have been shaping the ways of existence for ages."

"So you're going to ignore things which have happened because they occurred within a relatively short length of time in relation to your existence? That would be like saying I could ignore you because I've only been in your realm for a few moments."

"Your ignorance nearly matches your penchant for irritation, and I am losing the desire to overlook both."

"I may be irritating you now, but as I said before, I'm not the real source of your frustration. If there's an irritant to you, Ryson Acumen has earned that honor."

"The delver? An irritant? I have considered that many times, but he is more than a wisp of smoke and less than a challenge."

"Less than a challenge? He has defeated you on every occasion."

The demon lord growled and almost unleashed his fury on the human wizard. He considered melting the flesh off the trespasser with a slow burning flame, or twisting the wizard's bones into knots with the force of pure will. He would have enjoyed hearing the human scream, and the memory would last for eons, for such was the quality of Demonsheol. The past grew stronger in the demon lord's domain.

The mention of Ryson Acumen, however, gave Rul Saattan pause. The delver proved to be an interesting puzzle. The demon lord considered that mystery in connection with the trespasser.

He pondered the correlation between the delver and the spell caster, and he considered the obstacles both had overcome. Ryson Acumen had managed to survive several encounters with various demons, and the wizard before him had found a way to overcome the barriers which surrounded Demonsheol. It was a tenuous link at best, but Rul knew it was unwise to dismiss anything involving the delver.

The master of all demons did not feel the need to explain himself, but a human capable of entering the demon breeding grounds created more than a distraction. Opportunities abounded across the realms of existence, and Rul understood the necessity of exploring every option.

"It is exactly that consideration which reveals the truth," Rul offered with a hint of justification. "A delver, no matter how talented, would not be able to thwart me a single time. It is simply not possible."

"And yet it has happened... continuously."

"Which is all the proof anyone needs to realize the delver is being used by other forces."

The wizard shook his head immediately, clearly dismissing the demon lord's assertion.

"Are you referring to some so-called benevolent force of providence which through some majestic scheme works in opposition to your own evil desires?" the spell caster asked with obvious scorn.

The demon inhaled deeply, as if he was breathing in both the words and the apparent emotions of the wizard.

"You speak of such power with clear disgust. Am I to believe you choose to resist the forces which have always aligned against me?"

"Resist?' No, that's not at all accurate. For me to resist something, I would have to acknowledge its existence. 'Reject' would be a far more accurate description."

"Even better. I encourage such rejection."

"Don't get your hopes up. My dismissal of providence is not due to some desire to embrace wickedness and become your hapless pawn. I simply reject the entire concept upon which such legends are invented."

"You are an interesting creature, still insignificant, but worth a small fraction of my continued attention."

The wizard had the audacity to laugh.

"You find humor in my indulgence?" the demon questioned with far more curiosity than anger. If Rul Saattan had felt even slightly insulted, he would have unleashed his fury, and he cautioned the wizard to explain with due care. "I wouldn't be so reckless. If I no longer find you remarkable in any fashion, your existence will no longer matter."

"That's exactly what I find so amusing. The opinion of yourself actually matches the prominence of your legend back on Uton."

"Uton? A land of humans, elves, dwarves, and other assorted creatures. Their understanding of my dominance is limited by their own weaknesses."

"There are many from Uton who would consider you one of the greatest forces in all of existence."

"That may be, but they still lack the ability to comprehend the extent of my power. Realizing that it exceeds anything else within their limited experience does not allow them to truly appreciate the intensity of my influence. They could say that all of existence is larger than one of their tiny villages, but their minds still could not truly grasp the vastness of everything beyond their small collection of huts and fields."

"So the inability to understand the upper limits of your influence prevents them from appreciating your power?"

"There are no limits to my influence."

"And that's why I laughed," the wizard admitted. "If there's no limit to your influence, why are you contained within this domain?"

The demon lord glared at the human wizard, but did not respond.

The wizard dared to press for an answer.

"There are barriers which surround your realm, barriers which prevent you from extending your influence into other regions of existence. You can't possibly deny that."

"The barriers are a complex matter. They are not some simple cage to keep me here. Their existence fulfills many purposes, and they serve me as much as they restrain my influence."

"I understand that. I never thought they were just a cage or even a wall. Before I even attempted to enter your realm, I knew these barriers kept potential foes from invading your domain. They stood between me and where I wanted to go, and I didn't simply climb over them to reach this place."

"And that is the only reason I have indulged you to this point. The barriers are new and there is much to be learned from them. You have found a way to enter my domain, thus you have earned a small degree of my indulgence."

"I appreciate that. I also admit that my ability to penetrate the barrier does not elevate my power above yours. The barriers were constructed to restrain demons. That's the principal reason for their existence. And though they also serve to make it extremely difficult for others to pass, it's far easier for me to enter this realm than it is for you to extend your influence beyond your domain."

"Then you admit I am your superior."

"I never denied it. It would be foolish for me to do otherwise."

The wizard's response held both a degree of respect as well as a surprising hint of humility. Though the demon lord did not admire modesty, he continued to find the human's answers oddly inconsistent. Rul Saattan had an affinity for lies and a deceitful nature, but he could not place the trespasser's words clearly in the category of willful treachery.

Due to the wizard's daring nature, the demon lord decided he wanted to gain a greater hold over the magic caster.

"What is your name?" Rul demanded.

The wizard, however, viewed the question as an admission of weakness, a validation for his own convictions.

"Don't you know? I thought your influence was without limits. If that was true, you would know everything about me."

"I do know everything about you," the demon lord growled. "The totality of your past entered my domain long before you discovered the means to breach the barriers of Demonsheol."

"Then why do you need me to tell you my name?"

"Because I want you to speak it here. Let your own consciousness place the echo of your identity within this realm. Imprint the essence of your name here by your own mouth."

The wizard grew silent, and for one brief moment, he appeared uncertain of what he should do. He shook his head as if to cast aside the brief indecision.

"I call myself Nodav, and saying that here hasn't changed anything."

"Of course it has. There are always consequences."

"On that we can also agree, but it doesn't change the fact that you remain who you are and I remain who I am."

"You believe you know the scope of my power?"

"Completely? No. But by knowing what you are, I also know what you are not. You are not the manifestation of absolute power. There is no such thing. You may indeed be one of the most powerful beings in all of existence, but you are still an individual comprised of an origin and a single chain of unique experiences. In that regard, you are the same as any other form of life."

"Your assumption carries with it a great level of significance. Do you realize exactly what you are saying?"

"Of course I do. There is no supreme power, no indescribable awareness beyond anything else in all of existence. Though there are many confused individuals who wish to believe there are entities which defy my concept of absolute truth, it does not change the fact that every individual consciousness can be defined within certain boundaries of reality. There is no benevolent creator of universal existence, just as there is no manifestation of evil."

"And yet you stand at the center of my realm and speak to me. Do I not exist?"

Nodav looked across the wide crater which comprised Rul Saattan's sanctuary. It was a pit, not a palace; a shallow but expansive dent in a gray land of angry dust and debris.

"Of course you exist. And I don't deny you are the lord of this realm, the master of all demons, but you are no different than some king on Uton proclaiming himself the ultimate leader of his people."

"I am far more than any king from your pathetic land."

"In terms of the power you wield, I agree, but the comparison in regard to your standing remains. You don't rule over Demonsheol because of some ordained plan crafted by some supernatural force with sovereignty over all things. You reign because you have developed the means to rule; by force of will, physical strength, magical ability, or some other trait you've managed to develop beyond the scope of any adversary."

"So you believe I have earned my place of authority? And do you believe that such requirements also apply to every king who has ever ruled upon your land?"

"Of course not. Some kings have earned nothing. They have achieved nothing."

"But still they rule. Doesn't that destroy your entire system of beliefs?"

"No, it justifies my understanding of the truth. A weak individual can become king only because a strong individual previously set the rules of ascension. It was not left to so-called providence. If it was, there would be no weak kings. Instead, the rules of ascension are systems designed by individuals who believed they could pass on their achievements to their heirs."

"But I did not inherit my rule."

"I wasn't talking about you."

"But you compared me to kings of your realm."

"And such a comparison remains. You rule this domain because of the actions you have taken, by the choices you have made, and by the power you wield through traits you have developed over time."

"I held dominion over this realm the moment it was created," Rul boasted.

"That would make sense. You were the first. You obtained immediate knowledge of your surroundings. You linked yourself to this place in order to benefit from its resources. If another was first, you probably wouldn't be here now."

"So you believe that there is no force beyond your understanding?"

"I never said that. There are a great many things I don't understand, but that applies to every single entity in existence. There are things even you do not comprehend."

"It is unwise to make such a claim."

"Is it?" Nodav questioned. "If you were all-knowing, how was it possible for Ryson Acumen to defeat you?"

"The delver has not defeated me," Rul Saattan insisted.

"We're back to that?"

"We have never left that point. If we did, we would no longer be talking. I would be tearing through your magical core in order to inspect the makeup of your essence. Your ability to breach the barriers offers certain opportunities, but it is your continued fixation with the delver which has truly gained my attention."

"Isn't that an admission of Ryson Acumen's importance? If you were an entity of incalculable power, why would a single delver be worth so much of your attention?"

"It is not the delver who is important, or even what he is capable of accomplishing on his own. He is an individual used by forces clearly beyond your comprehension."

"So Ryson Acumen is insignificant?"

"To me? Of course he is. He is nothing more than a puny stone, but when a stone is placed within a sling and driven by a far greater force, the results are significant."

"The delver wasn't flung at you by some unseen power. He decided to oppose you. He took certain actions to restrain your influence."

"That would be impossible."

"Can we at least agree that Ryson Acumen has thwarted your plans on more than one occasion? That's what I meant before when I asked if you liked losing."

"What could you possibly know of my plans?"

"I may not know the totality of your desires and schemes, but I know of certain events involving your actions. You made your presence known to others, even all the way to Uton. For a brief moment in time, you found a way to exert your influence beyond this realm, but the delver faced you in your own domain and threatened to destroy your demons and all of Demonsheol."

"And you should know that a single delver is incapable of such a feat. He called upon spirits of great power."

"So his army was stronger than your army. It was still the delver who called to those spirits. He also kept a primeval from your grasp. One of your underlings decided he wished to break from your authority. You wished to punish such disloyalty. Ryson Acumen defended that demon, even helped transform the creature. It's no longer a demon."

"And I no longer care about its existence."

"Then what about the rebellion which occurred throughout your domain? It was the desertion of that demon which sparked the revolt."

"I allowed that uprising. I could have crushed it at any time."

"From what I've learned, you were hoping that the uprising would allow you to finally overcome the supposed powers that oppose you. It didn't turn out that way. The delver intervened—again—and a new set of barriers formed around your realm. How could you possibly consider that a victory?"

"What do you know of victory? You speak of Ryson Acumen as if he has defied me through all of time. The delver's existence is a dust speck compared to mine. His actions are but the blink of an eye compared to the ages I have witnessed. And through those ages, I have amassed the transgressions of the past into a pool of ever increasing power."

"And even after all that time, the delver managed to survive every confrontation he's had against you. Not only survive, but come out ahead."

"You make it sound as if I have been completely defeated, removed as a threat, and left sitting upon some pile of rubble."

Once more, Nodav looked across the bleak landscape. Rul Saattan never created a glorious structure as some monument to his power. His sanctuary was not some imposing dark castle or a grand mountain. It was a wide circular depression, a huge crater in a dismal land of rock and dust.

"No, I never thought you were completely defeated," the wizard admitted, "but you are standing in what amounts to a heap of dust, and you are contained in this land."

"You think my realm is nothing but dust?"

"I think your domain is a graveyard for the past."

"You are only partially correct. I believe your opinions need an adjustment, but first, there are questions which require answers."

Nodav stepped closer to the demon master, not to challenge, but to reveal a willingness to comply. He needed more than Rul Saattan's attention, he needed something he believed was trapped in Demonsheol. He knew he would only obtain it if he proved to Rul he could use it to the demon king's advantage.

"It's my intention to answer your questions," the human wizard revealed.

"You came here to serve me?"

"No, I already told you that I came to make a request, a request I believe will benefit us both."

Rul smiled, a sinister grin, but a smile nonetheless.

"And you think I will accommodate you?"

"I came here knowing you would never assist me unless it suited your own needs. That's why I intend on answering your questions."

"I am not inclined to give you anything, despite what you do."

"I expected as much, but I was hoping that my appearance here would lead to certain indulgences. You've already spent more time with me than I expected."

"How did you breach the barrier?" Rul Saattan demanded, no longer caring about the wizard's desires.

"In truth, I didn't. I let the history of your realm do it for me. For a brief moment of time, there were no barriers around Demonsheol. That was in the past. I used that history to create a momentary deviation."

"There is more to it than that," Rul growled. "I have already attempted such an assault. The past grows stronger in this realm, and I have reached back in time to that very moment. I enriched the echoes with my own power. I turned the whispers of the past into a great shout, but the current barrier continues to defy me."

"It defies you because your connection to this place extends to its origin. The initial barrier existed from the very beginning. Its history overwhelms the small window when there was no barrier. When you call on the past, you have to overcome the complete history of this place."

"And how were you able to overcome such an obstacle. The past of Demonsheol is part of this entire domain. If I couldn't completely isolate a small portion of time, then neither could you."

"Actually, I can."

"Your influence cannot match mine."

"True," Nodav admitted, "but it's not only about influence. It's less about influence and more about certain bonds. I don't have the same connection to the history of this realm. It was possible for me to focus on a point of time without touching the entire fabric of history. I was able to reach back to a single slice of the past because I have no other connection to this place."

"If that was all that was necessary, then any wizard could overcome the barriers."

"True, but I am not an ordinary wizard. It takes a distinct set of powers to do what I have done. It requires the ability to reach back through the shadows of time and turn an echo into substance. That's not a skill shared by many. You should know that."

Rul looked beyond the wizard and deeper into the shadows of Nodav's past. He saw the spell caster's history and understood.

"You cast in a perfect circle of gray magic."

"That's part of my ability."

"And you are focused on the past."

"I believe history is important. If it's not analyzed properly, it can turn into distorted legends, and then myths, and then a great lie."

"And is that why you are also interested in Ryson Acumen? Are you concerned his legend is growing and that the history of his deeds may be overblown into legend and then exaggerated into myth?"

"My concern goes beyond the delver. I am disturbed with all myths, especially myths that are treated as some kind of incontrovertible truth. That's why I'm here, and that's why I believe you'll give me what I want."

Rul Saattan did not respond. Instead, the demon lord stalked around the wizard. Though Nodav was abnormally tall for a human, the master of all demons still towered over the magic caster. As he circled Nodav, Rul once more peered into the blurred shadows which surrounded every individual who walked the dreary lands of Demonsheol. The demon could see the history within the dimness of each individual's past. As he inspected the human closer, Rul finally realized what Nodav hoped to accomplish.

"You are not doing this to destroy Ryson Acumen's legend. You are doing it to destroy the concepts of a higher power, whether they are malevolent or benevolent. You want to prove to the inhabitants of your land that there is no divine being... and no manifestation of evil. But you can't do that directly, so you're going to do it through me."

"I admit it. There is a warped belief that Ryson Acumen managed to defeat you because he is part of some greater force, that he's somehow sanctified. You yourself just claimed as much. That belief has been carried to extremes by some individuals in my land. I have learned that some pathetic cliff behemoth actually claims that the delver is blessed by Godson."

"And you hope to disprove this theory?"

"I intend to show that you were defeated because of the circumstances of individual battles, not because Ryson Acumen is blessed. I will confront the delver and show the people of Uton that he is not some tool of divine power. Defeating Ryson Acumen will prove that there is no sovereign plan, no benevolent omnipotent force of creation filled with love for all existence. Life is a chain of actions and reactions, nothing more."

"You also hope to prove that I am nothing more than any other creature, that I was just fortunate enough to come into this existence at an earlier moment in time than any potential adversary."

"A head start is always an advantage."

"If your intention is to diminish my standing, why would I assist you in any way?"

"Because you have little to lose."

"Really? You hope to prove I am nothing of significance."

"I never said you were without significance. You have attained a great level of power and influence. I want to prove that there is nothing mystic about those achievements, that you achieved them by your own skill and labor, not by some supernatural force beyond understanding."

"And what do I have to gain?"

"You gain whether I achieve my goal or not. If I succeed, you will be rid of Ryson Acumen. Even if you continue to believe he is a tool of some higher power, that tool will no longer be used against you in the future. If I fail to succeed, then your own convictions of the delver are given that much more substance."

"That is not sufficient for me."

"What else do you want? Do you want me to pledge my service to you for all time? Do you want me to barter my immortal soul?"

"Do you doubt the existence of your own spirit?"

"Of course not. I've witnessed far too many instances of spirits on Uton to deny certain facts. Death will not be the end of my existence."

"Wouldn't those same facts contradict the very things you hope to prove?"

"Not at all. I don't deny the existence of my consciousness, an energy which will survive beyond the death of my body."

"And that is not proof of a greater power... of a spiritual mysticism which defies your insistence that there is no force beyond your understanding?"

"No, it isn't. It only proves that circumstances and events can expand each individual's comprehension, ability, and awareness. Transcending a physical existence allows every creature to cast aside the limitations of a mortal body. It does not establish proof that there is such a thing as divinity, providence, grace, or any other such convoluted concepts."

Rul Saattan smirked once more.

"I believe there is something you can offer me."

Nodav wondered if Rul was going to continue to focus on meaningless philosophy. He didn't wish to waste time on such nonsense. He wanted to keep the discussion firmly planted in the reality which he understood.

"I already told you what I thought about bartering my own soul. It's an absurd concept, and I'm not going to lower myself by pretending to accept some ridiculous notion just to get what I want."

"No, I do not need you to pledge your soul to me. I believe it will come to me of its own accord."

"Then what else do you require?"

"A contest."

Chapter 2

"A contest?" Nodav asked.

"Yes," the demon lord confirmed. "A test of skill and ability."

"I didn't come here to challenge you," the wizard protested.

Rul Saattan chuckled. Such a thought was clearly ludicrous. No magic caster could stand against him at the center of his sanctuary, but Rul had another conflict in mind.

"The challenge will not involve me. You will face one of my demons."

"That's not necessary."

"I deem what is necessary, and I see an opportunity here."

"You want me to prove myself, is that it? Haven't I already done that? I passed through the barriers of Demonsheol. That should be enough to prove what I can do."

"You explained how you overcame the barriers of my realm. That type of skill will not help you against the delver. You say you can defeat Ryson Acumen. I think you need to prove you can do more than just connect with the past. You were able to find an opening in a wall, but how will you perform against an opponent capable of fighting back?"

"So you're going to pit me against a demon to see if I can beat Ryson? What's that going to prove? You had numerous conflicts against Ryson... right here in Demonsheol. If you couldn't beat him, then one of your underlings wouldn't do any better. If I get the better of some demon, that doesn't mean I can overcome the delver. It's a waste of energy."

"But if you lose, then it will prove you lack the skill to accomplish your task. You just admitted as much. If you can't beat one of my underlings, then you will surely lose to Ryson Acumen."

"But why waste time with some irrelevant challenge? Either I beat Ryson or I don't. Why not leave it at that?"

"Because I have already invested time and interest in you. I want to see if you are worth any further indulgence. You said you had a request, and a request reveals a need. That means you require additional assistance."

"I haven't even told you what I wanted."

"It doesn't matter. You came here because you knew your own abilities would be insufficient."

"That's not entirely accurate," the wizard disputed. "I know what I'm up against with Ryson Acumen. I've developed a strategy to defeat the delver, but part of that strategy requires something from here, something from Demonsheol."

"Phrase it however you like," Rul scoffed, "but you still need my approval... and my assistance."

"But what benefit could you possibly obtain from a contest between me and one of your demons? If I lose, there'll be no one to challenge Ryson Acumen. If your demon loses, you'll have lost an underling for nothing."

"It is not for nothing," Rul insisted with a throaty growl. "You said it yourself; one of my primevals deserted Demonsheol and another died in the rebellion. They both need to be replaced. I have decided to elevate two demons to positions of authority. They will

become taskmasters and maintain discipline within the ranks of my lesser minions. I need to ensure they are worthy of such authority."

"So you're going to use me to test one of your demons?"

"It seems appropriate. You have demonstrated a level of magical skill by breaching the barriers of Demonsheol. If the demon of my choice defeats you, it will have proven itself worthy for a position of influence, to act as a disciplinarian. You, of course, will be dead, and as an added bonus, there will be no question about the destination of your spirit. It will be trapped in my realm for all eternity, and you will learn just how wrong you are about the limitations of my power and influence."

Nodav knew Rul's threat was true. If he died in Demonsheol, his spirit would lack the necessary ability to escape the realm. It was a risk he understood before he even entered the demon breeding grounds, but lofty goals required facing exceptional hazards. Turning misguided beliefs away from pointless myths wouldn't be achieved by hesitancy or timidity.

He was prepared to face great peril when he decided to meet with Rul Saattan, but he expected to be rewarded for his efforts.

"And if I win?" the wizard questioned.

"Then the demon will have proven itself unworthy of being a primeval, and I will have to look elsewhere."

"Shouldn't you know by now if one of your underlings is capable of being a disciplinarian? Aren't you admitting you don't know enough about your own minions?"

"I am proving I know them all too well. Creatures bred in this realm learn quickly that deceit is a path to survival. Though they cannot hide their basic instincts and desires from me, they realize they must always portray strength. They are all cunning enough to cover their flaws, because they know I do not permit weakness or tolerate frailty. That does not mean that flaws do not exist here. I reward nothing, but I encourage any means to obtain conquest. Those who serve me know I do not accept failure."

"But what about me? If I win, will you honor my request?"

"That will depend on the nature of your victory... and how I feel after the contest is complete."

"That hardly seems incentive enough for me to agree to this challenge."

"You no longer have a choice. You have invaded my realm and you even questioned the extent of my power. I have no intention of letting you leave Demonsheol unless you agree to this contest... and win. Whether I offer you anything else, that decision will be subject to my pleasure and my pleasure alone."

Nodav wondered if he had made a miscalculation. He previously believed Rul Saattan would seize any opportunity to see the delver defeated, even if it meant the dismissal of his legend as the personification of evil. The wizard doubted Rul cared about the beliefs held by individuals in Uton. Power was the defining quality of the demon lord, not maintaining some misguided myth over his role in fantasies held by others.

To his dismay, Nodav realized a potential flaw in his strategy. Nodav had failed to consider that the demon lord might have other uses for him. He was suddenly facing a challenge which could lead to his death. Even if he prevailed, there was no guarantee Rul would grant his request for additional assistance.

The human wizard considered the possibility of escaping. In order to return to Uton, he would have to focus on a complex spell of shadowy manipulation. He would have to

use the waves of history to move back to a time when the barriers around Demonsheol did not exist. Such a spell required massive concentration, and he doubted the demon lord would simply watch passively as the wizard attempted to leave.

Nodav also believed that there was a critical need that could only be fulfilled by Rul Saattan. If he attempted to flee and escaped, his plan to upend the delver's legend would be crippled. Perhaps Rul would not honor any bargain, but Nodav still needed the demon lord's approval.

"Fine," Nodav agreed. "If that's what it takes, I'll accept your challenge."

"Your acceptance is not an issue," Rul reminded the wizard. "I am not going to allow you to leave until the challenge is complete. It is also necessary for you to learn a greater level of respect. I want to show you exactly what my realm is all about."

"What does that mean?"

"I can read your emotional state. I can taste your opinions of my domain. You believe I stand in some desolate pit of rock and dust. You understand that the past is strong in my realm, but I'm going to allow you to become part of that past, to experience a miniscule slice of what I enjoy during every instant in which I rule these lands."

The demon lord waved his enormous clawed hand and sent a wave of magic across the crater which served as his sanctuary. He pulled upon the strands of history which found their way to his domain. The magic within the beast brought a single event to the forefront of the countless incidents from the past.

To Nodav's eyes, the gray dust of Rul's sanctuary was suddenly covered with grass and trees. Near the center of a clearing, a collection of huts formed the foundation of a small village. The dim light of rage which normally illuminated Demonsheol with a glow of hostility was replaced with the bright rays of an early morning sun rising in the east.

Nodav stood near the western edge of the village. There were fields to the south and a vast forest to the west. The air was pleasantly warm, like the weather during the end of the planting season back on Uton, but nowhere near as hot as the season of the high sun.

Several individuals passed him, but they paid him no mind. They appeared human, but they acted as if the wizard was not there. There was more activity at the center of the village, and several individuals moved about a simple market.

While examining the gathering of people, Nodav had to shield his eyes from the sun as he looked eastward. There were low rising hills beyond the eastern border of the village, and the sun was barely above the highest peak. The rays of light angled toward the village and turned the hills into rolling shadows.

The inhabitants of the area offered the appearance of a rural community and one of earlier times. They wore simple, almost primitive clothes, and their huts were basically collections of sticks, mud, and thatch.

The one oddity he noticed was that he could see no animals. There were no dogs running through the dirt roads or livestock grazing in the fields. He could only assume the villagers never domesticated any animals, or they decided to forgo such activities and instead focused entirely on cultivating plants in the fields and collecting food from the forest.

Nodav moved up to a single hut and touched the wall. It was sturdy, and the wood was rough to his fingers. He could smell the thatch, and the mud was growing warm from the rays of the morning sun. He looked carefully for small inconsistencies, gaps within the details, but he could find none.

The huts, the grounds, the very air he breathed; everything around him created a contradiction. Nodav knew he had not been transported out of Rul Saattan's sanctuary. The wizard still stood within the crater at Demonsheol's center. And though he remained in the demon breeding grounds, he was also standing near a village of some other realm.

Nodav immediately realized he wasn't experiencing an illusion. He had been placed within a moment of history from a different place and a different time. It was more than a memory. It was an imprint upon history, a truth that could not be denied. There were no fuzzy recollections or incomplete details. It wasn't magic which created the scene before him. It was a record of an actual event, and the significance of that moment in time carried every aspect back to Demonsheol.

The realization brought a level of dread to the wizard. He knew the kind of events which were drawn to the land of demons, and he understood which imprints of history would bring ecstasy to the demon lord. He wasn't about to experience a heart-warming scene of compassion or a blissful celebration of gratitude. There was something sinister lurking around the edges of the village, an evil waiting to be unleashed.

Nodav looked first to the trees of the forest, but in the early morning shadows, all he noticed was a light mist lingering near the ground. The lush green of the woods offered a sense of peace, even safety. The wizard believed the danger would not arrive from the west.

When he turned in the opposite direction, the bright sun shone in his face once more, and again, he had to shield his eyes. He looked beyond the center of the village. As he peered through spaces between the huts, he could see the outline of several more hills beyond the western edge of the small community.

He continued to struggle with the glare of the sun as he believed he saw movement within the distant shadows. He realized that such light would offer nearly as much cover as the darkness of night. The hills and the tall grass provided substantial obscurity, and the brilliance of the sun distorted any hope of a clear view.

Though still uncertain of what he faced, Nodav decided to cast a sight spell which would allow him to see the edges of the hills from a different perspective. He focused on a small portion of the magic within his core and limited the extent of his true power. A perfect circle of gray formed around his right hand as he molded the energy with strong fingers.

He cast the spell to the northeast and used a hilltop in the distance as the appropriate anchor for his incantation. When he gazed into the shade of his magic, he could finally see clearly across the eastern hills. He also began to feel waves of violence which pulsed within the slight breeze cascading through the huts with twisting ease.

There were thousands of men, far more than were needed for the apparent task at hand. The invaders did not have to move with stealth, nor did they need the advantage of the early morning sun, but they used both in order to make their attack as devastating as possible.

The villagers lacked the weapons and the experience to match the incoming onslaught. They were not even hunters. They were farmers and gatherers. They used the forest and the fields for their food and resources. They lacked swords, spears, bows, and even shields.

The villagers had managed to survive because they had been lucky. They avoided detection because they had found an isolated plot of land, but as their numbers grew, their fields spread. Eventually, they gained notice.

The barbarians had decided they wanted what the villagers had obtained over time. They wanted the food, the land, and the resources. They wanted everything. And they would take it all.

As the savages closed upon the eastern border, they could no longer avoid being spotted. When they heard the first terrified scream, they began their rampage. They sprinted past the outer storage huts and into the heart of the village. They threw their spears at any who dared to raise an axe, a club, or even a shovel in defense. They swarmed through the huts and killed without mercy.

Nodav understood he wasn't witnessing some grand battle. There was no epic fight, no heroic struggle. There was no brave stand, no display of courage. All hope was destroyed before the first life was lost. There was nothing which would offer any sense of justice. There was only fear and panic, anguish and death.

It was a slaughter, and the very air became intense with an evil even heavier than the despair. Just as he watched blood flow across the market grounds, Nodav sensed the terrible weight of vicious hostility turn into perverted pleasure. The invaders rushed through the village with an insatiable appetite to kill.

At that instant, Nodav understood why Rul Saattan could stand endlessly within his sanctuary, how he could call a crater his home. That pit of dust served as an unequal source of amusement for a twisted and evil mind. With but a hint of focus, the demon master could call upon any dreadful event which had ever occurred... at any time or at any place.

The wizard marveled at how a creature could manipulate such strands of history, but only for a moment. He did not overcome the barriers of Demonsheol to be awed by the power of the demon lord. He did not, not for one moment, accept that Rul Saattan was the expression of sheer evil. He came to purge such ignorance.

Rul Saattan was not some creature to tremble before or even idolize. There was nothing supernatural about his existence. The demon lord had lived within his realm for ages. If the beast did not adapt to his surroundings, learn to make the most of the energies which surged through Demonsheol, then he would have been displaced as its leader long ago.

Nodav also recalled Rul Saattan's stated desire. The demon lord wished to challenge not only the wizard, but also one of his underlings. The tragic scene unfolding before him was clearly the arena for that challenge. A demon would most likely use the carnage as a distraction in an attempt to win the contest.

Understanding that not only his mission but also his life was in jeopardy, the wizard moved away from the carnage occurring throughout the village. He looked first to the forest and recalled the initial sensation of security which hung about the trees. He considered moving to the edge of the woods, but decided against it. Seeking safety was not the path toward ultimate success.

He ran to the empty fields to the south. Once he reached a clear spot and stood completely alone, he fixed his attention back upon the mayhem of the slaughter. He believed the demon was prowling through the violence of the attack.

The open fields offered a slight advantage to the wizard. Though there was death and destruction swirling through the memories of some helpless village, the surrounding fields remained somewhat calm. The assault of the barbarians has been so swift, only a few of the villagers managed to escape the center of town. They rushed to the trees as opposed to the open ground in the south. Most of the victims had already been slashed or clubbed to death, and the few survivors were hoping to avoid detection by hiding in the shadows or within their huts.

None of the villagers had moved toward him, and Nodav believed that any demon would have to separate itself from the violence if it hoped to attack. The assault upon the villagers, though vicious, would only prove to distract the wizard if he allowed the cruelty and brutality to surprise him.

Such traits, however, offered no shock. He knew men were capable of monstrous actions, and they didn't need to be coaxed into such depravity by some manifestation of pure evil. Humans found their malice well enough on their own.

Nodav looked upon the butchery as nothing more than a historic painting that was given a level of movement, as if watching a number of still pictures cascade before him to give them life. Such considerations allowed him to detach himself from the savagery and remain aloof to the suffering. He knew he could do nothing to save the victims. The villagers had died long ago in a place which no longer existed.

Instead, Nodav focused his attention on discovering his foe before it attacked. The wizard knew many demons could alter their appearance or take on the characteristics of shadow. They could hide in rays of light as easily as they could lurk unnoticed in absolute darkness. The human wizard also understood that a demon considered for the position of taskmaster in Rul Saattan's service would be a creature of devastating power and dark cunning.

Rather than cast a defensive spell to shield himself from a potential assault, he reached out passively with his magic in hopes of separating substance from memory. Though the villagers and barbarians appeared as if they existed in physical space, the entire scene was still only an echo of a past event. The power within Demonsheol allowed Rul Saattan to feed on the savagery of previous transgressions, but there was still a boundary between the past and the present.

His own magic pulsed outward, not in a concise spell, but in a desire to separate the radiance around him into a proper perspective. The gray energy of his core allowed him to understand the workings of shadow and to perceive a great power within the deflection of light. A demon on the hunt could not conceal itself completely in the threads of a memory.

Depth and perception provided the only challenge. Nodav knew he was still physically standing within Rul's sanctuary. For all he knew, the demon lord might have been standing right next to him, but the wizard would not be able to see the beast. The light of Demonsheol was as much a slave to the past as were the forlorn spirits trapped in Rul's domain by their own misconceptions.

It was difficult for Nodav to perceive the boundaries of the crater or the actual swells in the dusty ground. If he spread his magic too thin, it might not detect his foe, but if he constrained the energy for greater power, the demon could remain just beyond his reach and avoid detection.

Deciding to be slightly more conservative than was his nature, he limited the pulses of magic in order to keep the strength of detection as potent as possible. Knowing that such restraint would allow his foe to remain hidden in the distance, Nodav took a calculated risk. For the same reason he did not flee into the woods, the wizard moved away from the relative safety of the open fields and back toward the mayhem within the village. He wanted to do more than just survive. He wanted to win.

Most of the killing had ceased. The first wave of violence was so drastic that the vast majority of villagers were slaughtered almost immediately. A number of savages moved with absolute determination to find potential victims hiding in dark corners or behind walls of thatch. It took perseverance to continue the hunt, but the brutes were determined to kill any individual within the borders of the village.

They allowed the few who had made it to the trees to flee. They did not give chase into the forest. They would permit a small number of survivors the right to pass on stories of the massacre. It would breed fear, and the barbarians knew that many battles were won before the first victim fell to the ground.

Still, there were hundreds of brutes roaming through the dirt paths, and they continued to make their violent presence known. The savagery which continued throughout the village was more of a destructive nature. Items which could not be plundered were wantonly destroyed. Once emptied of valuables, huts were set ablaze even if there were wounded villagers thrashing about on dirt floors. Fences were shattered and stone hearths were crushed.

Nodav continued to disregard the actions of the savages, just as they disregarded him. Even as he stalked carefully down a southern path, many of the brutes passed him without even a nod to his presence. The wizard did not ignore the barbarians completely. He watched them all for some hint of inconsistency. He knew the demon hunting him could not just walk up disguised as one of the savages—Nodav's magic would warn him of such treachery—but it was possible that the demon could be using its own magic to slightly alter the scene of carnage to create an opening.

As if to justify his concerns, Nodav heard a shuffling noise which seemed out of place. Within the din of screams and shouts, there was the expected clamor of rustling feet, crackling fires and splintering wood, but there was also a new sound in the distance.

For a moment, Nodav attributed it to a villager hoping to escape with an injured leg. A useless foot dragging across the dirt would make a similar noise, but the sound was inconsistent, even disturbing beyond the image of a wounded man limping desperately toward some futile hope of salvation.

The strange echo broke from the screams of agony. It danced around Nodav's magic and came toward him like a cat leaping from one burning hut to the next. When the fullness of its presence reached his ears, it dove deep down into the core of his soul, and it twisted Nodav's innards with the cries of anguish.

"You know I'm here," a slow moan of a voice called out from within the disturbing sound.

A trace of suspicion seemed to accompany the call. The demon might have acknowledged the wizard, but it remained cautious. Rather than unleash a full-fledged assault, it remained guarded against a counter attack. As it continued to pour its own waves of desperation through the images filling Rul's crater, it probed right into Nodav's consciousness.

"I can hear your magic," the demon revealed. "You have set an alarm. I can't get close to you without you sensing me, but does that really matter?"

Nodav considered raising a shield of magic. He knew there were demons which could cast spells from a great distance, or spit poison and hurl acid. The possibilities were nearly endless.

To defend against them all, his shield would have to be constructed to protect against both magical and physical assaults of various types. The drain would be considerable. He had vast reservoirs of magic at his core and he could tap into the heavy current of shadow energy within Demonsheol, but once again, he considered his ultimate goal.

He did not enter the demon breeding grounds simply to survive an attack. Individuals such as Ryson Acumen had already accomplished as much. He had to prove what the delver never could... that Rul Saattan and his horde of demons were powerful but not part of some incomprehensible supernatural force.

To separate myth from reality, he had grander plans, but he needed something from Demonsheol. To get it, he had to show Rul Saattan he was worth the beast's self-inflated attention.

"If you hope to attack me from a safe distance, you better be more careful," Nodav warned, hoping to provoke his foe.

"You think I will reveal myself by speaking to you?" the demon questioned.

"To a degree. I also know demons enjoy using diversions. I know I can't judge your position based on the direction of your voice."

"Ha. You have no idea what I can do with my voice."

Another noise erupted in the distance. A harsh rattling sound raged outward like a thousand bones being shaken in a metal bin.

"More distractions?" Nodav called out.

"Hardly," the voice moaned.

Nodav quickly realized the sound was a magical attack, one that was meant to render him confused and unsure of himself. He could feel it sapping his confidence, creating a wave of uncertainty he could not brush aside. The noise didn't simply draw out his emotions; it pulsed with an invading force as it entered his ears.

The village which had appeared within Demonsheol suddenly wavered in and out of his sight. It began to flicker, and the substance it once held turned into an almost liquid dream. As it faded, he did not see the dusty grounds of Demonsheol take its place. Instead, he envisioned a twisted barrage of shapes and colors.

"Are you distracted, or is it something else?" the voice mocked in a continuous groan. "A distraction would make you turn away, look in a different direction. You seem to be far more than distracted."

Nodav could not argue. He could barely remain standing. His surroundings swirled before him, but it had nothing to do with his vision. It was the rattling noise which utterly destroyed his senses.

"Then why don't you show yourself?" the wizard struggled to ask, hoping the appearance of the demon might give him a point of focus.

The creature did not accept the challenge. The clatter continued, and a new sound added to the wizard's misery. An irritating buzz rushed down from above, as if a swarm of angry bees had decided to attack. The hum did not diminish the sound of rattling bones, nor did it stop the assault on his senses.

Unfortunately, it added to it. His skin began to tingle harshly. It was far more than a minor itch or the prick of several needle heads. It felt like thousands of tiny insects crawling around his entire body, stinging and biting him over and over again.

"I was tasked with defeating you," the moaning voice revealed. "You showed a level of care by running to the fields. I admit I was surprised. I thought you would head to the trees. I had surprises waiting for you there, mysterious sounds which would have led you down one dreadful path after another. Shame."

Nodav fought relentlessly to regain a sense of balance and control. He covered his ears with his hands, but the assaulting noises penetrated his defenses. The sounds were both magical and devious in nature and could not be blocked by simple measures.

With the dreadful noises actually increasing in volume despite his actions, the wizard realized the attack was beyond any ordinary spell. The sounds sent to tear at his senses were an extension of demonic venom. They held to a bitter substance of hate and poison, and their potency revealed the source of their origin.

A desoni, Nodav considered in thought only.

The wizard had studied the nature of demons long before entering Demonsheol. He had investigated the myths and legends in so many forms. He had done so even before the magic had returned to Uton. He attempted to explain their existence, and their powers, in terms of natural development. He never doubted the existence of other realms. He viewed them as the logical aspects of complex formations and the progression of survival consistent with the understanding of continual development.

When he realized he faced a desoni, he knew why Rul Saattan was considering such a demon to take the role of primeval. A desoni was one of the few demons which had devised the means to spread its influence into other realms without risking its place within the demon breeding grounds.

Demons could leave Demonsheol, but it required substantial magic and a deliberate choice. If such a choice was made, returning to their home offered severe consequences. Such restrictions kept most demons from seeking victims in other lands, but certain beasts developed the ability to reach into far off realms without actually leaving their homeland.

A desoni was a monster of sound and horror, and such creatures learned that their assaults were not limited to the boundaries of Demonsheol. Every desoni could remain within its own territory but still send waves of persuasion into other realms through the passages of sound.

The demonic noises were not blocked by the barriers which surrounded Rul's domain. Like echoes in a canyon, they could ride the strands of history back to other realms across existence. Just as past transgressions traveled to the demon breeding grounds, desoni influence could rush backward over the same paths.

If there was ever an unexplained sound, a crunching outburst or an agonized screech that left the poor occupants of some lonely place cringing with uncertainty, it was most likely the work of a desoni. If there was a whisper in the dark or an encouragement to make the unwise choice, such persuasion normally came from an observant desoni watching from Demonsheol. And if there was an unsettling groan or a disturbing murmur which could not be explained, it was almost certainly the work of a desoni hoping to torment or confuse a lonesome traveler into making a hasty decision of terrible consequence.

Placing the identity of his foe in context with Rul Saattan's intentions, Nodav quickly devised a defensive strategy. He knew that his own shadow magic would be mostly ineffective against the demonic noises. The venomous sounds coming from the desoni would bypass his attempts to diminish their clarity.

He would also fail in any attempt to redirect or block them out completely. He knew the desoni could utilize the same threads of history which created the scene of carnage. The massacre of the villagers which had become the field of battle would amplify the poisonous noises. He understood all too well that shadow spells would not alter the waves of history to offset the attack.

It was that understanding which led to the wizard's initial hope of recovery. Though he could not directly defend against the desoni's poisonous assault, Nodav could divert the attack through the echoes of history which had become the vessel for the onslaught. If he directed his magic on the imagery which surrounded him, it might be possible to create a buffer of silence around him.

The maddening noises prevented him from focusing on the village with either his sight or his hearing, but the ground of Demonsheol could guide him with its own energy. Rather than fight the disorientation which tried to claim him, Nodav allowed his knees to buckle, and he fell to the ground. He would be vulnerable for a few moments, but the risk was necessary.

He rolled onto his back and threw his arms down to his sides, pressing all of his body hard against the surface of Demonsheol. He placed all of his focus on what he could feel through his limbs and his back, and he allowed the pulses of history which surrounded him to race across his prone body. Taking hold of the sensations, he took a firm grasp of the threads of the past with his own gray energy. The village reappeared before him, not through the sight of his eyes, but by an image cast in his mind by the shadows of his magic.

He isolated his exact position within the echo of the village and forced himself deeper into the ground, ultimately burying himself in the dust of Rul Saattan's crater. Once fully below the surface, he had succeeded in separating himself from the past images. He was no longer a part of that particular slice of history. Once he dropped deep enough, the onslaught from the desoni ceased.

Unfortunately, Nodav was also buried deep in the muck of Demonsheol, pressed downward by the shadows of his own magic. He could not survive for long under such conditions and his foe would certainly attempt to take advantage of his vulnerable position. But though he was prone, he was not helpless.

When he cast his next spell, he did not restrain his power. He unleashed it all in one massive discharge. Though the shadows of his gray magic could not block the fury of the desoni, there was another energy within him which was far more powerful. The perfect ring of shadow combined with a determined force of undefined character. The intertwined forces exploded out of the ground, and they sought out his demonic challenger.

A dark gray spear formed in the air, and it sailed through the village scene, riding on the waves of the desoni's own magic. It let the rattling sound of bones lead it directly to its ultimate target. The spear cut right through the center of the desoni, leaving a hole in the monster's chest that was the exact size of Nodav's fist.

The demon fell to the ground and the waves of sound ended abruptly. The challenge was over.

Chapter 3

With the desoni destroyed, Nodav used his shadow magic to break through the surface of the dusty crater and rise to his feet. He looked across the bleak pit. The scene of the village had disappeared, removed by the demon master for it was no longer needed.

Nodav had won the challenge, but he wondered if it was enough to gain Rul's support. The demon master never promised to reward the wizard for any victory, and the desoni's destruction was extremely sudden. The wizard knew the spell he used to annihilate his opponent was extremely powerful, but he doubted it would be enough to impress the lord of all demons. As he looked toward Rul Saattan, Nodav believed he might have been hasty with his magic.

Rul eyed the wizard with suspicion. The conflict raised certain questions, but they would have to wait. The demon lord needed to attend to the lifeless demon.

Rul stalked over to the fallen monster. He showed no sympathy as he kicked the corpse over onto its back. He examined the gaping wound at the center of the desoni's chest.

Again, the monstrous beast looked toward the human wizard. He sniffed the air, stared through the space between them, and then shook his head. With one swift swipe of his long powerful arm, he took hold of the dead desoni and raised the corpse high up over his head. He opened his jaws wide as he forced the lifeless body deep into his mouth. Chewing like a ravenous lion, Rul gobbled up the remnants of the demon and then moved back to the center of his pit.

Rul became still. He said nothing as he stared into the empty grayness in the distance. He did not consider the loss of the demon a setback. In truth, he gave very little thought to the desoni. Other considerations plagued him, and he wondered what forces might be plotting against him.

Nodav waited quietly for a moment, but the demon lord appeared to ignore him. After a long and uncomfortable silence, the wizard decided to speak up.

"Are you ready to hear my request?"

The demon lord sneered as he finally turned his attention back toward the wizard. His eyes blazed with obvious rage, and instead of answering the wizard's question, Rul asked one of his own.

"What are you?" Rul Saattan demanded.

"I told you who I am. My name is Nodav."

"I asked *what* you are, not *who* you are."

The wizard was slightly taken aback. He did not expect, or even fully understand the necessity for such a question. He replied with what he believed was the obvious response.

"I'm just a man."

"No, that isn't possible. Is this a trap?"

Nodav could not understand Rul's reaction. The demon lord looked concerned, not necessarily with Nodav himself, but with what he might represent.

"I've made no attempt to deceive you or set any trap," the wizard responded with confidence.

"Are you an angel?" the demon lord challenged.

"Excuse me?"

"An angel... a tool to test me?"

"Test you?"

"To see how far I might be willing to go. The time for the ultimate battle is not yet at hand, but it would make sense to probe my willingness to step beyond the set borders. I have always been willing to take an alternative path, especially if it leads to greater influence. The power that opposes me understands that. An angel would be the perfect instrument to send into my domain to test my interest in the barriers which hold me here."

"That's absurd."

Rul took a menacing step towards the wizard but also showed a surprising level of restraint, almost as if the beast feared what the wizard might do.

"Absurd?" the demon lord questioned, his hostility growing. "I know my realm, and I know my demons. The power you wield is beyond that of any human wizard, but it would be reasonable to expect such strength from an angel, especially an angel given the authority to pass through the barriers and enter my realm."

"Authority? I didn't ask anyone's permission. I came here on my own."

"Angels do not act on their own," Rul insisted.

"How could I possibly be an angel? Even if I was something beyond a man, wouldn't you sense something like that?"

"I can see your past, but I know that there are powers which can hide history, even misrepresent it. It is possible your true history has been cloaked or altered."

"Why would I go to all that trouble? I came here to make a request."

"Don't tell me about requests! I know them well. They can be used as temptations, and that is an influence which can be used with great effectiveness. The barriers around Demonsheol may have been restored, but their temporary removal created opportunities for both sides to extend a greater influence. You may be here to see how far I might press an advantage before the ultimate conflict arises."

"Ultimate conflict?"

"The final battle to determine who will rule; the enslavement of benevolence or the destruction of evil."

Nodav shook his head. The demon lord's assumptions were beyond preposterous. They were insulting.

"You think I care about some imaginary conflict?" the tall wizard questioned. "There are no forces for good or powers of evil. There are only individuals attempting to meet desires... whether they are power, wealth, influence, or anything else."

"Then why would you come here, if not to test me?"

"I already told you what I intend to do, and no, I'm not here to test you. I want to disprove the legends and myths surrounding you. When I succeed in that, it will also prove that these angels—these so-called tools of a higher power—are nothing more than spirits who have learned to extend their influence beyond a spiritual realm. There are no such things as angels! Like I said, they're just spirits. There is nothing mystical about their existence, just as there's nothing supernatural about my appearance here. And I have nothing to do with any ridiculous prophecy about a final war between good and evil."

"No?! Then what of the defeat of the desoni? Even a wizard capable of casting shadow magic in a perfect circle would not have been able to do what you have accomplished here."

Nodav frowned. Rul was correct. It was not his shadow magic which overwhelmed the desoni. It was an energy far more powerful, a basis in magic which Rul would understand. Nodav had hoped to conceal the full scope of his magical essence. He worried the demon lord might view him as too much of a threat. Unfortunately, he was no longer certain he could hide the truth, and he decided to expose everything.

"Though I didn't want to deceive you, I also didn't want to reveal the full extent of my power—not here and especially not to you."

"Then you admit you are hiding something."

"Only to a degree. You could see it if you wanted to, but based on your own history, I doubt it will please you."

"What do you know of my history? If you are only a human, your existence is but an insignificant fraction of my past."

"True, you've been in existence far longer than me, but I've seen some of your past in the shadows reflected around this place. I have also inspected regions of Uton where you were able to spread your influence for a short period of time."

"Do not avoid the question!"

"I'm not, but in order for me to explain my concerns, you must admit you're not what you once were."

"I have always been the master of demons."

"That's true, but you were once Reiculf, not Rul Saattan. It was only when you merged with the human sorcerer Ansas and the slink ghouls Baannat that you transformed into your current state of existence."

"My transformation allowed for the breaking of the barriers."

"But the barriers have returned, and you can't deny that you are no longer what you once were."

"What does that have to do with you?" Rul demanded.

"When you were Reiculf, your power was nearly incalculable. You could cast spells in three perfect circles of colorless magic. In your current form, no one is sure what the limits of your capabilities might be."

"Let them guess."

"I don't wish to guess, but I know Ansas cast in a perfect circle of pure black magic, and Baannat was able to control two rings of white energy."

"You still have not answered my question! What does any of this have to do with you and the secrets you hope to keep from me?"

"It's not a secret. I just didn't wish to reveal something which might jeopardize my request."

"Your failure to answer my question is jeopardizing your existence."

Nodav realized he needed to reveal the full extent of his capabilities.

"I am able to cast in more than one ring of gray magic," the wizard finally admitted.

"I have watched you cast your spells, both here and from your past. I only see one circle of power."

"That's probably because that's all you wish to see, even when I used all my magic."

"I do not blind myself out of fear."

"Then look back into the past and see beyond the single gray circle. Sense the magic as Reiculf would have been able to cast it."

Rul Saattan did just that. He took another look deep into the shadows surrounding the wizard. For a brief moment, he also took hold of his own past. He looked at his own shadow and recalled what it was like to be the original demon lord. He saw the echoes of his history and he compared them to the shards of Nodav's past. He almost could not believe what he witnessed, but the history of both Reiculf and the human wizard were undeniable.

"How did you reach this level?" the demon master sneered.

"You can see it now?"

"It is beyond seeing. Your second ring is colorless. You have managed to define your magic without a hue, beyond the pale of white magic and deeper than the fullness of pure ebony energy."

"Reiculf once cast in three colorless circles. You should know how it's done."

"Reiculf was not a human. *I was not a human!*"

"Aren't you part human now? You merged with the sorcerer Ansas. He was human."

"I took from the sorcerer what I wanted... what I needed. I did not hold to his humanity."

"Is that really the case? Even when I look at you, I see the echoes of a man in your face, just as I see the shadow of a slink ghoul."

"This is not about me!" Rul Saattan roared in fury. "Colorless magic should be beyond you!"

"Why? Because it's reserved for some majestic being beyond my comprehension... some god?"

"Exactly. You are mortal."

"The magic doesn't seem to care."

"That is no explanation."

"That's the only explanation I have for you. You can see it in my past."

"I see no explanation within your history."

"Because you don't want to see it. You don't want to accept what I see as the truth. If I can cast in a colorless ring of perfection, then there is little which separates a so-called demon lord from an ordinary human."

"I am done listening to excuses. Tell me what I wish to know or we will see if your magic can withstand mine."

Nodav had no intention of engaging the demon lord in such a conflict. That was not the battle he wished to fight. He would probably lose and such an outcome would only serve to heighten the legends around Rul Saattan. He continued to believe that defeating Ryson Acumen was the key to destroying the myths.

The wizard did his best to make it clear how he obtained his power.

"It was the gray magic that was the key, that and my own natural talents. The circle of shadow came easily to me. Almost immediately after the magic returned to Uton, I was able to cast concise spells utilizing the full breadth of energy which defied time and space. I explored the energy. The shadows unveiled certain things to me, especially regarding magic. To a degree, I could see into the past of my land, just as you can see into the past of this realm."

"I see the past of every realm!"

"Then consider the past of Uton."

"I have. No human was ever able to cast in a colorless circle."

"That's true, but long ago—before Ingar's sphere captured the magic of my land—there were wizards who were able to cast in circles of every other hue. If I focused on following the shadows of their most powerful spells, I was able to watch these wizards and sorcerers in the images of my own magic. I looked into their cores, just as you can look into mine. I learned how they manipulated their magic, the influence of every hue, and I perfected them all."

"That would have allowed you to cast in white."

"That's how my second ring first appeared. I kept the grayness of the first circle. When I engaged the past and added a new ring, it was pure white, but I realized it could be more."

"How did you turn a white ring into a colorless circle?"

"I didn't. It wasn't a direct alteration from white to clear power. It took several steps. First, I attempted to darken the colors which I had perfected, but that didn't bring me to where I needed to be. It only sharpened my focus on each hue. After that, I tried to blend all the colors together to treat them as one as opposed to separate hues. That turned my white magic into pure ebony energy."

"So you cast in gray and black. That is almost the same as casting in gray and white. It's only the opposite end of the spectrum."

"And that's what brought me to where I am now. I combined the white ring with the black ring."

"That would have brought you back to gray. Two rings of shadow would be understandable."

"I already understood the magic of shadow. It was part of my consciousness from the beginning. I didn't want to replicate it. That would have only doubled my power. That wasn't enough for me. I wanted to expand my ability by a far greater degree."

"Then stop offering me useless details. How did you reach a colorless ring?!"

"By letting the black and white energy come together so they would strengthen each other as opposed to losing their inherent elements. Mixing the two creates gray, that's true, but highlighting them both at the same time overwhelms everything. They do not cancel each other out. They encompass infinity."

"You have no concept of infinity."

"Apparently I have enough of an idea to cast in a circle of colorless magic."

Rul considered the human before him. He could not deny the power within the wizard's magic, though he remained unsure of how an ordinary individual arrived at such skill. The wizard's explanation held merit, but only to a degree. A true understanding of infinity had to be beyond any human. It was not possible for a mortal to grasp such a notion in its entirety. It would be like stretching a single drop of rain into a vast sea. Just as there were barriers surrounding Demonsheol, there were boundaries for mortal comprehension.

And yet, a human undeniably capable of casting in colorless magic stood before him and hoped to bring destruction to one of the demon lord's enemies. Rul might not have agreed with Nodav's motivation, but results often overshadowed reasons. For the moment, the demon master put aside his uncertainties and focused on potential opportunities.

"So you wish to destroy the delver?" Rul sought to confirm, but he also required a complete explanation. He understood humans and their usual motivations.

"That's my intention," Nodav replied.

"What has he done to you? I see nothing in your past which indicates a need for revenge."

"You still don't understand? I find that hard to believe."

"I understand all too well. Humans often make excuses. They say one thing but really mean another. I can always see the difference, but with you, I need to be careful."

"You're admitting you need to show care around a human?"

Rul growled.

"I've warned you before to show respect, wizard. I am not prone to patience."

"Then why do you need to be careful with me?"

"It is not you who concerns me. It is the colorless magic."

"But that comes from me."

"So you say."

"You think it comes from some place else? You still think I'm a tool for some omnipotent force? That's ridiculous."

Rul snarled again, but decided not to debate the issue further.

"If it comes from you, then you must understand its potential. Colorless magic cast in a perfect circle could easily distort or hide the past. If you don't admit to that, then I know you don't comprehend the power at your disposal."

Nodav realized that failing to make such an admission might strengthen the demon master's belief that the colorless magic within him was actually from another source. That was exactly the kind of myth he needed to dispel.

"You're right. I could distort the echoes of my history. I can't change the actual past, but I can hide it, or alter its perspective."

"Then answer my questions. Despite your colorless magic, I will know if you lie to me, especially here in my domain. Tell me what the delver has done to you. Why is it you seek revenge?"

Nodav looked directly into the fiery eyes of the beast.

"I'm not looking for revenge. The only thing the delver has done to me is anger me. He has allowed his actions to justify absurd beliefs. If he would tell the full story, people would know the truth. Instead, he's helped strengthen these ridiculous ideas that lead to more myths... more wasted worship on something which doesn't deserve it."

"But you claim the delver has beaten me. He would gladly admit to as much."

"He never takes the credit for what he's done. It's almost as if he takes pride in his humility. I'd almost give him credit for that, but when he disguises the truth and allows other considerations to take precedence, he damages all of humanity. That needs to be stopped. He even allows some ridiculous cliff behemoth to call him blessed. And then there's that sword of his."

"The sword? What about it?"

"The elves forged it with magic, called it the Sword of Decree. It's not some link to a higher power."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Part of the sword's enchantment gives the holder enlightenment. On more than one occasion, it has revealed what needed to be done. The weak minded believe it's some kind of holy item. It's not. It's the enchantment that gives the blade its power. It's based on magic, not some omnipotent force."

"The magical powers within the sword blossomed in the hands of the delver. Don't you know that?"

"Yes, I do," the wizard admitted.

"Then it would seem as if the delver is indeed something special, perhaps the cliff behemoth is right."

"No, he's not! There's no blessing. There's only the magical energy. If the enchantment became altered, it was because it reacted differently with the magic that's inherent within all delvers."

"But you can't explain it, can you?"

"There are a lot of things I can't explain, that doesn't mean it's some blessing from Godson. The enchantment is no different than the spells I cast."

"So this is about envy and arrogance," Rul responded with a gleeful snarl.

"No! This is about the truth," Nodav answered back with his own defiance.

"The truth is you don't like the fact that Ryson Acumen has gained both notoriety and success. Even the sword he carries gives him a degree of prominence."

"I don't care about that. The delver is entitled to any respect and distinction due his achievements. That's the problem. He allows that praise to go where it should not be placed."

"So you care about what others think. You're trying to change their minds about what you call myths. Why?"

"Because it's wasted energy. It's directionless. It's worshipping an empty closet instead of working toward a more productive goal."

"And you think you can destroy what you consider myths by defeating the delver?"

"Not just defeating him. I'm going to prove that there's nothing special about him, that he's not blessed. When that's revealed, everyone who thinks there's some benevolent force capable of issuing such a blessing will have to face the truth. Then it comes back to you. They'll realize that you might be a powerful creature, even one with twisted desires, but you're not the manifestation of evil. They'll have to accept you for what you are, a beast capable of many things but also one who was defeated by an ordinary delver."

Surprisingly, Rul began to laugh, not out of scorn, but out of sheer delight. The demon lord looked down upon the wizard and realized he had been given a gift. A human capable of casting in colorless magic wanted exactly what he himself wanted, the destruction of Ryson Acumen.

The beast also knew that the ruin of the delver would not accomplish what Nodav hoped. It would not bring the kind of enlightenment the wizard sought. It would do the reverse. It would bring more followers to the demon lord. All he had to do was to ensure Nodav's success.

"Then tell me what it is you require," Rul said through several more snorts of laughter. "You said you had a request of me. What is it you want?"

"There's a spirit I need."

"You need the help of a spirit? You cast in colorless magic. Shouldn't that be enough?"

"Was it enough for you?"

The question annoyed the demon lord enough to end his laughter.

"No, it was not, but I remain convinced it was not the delver who defeated me. You think otherwise. If the delver is nothing special, why do you need a spirit?"

"Ryson Acumen may not be blessed by some other power, but he's still a delver, and he has powerful allies as well. The spirit I have in mind can help offset those advantages."

"Explain."

"The delver lives in a town called Burbon. This town is protected by a spirit warrior."

"I am aware of the ghost. It is the spirit of Sy Fenden."

"I've spent a great deal of time studying the town," Nodav admitted. "I have avoided entering it in order to escape attention, but I have spoken with merchants and visitors who have witnessed interesting events. I've heard that the spirit of Sy Fenden not only protects the town, but he can also enter Demonsheol. Is that true?"

"You don't know?" Rul mocked the wizard, as if to prove certain information could be hidden from the powerful, even from a human capable of casting in colorless magic.

"If you want me to defeat Ryson Acumen, I need to confirm these details," Nodav replied.

"Yes, it's true. The spirit is restrained to his pathetic village in Uton. He cannot stray beyond its borders, but the delver managed to mix part of the spirit's essence with dirt from Burbon. He brought that dirt here and spread it across my domain. The spirit of Sy Fenden can enter my realm at will."

"Even with the new barriers?"

"He is bound to the people and the town he protects. Part of that town now resides in Demonsheol. The barriers cannot stop him from entering my realm or from returning to Burbon."

"And that is exactly why I need the spirit I desire. You've just admitted that the ghost of Sy Fenden has certain abilities. This warrior spirit can protect the delver. I need something of equal power to offset such an advantage."

"You wish to pit spiritual influence against spiritual influence? Good versus evil. Isn't that the very concept you hope to disprove?"

"No. As I said before, I do not deny the existence of consciousness beyond a mortal body. That doesn't mean there is some great force which binds those spirits together, or that can judge them. The spirit is a force of energy, nothing more and nothing less. The energy of Sy Fenden protects the delver, not some blessing."

"So you hope to defeat the delver by removing his allies? That would indicate you attribute all of the delver's past successes to his friends. You would be underestimating the delver's own talents."

"No, I'm not making that mistake. I have questioned many individuals—men, dwarves, elves, even goblins—and I have learned a great deal about the delver and his abilities."

"Then why do you appear more concerned with his allies?"

"Because I have learned that those who try to outrun the delver, match his speed, or contain him always lose. His enemies have tried to increase their own speed or decrease the delver's. They tend to turn any conflict into a race, a race that the delver always wins. That's why people are misguided into thinking he is blessed."

"Whether he is blessed or not, he is still a delver and he will rely on his skills."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. If you try to be patient with him, hoping he will tire, his endurance will beat you. If you try to make him outrun himself, hoping he will become careless, his senses will save him. If you try to slow him down or frustrate him,

his quickness will outmaneuver you. It's not just speed which makes him dangerous. It's how he uses it with his other skills."

"And what do you propose?"

"Take away his advantages. I can't offset all of his skills, but I can remove the aid he gets from others, and from his surroundings. It's not about whether he can be slowed, or tired, or trapped. It's about how much room he has to run."

"Others have tried to cut him off, to limit his paths. That has never worked."

"Because they have always allowed his allies to open new paths for him. Consider his home. It's a sanctuary. It's protected by a warrior spirit. The delver knows that. All he has to do is reach Burbon and he's safe. Having that sanctuary offers him a great deal of comfort."

"He has faced adversity away from his home, even away from Uton. As you pointed out, he has come to Demonsheol and he has survived."

"Did he come alone?"

"There were times he faced me with no one else around."

"That's not what I meant. He didn't face you completely alone. It would be impossible. He's not a magic caster. He doesn't have the ability to enter your realm without some spell. Someone helped him get here, and he knew he always had a way to leave. What would happen to him if he was cut off from a spell caster?"

"I believe he would still find a way."

"That's because you want to believe he's blessed, that he's something more than a delver. You think he's being helped by a power that opposes you... that opposes evil. It gives you an excuse as to why he's beaten you. It keeps the myth alive."

"And you honestly believe that if you get him alone—that if you face him on neutral ground and remove the other advantages you think he has—that you can defeat him?"

"I'm certain of it."

Rul Saattan laughed again, another deep and sinister laugh.

"So you hope to gain an advantage by allying yourself with me."

"I do not need *you* as an ally. I need an entity capable of offsetting the spiritual influence of Sy Fenden. There is one I have in mind; one which I'm certain is in your realm. I need you to release him to me."

"A dark soul?"

"Call him what you will, but he is a spirit that must be trapped in this place."

"You have found this spirit here?"

"No. I didn't explore your realm. I decided to come to you directly."

"Then how do you know this soul is here?"

"Because of what he accomplished in Uton. He was not a serp, but he had the ability to overcome the willpower of several serps. At first, he defied them, but the serps saw the unique abilities of this creature. They asked him to join their council. He did, and together they brought turmoil to Uton. Though they were ultimately defeated—again by Ryson Acumen and his allies—they still managed to offset the power of a wizard capable of casting spells in two circles of pure white magic."

"You speak of the human wizard called Enin."

"Yes, another ally of the delver, another reason Ryson Acumen tends to defy the odds. It helps when you work with a wizard of such power."

"Enin has lost his magic."

"He lost his core, but not his skill or his knowledge. Recently, Enin defeated a horde of your demons in Dark Spruce Forest by channeling the combined energy of wolves. That occurred after his core had been removed. That's not lost magic."

"And what else is there to know about the soul you want me to turn over to you? Working with serps would not necessarily cause a spirit to become trapped in Demonsheol."

"That may be true, but the council of serps took great risks, one in particular which linked them all to Demonsheol. In order to achieve their lofty objectives, they decided to take control of demons. They used their combined will to force dierhunes to do their bidding. The serps were ultimately sent to Demonsheol for taking such liberties. I believe the spirit I need would have faced the same fate."

"I know of the soul you speak. He is indeed in my realm. I have the power to place him in your care. He will be forced to follow your commands, but you will be paying a price."

"And what price is that?"

"Just as this spirit trapped himself in this realm by calling on demons, you are placing yourself in the same jeopardy by aligning yourself with a spirit caught in my domain. Maintain that link and you will not be able to break the bond which will form between you and Demonsheol."

"I'm not worried about that. That's exactly the kind of thinking I'm going to destroy."

Rul Saattan saw no reason not to honor Nodav's request. If the wizard could utilize the talents of the malevolent soul with his own colorless magic, he might be able to do more than destroy what Nodav called myths. The wizard might actually kill Ryson Acumen. If not, Rul would collect the wizard's soul. The demon lord believed he would win in either case.

"Then I will give you control over that spirit and allow you both to return to Uton."

Chapter 4

"You're going to have to spend more time practicing with your sword," the elf advised, "and with your battle blades. You need to work on your balance as well."

"Why?" Ryson Acumen asked. "I really didn't have to practice that much in the past."

"You didn't have that injury in the past," Holli Brances reminded the delver.

Ryson looked at the upper portion of his left arm. His sleeve covered the abnormality from most people's view, but his keen eyesight could pick out the deformities within the folds of the cloth.

He lost a considerable amount of muscle and flesh from the bite of a demon. The wound had been healed hastily in battle, and much of the damage could not be reversed. Ryson found that the injury slowed his movements and created noticeable weaknesses. He compensated as best he could, but he could not deny the diminishment of his skills.

"It doesn't matter how much I practice. My arm's never going to get back to the way it was," the delver admitted. "The damage is permanent. It's always going to be weaker... and slower."

"That is true, but you have to make allowances for that."

"I have."

"Not in the proper way," Holli advised. "You are overcompensating by placing far too much emphasis on your right side."

"I have to in order to keep my balance."

"That is the mistake you are making, and that is what we have to correct. You need to become accustomed to what your left arm has become as opposed to simply making your right side work harder."

"I don't understand. I adjusted my movements because *I am* growing accustomed to my injury. If I didn't, I would be a lot slower. I know I lost some speed, but I thought it was minor."

"It is... at the moment. But as you place more and more reliance on your right side to make up for the difference, you will continue to offset the balance. It will be a constant struggle and create the need for continuous adjustment."

"You think I'm eventually going to become totally dependent on my right side?"

"Not totally, but the dominance will grow with each day. I doubt your left arm will ever become completely useless to you, but it will continue to weaken."

"There's not much I can do to strengthen it. Most of the muscle is gone. I've talked to a few healers. There's nothing that can be done at this point."

"You can do what I suggest. Know the absolute limits of what that arm can do, and continue to press those limits. You may not be able to restore it to its previous state, but if you do not become more confident in what it can do, your arm will only get substantially worse."

"So that's why you wanted to come out here today," Ryson acknowledged. "I thought you were going to come with me on a scout, maybe even suggest we go deep in the forest, check on your old elf camp."

"That was never my intention. I must not interfere in the activities of the Dark Spruce camp, especially now."

"Why's that?"

"You know why. The dormant season is over. The elves have much to do. They must restock their food supplies, determine the number of goblins returning from the south, and check on river rogues rising from their long slumber. They may even decide to move their camp."

"You're right. I assume they are busy, and they might even ask for your opinion on what to do."

"And I must not allow for that. They must rely on their council and the camp elder. I would be a distraction."

"I suppose the elves have enough problems."

"They do, and so I did not come out here to accompany you into the forest. You and I have spent too much time inside the town and not enough time honing our skills. I needed some time out in the open, and you need to grow far more comfortable dealing with the consequences of that injury."

"So what's the best way to keep my arm from growing weaker?"

"First, you need to understand how you have already compensated for the injury. You cannot undo what is already done unless you recognize the deed itself."

Holli surveyed their surroundings. They stood in the wide clearing just outside the wall which surrounded the town of Bourbon. They were several paces from the western gate, but still a good distance from the edge of Dark Spruce Forest. There was a great deal of room to maneuver and there was no one else around.

It was past the heart of the early planting season. There was more daylight, but still not as much as they would receive during the season of the high sun. The air was warm, but the ground was still somewhat soft and damp. Cool breezes continued to sweep in periodically from the north to remind everyone that a few cold damp days were still in the offering.

There was little reason for the citizens of Bourbon to enter the forest. There was still a sufficient supply of firewood leftover from the dormant season. Farmers with fields to the north and east had already prepared their lands, and nearly all had completed the first planting of the season. If there were any travelers, they were headed either toward the much larger city of Connel or the town of Pinesway.

Pinesway had become the popular destination for merchants, especially since they could use the tunnels built by the dwarves to bypass the forest. Selling food to the dwarves of Dunop was even more profitable than bringing goods to the coast. Pinesway was the entrance point to those tunnels, so merchants passing through Bourbon saw no reason to head west into Dark Spruce.

With only guards at the western gate and a few soldiers standing upon one of Bourbon's nearby watchtowers, Holli decided it was safe to utilize her bow. She removed three arrows from her quiver, but before nocking any against her bowstring, she called out to Ryson.

"Draw both of your war swords."

Ryson followed her instructions and pulled both blades free from the sheaths at his hips. The weapons were light, the blades curved and not nearly as long as the Sword of Decree which remained sheathed across his back.

"Move to the edge of the forest," Holli continued. "Place yourself in front of that large maple tree, the one just to the left of the path leading into the woods."

"Got it," the delver declared as he moved into position.

"I'm going to fire three arrows at the trunk of that tree," Holli declared. "You need to deflect each one."

"But how do you want me to use my left..."

Before Ryson could finish, the elf guard fired her three arrows in quick succession. Ryson stepped deftly to his right, turning his right shoulder toward the incoming arrows. He used both swords to deflect the arrows in midair by slicing them in half at the center of their shafts.

The arrows shattered in flight and not one made it to the tree, but Holli pointed out the obvious movements of the delver.

"You moved to your right."

"But I used both hands."

"Not equally. Two of the three arrows were deflected by the blade in your right hand. You used your left hand only once."

"That really doesn't mean much. I was going to ask you how you wanted me to use my swords. You didn't give me a chance."

"I wanted to see what you would do instinctively. I wanted you to see the same thing. You favored your right hand."

"I still don't know if that matters in this case. I might have done the same thing even before my arm was injured."

"You never favored one side over another."

"But there were three arrows. One arm was going to knock out an additional arrow. This time, it was my right arm. It could have just as easily been my left."

Holli shook her head.

"It should have been your left," the elf guard revealed. "I did not fire directly at the center of the tree behind you. I fired the arrows slightly toward your left side. In truth, you should have moved more to your left to compensate. Instead, you moved to your right and attacked the arrows as they passed as opposed to deflecting them head on."

Ryson recalled his movements and realized the elf was right. He didn't even think about it at the time. He tried to justify his actions.

"It was a defensive move. It was safer to move out of the arrows' path."

"You are right, and for an elf guard, it was the proper maneuver, but you are not an elf guard. When have you ever been more concerned with safety than speed? Speed has always been your best defense. Your movements placed you out of harm's way, but they also created a slower response."

"You think that was slow?"

"I have seen what you were capable of before the demon bite. Your movements may not be slow compared to a human, or even to an elf, but they do not measure up to what you were able to do in the past."

"But we've been through that. I'm never going to be as fast as I once was."

"I understand, but why are you putting thoughts of your injury over your skills? You still have the leg speed of a purebred delver. You could have attacked the arrows in any number of ways. The maneuver you chose indicates you doubted your abilities and you moved out of the arrows' path."

"I think Linda would have been happier with my decision. She wants me to stay clear of danger."

"Your wife is not here. Do not use her as an excuse."

"I don't think it's an excuse. I admit in the past I might have done things differently, but I'm learning to be more careful about a lot of things."

"Why would you consider it favorable to lose confidence in your speed?" Holli questioned.

"You think I've lost confidence?"

"Not to a great extent, but facing just three arrows from a known source would have never been a challenge for you in the past. Your movements indicate you weren't sure you could deflect each arrow."

"Maybe, but maybe I just wanted to get into a better position."

"A position that would favor your right arm over your left."

"So you think I've already..."

Before the delver could ask his question, he was interrupted by a call from within the forest.

"Ryson Acumen?"

The delver turned toward the trees and looked down several paths. He saw a lone figure moving slowly towards him. He could see it was a man. Ryson looked deeper into the woods but saw nothing following the individual. Still, it was strange for a man to be walking around in the forest alone. Knowing that there were many dangers in Dark Spruce, Ryson immediately wondered if the stranger was in need of assistance.

"Do you need help?"

The man kept moving forward, showing no sign of concern for what might be tracking or trailing him. He didn't appear lost or frightened. He marched through the woods as if he was taking a stroll through a guarded sanctuary.

"Actually, yes," the man responded, "but not the kind you probably think I need. I don't need you to save me from some monster. I'm not in any danger at all. I was just hoping I would find you."

"You still might want to come out of the forest. It's not the safest place to be at this time of the season. Shags and river rogues haven't been out of hibernation for that long. A lot of them are still desperate to find food. Goblins have been returning from the south as well."

Holli stepped up next to the delver.

"Do you know this man?" the elf asked.

"I've never seen him before," Ryson admitted.

They watched as the man kept moving toward them. They were both intrigued regarding the man's indifference to his surroundings.

"He is either brave, powerful, or a fool," Holli commented.

Ryson continued to inspect the individual. He noted the man carried no obvious weapons, and the delver doubted that anything other than a long dagger could be hidden in the man's clothes. The delver also examined the man's movements. There was a clear degree of confidence, but the man's extremely long legs and conspicuous height would make him a fairly easy target for a goblin crossbow.

Ryson didn't think the man was extremely agile, though he also believed the stranger was far from clumsy. Still, Ryson doubted that it was any physical dexterity which provided the man with his apparent confidence.

When the stranger finally stepped clear of the woods and moved out into the clearing, he stopped to gauge the position of the sun and to glance toward Burbon.

"Still early in the morning," he noted. "Good. It's also quite fortunate to find you out here. You are Ryson Acumen, correct?"

"Yes," the delver responded without reluctance in admitting his identity, but still somewhat unsure about the individual before him.

"You had to be. I saw the way you moved. Ordinary humans don't move that way. And just by looking at you now, I can tell it's you."

"Do I know you?" Ryson wondered, as he inspected the man very closely.

The stranger was very tall, and while the man possessed no other remarkable characteristics, the delver believed he would have recalled someone of that rather notable height.

"We have never met, and I doubt you have heard of me. Although it is possible."

"Why is that?"

"My name is Nodav and I've been studying you for some time. I've asked a great number of questions about you, and it's possible someone might have told you about a tall man curious about your activities."

"No, I haven't heard that."

"It's not because I've been secretive about it, let me assure you of that. I've been very open with my questions, and I never requested anyone to remain silent about my inquiries."

"You've questioned people I know... my friends?"

"Not necessarily your friends. I attempted to find people somewhat neutral in their opinions about you. I didn't want emotions or relationships to cloud the facts. I've spoken to individuals who have witnessed your activities. You have to admit you've been very busy the last few seasons... ever since the magic returned to the land."

"Why are you studying me?"

"It's not only you. A good portion of my questions involve an enchanted item. You see, I'm extremely interested in the Sword of Decree. To be honest, it's more than just interest. I think there may be an important secret hiding in the history of your blade."

A Final Note from the Author

Concealed by Deceit 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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