

# **Delver Magic**

**Book XIV**

## **Conflict of Purpose**

**Sample Chapters 1-4**

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By Jeff Inlo

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\*\*\*Important Note\*\*\*

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

*Conflict of Purpose* is the fourteenth book in the *Delver Magic* series. While it is a complete novel, it is recommended that the series be read in order.

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

Thank you.

*To Joan, for helping me understand my purpose!*

## Prologue

"Not complicated," Dzeb corrected the delver. "Actually, very simple. You can't make individuals believe in something they wish to ignore, but you can't force them to ignore something in which they believe either. Nodav needed to learn that."

"And he paid a high price," Ryson Acumen added.

"The price would have been higher if he had learned nothing at all."

The cliff behemoth smiled and turned to leave, but before he did, he offered the delver one last thought.

"Nodav didn't want to believe you were blessed, Ryson Acumen. You yourself don't want to believe you are anything special. You should consider if that's really true. Blessings come in all different measures. There's more than a cliff behemoth watching over you, more than a warrior spirit, even more than an angel. Don't ever dismiss that kind of blessing. Godson be with you all."

Ryson watched the cliff behemoth march off through the clearing which surrounded the town of Burbon. The delver held aloft the Sword of Decree, which reflected and magnified the starlight from above. He knew Dzeb didn't need the light, nor would the giant face any real danger in his journey home to the Colad Mountains. Even the largest of shags would retreat from the behemoth's size and strength.

After but a few long strides, the giant moved beyond the radiance from Ryson's blade and toward the edge of Dark Spruce Forest. At the wall of trees, Dzeb turned north. He did not enter the forest, but walked calmly along its borders. He enjoyed the cool night air even as he considered the pleasure of eventually watching the early morning sun light up the treetops. The beauty of the sunrise would remind him of his faith in Godson's promises. A new day would soon arrive.

With a delver's vision, Ryson peered through the darkness and looked deep into the forest. It remained quiet, a welcome change from the setting he had witnessed earlier that day. He recalled the mayhem which had threatened the town. As he remembered what he had seen, he considered his own role in the hardships faced by the people of Burbon.

The vindictive spirit of the goblin Okyiq had led a vast horde of wicked creatures through the forest and right to the borders of Burbon. The ghost goblin had joined forces with the wizard Nodav, a man Ryson had never met until earlier that day. The two had hoped to bring an end to the delver. They initially threatened the town, but as Dzeb had noted before he left, an angel was watching over them. Metanoch had appeared, altered the course of events, and thwarted the plans of the wizard and the ghost goblin.

Ryson could not shake the belief that he was at least somewhat responsible for the turmoil created by his enemies. It might not have been his intention, but his past decisions had set the stage for the conflict. Though Dzeb insisted Ryson had gained some special favor with powers the delver could not begin to comprehend, he found such a declaration difficult to accept.

Even as he acknowledged the involvement of divine forces—such as the appearance of the angel Metanoch—he would not allow himself to believe that such intervention was concerned predominantly with his welfare. Such a presumption did not sit well with his view of existence. He felt undeserving of any righteous attention. And as he considered the tragedies faced by others, a sense of guilt crept into his soul.

Ryson looked down upon the broken and lifeless body of the wizard he had met the previous morning. Nodav had not achieved his initial objective—to destroy Ryson—but the desires of the spell caster had altered during their encounter, changed drastically in ways the delver still could not understand. That fact could not be easily dismissed.

Within the scope of a single day, Nodav had apparently found a new sense of direction, a hope of salvation. The enlightenment transformed the wizard's priorities, and he struggled to reverse the damage he had caused. Nodav had helped to defeat the ghost goblin, even restored Sy Fenden to a full state of spiritual existence, but he died in the process; the final victim in a malevolently conceived plot to destroy hope, to destroy the choice of faith.

As a delver, Ryson instinctively searched for clarity. He knew answers were becoming more difficult to grasp. In perhaps an act of desperation, he attempted to seek insight from the warrior ghost, the spirit of his friend. He turned to the ethereal form of Sy Fenden and attempted to find some level of comprehension in the entangled mass of events they had all experienced.

"Sy, did Nodav really change?"

*"You still have doubts?"* the ghost captain asked with a voice only the delver could hear.

Ryson considered the question against everything which had occurred. He didn't wish to place any suspicion on the wizard's final intentions. He wanted to believe that Nodav had been sincere in his assertion of a newfound perspective, but other considerations clouded the delver's acceptance.

"I'm having a hard time understanding what happened here," Ryson admitted. "I want to believe he had a change of heart. He certainly acted differently, but if that's the case, then why did this happen to him?"

The spirit warrior, as was his tendency, became quiet and offered no response.

Ryson realized he had asked too broad of a question. He knew the ghost captain remained guarded in offering explanations. The spirit had previously explained that it was for the delver's benefit. Spiritual awareness was not meant to be shared too readily with individuals still facing the challenges and conflicts of a mortal life.

"I'm just trying to reconcile what happened here," Ryson added. "You asked if I have doubts. That's hard for me to answer."

*"You either have them or you don't,"* the spirit advised.

"I'm not sure that's completely accurate. I can be certain of one thing, but have doubts about something else, even if there's a connection between the two. I think that's the case here."

*"A doubt doesn't erase a certainty, unless it's not truly certain."*

"But what if the doubt is being created by a different uncertainty? If I consider Nodav's actions, then I don't have any questions about his sincerity. But if I look at the results, they tend to send a different message. So my problem isn't really with Nodav, it's with how everything played out in the end. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

*"Separate the issues."*

"I'm not sure it's that easy. I saw a change in Nodav. He came here hoping to kill me. That was obvious, but by the time the sun set, he was trying to help me. He was a different person, but if he found some kind of enlightenment, then why did he die?"

"We all die," the ghost explained. *"The good, the bad, the indifferent; it happens to us all. Do you really have to ask that of me?"*

"I know you died, but you came back."

*"The reasons for my return are both simple and complicated. Do not ask me to explain them in any greater detail."*

"I'm not. I know you want to be careful about what you tell me, but I'm trying to explain how I feel about Nodav, not you. I realize not everything makes sense, but this is a contradiction that goes beyond some unanswered question."

*"In what way?"*

"At first, Nodav appeared to be... let's just say he was on the wrong path. He made a bargain with the demon lord, he joined forces with Okyiq, he wanted to destroy Burbon, he was ready to kill innocent people. Everything he did during that time, everything that happened, was at least consistent."

*"But you spoke of a contradiction."*

"Because he saw something which apparently changed him. After that, he did everything he could to rectify his mistakes."

*"Some mistakes were beyond his ability to correct. Redemption is not based on correcting the past. A change of heart, a change of faith, comes with an acceptance of a new path. That is true redemption."*

"I understand that. Even Nodav seemed to accept that. He admitted he couldn't fix everything, but he still did whatever he could to make things right."

*"Then why do you doubt him now?"*

"Because I can't help but feel that Nodav was punished after he changed. He had so much power and he was able to do so much, even while he was working with the lord of demons, but just when he turned away from that, he was murdered. That's the contradiction. Something clearly happened to him, but why would he be punished if he had a change of heart?"

*"Punished?"*

Ryson pointed to the broken corpse of the wizard.

"Look at what's left of him."

*"Have you already forgotten the message he offered you?"*

"No, but that doesn't change what happened here."

*"It changes everything. What he said was important. 'How you leave this existence is not as important as how you carry your beliefs into the next one.' That was his message. That is what he wanted you to understand."*

"I understand the importance of belief... of faith, but how does that justify what happened to him? Okyiq managed to kill him right when Nodav realized how important it was for people to make their own choices about faith and doubt, about right and wrong, about good and evil. The timing seems all wrong. Nodav could have made a difference here."

*"He has made a difference."*

Ryson considered how the wizard had helped stop the ghost goblin, but he also recalled Nodav's magical abilities.

"Think of what else he could have done," the delver offered. "If he had survived, he could have been a powerful force to help people. He could cast spells in colorless magic."

*"Colorless magic is not to be used carelessly."*

"But what if he wasn't careless? He could have solved so many problems."

*"By interfering in the lives of others?"*

"Interfering?"

*"Using his magic to correct what he believed needed to be fixed, that could be seen as interference."*

"Now you sound like Metanoch. The angel told Nodav that he needed to be careful about forcing his beliefs on others."

*"Wise counsel."*

"That may depend on how you look at it. Where's the line?"

*"Line?"*

"Yes, when does help turn into interference? Are we all supposed to turn our backs on every problem, on everyone in need?"

*"Of course not."*

"Then what's the difference between helping and interfering? Every time any of us get involved, we affect someone else's life. We try to help each other because we think it's the right thing to do. Is that interfering?"

*"Solving other people's problems without their consent, not looking at the surrounding circumstances, enabling others to avoid larger issues; all of these are forms of interference."*

"But how do you know Nodav would have done that? If he changed for the better, he could have had a positive effect."

*"The full effect of colorless magic is impossible to measure."*

"So, you're saying he shouldn't have been allowed to use his power?"

*"I am saying there are consequences when using energy that is not fully appreciated."*

"And that's what I don't understand. Nodav was allowed to use colorless magic when he wanted to destroy Burbon... just to kill me in order to prove I'm not blessed. How do you think that makes me feel?"

*"Then this is about you?"*

Ryson knew he couldn't lie to the spirit.

"Part of it is, yes, but that's not all there is to it. Nodav targeted me, and because of that, Burbon was almost destroyed. Look at what happened to you. You were separated from the town. For a while, you lost everything."

*"I have lost nothing. I was given the opportunity to defend this town and its people. That opportunity remains."*

"But you lost your connection to the town, you lost the power of your spiritual influence. You were basically fading into oblivion. Nodav's colorless magic made that happen. Nothing stopped him at that point, but when he used it to help you, he died. How is it that he could use colorless energy to destroy things, but he couldn't use it to help others?"

*"You are creating a question with too many branches."*

"I don't think so."

*"Do you wish to know if Nodav really changed, if he was punished for that change, if his colorless magic was dangerous, or if you were in some way responsible for his death?"*

"I want to understand it all."

*"It is not for me to solve all your mysteries."*

"I'm not asking you to solve them. All of those questions come down to what I see as an inconsistency. I believe Nodav had a change of heart. I think his entire outlook was altered and that he could have been a powerful force for something good. But just as he turned things around, he died. It was as if he was allowed to use his colorless magic only as long as he was willing to use it for the worst reasons. Most of his focus was on killing me, but he was willing to make everyone else suffer as well. When he attempted to correct what he had done, he was killed."

*"And what do you want from me?"*

"I know you can't explain it all, but help me find some semblance of logic in what happened. Point me in the right direction."

Sy paused and stared deeply into the eyes of the delver. The ghost captain considered saying nothing, to do what he had done several times in the past... refuse to answer. During his silence, a voice, which ironically only he could hear, offered him guidance. He repeated what he had been told.

*"The struggle to accept both faith and purpose, by its very nature, creates the inconsistency you perceive."*

And with that, the spirit form of Sy Fenden disappeared.

Ryson stared into the empty space once occupied by the ghost captain. He repeated Sy's words several times in his mind, but he could find no clarity from the puzzling response.

The delver noticed several soldiers with torches marching toward the gate following Captain Klusac. Additional guards were carrying a stretcher. The captain had apparently gone to get aid in order to help recover Nodav's body from outside the town wall.

Klusac directed the soldiers to assist in carefully moving the fallen wizard. With the additional light from the torches, Ryson decided he should sheath his sword. There was enough attention upon them as it was. He realized his blade created a beacon to the southern gate, and Ryson didn't wish to draw any further interest to the wizard's mangled corpse.

As he turned his shoulder to slide the weapon into its sheath on his back, the sword offered a staggering wave of insight into the delver's consciousness. Rather than receiving one message, as was usually the case when the blade presented some new level of awareness, Ryson's mind was flushed with multiple messages in the same instant. Though they came out of the sword in a singular flash, each individual impulse retained its unique identity.

He witnessed three distinct revelations, each crystal clear. The depth of the insight went beyond a simple vision or a worded message. He felt as if the full awareness of his senses had been placed in three actual events simultaneously. He could see, smell, hear, and feel the implications of each foretold event.

As if his body occupied three separate places in the same moment, Ryson was overwhelmed by the experience. Initially, he found the surge of perception dizzying. Though the power of the sword forced his mind to distinguish and accept each message with absolute clarity, the division of reality broke his concept of space and time. It was far more disorienting than walking through a portal or being teleported across the land.

His natural abilities as a delver, however, enabled him to regroup quickly. Throughout his entire life, his senses perceived a multitude of elements. He could capture whispers spoken in distant corners, catch meager scents in the wind, notice the odd

flicker of a shadow in a busy market, and feel the heat of a candle across a crowded room. He had learned to recognize, isolate, and organize such signals; place them in context with his surroundings. It enabled him to maintain his sanity even as he found himself flooded with sensations from every direction.

Though the insight struck him in a manner with which he was unaccustomed, he managed to maintain his concentration. He studied each vision with a delver's sharp focus and allowed the details to seep extensively into his memory.

The fulfillment of each revelation was instantaneous and the gravity of their significance staggered him. His world almost fell apart as all three visions carried unmistakable degrees of misery, but one in particular left him nearly paralyzed in horror.

As the delver stiffened, those around him failed to notice his condition. They tended to the body of the fallen wizard, carefully moving it from the low cut grass to the edge of the stretcher. They attempted to be as respectful as possible, even as many of the soldiers recalled Nodav's desire to decimate the town. They were told that the wizard had helped restore the essence of Sy Fenden, and the return of their spiritual protector was an offering of goodwill, an atonement which could not be ignored.

Ryson finally managed to completely sheath his sword, and the images plaguing his mind ceased. He stood unmoving in the flickering light of the soldiers' torches. His companions attributed his silence to the somber nature of the moment. Nodav's body would be treated with dignity, and other than a few directions uttered by Captain Klusac, a respectful quiet prevailed over everyone else present.

When the body was finally placed upon the stretcher and brought through Burbon's gate, Holli Brances and Jure looked once more to the delver. They had heard Ryson's earlier remarks offered to the spirit of Sy Fenden, but they were not privy to the ghostly responses. Only the delver and the captain of the town guard were able to fully communicate with the spirit warrior. Captain Klusac had left to obtain assistance, so only Ryson had heard Sy's words.

Due to the nature of what he was able to hear, the elder wizard questioned the content of the discussion.

"That must have been an interesting conversation you had with Sy," Jure noted. "I wish I could have heard what he said. Did he offer anything that gave you some direction?"

Ryson did not respond. It seemed as if he did not even hear the elder wizard's question.

"Ryson?" Jure attempted to gain the delver's attention.

The delver finally looked toward the wizard but said nothing.

"What did Sy say to you?" Jure wondered.

"Sy?" Ryson mumbled.

"I heard part of what you were talking about with him, but I didn't hear his answers. At the end, you asked him for direction. Did he give you anything you could follow?"

"Direction?"

"Yes, direction, that's what you wanted from him, wasn't it?"

"I'm not sure."

"You seem more confused now than you did before. Can you tell us what he said?"

Ryson nearly forgot his conversation with the ghost captain. His mind was consumed by the insight he had received from the Sword of Decree. The weight of each message hampered his thoughts, and one in particular left him nearly overcome with despair.

Uncertain of what to do, he attempted to offer a reasonable excuse for his reaction.

"A lot happened today," he stated. "I'm still not sure how to deal with it all."

"And Sy couldn't help you?"

Ryson decided to reveal what the ghost captain offered, but he remained quiet about the sword.

"He said that I was creating too many questions and that he couldn't solve all my mysteries."

Ryson hoped that would be enough to satisfy the wizard. The delver's mind reeled with anxiety, and he needed to focus on far weightier matters. The elf guard, however, revealed her own concerns about the delver's response.

"The ghost captain has maintained a level of secrecy in the past," Holli noted. "You have said that he is often guarded in his responses. Such elusiveness has not affected you like this before. I have seen you frustrated with the spirit but never so unsure of yourself."

Ryson considered revealing all he had seen, but the three separate images were not only ominous, even heart-breaking, they were also disjointed; not in their clarity but in the manner with which they came to him. He could not find a clear connection among the three scenes he had witnessed. Each was separate and distinct, and also seemingly unrelated.

Though he trusted both Jure and Holli, perhaps more than he trusted himself, he believed caution was his best course. He knew the memories would not fade. The images were so strong and so menacing that he would be able to recall them with ease, and he would not allow them to weaken into a hazy or false recollection. He needed time to evaluate them in their entirety and to determine a possible way to counter their ultimate consequences.

Ryson attempted to focus on Sy's responses, and he placed them in context with his apparent confusion.

"He wasn't elusive," the delver explained to both the elf guard and elder wizard, "not completely. At first, he told me I was asking too many questions. Before he left, he told me that struggling to find both faith and purpose can create the inconsistencies I'm trying to reconcile."

"That's rather cryptic in itself," Jure offered.

Holli remained concerned with Ryson's unusual demeanor. He remained distracted, lacked his usual delver focus. The tone of his voice revealed more than a level of uncertainty. She detected a greater sense of apprehension, as if Ryson was trying to avoid something.

"Did he tell you anything else?" she questioned.

"He said a lot of things," the delver replied, not wishing to repeat everything the ghost captain offered.

"Anything of great importance?" the elf guard persisted.

"I don't know, maybe it's all important, maybe none of it is," Ryson answered.

"Is there something more you should share with us?" Holli nearly demanded.

The tone of the request surprised the delver.

"You think I need to repeat his every word?" Ryson responded harshly.

"No, but you appear more than simply distracted, and your behavior indicates you are reacting to more than just a cryptic response about the potential inconsistencies between faith and purpose."

Ryson clamped down on his emotions. It was nearly impossible, but there was far too much at stake, especially for his own personal well-being.

"Sy didn't really say anything else. We were just focused on Nodav, and it's not any of Sy's answers that are bothering me. I'm just trying to understand all of this."

He looked at both Jure and Holli and realized that they remained unconvinced by his answer. He decided to place all of the focus on himself.

"I can't help but think that I'm to blame for all of this," Ryson offered as a reasonable excuse. "Nodav came here to kill me. That was the basis of his plan."

"But that's not your fault," Jure replied. "That was his decision."

"But it's all tied together and everything points back to me. I can't hide from that."

"I disagree," Holli responded. "The paths lead in many directions and many played a part. From the demon lord to the angel Metanoch, decisions were made based on the circumstances. You did not dictate what happened."

Ryson looked away. The images of the sword continued to haunt him, but he believed he had offered a sufficient response to hide his concerns. He attempted to end the discussion.

"Maybe you're right," he acknowledged. "We've been through a lot. It's not even morning yet, and I can't believe all that's happened. I just need some time to get all of this in perspective."

"You need some rest," Jure advised. "I think we all do."

"You're right," the delver replied gratefully, but rest was not what he required.

He needed a plan, a way to obtain the means to stop what he had seen. He couldn't allow the Sword of Decree to become the final word on his future.

"I think I'm just going to go home. I'll try to sleep a little bit and then I'll go for a short scout around the edges of the forest when the sun comes up. I want to make sure there aren't any goblins hiding in the trees. It'll give me a chance to clear my head."

"Would you like me to accompany you on that scout?" Holli offered.

"No, I think I just need to be by myself for a while."

Such a request was not unreasonable or surprising. Delvers enjoyed their solitude. Jure and Holli would attribute Ryson's request as nothing more than a desire to unravel the mysteries surrounding Nodav's death.

The delver, however, did not crave isolation in order to contemplate the wizard's untimely end. He remained consumed by the potential future he faced, a future he would not allow to become a reality. He needed the time to think, time to find a way to keep his life from falling into chaos and despair.

# Chapter 1

"Why are we even here?" Dimi whined. "I don't like this place."

Neltus shared the boy's sentiment, but he kept his anguish to himself, even if he was far more vulnerable than his companion. He was defenseless, had to rely on Dimi's magical essence. Without a core, he couldn't hold his own magic. He could still cast powerful spells in pure crimson, but he needed to be fed the energy as if he was an infant.

"There's nothing here that can harm us," Neltus tried to reassure both himself and his companion.

"What about the goblins?" the young and somewhat inept magic caster questioned, still apprehensive, still looking over his shoulder and flinching at imagined shadows cascading over the gray dusty ground.

"They left," the rotund wizard reminded the boy.

"They could come back."

Neltus gave one sweeping glance toward the horizon where numerous goblin tracks trailed off into the distance.

"They have no reason to come back," he responded firmly. "There's nothing here for them."

"Nothing here?" the boy remarked. "We're here."

"They don't know that."

"How can you be sure? They might have sensed us."

"We were careful... and patient. We didn't just show up here without taking precautions. You helped me put a beacon spell on one of the goblins. We were able to watch what was happening. We saw them all leave. They're long gone."

"But there were so many!"

Neltus reached the limit of his patience and finally snapped at the worried adolescent.

"They're just goblins! Okay? They're not sorcerers or even serps. They may need magic to survive, but they don't cast spells, and they're not able to sense spatial distortions. Even if they could, so much has happened here that it's doubtful they would have even noticed our arrival."

The large bellied wizard knew that was true. He was having a hard time locating the remnants of the spell he needed to analyze. Several portals and other spells had been cast over a very short period of time. There was a great deal of magical debris in the air, and the dark realm itself was always flowing with strong currents of energy.

"Are you sure?" Dimi questioned, still very insecure about following Neltus, and even more anxious about entering the dark realm.

"You shouldn't even have to ask me. If a sizable number of goblins decided to return, it would create enough of a disturbance in the land that you would know it before they could even see us."

"But I haven't cast any spells to detect them, and I'm not very good at that anyway."

"You wouldn't even need a spell! You have a core of pure red energy. You have a natural connection to the land, even if you don't understand it. You should be able to sense those kinds of disruptions."

"There are all kinds of magic here. I can't follow it all."

"You don't have to follow it all. You just have to understand your own core and the land around you. If the goblins suddenly turned around, it would create a substantially new wave of magic. The land would warn you... if you let it."

"I can't sense the magic the way you do. I don't have your control."

"That's just an excuse. You may have poor control over your spells, but that shouldn't affect your understanding of the energy inside of you. "

"But that's the problem. I don't know how to interpret what I feel."

"Another excuse."

Dimi finally grew tired of being blamed for what he couldn't accomplish on his own.

"It's not an excuse, it's the truth. I never claimed to understand how the magic worked. That's why I agreed to follow you. You told me you could help me. You promised me you would teach me how to use my magic, but you haven't taught me anything. You just keep asking me for more and more of my magic."

"The only thing I promised you was that I would help you utilize your magic to find precious metals and gems in the ground. I've done that. Or have you forgotten that deposit of gold I uncovered for you before all of this even started?"

"That was several days ago."

"You still have the gold. In return, you need to follow my instructions. And before you decide to ignore me, you best remember how quickly you go through money. You're going to need me in the future, so you better start paying more attention to what I say or you'll never find anything of value ever again."

The mention of potential wealth caught the boy's attention.

"Is that why we're here; is there any gold below all this dust?" Dimi asked hopefully. "Or gems? Maybe they're quite rare... gems from the dark lands."

Neltus shook his head. He understood the importance of wealth, appreciated its significance far more than Dimi. An endless supply of it would allow him to return to a life of leisure. Wealth could keep him safe and satisfied, but he also knew its limitations.

Magic and the ability to cast spells represented a power which broke through those limitations. He came to the dark lands to discover an important secret, to examine the echo of a spell which would increase his understanding of the energy and raise his ability to overcome certain boundaries. That type of knowledge was worth far more than gold or gems.

"We're not here for that now. There's nothing in this wasteland other than the gray dirt we're standing on and the remnants of the spell I need to analyze."

Dimi didn't care about examining the echoes of past spells. He only wanted to learn new ones, spells which would help him find gold or silver, not transport him to an even more dreadful realm, one he never wished to enter.

"Why? Why are you so interested in this spell?"

"You really can't figure it out?" Neltus questioned.

"No, I don't even know why we're paying so much attention to that delver. Why have we been following him?"

"Because Ryson Acumen is responsible for me losing my core! I've been trying to find a way to make him pay for that."

"Why do you care? Just forget about him."

"I can't do that. It goes beyond losing my core. That delver isn't just a nuisance that I can ignore. Every time I get close to something I want, he shows up and ruins it. If I'm

ever going to succeed in getting everything I should have, I need to find a way to stop him."

"Why don't you just wait for him to go out on a scout and blast him?"

"And how am I supposed to do that? I don't have a core, remember?"

"But you can still cast spells."

"Only if you offer me the proper magic! I can't do it on my own! Don't you understand how that must feel?"

To a degree, Dimi believed he understood the wizard's sense of inferiority. The boy was never good at shaping influence into magical energies. He also believed he could appreciate the loss of magical essence.

Dimi had a previous encounter with the rotund spell caster. Neltus once offered the boy a great sum of money in return for a portion of the boy's crimson core. Neltus planned to remove a large section of Dimi's magical foundation and place it within his own essence, a bold maneuver. The wizard wished to replace what he had lost... what had been taken from him by the spirit of Sy Fenden. Neltus, however, could not maintain a hold on the condensed energy and had to return it almost immediately.

In the few moments Dimi had allowed Nodav to remove a section of his core, the boy felt hollowed out inside, as if someone had taken a large spoon and scooped out actual substance from the very center of his body. He felt a breaking of his essence and an absence in his being. When the core slice was returned to him, he knew he would never allow anyone to take a portion of it from him again.

Still, the boy lacked control of his magic. His spells were weak and disjointed. Though he had a dark crimson core and a strong connection to the land, he could not focus sufficient awareness upon the energy to reap any rewards.

Pure red energy should have allowed him to perceive the makeup of the ground below him, even to great depths. Precious metals and gems should have virtually called out to him, but he could not tune his ears to the song the magic could sing. He was deaf to the energy of the land.

"Maybe I do understand," Dimi offered. "I hate feeling so weak. You keep telling me I have enough magic to do whatever I want, but I can't figure out how. I see what you can do with it when I send it to you, but it's almost useless to me."

"Then imagine how useless I feel when I have to rely on you to cast even a simple light spell."

"But I can give you more magic than that. We don't have to stay here to analyze some spell. Let me give you what you need. You can cast the spell to obliterate the delver, and we can be done with all of this."

"And then I can focus on making you rich, right?" Neltus questioned without hiding his disgust.

"You know how important it is to have money."

"You still don't get it, do you? Money can be taken away from you by almost anyone, but when you have power, real power, then you don't have to worry about money. You take it when you want it."

"But you had real power, and you lost it."

"Exactly. I lost it because of Ryson Acumen, and that's why I can't just forget about him... or blast him into oblivion. If I try, I'll fail."

"How do you know?"

"Haven't you been paying attention to anything that's been happening? It's not just about me. There's something about that delver, and I'm not the only one who understands that. We've been following a wizard with unbelievable power who believed he could destroy the delver. Nodav had the ability to cast in clear magic, but what happened to him when he went after Ryson?"

Dimi considered the events he had witness while he and Neltus has been following the delver over the past few days.

"I'm really not sure," the boy admitted. "It looked like Nodav changed his mind."

"And how was that even possible? Think about it. Nodav made a deal with Rul Saattan. If you make that kind of choice, you don't just switch sides. And I don't even know why he bothered with Rul Saattan. Nodav had enough power to rule nearly all of Uton, but he chose to go after Ryson. How does someone like that change his mind... decide in some way to become the delver's friend?"

"I don't know."

"Well I do. It was because Nodav went too far. That was his mistake. I don't understand it, but it's clear to me that when someone tries to go directly after Ryson Acumen, it never turns out the way it should. That's why I can't just blast him with some spell. If I tried, it would only end up causing me more grief. I guarantee it."

"If that's all true, then aren't you wasting your time trying to find a way to destroy him?"

"No," Neltus responded defiantly. "I've thought about this for some time, and though it seems like there's something protecting Ryson Acumen, he's not completely invulnerable. In certain ways, he's already suffered."

"How?"

"In how things have turned out for his friends. He was close to an elf, Lief Woodson, and that elf was killed by a sorceress in the Lacobian Desert. So was a reader from the Church of Godson, a man named Matthew, another close friend of the delver's. Others have also died, like Sy Fenden."

"But Sy Fenden came back."

"That's true, but he still died. It was still a painful loss for the delver. And that's how I finally get to him. I don't go after him directly, I go after someone else, someone important to him. I destroy his life the way he destroyed mine."

"But if you just focus on his friends, then Ryson is still around. I thought you said you needed to get rid of the delver?"

"I do... but I can't. That's the problem, so I need to weaken him, create such turmoil in his life that he falls into despair. That's how I beat him."

"Then why are we even here? We don't need to waste time examining these spells. Let me send you some magic and you can kill one of his friends... or all of them if that's what you need to do."

"Just like that? You really don't pay attention, do you? Who should I try to kill first? Holli Brances, a highly trained elf guard? Or maybe you think I should go after Enin. He lost his core just like me, but Holli protects him. He can also still cast spells with the right magic. Enin knows more about magical energies than nearly every other wizard combined."

"But he still has to be vulnerable at some point."

"I know my limitations," the rotund wizard admitted, "and I know yours too. We'd never pull it off, not against Enin."

"But there are others we could go after," Dimi stated.

"That's true," Neltus acknowledged, "but we have to be careful. Ryson's wife is immune to magic. Casting a spell directly at her is as bad as going after her husband. The delver's friend Jure is now able to cast in two rings of energy; one white and one yellow. Sy Fenden has regained the full strength of his spiritual essence, and he guards the delver's hometown. We can't just decide to cast spells at them without the right plan, and that's why we're here. We have to do this right, or we'll end up like Nodav. I have no intention of letting that happen."

"But aren't we setting ourselves up for the same mistake? Nodav attempted to kill Ryson by removing his friends and allies."

"It's not the same. Nodav still ultimately wanted to kill Ryson, and that was his downfall. That's what you should have learned from watching what just happened. Nodav was able to cause Ryson a great deal of pain. He managed to basically cutoff Enin's ability to cast spells. He brought the ghost of Sy Fenden to the edge of oblivion. By accomplishing those two things, he was able to force Ryson into a position of weakness."

"But Nodav still lost."

"Exactly, but he lost because he went too far. That's what I learned from watching what happened today. Nodav remained far too focused on killing the delver as opposed to making him suffer. If he had just walked away after his initial success, he would have won. Enin would still be a shell of his former self and the spirit of Sy Fenden would be haunting a small section of Dark Spruce Forest. What do you think that would have done to the delver?"

"I guess he wouldn't have been happy."

"He would have been utterly destroyed. He would have blamed himself for the ghost captain's ultimate destruction. His life would have never been the same. That's what Nodav should have done. That's what I want to do."

"And is that why you want to study the remnants of that portal to Demonsheol? Are you going to talk to Rul Saattan and make a deal with the demon lord like Nodav did?"

"No, I have no intention of making any deal with that beast. That was another one of Nodav's mistakes that I don't intend on repeating. It's difficult enough having to rely on you for magic. I'm not going to add dealing with the lord of all demons to my problems."

"Then why do you want to study the portal Nodav created to Demonsheol?"

"Because I don't think too many people understand the power behind that spell, maybe Jure does and probably Enin, but not many others. Nodav's dead and Jure won't help me. If I'm going to learn how to create a portal to Rul Saattan's domain, then I need to figure it out now."

"But that doesn't answer why you even want to make such a portal."

"Because this is a portal to a place that's protected by barriers few people can comprehend, let alone breach. A gateway to Demonsheol allows access to the breeding grounds of demons."

"I don't want to learn about Demonsheol."

Neltus' frustrations rose once more.

"Do you ever stop whining? We're not playing a game here. This is about power. That's all you should worry about. And don't start moaning about not knowing what I'm

up to. You don't need to know! In fact, be thankful I'm not telling you. It's complicated and dangerous. You want to walk away? Go ahead, but you'll have to wait until I'm done here. After that, you can go on your way. I'll find someone else with a crimson core willing to learn what I can teach him."

Dimi knew he couldn't leave. Neltus was the only spell caster willing to offer him any advice at all. Other wizards viewed the boy as too lazy, too careless, or a dreadful combination of the two. He would never be able to utilize the crimson magic in his core on his own. He needed guidance, and Neltus was his only option.

"No, I don't want to walk away," Dimi whimpered. "I just want to learn enough to control my magic."

"Then be quiet and pay attention!"

Neltus looked at the boy and realized he would need him in the future. He had to build Dimi's confidence or he'd never have a chance against Ryson Acumen.

"Look, we don't have a lot of time here," Neltus offered in a conciliatory tone, "and this is important. In fact, it may be the most important thing we ever learn."

"More important than finding gold?"

"This is beyond gold."

"But it's just a door to the demon lord's sanctuary."

"It's more than that. It's about breaking through a barrier that's strong enough to contain Rul Saattan. Think about what that means. Creating a portal is one thing, but bypassing barriers meant to stop a demon lord has to hold the key to even greater power. It signifies the ability to overcome an obstacle, a potentially divine obstacle, even an obstacle such as Ryson Acumen. Now let me find the right echoes, and I'll show you what I mean."

Neltus was not naturally adept at following past tremors of previous spells, but he could link them to the surrounding lands. Air flows, water currents, storm surges, and beams of light were difficult for him to grasp on their own, but their effect upon the land slowly allowed him to recognize certain properties.

Echoes from past spells worked the same way. He realized he couldn't simply sort his way through lingering remnants of old castings. He needed to concentrate on the ground, find traces of the magic in the rock and dirt, and let the land reorganize the pieces of the puzzle for him.

The ground didn't exactly talk to him, whisper secrets only he could hear, but it did define certain characteristics and organize a number of aspects into recognizable patterns. Neltus knew there was order in the land. Jungles didn't just grow out of the frozen tundra, and glaciers didn't rise up from the scorching deserts. The structure of the land was defined with a certain purpose, and through his understanding of crimson energy, Neltus could sense that purpose, even in the dark realm.

"I may not have a core anymore, but I still feel the magic," the rotund wizard explained. "I still can sense how it works with the land. If it's not disturbed, there's a stability which sets its foundation. Portals interfere with that stability. Rifts connect two realms through magical distortions. They utilize connections through the void."

"But all the portals were closed," Dimi replied.

"That's true, but the land tends to hold on to history more than any other natural element. Water washes it away. Wind blows it out of the air, but the ground is more stable. Have you ever seen footprints in the mud?"

"Of course."

"A distortion connected to the land is just like that. The mud can dry up, but the footprint remains. A portal leaves the same kind of trace. That's why wizards can follow teleportation spells and portals."

"But we already know the portal opened a path to Demonsheol."

"That's true, but the echo of magic leaves an impression which carries more than just the destination. It holds certain attributes which can reveal the substance of the spell."

"You mean I could learn how to cast any spell just by examining the echoes?"

Neltus chuckled to himself.

"Yes, you could. That's the scary part."

"Then why can't I?"

"Because you don't know how to connect with the land. It takes more than just analyzing spell fragments. You have to find all the pieces and arrange them in the proper order. We can't do that on our own, but I know how to let the land do it for me."

"But you don't have a core."

"That only means I can't cast spells on my own. That doesn't mean I've lost my understanding of magic. I can still sense it. Now let me analyze this section of ground in peace."

Dimi grew quiet and allowed Neltus to examine the land. The boy watched, somewhat baffled by the wizard's movements as Neltus shuffled about and waved his hands near the dusty surface of the barren gray soil.

The stout wizard couldn't take hold of the magic, but he was able to locate several remnants of past energy stuck in the loose dirt. He found them by searching for certain patterns and structures trapped in the folds of magic.

Neltus knew he needed to find all the fragments of the portal to Demonsheol in order to understand the foundation of its purpose. The shards of the gateway might have been scattered about, but the surrounding grounds offered clear clues to the wizard regarding their influence.

The largest problem the wizard faced was that a number of spells had been cast over the grounds before him. Isolating the rift to the demon breeding grounds took painstaking work, a labor the wizard did not appreciate.

His expected reward, however, kept him motivated. He carefully picked through the threads and eventually pieced them together. With the echoes properly aligned, he was finally able to analyze certain aspects of the spell as a whole and differentiate it from the other remnants.

"It's all here," he announced to Dimi. "Now I need your help."

"I don't even see what you're looking at," the boy admitted.

"I don't doubt that for a moment, but you don't need to see it. What you need to do is open that narrow mind of yours, so listen closely. You've told me you want to gain better control of your spells, this is a step in that direction."

"You want me to cast a spell?" Dimi asked, obviously concerned with such a request.

"No, we don't need a spell, but we do need you to open up that core of yours. Your essence is connected to the land, whether you appreciate what that means or not. Your core can act as a filter. Or maybe you should think of it as a spyscope, a carefully designed tube of lenses that will allow you to see things in the distance as if they were up close. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"I've looked through a spyglass before."

"That's basically the same thing. It allows you to get a closer perspective, and that's what your core is going to let us do."

"So you want me to cast a sight spell?"

Neltus rubbed his forehead with his hand and he nearly groaned in frustration.

"What did I just tell you?" the wizard asked. "I said we're not going to cast a spell, so listen to me. All you need to do is concentrate on the center of your core and allow it to absorb broken threads of magic that once formed a spell. You don't have to identify anything. Your core will do the work for you. What you need to do is place a desire inside your core."

"But that's how I cast a spell."

"No! It's not the same! You cast a spell by placing influence in the magic. I'm not asking you to mold your energy in that way. All I want you to do is isolate a simple desire, place it at the center of your core, and then let your magic find the patterns which match that desire. That's it. You don't have to do anything else; no struggling with magical manipulations, no structuring a spell, none of that. You just focus on the desire."

"What desire?"

"A desire to reconstruct the portal to Demonsheol. You don't have to create the gateway itself, you don't even have to want to travel to Demonsheol. You just have to focus on the concept of how such a portal could be created. It's like asking a question and really wanting to know the answer."

"That's it?"

"In this case, yes. I've already located all the essential spell fragments. They need to be examined. The surrounding grounds have shown me the proper order, but I still don't understand how it all comes together, how the pieces fit. In order to see that, someone with a crimson core has to call on the land to reveal the complete structure. Your core will take the fragments and put them into one complete sequence."

"But you won't be able to see it if it's in my core."

"True, but once the echo of the spell is completely regenerated in your core, you can send it to me, just like you send me magic to cast a spell."

"That sounds fairly easy."

"Don't get careless. You have to follow the order precisely. You have to obtain the complete structure of the spell before you send me anything. If you cut it off early, I won't get the full spell. That could be a disaster."

"How will I know when I have it all?"

"When the land stops sending messages into your core, then you'll have it all. Remember, you don't have to understand the incantation. You don't even have to recognize the fragments. You just have to let them take their natural place inside of your essence. The crimson energy will do that for you. Are you ready?"

"I guess so."

## Chapter 2

"This is where the portal was created," Neltus stated, as he pointed to the thick, humid air in front of Dimi. "Magic remnants don't fall to the ground like dried up leaves. They linger in the air, but the land still retains a reflection of their structure, just as it holds a shadow of a tree branch that's never touched the ground. Do you understand?"

"I think so," the boy muttered. "It's like after a light rain. The ground under a tree is sometimes still dry. You can almost see the outline of the outer branches in the border between what's wet and what's dry."

"That's one of the smartest things I've ever heard you say," Neltus admitted. "And that's exactly the kind of thinking you need to rely on now."

Neltus moved a few steps back to give Dimi plenty of room. He steadied himself for what he knew would be the most difficult part of Dimi's task. He realized if he made it too complicated, everything would fall apart, but he had to make sure the boy could isolate the correct portal.

"There's one last thing you need to remember... a lot of spells have been cast in this area, so there are a lot of fragments. I've analyzed all the remnants, and I've come up with a way to focus on a single property which will allow you to retrieve only the pieces you need."

"I thought you said that all I had to do was focus on a simple desire, a desire to recreate the portal to Demonsheol?"

"That's right, but now it's time for you to define that desire with as much distinction as possible. You can't base it only on reconstructing a portal, even a portal to Demonsheol."

"But wasn't that the purpose of the spell?" Dimi questioned, suddenly unsure if he could do what was necessary.

"There's a problem," Neltus admitted. "There were two portals created together; one hidden in another. That second gateway could spoil the structure of the initial portal if you just focus on a path to Demonsheol. You need to distinguish clearly between the two."

"Won't focusing on Demonsheol be enough to do that?"

"No. They were too closely linked. The first portal was actually created to disguise the second one. That's why you have to focus on something which will isolate one from the other. There's one characteristic which separates the gateway to Demonsheol from all the other spells, including the hidden gateway."

"What's that?"

"Limitations. The portal to Demonsheol didn't lead to the center of the realm. That's where Rul Saattan rules over the entire domain. The passage was restricted in its construction so it wouldn't create a path directly to the demon lord. Instead, it led to the very outskirts of the realm."

"Why is that a limitation? All portals lead to a single destination."

"But all realms are not like Demonsheol. Rul Saattan has complete dominance over his lands. The portal was created in hopes of limiting the demon lord's awareness of its creation. I think it was meant to keep Rul out of the conflict, but that element is also strong enough to distinguish the portal from the other spells."

"That's good, right?"

Neltus controlled himself. He couldn't outright criticize the young spell caster, but he needed to ensure the boy had the right frame of mind.

"You think it's good because you won't have to focus on Rul Saattan, but that's not what's important. Demonsheol is basically a hierarchy of power. It's set up in rings. The greatest power is at the center. As you move away from that focal point, there's a decrease in strength. The strongest creatures dwell closer to the center, and lesser demons inhabit the outer rings. They sacrifice any opportunities of gaining more power in exchange for safety."

"So how do I do this?"

"I want you to define your desire based on the structure of the realm. You need to think about what it's like to live in Demonsheol, to be a lesser demon. Consider the idea of finding some semblance of safety in a dangerous land. I know it sounds like a contradiction, but that's the way the spell worked. Can you do that?"

Dimi considered the request, and though he didn't completely understand the connections to Demonsheol, he certainly understood the concept of limitations. He believed he had been hindered by such obstacles ever since the magic returned to Uton.

Based on what Neltus explained, Dimi also understood the dilemma of the lesser demons. They were bound to the breeding grounds, but they were vulnerable to the more dominant demons. The weaker beasts sought refuge in obscurity and hoped to avoid notice. They would shrink from the heart of the realm.

Dimi had faced the same insecurities. The magical energy within his crimson core separated him from ordinary humans, but his lack of control left him weak and uncertain. He knew he stood out, but he couldn't utilize the energy to gain any substantial benefit. He hoped to hide in the shadows, avoid notice, but the crimson power could not be completely restrained.

He might not have glowed with a red hue, but an aura of distinction separated him from the crowd. It was as if the land wanted to make him conspicuous even as he hoped to hide.

"Yes, I can do it," Dimi finally responded with a surprising level of confidence.

"Then don't waste any more time," Neltus replied, hoping to keep the boy from lapsing into another bout of self-doubt. "Open up your core and let that desire guide the magic of the surrounding grounds."

Dimi considered the concept of limitations in relation to his own shortcomings. In essence, he matched his own insecurities to those of the lesser demons in order to seek a path to safety. Within that desire, he framed the concept of a portal and let the entire craving rush down into the core of his magical essence.

Since he did not have to construct the foundation for a spell or mold the magic in any fashion, Dimi never faced a moment of uncertainty or hesitation. If spell casting was based solely on desire, he would have been a far more competent wizard.

Once he placed his wishes into his core, he let the magic within him reach out to the surrounding grounds. He did nothing to interfere with the process. Dimi's control might have been weak, but his magical essence was bursting with potential. The deep crimson energy took his desire and carried it out of his essence. There was no other influence, no structure of a spell, so there was nothing which could break apart based on the boy's incompetence.

The magic within the dark lands reacted to the energy pouring out of Dimi's core. It sensed what the boy wanted through the connecting flows. The energy of the land embraced the echoes of the portal to Demonsheol. It placed them within their proper order and completed the structure of the spell's intention and construction. The influence within the threads flowed through the magical connection and raced back into Dimi's core.

"It's coming to me," Dimi cried out almost joyfully.

"Let it come," Neltus commanded. "Don't try to understand it, and don't manipulate it in anyway. The memory of the spell will take a temporary place in your core. When the flow stops, then you have to send it to me."

Dimi followed the portly wizard's directions without reluctance. The spell was so complex that he knew he would never understand it. As far as manipulating it, he didn't wish to take a chance of opening a passage to Demonsheol.

"It's still coming," Dimi noted.

"That doesn't surprise me," Neltus revealed. "There were a lot of fragments. I knew it wasn't going to be a simple incantation. Just keep your core open."

Dimi did not believe that would be a problem until the last portion of the spell entered his core. The final echoes contained the connection to the demon breeding grounds. It bristled with the evil of the gateway's destination. In those final threads, he sensed the composition of absolute horror and malevolence. It invaded his essence like a stain of rot seeping into a stagnant puddle.

His eyes widened and he almost shut down completely, but Neltus had been watching him carefully. The wizard knew the boy would face that moment of panic and shock, and Neltus was prepared to see the process completed.

"Don't close your core!" Neltus screamed. "You wanted to learn about control, and this is your first real lesson. If you let go of this, you'll always fail."

"I can't let this inside of me!"

"It's a memory... an echo! It can't hurt you. It has no hold on you. It's just an old spell. It's not even a nightmare."

"It's worse than a nightmare!"

"No! It's not! A nightmare is in your thoughts, in your mind. It's your fears taking control. This has no control. None. It's a reflection. It's not even *your* reflection. It's a pattern caught in the ground that doesn't involve you at all."

Dimi wanted to close his core, break his connection with the land and end the flood of echoes into his soul. He no longer cared about gaining greater control of his magical essence. He just wanted to be rid of the evil shoving its way into the memories of his core. He was about to break all connections with the land when Neltus made his choice very clear.

"If you stop now, you'll be on your own. Worse, that echo will be within your core for the rest of your life. I won't take it from you, and you won't know how to get rid of it without me."

"You can't leave it in me!" Dimi screeched.

"I don't want to, but I have no use for it unless it's complete. It's yours forever unless you make sure I get every piece."

The threat forced Dimi to hold on for an additional few moments, but as the darkness of Demonsheol continued to fill his core, he no longer cared what Neltus might do. He

knew he couldn't withstand the desolation filling his essence, and he attempted to shut down his core, to break the flow of magic rushing into his inner essence.

As he struggled with his own energy, the flow from the surrounding grounds suddenly stopped. He had done nothing to close his core. The land had given up all the pieces of the spell.

"It's done!" the boy cried out.

"You have it all?" Neltus questioned.

"Yes! Take it from me. Take it now!"

Neltus needed to be sure. He sensed that the flow of energy had subsided, but even a small flicker might be significant. He attempted to delay the transfer to ensure absolute success.

"Only if you have every piece," the wizard finally replied.

"I have everything! All of it! There's a shadow of Demonsheol inside of me, but it's not growing. The spell is trapped in my core... the whole thing."

Neltus peered into the boy's eyes. He tried to sense the flows of magic, but it was hard for him to sort through the boy's anxiety. In the boy's eyes, Neltus saw that the young spell caster's fear had turned to desperation, a sign that the flow from the land had indeed stopped.

"Alright, send it to me, send it all, just as I showed you how to send me your magic... no spell attached, just a desire to give me the echo that's inside of you."

Dimi did so willingly. Once he created a link to Neltus' coreless essence, he was able to flush the echo of the spell completely from his core. The open passage enabled the boy to remove the full memory of the spell. As it left his essence, he could feel the shadow of Demonsheol go with it.

Neltus did not recoil from the flow of stained magic, even as he immediately felt the onslaught of Demonsheol. He did not have to wait for the fragments of an old spell to come together. When it reached him, the structural foundation of the portal was completely intact. The shadow of horror struck out at his hollow essence and forced him to accept the painful truths surrounding the demon breeding grounds.

Entering Demonsheol was nothing like walking upon the dusty gray grounds of the dark realm, not anymore. The realm of Rul Saattan was surrounded by barriers for good reason. The bitterness and hate of the entire region simmered with aggression. Demonsheol had become the absolute symbol of torment and destruction. The nothingness of the outer sky served as an interesting contrast between the cursed grounds and the protective barrier, but even the absolute emptiness of its upper limits could not diminish the painful malevolence embedded in the domain as a whole.

Neltus bit down on the anguish racing through his coreless body. He couldn't cast it aside. He knew it was the price he would pay for obtaining insight so very few could comprehend. He allowed it to burn through his hollow essence as he attempted to find the defining secret of the spell.

Without a core, he could not hold to the magic forever. He could only ride with the current, as if he floated upon an ocean. Eventually, the wave would crest and fall, and then finally diminish into nothing, but he had sufficient time to analyze the magic.

With determination, he twisted his mind around the construction of the foreign spell. He saw familiar structures of portals, links, and the deviation of time and space. He saw how it was all placed together in an unanticipated fashion. When he finally reached a

portion which was totally unrecognizable, he seized it and forced his will upon it. With surprising clarity, he obtained the key to overcoming the barriers to Demonsheol.

Neltus whispered two words as he let the energy go. The echo of the spell slipped through the hole in his magical essence. Thankfully, it took the stain of Demonsheol with it, but the knowledge of the portal's creation would remain forever embedded in the wizard's mind.

"What did you say?" Dimi asked, grateful to be free of the spell's echo but still somewhat hopeful he could learn something more from the experience.

"Provisional relocation," Neltus repeated, but much louder and with greater emphasis.

"I don't understand," the young spell caster confessed.

"I didn't think you would."

"Can you explain it to me?"

Neltus laughed. He wasn't sure if it was possible to explain it, and he doubted if the boy would ever completely comprehend the subtleties of the spell. He remained certain, however, that he had learned something of extreme importance. He wasn't completely sure how he might use it against Ryson Acumen, but he didn't doubt the power behind the knowledge.

If given the proper amount of magic, he could create a portal to any portion of Demonsheol; whether it led to the absolute nothingness caught within the upper reaches of the sky, the somewhat safer regions of the outer edges where lesser demons sought refuge, or the absolute center where Rul Saattan himself ruled over the entire domain.

"Do you really want to open a portal to Demonsheol?" Neltus asked.

"No, I don't think so," Dimi admitted.

"Then why do you want to know?"

"Because I saw the spell. I couldn't understand it at all, but I know there was power behind it. If I could understand something like that, even a portion of it, then I might be able to use my own magic with a lot more control."

"That's possible," the rotund wizard admitted.

"So will you help me? I don't know what... what did you call it? Provisional relocation? I don't know what that means."

"It means the portal was constructed based on a concept of travel derived from very specific conditions, conditions which were never meant to be permanent."

"What type of conditions?"

"There was a window in time when the barriers did not exist, a period when Rul Saattan was able to extend his influence beyond his realm. That was an extremely important moment in time, and it created the conditions necessary to create a passage in and out of the breeding grounds."

"How does that help us?"

"The idea of provisional relocation utilizes magic to capture a certain moment, recreate it on a temporary basis, and then utilize it to establish a tunnel between realms through space and time. That passage will be constructed within an echo of a past moment, a specific point when the barriers did not exist."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes, but it's extremely difficult. Nodav was able to accomplish it by using shadow magic along with the added power of his colorless energy."

"But you and I don't cast in shadow, and I don't think anyone else in all of Uton can cast in colorless magic. Jure can't, and he's the most powerful wizard I know. Even Enin couldn't cast in colorless magic."

"That's true, but we have one advantage. We're focused on the land, and the land can actually be more helpful for this kind of spell than even shadow. We only have to adjust certain aspects of the incantation."

"Wouldn't that alter the spell itself?"

"Only in its foundation, not in its structure or purpose."

"How would you do it?"

"By understanding how the barriers around Demonsheol block entry into that domain."

"But that's too complicated for me."

Neltus grumbled, but he knew he still needed the boy. Dimi carried sufficient crimson magic in his core. Neltus would need that energy, especially after he realized how to construct a portal to Demonsheol. He believed if he could expand the boy's comprehension, even a little, Dimi would be more willing, as well as more able, to assist Neltus in the future.

"The spell was complicated," the wizard conceded, "but the principles behind the barrier's potential vulnerability are not. This is how you have to think about it; the current barriers surrounding Demonsheol prevent the creation of a simple portal, but they're also fairly recent in their existence. The previous walls, which were ancient, were shattered when Demonsheol broke free from the dark lands."

"Broke free?"

"Yes, Demonsheol was once Demonspawn and it was part of these lands. When the demon lord altered his form, Demonspawn separated from the dark lands and became an isolated realm. It became Demonsheol. Initially, there were no obstructions and Rul Saattan was able to reach into other existences. Thankfully, new barriers formed, but that doesn't alter the fact that for a short period of time, Demonsheol had no gate, no fence, no wall, nothing to stop anyone from entering or leaving."

"Why is that important?"

"Because Nodav used that slice of time to find a passage through the current barriers. He isolated an echo of history and placed it into a spell. His portal didn't break through the barriers, it somehow found a way to ignore them. The portal exists within what you can think of as a shadow of the past."

"So it's a shadow portal? I've heard of them."

"No, it's not the same. A shadow portal will normally separate the spirit form from physical existence. That's not what Nodav did. He created a gateway to Demonsheol that would allow a physical connection based on a historic shadow."

"How can that be? Shadows don't have substance."

"No they don't, but a portal can connect two planes of physical existence. A shadow in time can hold a memory of the past. Put them together and you have a portal which stretches across time and space in a way that incorporates a slice of history which isn't restricted by the current barriers."

"But wouldn't that mean you need to cast the portal based on shadow magic?"

"That's how Nodav cast it, but remember what I just said; a portal needs to connect two planes in physical existence. Nodav's spell, despite it being cast in gray energy, was

still connected to the land. That's the foundation for the spell. Rather than cast it based on a shadow of history, I can cast it with a focus on the history of the land."

"You can do that?"

"I believe I can. It would take extreme concentration, and a great deal of energy, but if I was able to focus for an extended period of time and had enough magic at my disposal, I could create the portal."

Before Dimi could respond, a whirlwind of dust rushed across the barren plain. It moved with unnatural speed and direction, and the boy cowered in fear. He barely managed to raise his arm to point to the disturbance, but by the time he cried for Neltus' attention, the wizard had already realized they were no longer alone.

## Chapter 3

The creature appeared as a deformed mix between a giant wasp and a thin elf. When she came to a halt several paces from Neltus and Dimi, the gray dust which had spun about her body instantly dropped to the ground. Her nearly transparent wings vibrated behind her as she stood otherwise still.

Neltus knew not to move or speak, but Dimi found his voice despite the terror clutching his mind.

"You said we didn't have to worry!" the boy moaned to the wizard. "You said no one was here!"

"Be quiet," Neltus commanded, "and don't move."

"You are wise," the dark creature offered with a low-toned voice.

It was almost a whisper, but the strength behind it carried her words with distinction to the ears of those she examined. As she moved one step closer, her wings finally stopped vibrating.

"You know what I am?"

Neltus just nodded slightly, barely enough to be noticed.

"You may speak," the creature allowed.

"An apocratin," Neltus replied respectfully.

"Very good. You are strangers here. This is not your realm."

"We make no claim on this land."

"I know that. I do not view you as a threat, and this is not my territory."

The response shocked the wizard. He knew he was not a threat to the creature, but an apocratin admitting she was outside her territory was in direct conflict to his understanding of the creature's habits.

"Is that true?" he mumbled before he could catch himself.

"You believe you are a threat to me?"

"No, I'm no threat... neither of us are."

"Then why do you question me?"

"You caught me off guard. I'm surprised you even decided to speak to us."

"I have my reasons, but I remain interested in your response. There are things I must know. I want you to speak to me without hesitation. Do not disappoint me."

It was a difficult demand. For Neltus, speaking to an apocratin was like speaking to the shadow of death with a ravenous appetite. He did not wish to become a meal, and so he did his best to speak as if he was not fearful for his life... even though every instinct within him told him differently.

"Then may I ask why you're here?" he attempted to ask rather boldly. "An apocratin normally guards her territory. That's why I was surprised. I didn't doubt your words. I just found it difficult to believe you would leave your territory."

"You appear to know quite a lot about apocratins. How is that possible?"

"I've made it my business to understand the differences between realms. We're from Uton, and this land is very different from ours."

"And why would you be so interested in another realm?"

"I'm a wizard. I can cast spells in crimson magic."

"I sense no such aura around you. The boy, yes, but not you."

"You can see inside me?" Dimi questioned with a quiver in his voice.

The dark creature's wings buzzed slightly and Neltus immediately admonished the young spell caster.

"Don't speak unless she tells you to!" the wizard growled.

Dimi wanted to teleport away, but he didn't know the dark realm. Without a clear destination, he could have ended up surrounded by goblins or in a hawk's nest. The only way for him to escape safely was to create a portal back to Uton, but he doubted he would finish the spell. He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and hoped for the best.

The apocratin's wings grew still once more. She disregarded the boy and returned her gaze to the larger human. He would have made a nice meal, but she had other desires, as well as additional questions.

"If you have no aura," the creature spoke with a demanding voice, "how is it you can cast in red magic?"

"I had an aura once," Neltus admitted. "I also had a core, but it was taken from me."

"Taken?"

"By a ghost, the spirit of a dead human back on Uton."

"Your core was removed? Let me have a better look at you. Step closer."

Neltus would have preferred to run in the other direction, but he knew he couldn't ignore the creature's commands. He took one careful step forward and then stood stone still.

The apocratin tilted her head as she peered at the wizard's rather large belly. She raised one of her six limbs and placed the clawed end upon Neltus' chest.

"You are empty inside."

"Yes," Neltus admitted.

"Interesting." The creature pulled back her limb and then questioned Neltus once more. "You had a crimson core?"

"Yes."

"And this allowed you to make contact with the land and learn of its inhabitants?"

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"I don't think so. I believe there are some creatures that can veil themselves, even from the ground they occupy."

"Why were you concerned with the inhabitants of this realm?"

"I needed to come here, but I didn't wish to trespass or end up surrounded by creatures I didn't understand. I'm careful about creating enemies."

The apocratin gazed deeply into Neltus' eyes.

"But you have made enemies. Quite a few."

"I don't want to make more, especially here."

"That's not quite true. There's vengeance in your heart. Revenge always makes enemies. Enemies upon enemies, like eggs hatching over and over. Apocratins know about hatching eggs. And if you were careful of such things, you would not be here."

"Sometimes certain risks are necessary."

The dark creature's wings vibrated again but in a different fashion. They appeared to glow slightly, and the apocratin offered her approval of the wizard's response.

"That is very true. I seek more things that are true. You asked me a question. What was it again?"

"I asked if you might tell us why you left your territory. I thought apocratins guarded their territory with absolute ferocity."

"I do."

"But how can you guard your lands if you're not there?"

"Sometimes certain risks are necessary," the dark creature responded by repeating Neltus' own words.

The creature then appeared to laugh, though Neltus was not quite certain if the odd twitching and snorting was true laughter.

"What should I call you?" the apocratin asked after ending her intermittent grunts.

"Neltus."

"Very good, Neltus. You may call me Sadeula."

"Thank you," was all Neltus could say. He could not comprehend why an apocratin would reveal her name, let alone allow a human to use it. The informality was beyond unexpected.

The creature, however, quickly revealed why she had been so indulgent with the wizard.

"I am here for reasons which match your own."

Neltus didn't even attempt to hide his intentions for entering the dark realm, but he focused on what he believed might actually interest the dark creature.

"You wish to open a portal to Demonsheol?"

"No, Demonsheol does not interest me."

"But that's why I'm here."

"That is incorrect. You came here to study spell fragments, to learn how such a portal could be created. I doubt you intend to open such a gateway, at least not for yourself. You may study lands, but you would not wish to enter the realm of Rul Saattan."

"That's true," the wizard admitted. "But I thought you said you were here for the same reason. I don't understand why you'd want to learn about such a portal if you weren't going to use it."

"It's not the passage to Demonsheol which interests me. I'm not even concerned with overcoming the barriers which surround the demon breeding grounds, which I suspect is your true desire. I am interested in portals themselves. I wish to understand them better."

"Do you want us to leave you to that task? The remnants of the spell are still strong enough to follow."

"You don't understand, do you?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't," Neltus confessed.

"Opening a portal is not an easy task, at least not for one of my kind, or for most of the inhabitants of this realm. If it were, we could leave these lands at will and expand our hunting grounds with ease."

"But dark creatures have moved beyond these lands before. Portals must have been created somehow... by someone."

"That is one of the inconsistencies of the magic in this realm. At times, portals will open naturally and they will lead to different lands, including your own."

"Portals will open on their own? Without a spell caster?"

"You doubt me?" Sadeula questioned harshly.

Neltus would have preferred to simply accept the apocratin's statement. He didn't want to challenge the dark creature, but he couldn't ignore his circumstances. If he lied,

he believed Sadeula would sense it immediately. It also appeared as if the apocratin wanted something from him. In order to satisfy the creature, he needed to be absolutely clear in his understanding.

"I don't wish to doubt you, but I don't see how that could be possible."

"You have lightning in your world, do you not?"

"Yes."

"It is a giant spark created by certain conditions which require a release of energy. In the same manner, portals randomly appear in our world caused by the build up of magic coursing through the lands. It is not a common occurrence like your lightning, but it does happen."

"Even without influence? Portals just open sporadically and with random destinations?"

"Yes, and that is why they are difficult to study. Without influence behind the casting, there is no way to understand the methods behind their structure."

"So no dark creature can create a portal?"

"I did not say that. It has been done, but the knowledge of such power is well guarded. The few who have managed to create the proper foundation have a distinct advantage over the many who can't."

"I don't mean this as an insult, but a portal isn't that difficult of a spell. Its foundation can be based on different hues, and its construction is fairly straight forward."

"Perhaps that is true in your realm, but not here. Gateways are confusing."

Neltus considered everything Sadeula had said. He began to see a plausible explanation for the encounter.

"You came here to study the remnants of the portals in hopes of understanding them enough so you could create a gateway on your own."

"I have studied many. I have tuned my essence to the disruptions caused by portals, and I will even leave my territory unguarded in hopes of finally understanding their construction. I sensed several portals in this region and I came to study them. I found you here, and I believe I finally have an opportunity to obtain my goal."

"Opportunity?"

"I listened to you from a distance before I made my presence known to you. You can help me."

Neltus knew he couldn't refuse the apocratin. He also knew the consequences if such a creature gained the ability to create portals to Uton at will. For him, however, it was not a difficult choice. He was not willing to sacrifice himself to save anyone else in Uton, but he wanted to ensure his own survival.

Realizing he needed to be very careful in how he attempted to bargain with Sadeula, he approached the matter with great caution mixed with sufficient cunning to secure his safety.

"I'm certainly willing to help you. I'm well aware of the consequences if I don't, but I think we both need certain assurances."

"Assurances?"

"Yes, if I leave out certain critical information, you might be able to create a portal, but it wouldn't be stable."

"I would know, and you wouldn't dare," Sadeula responded as her wings vibrated with obvious agitation.

"Would you? Perhaps, but if portals are difficult for you to comprehend, perhaps not."

"And would you be willing to take such a risk? I doubt that very much."

"You're right. I don't want to take that chance, but I'm afraid of what you might do to me after you've obtained everything you need."

"I could do terrible things to you right now."

"Yes, you could, but then you wouldn't be able to learn anything from me."

"What of your companion? Once I eat you, or turn you over to my offspring, I'm sure he would be much more willing to help me."

And in that moment, Neltus gained a slight advantage over his adversary, and he decided to use it.

"By all means, look to him for help. Good luck."

"You wish me to eat you?"

"No, but you overestimate my friend here. He couldn't help you no matter how much you threaten him."

"He can make a portal. I sense that much from him."

"But can he explain it to you? Can he explain anything to you?"

The apocratin examined the young spell caster closely. The fear within Dimi's heart was thick and vibrant. She knew he would never be able to overcome it.

"Well played," she offered as she turned back to Neltus. "Perhaps you would consider trading him for your safety. That might make you feel more confident. He would make a nice meal, not as filling as you, but he would suffice."

Neltus considered trading Dimi for his safe return to Uton, but he had made great strides in learning how to overcome the barriers of Demonsheol. In order to take advantage of that knowledge, he needed a willing accomplice, someone able to infuse him with great flows of crimson energy.

"As much as I might hate to admit it, I need the boy, so I can't offer him either. And this is exactly what I mean. You need my assistance, which I'm willing to give, but I need to ensure you won't attack me once you have what you want."

"And what assurance can I give you? I doubt you will accept a simple promise."

"No, but I'm hoping you'll accept a promise from me, one that will make it in your best interest to allow us to leave."

"What else could you offer?"

"Additional information in the future."

"Additional information?"

"Yes, you see, I think I can help you construct a portal, but that's all I'm willing to offer you at this time."

"That is all I need."

"Is it?" Neltus dared to challenge the apocratin. He considered other spells which were similar to gateways and believed if Sadeula couldn't construct a portal, then she probably lacked the knowledge to cast comparable incantations. "Can you use magic to send yourself across this realm?"

"I do not need to use magic. I can move swiftly on my own."

"There's a difference. Imagine being able to transport yourself anywhere within this realm in an instant and then return back to your own territory with the same speed and ease."

The creature glared at the wizard.

"Such a spell would be useful," Sadeula admitted. "You will teach that one to me as well."

"No," Neltus answered boldly.

"You risk defying me?"

"No, I'm willing to give you exactly what you came here for. I'll help you construct a portal, but that's all. If you attack me because I refuse to give you more, you'll never learn the spell. However, if you allow us both to leave after I've taught you about portals, I'd be willing to help you in the future."

"And how long will I have to wait?"

"I'll be honest, I don't like deadlines. I've always liked the easy life."

"I can make things very difficult for you."

"I know that, but I still think you can wait. Once you know how to make a portal, you can come to my homeland."

"But then I will have to find you."

"That's true, but look at me. I'm not that hard to find, am I?"

Sadeula took one long look at Neltus and snorted again, several times.

"No, you are not. You are a large wizard without a core. I think I can find you with ease."

"And when you do, I'll have to teach you more, and maybe we can make another deal, just like this one."

"You like options, don't you?"

"I like to stay alive."

"Very well. If you teach me how to create a stable portal, I will let you and your companion return to your homeland. But I will call upon you again."

Neltus nodded and then turned to Dimi.

"Listen very carefully to me. You need to feed me enough magic to create a portal back to Uton. But I know what you're going to want to do. When you see the gateway, you're going to think it's a good idea to run for it. Don't. If you do, I'll find you and kill you myself. Do you understand?"

Dimi just nodded.

"Good, now send me some magic."

Dimi focused on the ground at Neltus' feet. He did everything in his power not to look at the apocratin. If he took one glance, he knew he'd lose his concentration. He focused on the energy within him. He didn't mold it into a spell, but he opened up the energy so that it could be sculpted by an outside force. He struggled with the concept, but he managed to manipulate it by focusing on his own insecurities. He placed his own desire for assistance into the magic, a craving to allow someone else to carry his burdens.

Once the energy was properly prepared, he had to create a link to Neltus' empty essence. It was the most difficult part of the process, but the wizard had already given him very specific instructions in that regard. He followed the directive explicitly without trying to adjust the connection based on his own talents.

The link was not very strong, but it was sufficient to pass ample magic into Neltus' hollow essence. The magic flowed through at an unsteady current, and some of it leaked out into the open air. The display was weak enough to gain the attention of the apocratin.

"He is a poor apprentice," Sadeula remarked.

"Yes, he is," Neltus agreed.

"You could do better. Are you sure you don't wish to leave him to me as a meal? I would appreciate it."

Neltus could feel the boy panic through the magical connection, and he realized he needed to calm him. He acted immediately to keep the boy stable.

"No, he stays with me. His magic is the best match for my skills. Please let me concentrate. Molding this energy into a spell isn't easy."

"I imagine it isn't, not without a core."

Creating a portal was normally simple for Neltus, even when using Dimi's magic. The instability of the flow, however, made the construction of the gateway much more difficult. He struggled to maintain control and did his best to sculpt the uneven current into a strong foundation. Hoping he had sufficient magic, he cast his spell and created a portal back to Uton.

He used the coast by the western sea as his destination. He was familiar with the region and believed it would be the safest place to form the connection. He pinpointed a spot near a rocky shoreline. It was a good distance south from the city of Portsans; a rugged area which had no usable harbor and treacherous sea currents. For those reasons, it was almost always deserted. He hoped to avoid spectators from Uton witnessing the creation of the rift. He didn't want anyone to get too curious.

He looked into the center of the portal and realized the weather was harsh back in his homeland. The sea was rough and a light rain fell upon the rocky grounds. He could see no one on the other side of the gateway.

Sadeula was far more interested with the portal itself as opposed to its destination. She made a clicking noise as she inspected the rift. She used four of her six limbs to feel the curved edges. Her claws ran up and down the magical borders.

"You made this completely from crimson magic?" the apocratin questioned

"Yes," Neltus stated simply.

"It is completely stable?"

Neltus took one moment to inspect the portal. He had no intention of misleading the creature.

"Yes."

"How long will it stay open?"

"About the same time that we've been talking, maybe slightly longer, but not by much."

"That is not very long. Still, it is sufficient time for many to utilize the opening."

"I could have made it last longer," Neltus admitted. "I could have even made it with a wider opening. That would let more individuals through at a time, or allow for larger creatures to pass, but that would have taken more energy. The flow I received wasn't very efficient."

"I know."

Sadeula turned away from the wizard as she turned her attention fully upon the portal. She circled the gateway examining different portions with her darting eyes.

"Explain the foundation of your spell," she demanded as she completed her initial inspection.

Neltus decided to start with the basic principle.

"Can we agree that a portal is a spell which connects two distant and distinct realms and allows individuals to move from one land into another by passing through the gateway?"

"Yes."

"Good, then to create a portal, you only need to connect the two separate points by bending space through a magical construct. In essence, you create a tunnel in your mind between the two points, but you condense that tunnel across a flat space. You let the magic complete the connection and the gateway appears. That's really all there is to it."

"That is not all there is to it. If it were, I could create a portal."

"But if you cast spells with any level of control, then you should be able to do it. The only portal which presents a challenge would be a gateway to Demonsheol, and that's because of the barriers. There aren't any barriers around the dark lands or around Uton."

"I am not interested in going to Demonsheol," Sadeula remarked. "And barriers are not the problem. The difficulty rests within connecting two distinct places existing in separate realms."

"But you connect the realms with your magic. That's the whole idea."

"In order to connect them, I need access to them both. A spell which connects two places needs an anchor in both places. I only have access to this realm. My portal will never have a destination, and that makes the spell useless and the casting impossible."

"But you know it's possible to create a portal. I just made one."

"Yes, you did, but you did not explain how you managed to set an anchor back in your homeland."

Neltus realized Sadeula was trying to make physical contact with a portal's destination before establishing the gateway, creating a problem with no solution. There was, however, another way to make such a connection.

"Do you know what the void is?" he asked.

"Yes," the apocraatin replied with certainty. "It is an emptiness which fills in the space between realms."

"That's right but it also acts as a link between those realms."

"A link?"

"In different ways, the void touches all realms, domains, and existences. That's the key to a portal."

"It is not a key. Portals bypass the void. To think differently would be to ignore the obvious."

"They don't bypass the void. They utilize it in their construction."

"But the void is empty," the dark creature maintained. "Correct?"

"That's right, but..."

"The void separates realms. That is also correct, yes?"

"Yes, but..."

"If a portal connects that which is separated, it must bypass that which creates the separation. I am not wrong."

"I didn't say you were wrong. This is all about the proper perspective. Let me explain this differently," Neltus offered, becoming somewhat flustered and a little more than concerned. He hoped he had not entered a bargain he could not fulfill. "Spells need anchors. You agree with that, yes?"

"Of course."

"A portal connects two distant points. In order for it to be stable, there needs to be an anchor in both locations."

"That is why portals elude me. How can I utilize an anchor for a destination beyond my grasp?"

"The void is your anchor."

"Impossible. The void is emptiness. It cannot serve as an anchor."

"Hear me out. If you can understand this concept, you'll be able to create a portal."

"Proceed."

"You're right about the void being empty. By itself, it could never be an anchor. But when it comes to connecting two locations through magic, the void allows for the necessary link, and it's the emptiness which makes this possible. There's no physical connection between the two locations, none at all. They both, however, have a relationship with the void. They don't actually touch the void, because the void has no substance. It's empty, as you said."

"That's right."

"But the void separates all points of existence, no matter where they are. It's like one large unseen boundary. It may be empty, but it's also everywhere at once. It has to be. If it wasn't, the separation wouldn't be complete and existences could potentially crash into each other. That would be devastating. The void serves its purpose by maintaining separation even between different dimensions."

"It is still empty, which means it cannot be an anchor."

"On its own it can't, but like you just said, it's empty. That makes the void one large single unit. It's not a cloud or a mist. It's one large block of emptiness. If it touches everything, it can serve as a... think of it as a bridge that can go in any direction and for any distance. By being a single entity, it allows for contact of two distant points with magic."

"What of the magic?" Sadeula challenged the wizard.

"Excuse me?"

"The magic. The void may be empty, but magic must travel through the emptiness in order to complete the spell."

"Well, yes, but the temporary transfer of magic doesn't alter the characteristics of the void. It doesn't remove its emptiness."

"If it has something within it, the void is no longer empty."

"Are you familiar with water?" Neltus immediately asked.

"Yes, of course."

"If you go in the water, does it stop being water?"

"No."

"The same applies to the void. It continues to be what it was meant to be, a border which separates all the different levels of existence. Stop thinking the void becomes altered when magic enters it. Just remember it separates all things. In order for it to do that, it has to touch all things, even though it really can't touch anything. Yes, it's a contradiction, but it's the one constant which allows for portals to exist. Remove the void, and gateways couldn't be constructed, but then again, everything would start colliding into everything else, and that would be the end of all existence."

"I begin to see," the apocritin noted, making several snorts as she looked upon the portal. "The magic does not nullify the emptiness, and the emptiness touches even as it

can't be touched. That is what I was missing. It is simple yet... enormously complicated.  
You must tell me more about this process."

## Chapter 4

"I'm surprised dark creatures have so much trouble with the concept," Neltus admitted.

"You do not know what it is like to exist in this realm," Sadeula replied with a harsh clicking sound. "Your ignorance is insulting."

"I'm not trying to offend you," Neltus attempted to reassure the apocratin, "but it just doesn't make sense to me. I always thought creatures from the dark lands would have more exposure to the void than someone from my realm."

"And why is that?" Sadeula asked, but it was clearly a demand for an explanation as opposed to any true interest in the human's point of view.

"Because for the longest time, the dark lands didn't even have a real sky. I know it's different now, but there was a time when there was nothing up there but a big gray stretch of nothingness."

The apocratin looked up at the stars twinkling in the heavens.

"Yes, there used to be an emptiness above us, but it was not the void, not the expanse of oblivion which separates realms. Do not confuse the concept of emptiness and the necessity of magic. That is what you don't understand."

"I still don't understand it," Neltus responded, hoping to sound apologetic, "but why would that be such a problem?"

"Because dark creatures require magic to exist."

"I know that, but I also know that the energy forms a foundation for any portal, so needing magic to survive is the same as needing magic to create a portal. Isn't it?"

"You look in the wrong direction," the apocratin corrected Neltus with a single click to emphasize her point. "I consider the void a potential trap. Yes, magic can be sent through the emptiness and potential paths can be made, but a turn in the wrong direction might cut me off from its flow. If I am ever completely separated from the energy, I will not survive."

"But a portal wouldn't mean you're actually entering the void. You're just using it to link two points. The void is what allows you to create the second anchor."

"I understand that now, but I needed to view the idea of a portal from a different perspective, from a perspective nearly opposite that of my own. You explained it in terms of the void touching all things at once even as it could never actually be touched. The concept of needing magic makes that idea impractical. I would have never considered that way of thinking."

Neltus decided to capitalize on Sadeula's explanation.

"You see? I told you I could be helpful to you. How many individuals exist who understand magic the way I do? You could learn a lot from me in the future."

The apocratin's wings buzzed lightly, but only for a moment.

"Such nonsense is unnecessary. You do not have to convince me of your usefulness. I understood your potential before you even spoke to me. Otherwise, you'd already be feeding my children with your body."

"I'm just pointing out that my situation is extremely unique."

"I understand that as well, and I will let you and your companion leave this realm, but I still require more information. I believe I am closer to creating a portal. I understand the

overall concept, and now I see how to gain access to the necessary anchor points. I only need to construct the foundation of the spell and the incantation will be complete. What did you use as the basis to create this portal?"

"You should know by now that I cast in red magic, so I used the land... both here and in Uton. When using crimson energy, it's easy to envision a tunnel. Tunnels are like caves. They can go through mountains, they go underground, and they can even go under large bodies of water. My foundation is based on that concept."

"I do not like such perceptions," Sadeula revealed as she shook her head with obvious displeasure.

"That's probably because you don't cast in crimson energy. What's the base color of your core?"

"I cast in yellowish brown," Sadeula stated as if it was common knowledge.

Neltus, however, stared at the apocratin in confusion as he attempted to consider such a foundation.

"You cast in light?" the wizard finally asked. "Here... in the dark lands?"

"No, I said I cast in brown. Plague magic is very useful in this realm."

"But you said *yellowish* brown. That means you have light as part of your foundation. I didn't think that was possible."

"That would be a natural assumption, but like you, I am somewhat unique among my kind. The small degree of light in my core allows me to spread my spells with greater range and speed."

Neltus suddenly realized what a creature utilizing such power could potentially unleash upon his own homeland. Plague magic enhanced by yellow energy could wipe out an entire city in days. The power of light would allow the apocratin to send large rays of infected beams across fields and villages. A spell created with brown and yellow magic would be difficult to counteract and almost impossible to block.

Sadeula could become a scourge far worse than any calamity in the history of Uton. Magically spread decay and blight could wither crops. People would suffer from both disease and starvation. It was a blessing the apocratin could not create a portal, but that blessing was about to be removed... and by his own hand.

"You seem concerned by this," Sadeula noted.

"No," the wizard lied, "just surprised."

The apocratin sensed the deceit.

"You are more than just surprised."

"I guess that's true," Neltus admitted, hoping to avoid any confrontation, "but I never expected you to have that kind of core. That's the truth. There's something about disease bred magic that makes me uneasy."

"Yes, that is clear," the apocratin acknowledged, "but your continued concern leads to a question of my own. We had come to an understanding. Does this hesitation on your part reveal a reluctance to maintain that agreement?"

Neltus understood there were only two paths he could take. If he agreed to help the apocratin, he would have to finalize his instructions on how to make a portal. Sadeula would know how to create gateways, including passages directly to Uton. He would be giving her access to every city of his homeland, and in essence, helping to unleash a horrible menace that would be difficult to contain.

If he refused to assist her, she would not hesitate to consume him before he had any chance to escape, or she would let loose her offspring and allow them the opportunity to feast on his flesh. Either outcome would be too horrible to imagine.

For Neltus, it really wasn't a difficult decision. The question became one of guilt; would he feel any remorse if the apocratin sent a wave of magic across his homeland that decimated city after city? Rather than face that question, he decided it really didn't matter. He rationalized that she was probably already close enough to understanding the incantation that she would eventually put the final pieces together on her own.

"I'm willing to help," Neltus replied after only a momentary pause. "Like I said before, we just need to have some assurances with each other. I help you and you help me."

"No, you help me and I let you and your companion live."

"Well, that's what I meant, but it wouldn't hurt if you kept an open mind about me. When I question you, I'm not trying to insult you. I'm just trying to understand you."

"Then stop haggling about something which has already been decided. Help me define the foundation for creating a portal. Do so with a consideration to the magic which is at my disposal."

"Absolutely. Clearly, light magic is the way to go. All you need to..."

"Yellow is only a small tint of my hue," the creature quickly interrupted. "I would prefer to use the essence of brown energy."

"You don't need a lot of light to create the foundation," Neltus responded. "You could probably do it with plague energy, but that would be harder, and more difficult for me to explain."

"You could try," Sadeula advised with yet another click.

Neltus knew it wasn't a suggestion, but rather a command. Sadeula wished to rely on plague magic for the portal, and it was his task to see that she did so effectively.

"Alright," he continued, as he quickly altered his thinking to adjust for plague based energy. "Consider how disease passes from one individual to another, or how blight spreads across the land. Place that connection in your mind and then use it to link two points."

"You believe it is possible to create a portal in the same manner that a plague falls over the land?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I told you this was going to be difficult."

"Then be more specific."

"When you create a plague, I assume you don't want to limit its potential. If you restrict its ability to expand, you could cut it off before it ever takes hold."

"That is correct," the apocratin agreed.

"You can't think the same way with a portal. An undefined scope will cause the portal to break apart before it even forms. A gateway has to be restricted. It has to have clear and precise borders in its construction or it'll be like a tunnel with incomplete walls."

"And how do I adjust for this discrepancy?"

"I don't know. That's where a spell caster's creativity and imagination comes into play."

"What would you do?" the apocratin demanded.

Neltus didn't enjoy being forced to consider spells in another hue. He understood the land and the power of crimson magic. Plague magic was distasteful to him.

"I don't have any experience with brown magic," he responded, but he tried to think of the quickest way to solve the problem. "Maybe I would think of a disease which could only be transferred in a certain way and focus on the restraints in how it's spread. I would try to create a passage which is limited in its form of transmission, structure it so the borders are formed based on those limitations."

"Very good," the dark creature congratulated the wizard in his quick thinking.

Sadeula turned her attention back to the portal to Uton. She examined the borders once more and then peered into the center of the rift. She nodded in satisfaction.

"I have all that I need to know," she announced. "You may leave now."

"We can go?" Neltus wished to confirm.

"Yes, but remember your assurances to me. There are other spells I wish to learn in the future. I will come looking for you... eventually."

Neltus didn't bother to question Sadeula any further. He didn't even recommend that the apocratin attempt to create at least one portal before he left. He didn't care if she got it right or not.

"Let's go," the rotund wizard directed the young spell caster who had remained silent.

The boy was just as willing to leave as Neltus, and neither of them cared that the destination of the portal before them would lead to a rather desolate spot on the rocky coast of the western sea. They both leapt through the portal without hesitation.

A cold rain splattered against their faces and the wind whipped their coats. Neltus looked back through the portal to see if Sadeula might follow. He didn't believe she would, but he was surprised she let them go so easily.

"Send me some more magic," Neltus commanded of Dimi.

"Why?"

"Because I want to close the portal. Do you want to leave it open?"

"No, but why do you need more magic? Just end your spell. Even without a core, you can still pull back on your influence, can't you?"

"Yes, but I want to make sure it's closed completely. A little extra magic will help me confirm no link exists."

"Why would there be a link?"

"Just send me the magic!"

Dimi cowered slightly at the wizard's harsh rebuke but did as he was told.

Neltus pulled upon the strings of magic that were of his own making. Because he constructed the spell, he remained connected to its purpose.

After the gateway closed, Neltus used the additional magic he received from Dimi to cast an incantation of awareness around the remnants of the spell. He needed the crimson energy to remove his concerns about Sadeula's intentions. He let the land do most of the work since it was capable of reacting to foreign energy. When he was finished, he finally explained his motives.

"I didn't want to say anything while the portal was still open, but I needed to make sure there wasn't any residue from the gateway that was linked backed to that apocratin."

"But she didn't create the portal, you did."

"That's right, but she inspected it closely. Didn't you hear what kind of magic she uses?"

"She said yellowish brown."

"That's right, and she certainly placed a lot of attention on that portal, didn't she? She put her claws all over it."

"I tried not to look."

"But a few times you did look. I saw you."

"I wanted to make sure I knew what was happening."

"If that's true, then you should know why I was so careful. Sadeula spent a little too much time examining that gateway."

"She probably only wanted to know how it was constructed."

"Maybe, but I couldn't be sure."

"What else did you think she was doing?"

"I wanted to make sure she didn't infect the portal itself. Plague magic is dangerous."

"Why would she infect the portal?" Dimi wondered aloud.

"Think about it. If she can pass a disease onto spell fragments, she could be even more dangerous than she already is. She has the ability to use light with plague energy. Imagine if she could infect magical flows."

Dimi finally realized just how devastating that could be. With magic once again flowing across Uton, a poisonous current could wipe out all of existence.

"Do you really think she would try such a thing?"

"I have no idea, but I needed to make sure there wasn't any trace of plague or blight in the fragments of the portal. There wasn't, so at least for now, we don't have to worry about it."

The young spell caster couldn't ignore the implications of Neltus' concerns.

"But it could be a problem in the future, couldn't it?"

"Maybe, but we're free from her for now."

"But not forever. Eventually, she's going to come looking for you. That's what she said, and you agreed to help her in the future."

"I'm not going to make it easy for her to find me."

"But she knows you now, and she knows me."

"There's nothing we can do about that. Hopefully, she'll get to know other people when she starts creating portals of her own."

And yet again, Dimi realized the potential consequences of Neltus decision to teach the dark creature how to create a gateway into Uton.

"She's going to come here. Even if she doesn't come looking for you specifically, she's definitely going to show up. This is the destination you used."

"I didn't have much of a choice. I needed to make sure the portal was stable. If I tried a different realm, the gateway might have collapsed on itself. Sadeula would have thought I was trying to trick her."

"Maybe you should have."

The boy's response surprised the wizard.

"You really think I should have taken that risk?"

"It's all risky, especially what we face now. If she comes here, she could spread disease all over. Entire cities could be devastated. She could spread famine across the entire central plains. If she casts plague magic with light, she could reach anywhere."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Then why did you show her how to make a portal?" Dimi challenged the wizard.

"Because I didn't want to be eaten, and I doubt you would have appreciated it either."

"But this could be worse."

"Worse? Worse?! Do you have any idea of how many offspring an apocratin has? Thousands! They're a swarm of flesh eating creatures. They claw and bite at your skin as they crawl all over you."

"But a plague could be just as bad."

"We'll just have to be careful about where we go."

"How can we be careful about something like that?"

"Because the land will tell us. That's what you've never been able to understand about the magic inside of you, and it looks like I'm going to have to teach you."

And in that instant, Dimi forgot about the potential danger to the people of Uton. Like Neltus, he thought only of himself and what he might be able to gain.

"You can teach me how to be safe from something like that?"

"I can teach you to listen, how to hear what the ground can tell you. If there's blight, if there's disease, if there's poison, then the land knows about it, and the magic can warn you."

"So the land can protect us from her?"

"If you learn to pay attention to the energy in your core, the land can protect you from a lot of things. That's what I've been trying to tell you for some time now, but you just don't want to listen."

"I try, but it's confusing."

"Try harder. It's important."

Dimi considered if he could ever be safe from the likes of an apocratin. He didn't like his chances.

"But even if we can find a way to perceive her spells, what about the lack of food or the diseases that will spread from city to city. Where can we go?"

"You worry too much," Neltus scolded the boy, but his own thoughts grew clouded by the possibility of plague and famine. He didn't appreciate listening to the possible consequences of his misdeed, and so he decided to make the situation clear. "If you're so concerned about what Sadeula might do, maybe we should go back there and stop her."

"Stop her?"

"Sure, even if she moved on, we could follow her. The land would reveal where she is, probably even lead us right to her nest, hive, den... whatever it is she calls home."

"How do we stop her?"

"You've got a core of crimson magic. If you use it right, you could destroy her, her and all of her offspring. Of course she'd probably hit us with a few spells of her own, but plague magic wouldn't kill us right away. I'm pretty sure we'd be able to stop her before we get sick and die."

"But I wouldn't know what kind of spells to use against her."

"I could help you."

"But you just said she'd probably cast a plague on us."

"Yes, that's right, almost definitely, but we wouldn't have to worry about her coming to Uton. What do you say? Are you ready to die to save people you don't know, or people who never cared for you?"

Dimi was clearly not prepared for such a sacrifice.

"Isn't there another way to stop her?" he wondered.

"Not that I'm aware of. It's not like I can take back what she's learned."

"What if we told somebody else?"

Neltus wasn't against dropping any of his problems in someone else's lap, but who was he going to ask for help? And what was he going to say? He knew that if he started warning people about what had happened, there'd be quite a few questions he wouldn't want to answer; such as what was he doing in the dark lands, and why did he help the apocratin in the first place?

"Who are we going to tell?" he asked of the young spell caster, but he didn't wait for an answer. "And we don't have a lot of time here. We'd have to follow her right now while her movement is still fresh in the ground. If we take any time to get help, we'd lose her trail. It's now or never, boy, which means it's just you and me. Are you ready to die to stop her?"

Dimi stumbled over his words trying to find an answer.

"No... but... maybe... I don't know. Do you really think she needs to be stopped?"

Neltus hid a smile.

"Not at the moment. Look at it this way; she's going to be playing around with portals for a while. I'm sure she'll find quite a few things to keep her busy before she becomes a real problem. If she ever does start spreading disease, people will notice and they'll figure out what to do about her. It's not the first time some evil creature has come to Uton to cause death and destruction."

"And what about us? Aren't you worried about what might happen when she comes looking for you... for both of us?"

"Like I said before, I'm not going to make it easy for her. She doesn't know about these lands, and she can't possibly know what I can sense through crimson magic. I might not have a core, but I can still listen to certain things, especially with your help. If she ever comes to Uton, she's going to be overwhelmed by the number of people here, and no one is going to want to help her find us."

"So what do we do now?"

Neltus quickly turned his thoughts to far more personal matters.

"We do what we set out to do. I went to the dark lands to learn about that portal to Demonsheol. I've done that, and now I need to see if I can use it in some way against Ryson Acumen. He's more of a problem to us than that apocratin."

### **A Final Note from the Author**

**Conflict of Purpose** 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](http://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](http://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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