

Delver Magic

Book XV

Broken Existence

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Slow Fall: Counting Down

Humor:

Counterproductive Man

Important Note

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

Broken Existence is the fifteenth 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 being my guiding light!

Prologue

At the center of Demonsheol, a wide but shallow crater marked the unquestionable heart of the demon breeding grounds, and Rul Saattan turned that dank hole into his sanctuary, a lifeless pit where he watched ages pass. From that unspeakable trench, his awareness and influence extended to the edges of his domain.

His connection to the realm offered him absolute authority over every creature inhabiting his lands. If he so desired, he could pluck a lesser demon from the far reaches of Demonsheol, drag it across the desolate and tortured landscape by sheer force of will, and chew upon its thrashing form until its torment quenched his momentary hunger.

The crater itself, however, was more than a symbolic throne. It served as the receptacle for the most devious and malicious acts ever committed throughout all of existence.

Corruption, no matter where it was conceived, seeped initially into the void which kept realms apart. The taint of every disgraceful act surged with purpose through the emptiness and ultimately reached Rul's pit of depravity. Streams of hate pooled at his feet as he monitored the decadence of every individual across numerous realms. He let the gloom of cruelty feed his own malice. He entertained himself with the echoes of spite and loathing.

Though barriers of incredible power surrounded Demonsheol and restrained Rul's influence, they could not prevent the shadows of malevolent deeds from reaching their final destination. The passage of memories through the void did not crack or weaken the barriers, but the movement of echoes into Rul's domain opened corridors of opportunity.

Rul's place at the center of his domain was well established among the demons slinking across Demonsheol. Even as they struggled amongst themselves for greater influence, they knew they could not challenge the lord of their realm. For ages, they felt his presence. They understood the flowing currents of evil and how they fed their master, even from as far back as the initial spark of creation.

Decadence provided a sustenance which continually poured into Demonsheol. Every demon longed for the chance to feast upon its offerings, but they would never dare to steal even the smallest of morsels. The center of the demon breeding grounds had become Rul Saattan's sole possession, and yet, the creatures of the realm suddenly sensed a strange departure from the ordinary. For reasons yet unknown to them, their lord had temporarily abandoned his sanctuary.

As Rul stalked across his lands, he considered the numerous paths before him. Much of what happened throughout reality was beyond his control. Demonsheol was under his unquestioned dominion, but there remained an opposing force, a power strong enough to contain him.

A time had come, however, when much of what had been preordained had become blurred. The eternal design did not quite break, but it had become... flexible. It was a time he always believed was inevitable, and he remained determined to use such an opportunity to his advantage.

The arrival of a particular human in his domain was not completely beyond the structures of destiny. If anything, it was the providence of fate which brought the coreless

magic caster to Rul's realm, but the circumstances surrounding the human's appearance allowed for certain measures of manipulation.

Rul might have been contained in his realm, his influence restricted, but it was always understood that his decisions and actions would be guided solely by his own desires. It was a necessary component in order to allow a degree of free will.

Every individual received the ability to make a choice of character, to select a path in one direction or another. With Rul Saattan as the embodiment of iniquity, the road to his realm needed to be cleared of any interference. Individuals who decided to embrace eternal suffering would not be permitted to shift the blame from their own twisted desires to the will of destiny.

Rul understood from the beginning that such a condition offered him the chance to overcome even divine power. It was the crack in the foundation of eternity, a weakness which could be exploited. The lord of demons knew instinctively that all power should be guarded. It should never be shared. Freedom of choice, the ability to choose one's own path, was a liberty he would have eliminated before it was even considered.

To his delight, the aspects of free will had suddenly aligned in such a manner that he could use the corrupt spirit of a single human to shatter the orderly structure he despised. He placed the opportunity carefully within the confines of his domain.

Time maintained a powerful role in Demonsheol. The past grew stronger as the future dimmed. Glimmers of hope quickly faded for all those trapped within its boundaries, and the malicious stains of history grew darker.

An appreciation for that unyielding aspect forced the demon lord to move slowly across his domain. As time passed, the burden of past deeds would only grow stronger. Even without regret or remorse, the hollowness of every selfish act would spread like unchecked ivy across a stone wall.

The human Rul hunted was trapped at the outer border of the realm, a bleak and barren region far from the center of power. Lesser demons sought safety at the edges of Demonsheol, hoping to remain undetected for all eternity, but nothing within Rul's lands escaped his notice.

As he moved slowly toward his objective, Rul considered the prospect before him. The human—an oddity of sorts in his own right—had found a way to overcome the barriers surrounding the demon breeding grounds. He could cast powerful spells, but the removal of his core left him without a usable supply of magical energy. The wizard could still mold magic into incantations, but he required an external source of power.

While considering the trespasser, Rul Saattan used his authority to torture the human but also to keep him alive. He forced demons consisting mostly of heat and smoke to distract and confuse the individual. Rul used his link with lesser creatures to keep watch over the powerless wizard even as he stepped deliberately toward his intended victim.

As the demon lord finally approached, the human—a coreless wizard named Neltus—considered his own bleak situation. He was trapped in Demonsheol, forced into a nightmare by the purebred delver, Ryson Acumen. Neltus didn't consider his own actions, did not take any level of responsibility for his dilemma. He simply blamed the delver for all his misfortunes. It seemed a pitiful tragedy that he would die slowly and wretchedly at the outer edge of that miserable realm, deposited and abandoned there by that one individual who continuously tormented him.

The lesser demons seemed to take great satisfaction in harassing him. Neltus wondered if they might finally grow tired of the game and slowly asphyxiate him or melt away his skin. He had nothing to eat and was forced to suck on whatever moisture he could find, mostly droplets of gray water which formed on smooth stones from the humid air.

With no sun moving across the sky, he had no idea how much time had passed. It felt like days, but he couldn't be sure. Eventually, he looked about the gray and ashy ground for a sharp rock that he might plunge into his neck. He wasn't sure if he had the strength or determination to slit his own throat, but the pain of wasting away in Demonsheol was a powerful incentive.

Before he found a suitable stone, he noticed the approaching shadow of a towering figure. He knew there were demons of all shapes and sizes, but the aura of the demon lord was unmistakable. Neltus could almost sense the edges of Demonsheol trembling before their master, and he certainly noticed the apprehension of the lesser demons that had tormented him.

"What do you desire?" Rul Saattan growled as he advanced upon the horrified human.

Neltus wanted to race away, but both terror and despair held him in place. He had no where to go. He could not even break his gaze from the grotesque figure. The sheer radiance of hostility demanded his complete attention.

"Silence will not help you here," the demon lord advised. "You have come to my realm, now answer my question."

"I don't want anything. I just want to leave."

"You believe you do not belong here?"

"I don't," Neltus cried out. "I didn't even want to come here."

"You are wrong on both counts."

"Wrong?"

"You belong here and you wish to be here. You are fulfilling both your destiny and your desire."

"I only want to go back home... to Uton. That's where I belong."

Rul snickered.

"If that were true, that's where you would be."

"It is true!" Neltus insisted.

"Then go there now. You're a wizard, a talented magic caster. You are one of the very few capable of overcoming the barriers which protect my realm."

"Protect?"

"Yes, protect," Rul snarled. "You probably think the barriers lock me in this place."

"Don't they?"

"Why would I be locked into a place I do not wish to leave? You think this is a prison? This has been my home since the beginning of time."

"But it's not my home," Neltus whined. "That's why I don't belong here."

"Then, as I said before, leave."

"I can't! I know how to overcome the barriers, but I don't have any magic."

"You think that is all that's keeping you here?"

"If I had magic, I'd already be gone."

"I can give you all the magic you need."

Neltus almost jumped at the chance, but he quickly realized that such offers were not made without a price attached.

"What do I have to do for it?"

"Nothing," the demon lord muttered.

"That can't be true. I know it's dangerous to accept anything from you."

"Then you have proven my point. You wish to be here because you don't wish to accept any other possibility."

"I want to leave. I just don't want to be in your debt."

"Debt? You make it sound as if I am some pathetic money lender."

"Call it whatever you want, but I know I can't trust you. You'll trick me."

"You think I need to stoop to deception? You are woefully ignorant of my power."

"I know I have a choice whether or not to make a bargain with you."

And with that said, Rul grinned.

"That is very true, but it is not a bargain that I offer. I'm allowing you the choice to obtain the desire which has brought you here."

"Ryson Acumen brought me here... and he left me here to die."

"You opened the initial portal," Rul Saattan reminded the wizard. "You certainly did not create such a gateway to please me. You did it for yourself. That is the desire which has brought you here, but you remain too blind to see it. You set a trap, but it failed. It was your craving to torture the delver."

"That's because he ruined my life! I wanted to give him what he deserved. I'm not blind to that!"

"Then accept that you belong here, not as a punishment, but as an opportunity."

"I told you I don't want to make a bargain with you. I just want..."

"I am not offering you a bargain!" Rul roared, unable to control his fury. "Let me show you what I can do to you with or without your approval."

For one brief instant, a moment so short it could not be measured within the scope of human understanding, Rul forced the full rage of his hatred into the thoughts of the wizard. Had it lasted within any conceivable length of time, Neltus' mind would have shattered. It was enough, however, to drop the wizard to his knees, leave him devastated by the anguish which flowed throughout Demonsheol.

Rul did not regret torturing the human wizard, but he knew he needed to make it clear his actions were not designed to influence Neltus' decision.

"You are trespassing in my realm. How you came here is not my concern. I can do to you what I wish, and it has nothing to do with any choice that you have made... or one you might make in the future. Do you still wish to speak of bargains?"

Neltus tried to answer, but he coughed up a sizable mass of bile and blood. He remained on his knees as he wiped his mouth and finally found the strength to answer.

"No," he gasped. "I'll do whatever you want."

"No!" the beast shouted. "You will do what *you want!*"

"I want to go home," Neltus moaned.

"Do you? Or would you rather make the delver pay for leaving you here? He knew you had no core, no magic within you. Yes, you have the skill to create a portal, but you can't do so without help. The delver knew that. It didn't matter to him. He abandoned you to this place. Look around."

Neltus barely lifted his head. He saw a barren landscape, but he sensed the true horror of Demonsheol. Even at the outer edges of the realm, he could feel the agony, desperation, and hatred. The ground might have been an empty sea of dust, but it contained the grinding emotions of despair and hostility. The currents of misery became so heavy, he could barely breathe.

"And this is the outermost edge of my realm," the demon lord continued. "Imagine what it is like at the center. The delver has been to the heart of this place. He knew what it was like, yet he abandoned you here any way, left you to die. He knew what that meant."

"I know," Neltus gasped.

"You hate the delver. You hated him before he even brought you here. That's why you want to destroy him."

"I tried," the wizard admitted, "but I never wanted to do it with your help. I wanted to do it myself... without making any connection to you."

"You keep dragging me into your excuses," Rul growled. "This is not about me. This is about what you want. This is about *your choice*. You said you don't belong here. I say that you ended up here because you knew this was your only hope of getting what you want."

Neltus would not answer. He only coughed up more blood.

Rul wanted to grab the human by the neck, possibly tear off the wizard's head, but he contained his anger and frustration. The beast decided to make a bold move. He prepared an offering for the coreless wizard, but one without any cost. It was uncharacteristic of the beast, but it was part of what he needed to do.

With a snort of disgust, the demon lord forced an infinitesimally small fraction of his energy into the magical essence of the human wizard. Without a core, the energy would have quickly dissolved out of Neltus' reach, but within the boundaries of Demonsheol, the magic bowed to the master's whim. It remained inside Neltus' essence, though he lacked a core to hold it in place.

The demon lord quickly explained what he had done.

"Let us finally see what you really want. I've just given you sufficient magic to make several portals to other realms. You now have all the power you need to leave. You can go home, or you could stay here."

The wizard could sense the magic within him. He did not have to struggle to hold it. He knew it was not draining away from him.

"You restored my core?" Neltus asked hopefully.

"No. I have directed the magic to remain within you despite your coreless nature. As long as you remain within Demonsheol, the energy will be at your disposal. The magic will also sustain you for as long as you're here. You will not have to eat or drink, or even sleep."

"And when I leave?"

"If you decide to leave, the magic will remain here. You will return to being a coreless wizard without the ability to retain any energy within your essence. That is a condition I cannot alter. The barriers prevent my influence from reaching into another realm. If you leave, my influence will not follow. It is not a price I have placed upon the magic. It is a condition based upon the aspects of my realm and of your coreless existence, nothing more."

Rul immediately noticed the growing anxiety within the wizard. His penchant for the discomfort of others made such awareness inevitable. The beast, however, needed to ensure Neltus understood the full nature of the situation.

"To relieve your concerns, this is not a bargain," Rul conceded. "I have not given you this magic expecting something in return. It is not a gift... or a bribe. I do not lower myself to such levels. This is a tactical decision. That is all. The choice of whether to leave or stay is completely up to you. I have given you the means to do so with absolutely no conditions attached."

Neltus almost immediately created a portal back to Uton. It would be a difficult spell to cast. Concentration regarding a number of factors was required in order to overcome the barriers surrounding Demonsheol. The loss of magic when he returned home, however, gave him sufficient reason to pause.

He missed his core greatly, missed the power it afforded to him. He was weak without it, unable to obtain the luxuries and conveniences he desired. He did not wish to spend his existence in Demonsheol in order to retain the energy, but he did not wish to lose the magic either. Such a loss kept him from fleeing.

Rather than admitting the conflict within him, Neltus continued to focus upon Rul's intentions.

"What kind of tactical decision? You said this wasn't a bargain, but it sounds like you hope to gain something if I stay. What is it?"

"You would not understand," the demon lord scoffed.

"Maybe not, but I still have to ask. If this is my choice, then I need to consider the circumstances."

"And that is exactly the basis for my strategy. If you make this choice without my influence, the events which transpire from your decision will be based upon the consequences of free will. That is why I have given you the magic to return to your home with no cost involved, no price to pay. Leave... if that is what you want."

Neltus paused again. He could sense the beast was actually speaking the truth. There was something very serious and genuine within the monster's tone, as if Rul was speaking to someone else, someone with a power greater than his own.

"What does that really mean?" Neltus dared to ask. "If this is up to me, I need to understand what you're talking about."

The demon lord found the wizard's lack of comprehension excruciatingly painful, but he also realized that Neltus' absolute understanding was a necessary component for the demon's ultimate victory. Rul could not blur the circumstances surrounding Neltus' choice in any fashion.

"Throughout my existence, I have been bound by what you might call fate... a clumsy term, but one you should be able to comprehend. Events have taken place which were dictated by the same force which hopes to keep me restrained. These events were placed within a structure, a foundation used to maintain a certain order. It keeps existence on a steady course. I intend to break that order."

"Then why do you need me?"

"Due to some demented allowance for inferior creatures such as you, a level of free will is allowed to operate within this semblance of order. Throughout history, these choices have created nothing more than a minor wrinkle within the boundaries of existence, but you are now an exception."

"But I didn't choose to be here, not really. You keep saying I belong here, but I didn't come here of my own desire."

"No, you didn't, and in that, I believe I have found the most colossal of errors. You were meant to be here. That was part of the overall design."

"I don't understand. If I was meant to be here, then whatever happens is part of the destiny you said you wanted to defeat."

"That would only be true if I allowed myself to act in absolute accordance to my structured existence. If I attempt to take advantage of you in any way, I will simply be following the patterns which hold me here, but if I let you choose—if I remove my influence—it alters the pattern."

"So I really can just leave here without any consequences," Neltus claimed with exuberance, as he finally began to comprehend the demon lord's strategy. "It's all up to me, and you can't do anything about it, or that would put things back in their proper order, the order you hope to destroy."

Rul remained silent for a moment as his eyes burned with hostility. He longed to threaten the wizard with painful consequences and force Neltus to do his bidding, but if he did, he would be doing exactly what he was destined to do. In order to finally break the bonds of fate, he had to act in a manner completely out of character.

"That is correct," Rul finally admitted with a snarl. "You can leave and I will have no hold over you. None whatsoever."

"So I can leave or stay," Neltus acknowledged. "That's my choice. You won't stop me from going home, but I can't take the magic with me. If I stay, I can keep the magic. You've also implied I can use it as an opportunity, a chance to get back at Ryson Acumen."

"I have implied nothing. I make no offers, no guarantees. I do not command you to leave my domain, nor do I ask you to stay. I have only spoken of your history with Ryson Acumen. As it stands, I want the delver removed as an obstacle from my path. That is no secret. You wish to see the delver destroyed. That much is also clear. The past is strong in my realm. Your history is open to me, but your future is something I will not manipulate."

As Neltus considered the conditions placed before him, he began to see a potential weakness in the demon lord's strategy, an aspect he could manipulate to his own advantage.

"Then I can leave whenever I want," Neltus noted. "Right? I can stay a while, even work with you to stop the delver, but the moment I want to leave, I can make a portal and go. Correct?"

The demon lord snarled, but he needed to remain absolutely neutral regarding the wizard's decision.

"That is correct," the beast admitted.

"Before I make any decision, I have a question; why didn't you just annihilate the delver when he was here. I know he's been to Demonsheol before. He's faced you at the center of this realm. Was his speed too much for you?"

"His speed is nothing. His skills are insignificant," Rul growled. "The delver has survived because he is part of the structure which restricts my influence."

"If that's true, then how can I do anything against him? You may not be offering me a bargain, but there has to be something for me to gain with the magic you've given me. I

want to see Ryson Acumen punished, but if you couldn't succeed against him, how can I? I'm nothing compared to you."

"The consequences of your decisions are not bound in the same fashion. While I rule this realm with absolute authority, my influence is limited beyond the barriers which contain me. Your potential to cause havoc is not restrained in the same way."

"But I've tried to destroy the delver. I keep failing. Whatever is protecting him from you is probably also protecting him from me."

"That is possible, but you are now in Demonsheol, a realm which bends to my will alone, and you have free will. That combination threatens the structure of control... and dominion. That is the opportunity before us."

"There has to be more to it than that," Neltus replied, still trying to weigh his options. "What do you really hope to accomplish? If I stay here, we need to have some kind of agreement."

"Stop being a fool! There is no agreement! There is only your decision to stay."

"Sorry," Neltus said with a tremble in his voice. "I used the wrong word. Let me try again, because this is important. I don't want to stay here if this is just another futile attempt to punish the delver. I need to know there's a chance we can succeed. How can I use my magic to finally give Ryson Acumen what he deserves?"

"Your free will combined with the power of this realm offers a variety of opportunities."

"But what kind of opportunities? It can't end there. There has to be something more. If Ryson's part of some greater design, then he's protected beyond anything I can do."

"That was when we were all trapped under the structure of an opposing force. Your decision to stay in Demonsheol under these circumstances alters the foundation of that structure."

"Interesting," Neltus acknowledged, but then he considered his history, along with Rul's. "If we were all trapped before, then we never had a chance against Ryson. We were always destined to fail."

"In a way, that is true."

"If that was the case—and you knew it—why did you even bother struggling against the delver?"

"I will always struggle against those who oppose me."

"Even when you know you're going to lose?"

"Don't be so short-sighted. The true winner is only crowned at the end, when all other opponents have been vanquished. I am still here, thus I have not lost. The struggle continues."

"But we're just moving in circles, aren't we? I don't want to do this anymore if I'm just going to lose to that delver again. Look where I ended up. Now you've given me the magic to leave. If we're just going to fight another losing battle, why should I stay?"

"Why must I repeat myself?" Rul snarled.

"Because you haven't answered my question. What's different?"

"You are! Your free will is now aligned with my authority within Demonsheol. That is the key difference. If you return to your home, then we are back on the same destined path of endless struggles. If you actually choose to stay, you become an aberration, a deviation from destiny."

"But we're back to my original question, what do we do about it? Even if we send an army of demons to hunt Ryson Acumen, I still think he'll find a way to win. He has in the past."

"There is one other key factor to consider. Ryson Acumen is not the focus of my interest, at least not initially. There is another target to consider."

"Another? Who?"

"An elf, a leader of elf soldiers, a member of a camp within a forest you call Dark Spruce."

"You mean Birk Grund?"

"Yes."

"Why him?"

"Ryson Acumen allowed this one elf to peer into the delver's essence, to examine the magic within him and search for weaknesses."

"How do you know this?"

"Because it was done out of spite, and such actions do not avoid my notice."

"Spite?"

Rul Saattan growled impatiently, growing tired of explaining himself, but he knew he could not allow his hostility or frustration to rule.

"In order to obtain a level of assistance from the elf camp, the delver was forced to allow an examination of his magical essence. This was done at the request of the camp leader. It was not done out of necessity, but out of spite. The elf elder wished to assert his authority. It was an act of pettiness, and so the malice of its purpose carried the echo of the deed to my attention."

"And Birk Grund examined Ryson's magical essence?"

"Completely," Rul nodded with a grotesque grin. "The delver allowed for it, dropped his defenses. He did not put up a single barrier. He never considered the significance of his decision."

"So this elf knows the exact makeup of the delver's magical essence. That's something I didn't consider," Neltus admitted.

"The delver might be protected by a force which opposes my rule," the demon acknowledged, "but the elf captain is another matter entirely. If I can bring him to Demonsheol, I can break him. I can pull the delver's secrets from his mind. That is a path which goes beyond the structures of fate."

"But you can't do it without me, can you?"

Rul fumed, but once again, he was forced to respond to the human wizard's question.

"No, I can't," Rul growled. "That is the opportunity before us, and it is the strategy I wish to employ. Your ability to choose your own path places you beyond the barriers of Demonsheol, and your appearance within my realm creates a weakness within the structures of destiny. Your decision may be one of the most significant in all of creation, then again, it may be nothing more than, as you say, an exercise in futility, a meaningless attempt to overcome something beyond your reckoning."

"Overcoming that delver isn't meaningless," Neltus insisted. "That's the only thing keeping me here, that and the possibility of using magic against him. That's what he took from me."

"I am not concerned with what he has done to you. It is irrelevant to me. That is exactly why this decision has such potential. When you initially arrived here, I did not

interfere. I am setting the entire workings of existence at your feet. If you do not believe me, then leave. Use the magic I have given you to create a portal to whatever part of your land that you wish to go. There will be no consequences."

"But I'll lose the magic."

"That is a condition based on restrictions not of my making," Rul reminded the wizard.

Neltus looked closely at the demon lord, realizing that the beast would not harm him. In the darkest corner of the wizard's soul, Neltus understood exactly what the monster desired. Rul Saattan wished to become absolute ruler of all existence, to extend his influence beyond Demonsheol and into all other lands. The demon lord could not overcome the forces which confined him, but there was potentially one key to conquer the limits of destiny... and that was Neltus' freedom to choose. Rul needed the wizard to be the spark which might break the boundaries of fate.

In realizing the demon lord's needs, Neltus found the courage to face the monster. The wizard saw the malevolence, hatred, and fury in the beast, and he knew Rul would twist all of existence into a horror beyond the suffering that already existed.

Neltus didn't wish to be caught within such potential torment, a reality tortured by the will of the demon beast, but his own desires weighed heavily against leaving Demonsheol too soon. Instead of fleeing immediately, Neltus would leave at his own choosing; a variable which he believed would allow him to gain everything he wanted and prevent Rul Saattan from placing all of existence into a state of anguish.

All he had to do was ensure his goals remained dominant over the demon lord's, a path made possible by Rul's own declared strategy. The events which transpired from Demonsheol had to be based upon Neltus' free will. As long as the wizard was careful, he could use the magic at his disposal to finally punish Ryson Acumen.

"I'll stay," Neltus declared.

Chapter 1

Ryson Acumen opened the front door to his home carefully, creating just enough space to slip outside without slamming the edge of the door into the back of the stranger who was sitting on his porch. Once past the threshold, he pushed the door closed and took a graceful step to the side. He moved around the visitor so he could face him.

The man looked up at the delver and raised both his eyebrows. He didn't smile, but he appeared pleased to see Ryson nonetheless. He said nothing as he waited for the inevitable question.

"Can I help you?" the delver asked.

"Do you mind if I sit here for a while? I'm alone, and I'd like to take a moment to rest."

Ryson considered the request briefly before responding. He looked around and knew the man was speaking the truth. There was no one else nearby. The delver's senses would have certainly picked up a trace of additional visitors.

It was late in the morning and most of Ryson's neighbors were at work or the markets. A cool breeze offset the bright warmth of the sun. Ryson looked to the treetops to gauge the strength and the direction of the wind. As he did, he took in a deep breath. Everything around him appeared normal and serene, just another day in the structured town of Burbon.

"No, I don't mind," Ryson revealed, "but wouldn't you be more comfortable at an Inn? They'll be serving the midday meals by now, and I don't think I have anything to offer you."

"That's okay. I'm not hungry or thirsty. I'd just like to sit a moment, and maybe talk. That's really why I'm here, but I am a bit tired. I've been walking almost all morning."

"Do you always start conversations this way... just walk up to people's homes and sit on their porch?"

"No, this is the first time for me. Normally, I don't like to disturb people."

"How did you end up here?"

The stranger chuckled as he looked around.

"That's a good question. I mean, I know how I got to your porch, but I've been on a rather long journey. Most recently, I was in the forest."

"Alone?" the delver questioned.

"I know. Dark Spruce is a dangerous place, but it couldn't be avoided. Sounds odd, but it's true. Still, I'm really not sure what's going on. I did, however, have my reasons for coming here. And in order to be completely honest, I didn't just end up on your porch by accident. Back in the forest, I knew I was close to Burbon. I asked around when I entered the town and was directed here. I was hoping to talk to you."

"You know me?"

"I know about you, but that certainly shouldn't surprise you. And don't struggle trying to remember me. We've never met. My name is Talcun. I also want to make sure you know that I'm a magic caster. I don't want that to be a surprise later on. That's why I wasn't worried too much about traveling through the forest alone. I can escape quickly if I have to. But I know you've had your share of difficulties with wizards and sorcerers, so I think it's best to tell you now."

Difficulties? Ryson thought. The word hardly seemed appropriate for all the delver had been through, and though Ryson didn't enjoy admitting to suspicions, he couldn't discount the history of his past encounters.

"Spell casters don't usually come to me unless there's some kind of trouble, and I've had more than my share lately."

"I can appreciate that," Talcun acknowledged. "Most people don't want trouble, but you've saved quite a few lives and helped a great many more. There are stories about you fighting demons, even the demon lord himself. I would say trouble has been finding you for some time now."

"I'm not looking for more."

"But you do look for answers. You're a purebred delver."

Ryson was becoming more apprehensive regarding the stranger's arrival. He spent his life sorting out mysteries. He knew how to arrange the pieces of a puzzle, and he quickly placed Talcun's words into a possible dilemma.

"Don't use that against me," the delver warned. "I know my curiosity can be strong, even overwhelming, but that doesn't mean it's an invitation to bring problems to my doorstep."

"Actually, I want to avoid just that. That's why I'm here, and that's why I'm talking to you like this."

"Then why don't you come out and say what brought you here?"

"I'm following someone," Talcun revealed. "That's what I was doing in Dark Spruce, but I'm finding it hard to stay on the trail. I was hoping you could help me."

"I'm not a tracker," Ryson admitted, clamping down on his own curiosity. "If that's what you're looking for, you're better off with a human scout—maybe one with a little delver blood in his background—but I can get distracted."

"I've heard that, and I believe that might work to my advantage."

"How could that be possible? If you're having a hard time following someone, the last thing that you need is a tracker who can't keep his focus on the trail."

"That would be true if it was an ordinary trail, but that's not the case here."

Ryson sighed heavily. He felt as if the stranger was purposely offering vague answers.

"There's nothing much that's ordinary anymore," the delver noted. "There are goblins and river rogues in the forest and shags in the hills. There's even a ghost who guards this town. He protects the citizens of Burbon, so if you intend on bringing trouble here, you might want to think very hard about that."

"I've heard of the ghost captain; a close friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was... still is." Ryson paused, wondering if the spirit of Sy Fenden might suddenly appear. He didn't look around expectantly, but he allowed a lingering silence to emphasize his point. And though the ghost warrior remained beyond their sight, the delver knew that the spirit of his friend remained watchful over the entire town. "We may not be able to see him, but I can assure you, he's ready to make his presence known if you're here to cause any problems."

"I don't dispute that for a moment. I think the stories about him are growing faster than the ones about you. Some people avoid this place completely because they're afraid of ghosts, even if they're considered helpful spirits. Then there's the other side. I'm sure you've noticed visitors in town hoping to catch a glimpse of a walking dead man."

"Burbon has been dealing with that for some time now. We don't mind guests, but we don't put up with troublemakers, never have."

"I'm aware of that as well. Burbon is known for its structure; everything in order, everything in its place."

"And the town guard ensures it stays that way."

"Led by a very capable Captain of the Guard," Talcun acknowledged.

"Yes, he is capable."

"Then we're both in agreement that Burbon is well protected and it would be foolish for me to come here with the wrong intentions."

"That hasn't stopped others from making that mistake in the past," Ryson declared.

"That's exactly why I told you that I was a magic caster. I didn't want to hide anything from you. I want your help, and I don't want you concerned about my intentions."

"That may be, but you said you need a tracker. That's not what I do."

"But you do solve mysteries, and that's what I'm following."

"Just tell me what this is all about," Ryson responded in a demanding tone.

"There's a sorcerer out there who's collecting spell remnants," the man replied as plainly as possible. "That's who I'm following, and that's who I want you to help me find."

"A sorcerer?"

"I think so. It's difficult to tell, but it would make sense that magic is being manipulated in some way to capture spell threads before they completely dissolve or decay."

"And you think this is a problem?" Ryson questioned.

"It could be. There's still a great deal I don't understand, but I do know that capturing spell fragments creates a number of questions."

"If that's the issue, then you'd be better off talking to Jure."

"He's a very powerful wizard, another friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Yes, and if this has to do with magic, he's the one you need."

"I'm more than willing to talk to him, but he's not who I need. I need you. I know you don't believe me, so let me explain why."

"I've been waiting for an explanation this entire time."

"The individual I've been following has collected a great number of spell fragments, including spells cast by Jure. That means Jure's magic is held within this person. That doesn't necessarily mean that Jure can be influenced by this individual, but it does create some potential hazards."

"What kind of hazards?"

"I won't know for sure until I understand what the person's intentions are."

"That's rather vague. From what I've experienced, there are always remnants and magical threads hanging around after a spell is cast. I've seen Jure analyze them. It gives him some insight into the skill of the spell caster, but it hasn't led to any critical problems."

"There's a difference between analyzing remnants and actually collecting spell fragments. This magic is being captured in a way that the history of the spell is apparently maintained, at least that's the way it appears, and that's what has me concerned."

"I'm not skilled enough with magic to understand the difference."

"You don't have to cast spells to see the potential danger. All you have to understand is this; it's extremely difficult to keep magical echoes from fading. Collecting spell fragments and maintaining their integrity would be like capturing a single breath and preserving its uniqueness from the surrounding air for an unlimited length of time. In terms of a spell, it would allow for the preservation of both knowledge and power that would expand over time."

"How can you be sure that's what's happening? You've admitted you haven't even located the person you think is responsible."

"Because I can sense the holes."

"Holes?"

"Yes. I don't know of any other way to describe it. It's the ability to sense the gaps left behind when magic is removed from the surrounding currents of energy. I've heard that Jure is very adept at following the flows of magic. It's an inherent gift which is part of his magical essence. My essence allows me to see the reverse. I don't sense currents. I sense an emptiness when magic is pulled out of the flow."

"Emptiness? In the magic?"

"Yes. It's like looking at a stream with a section of the water flow removed. There's a current on both ends, but there's a blank space in the middle."

"But this is magical energy. Is that really all that odd?"

"It can be. It depends on the gap. The holes I'm following are different. The first time I noticed something odd, I was in the city of Connel. I was there by chance really. I wanted to examine some dwarf construction. I've heard the dwarves know how to use certain techniques to restrict magical flows. That's interesting to someone like me. I wanted to see how the gaps appeared within the city. That was when I first noticed a strange kind of hole. It wasn't a natural break. It was a deliberate removal of magic, as if someone cut out a specific piece of energy."

"Maybe the difference was caused by the very thing that brought you to Connel," Ryson suggested. "Maybe it was all that dwarf construction."

"I considered that," Talcun confessed. "It seemed reasonable at the time, but I couldn't figure out why one particular gap was so different than every other break that I could find. I also realized there was something very unique about it. The break itself withstood natural decay."

"I still don't understand," Ryson admitted.

"Usually, surrounding magic fills in a gap rather quickly. It's not as fast as say water, where if you remove a bucketful, the surrounding water rushes in to fill the empty space. It's more like very loose sand. If you remove a bucket of sand, the hole remains. It takes time for loose sand to fill the hole, but it does start to fill up."

"So this particular hole stayed open for a longer period of time?"

"Exactly. It appeared as if the borders around the gap were similar to walls and the hole maintained its integrity for quite some time. It was clear there was something odd about it."

"There are a lot of things odd about magic."

"I can't argue with that, but this was something I had never seen before, so I looked for another gap. I found one a few blocks away. I was more careful in analyzing the surrounding magic. I searched for other echoes. I found very loose threads of a past spell

and I realized the hole must have contained the larger remnants of that incantation. It began to make sense."

"Maybe to you, but not to me."

"It's like history," Talcun explained. "It's important, but only if it's retained... and retained properly. You can't depend on memory or someone else's perception. You have to record it with a certain level of respect and honesty. The moment you start bending history to suit your needs, or cutting it up to support some perspective of reality, it loses its significance."

"And what's that have to do with magic?"

"The holes I've witnessed represent a deliberate attempt to record the exact makeup of previously cast spells."

"If that's all the person is doing, why are you even concerned?"

"It's like I said before, this has the potential to expand magical power and influence. The ability to capture and maintain spell remnants would allow an individual access to magical manipulations of varying degrees."

"And why would that be a problem?"

"It may not be. It may be the simple act of creating a base of knowledge. Such a base could be extremely beneficial. If misused, however, it could be just as dangerous. Imagine if someone decided to mix spell fragments from two powerful but opposing spells and then introduced the influence of a dark creature or a demon."

"Would that be possible?"

"If the individual gained access to spells cast by such creatures, then absolutely."

Ryson considered such a possibility for only a moment. He had witnessed a great number of dark creatures and demons enter Uton. Not all had the ability to cast spells, but some had cast incantations of incredible power, including the demon lord himself. He couldn't be sure if the remnants of such spells had been captured, but if they had, it certainly raised his concerns.

He remained confused, however, regarding why Talcun came to him.

"Alright, so it might be a problem, and it probably needs to be investigated, but why me? Why not someone like Jure?"

"Based on what I've seen, it appears that many of Jure's spells have been captured. That means the person I'm looking for has a degree of insight into Jure's essence. I can't be totally sure, but I believe it would be possible to use that insight to keep watch over Jure without him knowing about it. If that's true, the person I want to find would be able to avoid detection by avoiding Jure. That wouldn't be a problem for you. You don't cast spells, so your magical essence remains isolated within you."

"That's not completely true. I once gave a portion of my magic to Enin. Do you know him?"

"I do. I also know he lost his core. Any connection between your magical essence and Enin was removed at the same time, so I'm not worried about that."

"But you also said you weren't worried about me being distracted. Why do you think I'd be able to even follow this trail, let alone avoid some other distraction?"

"Because of your connection to everything that's happened. I've talked to a number of people regarding some of the spells that were captured. In many cases, you were involved. You may not be going around looking for trouble, but as we both know, it does seem to find you. We've already acknowledged that. Whether you want to admit it or not,

you have a strong connection to the events which led to these spells being cast. I can help you focus on those connections because I understand how the magic fits into history, especially your history."

Ryson shook his head in disgust. He didn't know whether or not to trust Talcun. He was annoyed at even facing that question. He might have been a delver, but he didn't want to go off on another hunt involving magic with some stranger. He had discovered enough mysteries on his own.

"You know, I'm really getting tired of this," Ryson admitted candidly. "I can't tell you how many times someone has come to me and told me about some problem. I can't solve them all. I don't even want to try. Now you show up and tell me about someone who's collecting magical remnants. You tell me I should be interested because of my history. I don't need my past thrown at me like that."

Talcun knew the delver was serious. He could see the weariness and frustration in Ryson's eyes.

"I know it's a lot to ask, especially considering all that you've been through."

"You have no idea what I've been through. I've had mysteries used against me. People I care about have died. It seems I've faced one catastrophe after another. I've had enough."

Talcun nodded.

"If that's how you feel, I understand. It's not what I hoped for, but I can't argue with you. It's fine. I'll try the elves."

"The elves?" Ryson questioned, becoming slightly more alarmed as opposed to relieved.

"They're my second choice. They understand magic better than humans, and their elite guards are trained to be excellent trackers."

"Then why didn't you go to them first?"

"Because they won't trust me."

Ryson considered his own encounters with the elves. Trust wasn't something they offered freely, and the camp in Dark Spruce didn't appreciate strangers creating issues they'd rather avoid.

"That's true, and they won't be pleased when you come to them with a problem. I know about that."

"They've helped you in the past, or so I've heard."

"That's also true, and now they hold it against me. Their elder thinks I bring nothing but hardship to his camp. He believes I'm a threat. After you tell him what's happening, he's probably going to look at you the same way."

"Standish Loftber is his name, correct?"

"That's right."

"This is the first time I've dealt with him."

"I don't think it's going to matter," Ryson advised.

"I can deal with it, if I have to, but that's one of the reasons I came to you first."

"What's the other reason?"

"I'm also worried about what might happen when they find the person who's collecting all these magical remnants."

"That could apply to anyone, not just elves."

"To a degree, that's probably true, but I've been able to determine a few things about the individual I'm trying to find. I'm fairly certain it's not an elf."

"You're sure?"

"Close to it. Remember, I can see the emptiness left behind after magic is absorbed. There's a pattern. I didn't understand it at first, but after a while, I started to recognize it. Elves, like delvers, have an internal magical essence. That essence affects the surrounding magical energy. It leaves a pattern. Whoever this is, it isn't an elf."

"Why do you think that matters?"

"You should already know. Elves don't trust outsiders. They don't know me and they won't trust who I'm following. I know I face the same issue with you, but I thought you might be a bit more accommodating. I also know that delvers are more curious than elves. I thought you'd be more willing to listen."

"So *you are* using my curiosity against me? That's something else I'm getting tired of."

"I'm not using anything against you. I'm telling you my concerns and why I came to you. If you don't want to help, I'll accept that. I told you I have another option. I'd rather depend on you than the elves, but I'll do what I have to do."

Ryson turned away and instinctively looked to the west. He couldn't see the trees of Dark Spruce—the wall surrounding Burbon blocked his view—but he could smell the forest. He thought of the elves and what might happen if they became involved.

He immediately considered Standish Loftber, the elder of the camp. Loftber would question Talcun before offering any assistance. The elf would almost certainly discover that Ryson refused to help. Loftber would wonder why. He might even believe Ryson was forcing the issue upon the elf camp. If anything happened to the elves, Loftber would probably blame the delver for that as well.

"I'd rather you didn't go to the elves," Ryson confessed.

"And I'd rather not, but I can't ignore this. I can't just turn away and pretend I didn't see any of this. I believe I discovered those gaps for a reason. I'm not sure what that reason is, but I have to follow through on this. That's what I believe, so that's what I'm going to do, but I can't do it on my own."

"Why not? You were able to follow the trail for a while, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was, but I can't keep up."

"What's the problem?"

"For one thing, there are too many dark creatures in the forest, too many false trails."

"I'm going to sense the dark creatures as well. Those false trails, as you call them, may distract me. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"Not if we work together. That's why I need help. I need a different set of senses, and yours are beyond anyone else's. I need someone who can read physical signs in the ground. I want you to look at the trail and tell me what it means beyond the obvious."

Ryson almost surrendered, but he decided to take one last precaution.

"Maybe I can help you," the delver offered, "but before I do anything else, I want you to talk to Jure... and Enin. I want them to hear what you have to say. Maybe Jure can't help you track this individual, but he can help me decide if this is something I should do."

"I'll be happy to talk to both of them," Talcun agreed.

Chapter 2

Ryson escorted Talcun to Enin's home, hoping he would find Jure there as well. He believed it was the best place to meet, and if Jure wasn't present, there was a good chance Holli Brances would know where to find him.

To the delver's good fortune, Jure was already there discussing certain magical techniques with Enin. When Ryson approached, Enin's dogs gleefully greeted him, as well as the delver's companion.

Ryson quickly explained the reason for his visit and allowed Talcun to describe what he had discovered and what he hoped to accomplish. Jure remained quiet at first, but Enin found the issue particularly disturbing. Holli listened attentively, watched the stranger's movements, but decided to leave the discussion of magic to those with far more experience.

"I understand how you can perceive the gaps in magical flows," Enin responded to Talcun's explanation, "but there has to be more to this than what you've said. The flows of magical energy are quite diverse. I'm not sure how you could attribute certain gaps to the actions of one specific individual. Due to the nature of the energy and how it reacts to the land and the elements, there would have to be numerous gaps within the currents."

"There are," Talcun confirmed.

"Then how are you able to find the ones created by the person you're following? It would be like identifying the flame of a burning candle within a house completely engulfed in flames."

"Not to me. For one thing, the breaks in the magic are very precise. In a way, they're like large snowflakes; the gaps are unique based on the hue of the magic absorbed and the amount of energy taken. Surrounding elements such as the land, the air, any moisture; all of these things tend to alter the characteristics of the gaps."

"That's exactly what I mean," Enin offered. "Every gap is different."

"Yes, but apart from the differences, I began to notice something which I couldn't ignore. Certain patterns may have varied, but the structure of the borders around certain gaps was unmistakable. Once I started seeing the similarities, they were almost impossible to miss. I believe these similarities were caused by the force which captured certain magical echoes."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," Enin acknowledged. "Sustaining the properties of spell remnants would require an extreme manipulation. Isolating individual fragments in the manner you describe is no easy chore. That kind of manipulation would have left a serious mark in the currents of magical energy."

"Then you understand."

"Only to a point. I keep seeing this in a larger context. Even if there was a clear indication of manipulation, it would still be surrounded by numerous gaps and twists in the energy. That's the part of your story which I find difficult to accept. Finding one or two identical gaps might be reasonable, but finding a trail seems like an impossible task, and yet you were able to follow this individual, at least for a time."

"That's what I'm concerned about," Ryson agreed. "He wants me to help him, but I can't even imagine what I need to follow."

"It would be difficult for anyone to follow," Enin responded. "Think of the process itself, and consider the individual capturing the actual fragments. How would one go about locating spell fragments before they fade away? And to do so at a distance? Such a task would be extremely daunting."

"I don't think so," Jure offered as he finally spoke up. "If this person is capable of capturing spell remnants, then it would certainly be possible for him or her to sense them, even from a distance. In a way, it would be like fishing with a line and a hook."

"What do you mean?" Enin questioned.

"The magical flows are the water. The line and hook would be a spell created by the individual capturing these remnants. The hook is cast out and searches for a recently energized incantation. The line goes back to the caster. When there's a hit, it sends a signal back, like a line that tugs when a fish takes the bait."

"So he lets the remnants call to him through the currents?" Ryson wondered.

"Probably. In fact, that's how I imagine Talcun is following this individual. Perhaps not exactly in that fashion, but it's probably close."

"I'm sorry, but that's not entirely correct," Talcun replied. "I don't cast any spells to follow the trail."

"Then how did you follow it?"

"I use passive magic. Just as you have the ability to follow magical flows, I can perceive the gaps from a distance. I just focus on finding them."

"But why not use active spells?" Jure questioned. "It would be more efficient... unless you lack the proper control. Is that a problem for you?"

"Yes... and no."

"What does that mean?" Ryson wondered.

"I have considerable ability when it comes to controlling magic. I may not be as efficient as Jure, and certainly not as capable as Enin, but I can cast in a shape close to a perfect circle."

"Then why would it be a problem?"

"It's not my skill that's the issue. It's the hue of my core. I cast in brown energy. It's very powerful, but extremely difficult to control."

"You cast in plague magic?"

"Again, that's a difficult question to answer."

"Try," the delver demanded. "I've seen what it can do. It's dangerous."

"I agree, but it's only a danger if it's not managed."

"I don't think anyone can manage a plague."

"You can... if you don't cast any spells. Since brown is the inherent color of my core, I don't take any risks with it by casting spells which might release even a fraction of its potential into the open flows of energy."

"You've never cast a spell?" Enin questioned, surprised by Talcun's response.

"I've only cast teleportation spells and portals. As you know, those are highly contained incantations. They have to be in order to allow for the proper manipulation of time and space. Under such circumstances, plague magic won't break free from the structure of the spell. It can't."

"And you've never cast another type of spell?" Enin pressed.

"No, I haven't."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"You wouldn't if you had my core. I know both you and Jure cast in white magic. You have equal control over all the hues, including brown magic. I realize you know its potential danger, but you have no idea what it's like to have a core filled with plague magic."

"That's not the point," Enin disputed. "If you are a proficient magic caster, you would feel a need to cast spells. It would be part of your natural existence. I no longer have a core, and I still ache to cast spells. It's beyond me unless someone deliberately feeds me with magical energy, so there's nothing I can do about it, but you... you have the means and an active core. I don't see how you could fight it."

"It's not easy," Talcun admitted, "but think about it; if you made a small error with your spell, the consequences would be extremely limited. If I made the same mistake, the magic could unleash something terrible."

"Isn't it possible a teleportation spell or a portal could do the same thing?" Ryson asked, suddenly concerned that Talcun might still be a threat to unleash a potential catastrophe just by opening a portal.

"No," Talcun replied with absolute certainty. "You don't have to take my word for it. Ask them."

Ryson looked to Jure and Enin.

"Is it really safe?"

"I would say yes," Enin offered, "though there is one possible exception."

"What's that?"

"If he sets the destination for his teleportation spell too close to his original position, the structure could break down. An attempt to teleport across a short distance is not a stable spell."

"That's why I avoid such spells," Talcun explained, "and that's another reason I need the delver's assistance."

Enin suddenly understood the visitor's needs.

"You can follow certain trails, but you don't want to risk teleportation spells which might not be stable, correct?"

"That's part of it," Talcun conceded. "I can follow the trail by examining patterns in the gaps of stored magic. It's not easy, but I can usually spot a general direction."

"If you know the direction, then why do you need me?" Ryson asked.

"Because the trail isn't always clear. I can spot the echo of a teleportation spell which has enough detail to lead me to the next destination. Unfortunately, some spells are rather short in range, and I know I shouldn't create the same path. It would probably be alright, but I won't take the chance."

"Then why not bring another spell caster?" Ryson offered. "Jure would be able to cast shorter teleportation spells without the same risk."

"That's true, but as I told you, some of Jure's spells have already been captured by this individual. If Jure starts casting teleportation spells, the individual might notice. If he or she doesn't want to be found, this would offer an alarm of sorts. That's something I need to avoid."

"You're certain of this?" Jure asked. "Echoes of my spell have been captured in the manner you've described?"

"Yes. The remnants of your spells are very distinct, especially lately. I don't know what changed, but there's elf essence mixed in with your magic, two different kinds. One is very powerful with a clear mark of golden energy."

Jure did not wish to make a detailed explanation regarding the elf essence within him or how he obtained it, but Talcun clearly noticed the effect within the remnants of past spells.

"And some of these spells were captured?" Jure questioned.

"Yes. There were only a few very small echoes of your magic remaining in the surrounding flow, but they were there... and very noticeable. The gap was extremely distinct."

Once again, Enin appeared visibly shaken by the warning. He considered different levels of magical traces and how they might be manipulated, but he remained unsure if the potential danger was even possible.

"Do you really believe the threads of past spells can be captured and maintained for long periods of time?" Enin asked, hoping his worst fears might be misplaced.

"I can only describe what I've seen," Talcun replied. "The borders around the gaps show distinct boundaries. I watched several for quite some time. They didn't breakdown. The gaps remained without any indication of collapsing."

"Perhaps it just takes time. When I had a core, there were methods I could use to place magical threads in a state of dormancy in order to keep them intact for a more detailed examination. Dormancy, however, is much different than capture and containment. It would also be less of a concern."

"That's what I thought at first, but there was no indication of a dormancy spell. The remnants were forcibly removed from the currents. The breaks revealed a level of permanence. Obviously, I can't confirm that. I can't watch them forever, but I did study several for extended periods of time. The echo was one of absolute removal. That's why the break in the flow is so severe and so easy for me to see."

"But if there was no spell of dormancy, how could such a thing take place?"

"That's one of the questions we need answered. We need to discover who's doing this, how it's being done... and why."

"Yes, we do," Enin agreed.

"I have a question," Ryson interrupted. "Why is this so important? What's the problem with collecting spell fragments?"

"It goes beyond the fragments," Enin counseled.

"Indeed it does," Jure agreed. "Imagine if someone obtained the ability to gain access to hundreds of different spells, spells cast by a variety of magic casters, including demons and dark creatures. Control over that much diverse energy would be something beyond anything any single spell caster could achieve."

"Spells could also be combined in ways that would lead to terrible consequences," Enin added. "Jure and I can cast in white magic, which means we have an idea what would happen if we mixed spells of equal power without much care to the potential consequences. Think of a shadow spell immersed in fire, or a raging flood enhanced with the additional power of an avalanche."

"I realize it's dangerous," Ryson acknowledged, "but we've been through this before. We've seen powerful spells cast in different colors. You're both acting like this is different."

"It is different," Enin insisted. "It's not just mixing hues, it's also combining the talents and creativity of numerous spell casters."

"Couldn't someone obtain the same thing just by examining the remnants of all these spells? Why is the idea of capturing the echoes so critical?"

"If the echoes can be retained for an indefinite period of time, they would retain all of their qualities. Yes, a magic caster could learn a great deal by simply studying the remnants of other spells, but so much more could be gained with uninterrupted access. A spell caster could experiment with spell remnants without them ever losing their original influence. There wouldn't be a need for memorization. Limits based on an individual's mental capacity would be removed."

"Think of having a library of spells," Jure added, "but not just an ordinary library. This would be one that would allow for immediate access. You could call on a spell and it would be available for your inspection instantly. You wouldn't have to locate a book and search through the pages. The detail would be beyond anything you could imagine."

"You also wouldn't have to rely on your own creativity," Enin continued. "Manipulations you never considered would be revealed to you in an instant, and you could mix those manipulations in a variety of ways. This goes well beyond having great control over magic or a large pool of the energy within your core. This is an ever expanding resource of power, and that can be very dangerous."

"Or it could be nothing more than a collection of knowledge," Talcun offered. "Keep in mind, I've seen nothing to indicate any malice involved. Everything I've noticed to this point reveals only a capturing of influence. Nothing more."

"You think the remnants are just being captured for the sake of preserving history?" Enin wondered.

"It's possible."

"That's exerting a lot of time and effort to create a collection of past spells. A simple diary would be so much easier."

"True, but I don't want to assume anything at this point. All I know for certain is that remnants of spells are being captured in such a way that their integrity is being maintained. I have no idea why or how they might be used in the future."

"We might have a lot of questions," Jure agreed, "but we can assume a bit about the person responsible. There has to be a level of focus and skill beyond what would be normal. I doubt a serp would be capable of such delicate magic, certainly not a river rogue or a goblin."

"And probably not a dwarf or an algor," Enin concluded. "Dwarves are naturally resistant and algors have cores incapable of storing energy for any substantial period of time."

"I'm fairly certain it's not an elf," Talcun added. "I haven't been able to locate any elf essence around the gaps I've inspected. Under the circumstances, I can't imagine how an elf spell caster could have hidden such a thing."

"That might also rule out any other dark creature. I think you would have noticed their magical essence."

"A human is the most likely candidate," Talcun agreed, "but all of this is just speculation on our part. That's another reason I'd like Ryson to come with me. I'm not good at reading physical clues like tracks in the ground or anything like that. If I show

Ryson the trail, he should be able to determine a great deal more about who's behind this. That in itself would help immensely."

"That's true," Enin agreed, apparently willing to approve the endeavor.

Ryson, however, remained skeptical.

"But I'm not just following some ordinary trail, and there's always the possibility I'll get distracted. Think about it, there's more to this than just capturing magical echoes. There must have been other things going on when the initial spell was cast... a struggle of some kind. "

"That's true," Talcun admitted. "At some sites, multiple spells were cast by different magic casters."

"So there were conflicts in these areas that I'm supposed to inspect?"

"Yes, there were, some of which you were involved in. Like I said, I noticed Jure's spells had been captured. Based on what I could learn of what happened in the area, you were there too."

"That's not going to help either. I'm going to be torn by following my senses or my memories."

"I understand all of that, but I still think you're the one I need. I'm not going to depend on you completely. I'm going to give you directions based on what I find. I need help looking at things beyond the magic, finding physical clues, things I don't see. Your delver senses are going to help me tremendously."

"You think you can keep me focused?"

"I think the trail is going to do that. All I have to do is explain to you what I see in the gaps. The more involved you are, the greater your curiosity will become."

"Until we run into something I think is even more important. You want to use my curiosity to help you. It doesn't always work that way. Sometimes it works against what I want to accomplish."

"If we run across something more important than what I'm currently following, then maybe it's better if we change directions."

"Just like that?" Ryson challenged Talcun. "You won't mind if we suddenly switch priorities and go off following something else? I find that hard to believe."

"I won't be happy, but I believe something important is happening here. I don't think I stumbled upon this trail by chance."

"You believe you were meant to find it?" Jure asked with a tone which seemed to reflect potential agreement with the assessment.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, but magic has a way of directing us where we need to go."

"It's not always magic," the elder wizard noted.

"You think it's some kind of higher power?" Talcun asked doubtfully.

"I've seen things beyond this existence, things I couldn't possibly explain to you."

"I think we've all seen things we can't explain since the magic has returned."

"What I saw was beyond magic."

"Then I say we leave that discussion for another time since what we're dealing with now is clearly defined by magical essence."

"You're the one who brought it up," Jure reminded Talcun.

"I was simply stating that I believe the magic itself can guide us. You see magical flows and I see gaps. These things can direct us. The delver has magic inside of him. It

can guide him as well. All I'm saying is that this is important, and I don't think we should be worried about Ryson losing his focus. I doubt it'll happen."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Ryson responded. "I admit you've got me interested. Jure and Enin think this requires our attention. I'm ready to see where it leads, but if this trail just turns into a jumble of different signs, I may not be able to help you."

"We can worry about that if and when it happens. I'm just hoping this means you're willing to go with me."

"I'm willing to give it a try."

"I do not believe Ryson should go alone," Holli finally entered the conversation. "By all accounts, there is potential for great danger here, danger based in magic. Ryson is well equipped to handle many threats, but this one may be beyond him."

"She's right," Jure agreed. "Ryson shouldn't go alone."

"But we have to give ourselves the best chance of finding the individual responsible for this," Talcun argued. "In some ways, another magic caster might be helpful, but there is also a potential for a great disadvantage. Capturing magical essence gives the person we're tracking a definite advantage over other spell casters. If Jure goes with us, I believe we definitely lose any chance we have in surprising this person."

"Surprise may not be that important," Holli noted.

"It might be if the person doesn't wish to be found. I'd rather not give away our position, if that's at all possible."

"I can only stress what I see as an even greater danger. You are a stranger to us. We know nothing about your intentions. Everything we have discussed is based on your findings, findings which appear to be questionable. We have no way of verifying your claims. "

"He knew about the elf essence within me," Jure reminded the elf guard. "He must have some ability to sense magic."

"That still does not mean we should trust everything he says."

"My dogs appear to trust him," Enin stated.

"Your dogs would trust goblins if they had bones in their pockets."

"You know that's not true. Every dog I've ever met can sense dark creatures in the distance... and none of them would take a bone from a goblin, even if it was offered freely. In many ways, they're the best warning system we have."

"I will concede that point, but I am merely suggesting that neither we nor the dogs can be completely certain of this man's intentions."

"I only intend to find the individual responsible for the gaps I've seen," Talcun responded. "Everything I've seen indicates spell fragments are being captured. Something like that can't be ignored."

"I am not trying to be overly suspicious," Holli replied. "It is my nature to be cautious and I am trained to be vigilant. Due to our recent experiences with strangers and magic, I remain convinced that Ryson should not accompany you on this undertaking without additional support. To do so would be a foolish mistake."

"I don't really need a chaperone," Ryson argued. "I can take care of myself."

"You have proven that time and time again," Holli conceded, "but these particular circumstances raise many concerns. You are dealing with magic, which you yourself admit is an area somewhat foreign to you. We do not know this man, and since I am not as trusting as you, that is my greatest concern."

"But he said he doesn't cast spells. What can he do to me?"

"We have to take him at his word for that."

"Actually, we don't," Jure explained. "I've been examining the flows of magic around him since he said he cast in brown energy. He's telling the truth about that. I can sense the depth of his core. It's definitely pure brown magic. It's very powerful, but it's contained."

"In my mind, that is all the more reason for us to be extremely careful."

"What if you accompanied Ryson?" Jure wondered. "Would that satisfy you?"

"I wouldn't mind," Talcun offered. "You're a trained elf guard, right? You might be able to help track this individual."

Holli quickly explained her reluctance.

"My first priority is to protect Enin and Jure. I am hesitant to leave them under such circumstances."

"We've discussed this before," Jure responded. "I don't need—or want—you looking after me all the time. I appreciate your concern, but it's Ryson who would be better served by your protection than me."

"I agree with Jure," Enin added. "I have no plans to leave Burbon. This town is well protected. I don't think you have to worry about me."

"At this moment, I am worried about many things," Holli admitted. "If there is a sorcerer walking these lands capable of capturing magical remnants, then I must keep all my priorities in mind."

"Shouldn't that mean finding this individual would be important?"

"It would, but I would also prefer we all remain together," the elf advised.

"That's not possible under the circumstances," Jure noted. "Talcun's right about that as well. If this individual has captured my magic, I shouldn't be the one trying to find him. With my rare mix of elf essence and white magic, I'm going to shine like a beacon if I get anywhere near this person. Until we know more, that's not a good idea."

"Which is another reason why I am reluctant to leave you or Enin alone. You are both potentially vulnerable."

"And I just said you don't have to worry about me."

"And I will honor your wishes if you insist, but my duty to Enin is another matter."

"But I'm protected here in Burbon," Enin repeated. "The spirit of Sy Fenden guards the entire town and its citizens."

"That does not alter the focus of my duty as I see it," Holli maintained. "When I was banished from my camp, I offered to be your guard. You agreed."

"But I really don't see the danger to me."

"Jure has offered his magic to you in the past. You used it to cast spells. You may not have a core, but your magical essence is now aligned with Jure's energy. You are as vulnerable as he is. Jure has set limits on my duty to him, which I have accepted. When it comes to you, my responsibility has no such limits... unless you now wish to cast me aside."

Enin knew he could never make such a request.

"Do as you see fit," he conceded. "I trust you."

"Then we still have an issue to resolve," Holli stated. "I remain convinced that Ryson must not risk this endeavor on his own. Someone needs to accompany him."

"What about Vraya?" Jure offered. "I know you don't trust her, but she's helped us in the past, and she's very powerful."

"Actually, there may be another option," Talcun realized. "How about a cliff behemoth?"

Chapter 3

Ryson followed Talcun out of Burbon's western gate and past the edge of Dark Spruce Forest. The delver's senses quickly picked up the presence of the cliff behemoth. Ryson could hear the soft, steady breathing of the giant. He also heard birds chirping happily in the same area, revealing an absolute sense of security in the company of the faithful colossus. While scanning the paths through the trees, he spotted the unmistakable form of a towering figure capable of dispatching the largest of shags with a single swat of one massive hand.

Ryson found his enormous friend standing beside a tall, mature oak, though the immense frame of the behemoth made the wide tree trunk appear more like a meager sapling in comparison.

"Dzeb?" Ryson questioned the giant.

"It pleases me to see you," the behemoth greeted the delver with a serene smile.

"What are you doing out here?"

"What Godson wishes me to do."

Ryson had become far more willing to accept such responses, but the circumstances he faced required greater detail than Dzeb had offered.

"That's fine, but what exactly are you supposed to be doing... just standing among the trees?"

"I'm watching out for you."

"Out here? I thought you left for the mountains."

"That's true, but before I left I told you to consider how blessings come in different measures. Have you considered such things?"

"I suppose I have, but we can get back to that later. Right now I need to understand why you think it's necessary to look after me. Is there more trouble on the way?"

"There is always trouble in this existence."

"That's probably true, but that's not what I meant. Is there something specific I need to be aware of?"

"Specific? You tend to ask me that on nearly every occasion. You seem to want details about the challenges you face. How can one be specific about such things? Trouble comes in many forms."

"But you're here... now. That's not what I expected. Why are you standing in the forest and why do you think I need to be protected?"

"I already explained that. Godson wishes me to protect you as best I can."

"But from what?"

"From a growing danger."

Ryson sighed heavily. He realized Dzeb wasn't going to give him a more detailed answer, so the delver tried another path forward.

"Why didn't you come into town? Talcun told me he met you out here."

"He did," Dzeb confirmed. "I saw him as he passed through the forest."

"That much is obvious. He said you were out here and that he spoke to you. What did you say to him?"

"I told him to have a pleasant day."

"That was it?"

"Did he tell you I said something more?" the giant questioned with a slightly confused expression.

"No, but I'm just trying to understand all of this. You just told me that you're waiting in the forest because Godson wants you to look after me. A stranger walks through the woods, sees you, and you tell him to have a pleasant day."

"Should I have told him to have a miserable day?"

"No, but maybe you should have asked him what he was doing in the woods."

"This is a place of beauty. Look at it." Dzeb glanced about the forest before continuing. "There are chipmunks, birds, squirrels, rabbits, and deer among the trees. Why wouldn't he be out here?"

"Because there are also river rogues, goblins, and hook hawks out here."

"Not that I have noticed."

"Well, they're not going to bother you."

"Then they wouldn't have bothered him while I was here."

"But didn't you wonder what he wanted, especially since he came to see me... and you're here to look after me?"

"I am not as curious as you."

"So you weren't worried he might be part of some kind of trouble?"

"He didn't have the look of a troublemaker."

Ryson took a quick glance at Talcun. The magic caster shrugged as if to say that he wouldn't know what a troublemaker looked like but that he was happy he didn't appear like one.

"You could tell that by just looking at him?" Ryson asked, turning his attention back to the giant.

"Of course not, but sometimes you have to trust your instincts."

"Instincts aren't always enough."

"That's true, but sometimes that is all we have... that and faith. And what would you have me do? Stop and question everyone who attempts to enter the town?"

"No, but I doubt there have been a lot of travelers coming through the forest."

"I apparently do not view the forest in the same light as you."

"Well, how many people have come through the woods today... other than Talcun?"

"None," Dzeb admitted, but he seemed genuinely perplexed why that might be the case.

"Then don't you think it's strange that Talcun passed by you... alone?"

"I'm alone."

"He's not a cliff behemoth."

"That is true. I would have noticed that."

"Then why didn't you question him?"

"I didn't think it was necessary."

"But you obviously thought it was necessary to stand guard out here."

"I'm not guarding the forest. I'm keeping watch over you. There's a difference."

Ryson realized that he wasn't making any progress and attempted to make the giant answer a more direct question.

"Fine, but that still doesn't explain why you didn't come into the town, especially if what you just said is true. Standing in the forest and letting the only person you see walk right by you hardly seems effective."

"Have you been harmed in any way?"

"No, but..."

"Then it has been very effective."

"But it doesn't make any sense. Why didn't you tell me you were out here?"

"I didn't want to disturb you."

"You wouldn't disturb me. I'd be happy to see you."

"You don't appear happy now."

"Because I'm confused!"

"It's not confusing. I'm here to watch over you, but I don't wish to influence your decisions."

"What decisions?"

"Decisions you must make on how to lead your life. I realize I can be a distraction, and you have often stated that distractions cause you to lose your focus."

"That's why they're called distractions, but that's not the point. You're standing out in the forest, apparently to keep me safe, but you don't want to influence me. You seem concerned about the decisions I might make. I'm worried about the same thing. This has to be about more than what shirt I decide to wear, right?"

"Of course."

"Then how do I make any decision without wondering why you're here?"

"It seems to me you can do so with ease. You apparently decided to follow this man, even if you seem concerned about him being a troublemaker. That was a rather important decision. You decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Doubt is the enemy of faith."

"That's great, but it might have helped if you came to see me before he arrived."

"Or it might have made things more difficult for you. If I was in town, you might have changed your decision."

Ryson considered the possibility, but then spoke of a contrary truth.

"You didn't have to come into town to affect my decision. Your being in the woods changed a lot. Holli didn't want me to follow Talcun alone. Talcun knew you were out here and suggested that you could join us. That changed Holli's opinion."

"That is the elf guard, but what did you decide?" Dzeb asked, clearly interested in the delver's response.

"We all thought it was a good idea."

"We?"

"Yes, it satisfied Holli. Enin felt your presence would offer added security, and Jure said that if you were out in the forest, it probably meant we were supposed to meet up with you."

"Jure continues to follow his faith. I find that reassuring."

"So Jure was right? We are supposed to meet up with you?"

"You're supposed to do what you think is right."

"You're not helping."

"I'm here to help, if help is what you need."

"What I need is a straight answer."

"Then ask a straight question."

Ryson nodded and decided to be very specific, and to use Dzeb's own reasoning as a basis for better results.

"Talcun is following an individual who is capturing spell remnants. He's asked for my help in following that trail. Does Godson want me to help Talcun?"

"I would never be so bold to speak for Godson."

Realizing his question was specific but misdirected, Ryson moved his focus back to Dzeb.

"Do *you* think I should follow Talcun?"

Dzeb paused as he glanced at the magic caster.

"I don't think he means you harm," Dzeb offered. "Has what he said created questions for you?"

"More than I would like."

"I find that confusing," the giant confessed.

"You're confused?"

"Yes, you're a delver. Questions give you purpose. How could there be more questions than you desire when they provide such motivation?"

"Because too many can overwhelm me."

"You don't appear overwhelmed. You appear to be searching for a direction, and you're hoping that I can give you that direction. That is the very reason I didn't come into town. You need to choose your own path."

"Alright, I see your point, but you have to admit that just being out here alters the situation. Holli didn't want me to travel without an escort. You've provided an answer to that problem."

"No, Godson has provided the answer."

"Does that mean you would be willing to come with us?"

"Of course. I am always willing to offer you my assistance whenever I can."

"Great, but I have to admit, I'm still confused. Why does it matter whether you waited out here or came into town? You're still here and it does make an impact on my decision."

"Does it? Or did you make the decision before you knew I was here?"

"I guess I made it beforehand, but I have to admit, seeing you here makes me feel a lot better."

"Then everything is as it should be. You made your decision, and I am here to watch over you. There was no influence upon your choice."

In looking at Ryson's expression, the giant realized he had not offered nearly enough of an explanation to satisfy the delver, and he decided, rather uncharacteristically, to offer additional details.

"You have faced many challenges over the past few seasons," the giant continued.

"While you have been offered Godson's blessings in many different ways, you have also revealed a willingness to place the needs of others above your own. You appear to wish to continue in that fashion, but I did not wish to place added pressure upon you."

"But you said you came here to watch over me."

"That is Godson's wish."

Though Ryson was accepting of the behemoth's faith, he struggled with a number of details. He took the opportunity to question Dzeb regarding apparent contradictions in the giant's stated position.

"That's another thing I don't understand. If Godson wants to protect me, why does He send you?"

"You would prefer someone else?"

"No, that's not what I mean. If I'm under Godson's protection, why would I need anyone to look after me? Wouldn't His protection be enough in itself?"

"Of course it would."

"Then why are you here?"

"I would never ignore the wishes of Godson."

"But that's the question. Why would Godson send you to look after me if His protection is enough on its own? It seems to me you're being sent on a meaningless task."

"You misunderstand. There are no meaningless tasks offered by Godson. Yes, His will is enough to protect you, but His will does not end with you. We all have our paths to follow. It may not be clear why He sent me to look after you, but it will make its importance known when the time is necessary."

"So you may serve some other purpose?"

"I serve Godson."

"I get that, but you said you were here to look after me."

"I am."

"We're going in circles here."

"You are the one directing us."

"I suppose I am, so let's try this instead; I'm trying to understand you better. There was a time I dismissed the things you said when it came to Godson. I let you believe whatever it was that guided you, and I left it at that. I don't want to do that anymore. I want to understand it."

"What is there to understand? Godson directs me and I go where I'm directed. It's very simple."

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm trying to make some of the pieces fit together. I realize I can't get them all to line up, but there are some things which seem like flat out contradictions."

"I don't mean to interrupt," Talcun stated, "but is this really the time for this?"

"To a degree, I think it is," Ryson responded. "You yourself said you were following this trail for a reason, that it wasn't just some idle curiosity."

"That's true, but I wasn't talking about some guidance from the supernatural. I think the magic is guiding me, and that's real. You should know that. Magic is inside of you. And you've seen what individuals like Jure can do with it. There's no question about its power."

"I've also seen Dzeb show up with no other explanation than Godson directed him. His contributions have been just as important and as powerful as any spells I've ever seen."

"He's a cliff behemoth. I don't know if there's any creature more powerful in all of Uton."

"But something guides him to go where he needs to be. It can't be just coincidence."

"Why can't it be the magic?" Talcun offered.

"Is that what you think?"

"I think it's possible," Talcun replied. "Did you even believe cliff behemoths existed before the magic returned to Uton?"

"No," Ryson admitted.

"You had no contact with them. As far as I know, neither did anyone else. They stayed in the mountains, out of sight. When the magic returned, they felt the need to become more involved. That's what I was talking about when I said I think there's a reason I found the gaps in the magic. There's more to this energy than we can imagine. I think it can guide us, just as it might guide a cliff behemoth to come out of the Colad Mountains and seek out a delver in need."

Ryson turned to Dzeb.

"Do you think Talcun's right? Do you think the magic has been influencing you?"

"Godson uses many things to invoke His will. If He wishes to use the magic, the energy will obey."

"But what if the magic is working on its own?"

"I do not answer to magic," Dzeb stated with absolute certainty.

"He can view it any way he wants," Talcun allowed. "I'm not here to discuss who or what has the greater influence. I'm trying to find out how spell fragments are being captured and why. Maybe we should leave it at that."

Ryson considered his situation. He was standing between a cliff behemoth following the direction of Godson and a wizard with a core filled with plague magic. There they were in a forest filled with elves and dark creatures. He was about to begin searching for an unknown individual capable of capturing spell remnants in a way he could not begin to understand.

He wondered if he should turn around and head back home, forget everything that was said, but he knew he couldn't. In the end, he decided to base his decision on the very things Dzeb offered as an explanation for his own decisions. There were times you had to rely on instincts... and faith.

Ryson knew what his instincts told him. Out in the forest, there was a trail to be followed, and although he certainly wasn't looking for more trouble, he was always looking for answers.

As for faith, he was ready to make that a larger part of his life. Dzeb was a potential model to follow. The cliff behemoth based his life on the Book of Godson, and the giant followed his faith diligently. Ryson didn't understand how Godson spoke to Dzeb but he wouldn't doubt the giant's sincerity.

With a trail to follow and a cliff behemoth prepared to join him, Ryson knew he needed to accept the challenge before him.

"Alright," Ryson said to Talcun. "Take us to the last known position of the individual we need to find."

Chapter 4

"So what do we do?" Neltus asked the demon lord after they returned to Rul's sanctuary at the center of Demonsheol. "Start a war between your demons and the elves? That should bring Birk Grund out into the open. He's the Captain of the Elf Guard. He would coordinate the elf warriors' defenses."

Rul grunted with obvious annoyance.

"What?" Neltus questioned defensively. "You think he would only worry about protecting himself? I don't think so. He's not the camp elder. That's Standish Loftber."

"I know who he is," the demon lord hissed.

"Well, the elves protect the elder, but Birk Grund will be involved in almost any major battle. He may not always be on the front line, but he'd definitely be in the fight somewhere."

"You believe you know so much, and yet you know so little."

"I know enough about the elves to understand how they'd fight a war."

"This is not about the elves."

"Of course it's about the elves. You're the one who said that Birk Grund examined Ryson's essence. We need to get him here so you can force that information out of him."

"And you believe a war between demons and the elves will create that opportunity?"

"Of course it will. The elves won't have a choice but to fight back. I know that much."

"And yet you completely disregard history."

"What are you talking about? It's history that guides the elves. They have this thing they call elflore. I may not have read it, but I know it puts an emphasis on defending the camp elder at all costs. If demons attack their camp, the elves will be focused on protecting Loftber. The elf captain will be part of that defense. That would make him vulnerable."

Rul stared at the human wizard with obvious disgust.

Neltus found the gaze quite unsettling.

"Why am I wrong?" he demanded.

"Do you know why I can stand here in this desolate crater for ages on end?" the beast finally questioned the human wizard.

"Because you can't go anywhere else?" Neltus replied, knowing he was an essential part of the demon lord's plans and that Rul would not dare strike out at him, even in anger.

"Those are the words of the foolish. Even when I control all of existence, I will remain here. The reality of Demonsheol is that it is comprised of history. It is the past which feeds my realm, and in turn, feeds me."

"Then I guess you can call me foolish because that doesn't make any sense. If you live only in the past, you'll never catch up to the present."

"And yet it was you who just suggested that a war between the demons and the elves would be sufficient in drawing out the elf captain. Let me show you why you are wrong."

With Rul's magic still clinging to the wizard's coreless essence, the demon lord was able to send echoes of the past directly into Neltus' consciousness. Rul sliced out a particular image of a recent battle which took place in Dark Spruce Forest. The beast

minimized the hate, anger and fury caught within the shadows of the past in order to keep Neltus' mind intact.

Unable to break from the flow of images, Neltus' consciousness was filled with memories from another time and another place. Although they were nothing more than echoes of a past encounter, the shadows of history took vibrant form. They engulfed the wizard's thoughts and filled his senses. It was as if he had been transported back in time and was standing within the forest of Uton during a horrible battle.

Demons of all shapes and sizes raged throughout Dark Spruce Forest. With fury and venom, they attempted to overwhelm the elf camp hidden among the trees. Some raced across the land with great speed. Others lumbered forward with unimaginable force.

Not one demon, however, ever reached even the outer edge of the elves' defenses. An insurmountable wave of force kept them at bay. Spells of lightning and wind battered their bodies. Fire and ice sent them scurrying for cover. Powerful blasts of sheer determination plucked them out of the air and from the ground and tossed them into portals sending them back to Demonsheol.

In his ears, Neltus heard the deafening howl of thousands of wolves. He could almost feel their fangs on his flesh, though not a single wolf ever came in physical contact with any demon.

Neltus saw the image of a powerful spell caster rise before him, a wizard capable of casting incantations of pure white energy in two perfect circles. Neltus recognized Enin immediately and realized the wolves had fed Enin with near infinite flows of astonishing power.

Believing the human wizard had witnessed enough, Rul pulled back on the echoes of history. He looked down upon Neltus with scorn.

"That is one small fragment of history between your world and mine, and that is exactly why a war between the elves and the demons will fail."

Neltus needed several moments to recover from the experience. When his senses finally adjusted to his current surroundings, he considered what he had seen.

"I heard about that battle," the human wizard finally revealed, "but I never imagined it was so intense. I can't believe how much energy Enin used."

"Your pathetic ideas of power are not important. What matters is that you understand the significance of that event."

"Significance? It's obvious. Enin fought off an entire legion of demons."

"Exactly. That is why the past matters."

"But what does that have to do with the elf captain? It's him we're after, not Enin."

"The demons were hunting elves, not Enin. The coreless wizard interfered. With the energy offered from animals throughout Dark Spruce Forest, he was able to defeat a force that should have decimated the elves."

"They were defeated by Enin and the wolves," Neltus reminded the demon lord, "not the elves. If we attack now, there's no reason for Enin to get involved."

"There was no obvious reason for him to get involved during the assault you just witnessed! That is what you fail to comprehend."

"But the demons were a threat to the forest. That's why the wolves attacked, and they needed Enin to utilize their magic. If demons aren't threatening the forest, the wolves won't get involved."

"I give you a glimpse of reality, and yet you continue to ignore it."

"I'm not ignoring anything."

"There's more behind all of this than just the desire of the wolves hoping to protect their meager lands! History is more than just a recollection of the past. It is a clear reckoning of power and influence."

"But we're talking about two different situations."

"You speak as if events occur independent of themselves, as if one thing has nothing to do with another. There are underlying connections which cannot be dismissed, and history reveals the truth behind overlapping desires and the bindings of destiny. These are the foundations of fate which cannot be overlooked."

"If that's true, then we're back to my original point. I asked you if this idea of yours was futile and you said it wasn't. You said we could use the elf captain against Ryson, but now you're saying we can't go against history... or fate. Which is it?"

"It is both! We utilize the past to see what is and isn't possible. A war between demons and elves will rekindle echoes of history and reaffirm what has already happened. That is something we cannot allow. We must not place any emphasis on previous failures."

"That sounds like you want to try something new."

"I am trying something new! I have allowed you to determine the course of the future which will then become the past. Even at this moment, we are pursuing a thread which pulls on the structures of history. With such a thread in my possession, I can unravel that which has already occurred and then rebuild it to strengthen my claim on existence."

"How can you rebuild history to suit your needs? Based on everything you just told me, it's history that feeds you. If you change it, you'll change your own existence."

"Not here, not in Demonsheol. Actions taken in my realm are based on my will."

"But you've lost here. Ryson defeated you right at the center of Demonsheol."

"I have never been defeated!" Rul growled. "I still rule!"

"But you're not always able to get what you want."

"You continue to view events in terms of your limited perspective. What I want is an opportunity. That is what I have always craved."

Neltus shook his head.

"Now I'm completely confused," the human wizard admitted. "You talk about the past as if it's the only thing that matters, and then you tell me you're looking to the future."

"Of course, because eventually the future becomes the past. One diminishes and the other expands. That is why I will ultimately succeed. What has been done reflects a choice already made, and the weight of selfishness builds upon a foundation which cannot be undone. My realm grows in strength because I have always focused on the certainties of events which have already occurred."

"You just said you want to change history, that you want to unravel what has already occurred."

"I will not alter the events themselves. I intend to redesign the structure upon which they are built. That is the difference."

"So you're going to keep history the same, but you're going to rebuild it so it points to the ending of your choosing?"

"Finally you begin to see."

"Only a part of it. I see how a choice in life can lead a person down a certain path, but it's the whole idea of free will that can still cause you a problem. It's only the bad

decisions which feed you. There are people out there that dedicate themselves to helping others. It doesn't really get them anywhere. In fact, I've seen a lot of good deeds come back to haunt those people. Still, the basis for their actions isn't something that's going to help you. If anything, I think that kind of history might even oppose you. Wouldn't any benevolent action make you weaker... and strengthen anyone who goes against you?"

"No, another foolish mistake in the structure of power and fate. While I gladly accept the malevolent shadows of past behavior, the echoes of compassion and kindness are spread across all of existence. They are wasted on a broad sentiment as opposed to collected and combined into a greater force."

"So you remain at the center of this cavity and feed on history? I can see how that would add to your power, but doesn't it limit your ability to move forward? If you become so focused on the past, how do you know what might happen in the future?"

Rul roared in furious frustration. He considered ripping one of Neltus' limbs off his body and then healing the wound so the wizard wouldn't bleed out. He would then ask if Neltus still wished to hear an explanation or if he would do as he was told.

To Rul's great dismay, such a demonstration of power would destroy everything he hoped to accomplish. In order to prevent making such a rash mistake, the demon lord turned away from the wizard, but his rage required satisfaction. Rul randomly selected a demon far beyond the edge of his sanctuary but not beyond his reach. He sent a wave of fury condensed by magical influence out across his realm.

The boiling energy washed over the hapless demon and ripped it to shreds. The creature's existence ended in an instant of pure agony, never understanding why its master decided to unleash such torment.

For Rul, there was nothing to understand but his own level of frustration. He could finally see potential victory folded into the circumstances he faced. And yet, the individual who offered the possible means toward absolute authority over all existence proved to be nothing more than a witless fool. Of all the wretched creatures which could have ended up before him, he was forced to deal with an obnoxious wizard, with no core of his own, demanding answers to pointless questions.

Neltus did not see the result of Rul's rage. The victim was far out in the distance, well beyond the wizard's sight.

"Well?" Neltus finally asked.

Rul swirled about, held most of his anger in check, but finally revealed what he believed should have been obvious.

"The structure of our reality is based on the past and the future. In absolute terms, there is no present."

"Excuse me?" the wizard responded, baffled by the explanation.

"If you wish to understand my intentions, you must grasp this concept. Reality is divided into two structures... what has happened and what will happen."

"What about what's happening right now? I know this realm is filled with the past, but we're standing in the present, aren't we?"

"Do not interrupt me! The present is an arbitrary concept. By its own terms, it is impossible to define. What you define as the present has either just passed or hasn't yet occurred. There is an absolute border between the two, but there is no explicit space which can hold the instant in time you wish to consider. The present is an abstract contrast, an imperceptible line which separates the two concepts of time."

Neltus was momentarily stunned as he considered the truth behind Rul's words. He was unable to define the present in absolute terms. It was just as Rul described; it was a border with absolutely no measurable width.

"So things either have happened or they haven't," the wizard noted.

"And now you finally begin to see, but you still must grasp the importance of this division. That which has happened builds over time. That which hasn't happened diminishes as time passes. Both are separated by a concept which cannot be clearly defined, but the weight of time clearly moves from one side to the other."

"For that to be relevant, that would imply there is an end to the future," Neltus stated. "Otherwise, it wouldn't matter how much time moves from the future to the past because there would always be an infinite amount of time ahead of us."

"Of course there's an end to the future. There is an end to all things."

"Even you?"

Rul's face distorted into an ugly mask of perverted spite. Not long ago, Rul had absorbed the essence of a human sorcerer and a slink ghoul. The remnants of each made their mark on the beast's twisted features. The horrible demonstration highlighted the truth behind the demon lord's remarks.

"Yes, even me," the creature hissed, "but that is based on yet another error mixed within the bounds of creation. I will not remain in this state forever."

"But you said you would always be at the heart of Demonsheol."

"And I will! But when I become the ultimate authority of all existence, there will be no limit to my influence. That is what the end of time will bring because I will rewrite the rules of existence. There will be no concept of time. There will be no free will. There will be only me and what I deem necessary. Therefore, my existence as the lord of all demons will end and I will be the lord of all that is! The important factor is that I must be in control at the instant time ends, for it is that moment which will define eternity."

Rul's revelation did not surprise the wizard. He would have expected as much, even before he entered Demonsheol. Neltus understood the trappings of power, and Rul Saattan wished to encompass it all. And though Neltus feared such an outcome, he remained focused on his own desires. He too wished for power and influence, and that would only come after the delver's demise.

"That's what you want, but that's not what concerns me. I won't be around at the end of time."

Rul looked down upon Neltus and snorted but did not admonish the wizard for his shortsightedness.

"I want to give Ryson Acumen what's coming to him," Neltus continued. "You can go on and on about the past, the present and the future, but I still don't see what that has to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you," Rul huffed. "It is why I have given you this opportunity. You asked for an explanation, so listen closely. At the beginning of time, the future overwhelmed the past. Much of the future has always been constrained by certain structures, you might call them the designs of fate, but the allowance of free will creates unseen passages within those structures."

"That's what you talked about before... the importance of my choice in staying here."

"And you should now comprehend that the importance of that choice is far greater now than it would have been ages ago."

"Why is that?"

"Because of what I just explained to you. As time passes, the future begins to collapse. There are fewer opportunities for free will to make an impact."

"Wouldn't that mean free will is less important now than it was long ago?"

"No, you fool. Just the opposite. A choice made now is far more significant because there are fewer of them available in relation to the available future. Think of it this way; imagine there are a near infinite number of closed doors before you. Only one leads to my realm. The chances of you opening that door are infinitely low to the point there is practically no danger for you. But time passes and choices are made. One by one, the doors are opened. Now there are only a few doors before you, maybe only three or four. What door you open is extremely important, not only to you, but to all of existence."

Neltus finally realized the full extent of Rul's strategy. The demon lord was using the concepts of time and dwindling choices to enhance the significance of the wizard's decision to remain in Demonsheol.

"If that's true, then maybe I should leave now. I can still open a portal to Uton, can't I?"

Rul gritted his teeth angrily, but revealed the truth.

"Yes, you can," the demon lord grunted. "I have put no conditions upon your decision to stay."

"And that would mean the opportunity for you to seize ultimate power would remain closed."

Rul would not allow that possibility to exist.

"Is that what your decision was based upon? Are you here to save existence from my dominance? I thought you wished to punish the delver?"

"I do, but I still don't know how that can happen. You've gone on and on about how all of this will lead to your domination, but how does any of that relate to the delver? I asked if we should start a war between the demons and the elves, and you said such a war was pointless. I realize that the captain of the elf guard might hold the key to finally defeating Ryson Acumen, but how do we get to him if there are these structural designs of destiny that will protect him... just as they protected the elves in Dark Spruce when Enin channeled all of that magic against the demons that invaded the forest?"

"We use history to our favor. That is how we succeed. You suggested we start a war between the elves and demons. Such a tactic has already failed. Another attempt would only serve to revive the echoes of that failure. We need to draw strength from the past not weakness."

"But there doesn't seem to be a weakness when it comes to the delver."

"You know that is not true. You followed the delver, you examined his history. What did you learn?"

"I thought the only way to beat him was to attack him indirectly. His friends suffered in the past, and he always blamed himself. That's why I went after his wife, but that failed as well."

"No, it did not fail, not completely. It brought you here. Now expand upon that."

"Ryson saved his wife, and I got stuck here. What's left to expand?"

"Ryson did not save his wife. Ryson followed the structures of destiny. He remained upon the path of fate. Ryson's wife was saved when destiny was satisfied."

"I don't know how to keep fate from being satisfied."

"You already have. You chose to stay here. You made that choice on your own, with no outside influence."

"You're saying I'm defying fate?"

"I'm saying you've opened a door. The elves also opened a door when they demanded to examine the delver's weaknesses. That was their choice. We connect the two without allowing fate to intervene."

"That would mean we would have to continue to let the elves choose the path forward as opposed to forcing them into a conflict."

"To a degree, that is correct, but we also must allow your decision to prevail upon certain aspects of time and history. The difference is that the elves choice was made within the confines of their land. Your decision was made here, in Demonsheol."

"But what can I do here, other than open portals?"

"That's all you need to do, but you must place those openings within a plan that will allow you to take advantage of what the elves have done. I can't make the decisions for you. I can't even give you direction. All I have done is explained to you the structure of things which have already occurred."

"Okay. It seems to me that the elf captain is the key to all of this. That much is obvious from what you've told me. I need to place him in a position where he can be captured quickly."

Neltus paused as he tried to put certain pieces together here.

"You have hunters in your realm, yes?" the human wizard finally asked. "Demons with speed and power capable of capturing nearly any type of prey?"

"Be careful," Rul snarled. "I already warned you that starting a war with the elves is doomed to failure."

"I know that. I'm not thinking about starting some battle."

"A hunter sent to capture the elf captain will also fail. I once sent a hunter after Ryson Acumen. It was a decision which led to very complicated circumstances."

"I imagine it did, but I'm also not thinking of just sending out a hunter in hopes of catching the elf captain. The key is forcing the elves into a decision which places him at risk but doesn't involve direct intervention from any demon. I know the elves blame Ryson for many of the problems they've faced."

Rul began to grin with devious glee. Neltus ideas came from his own scheming mind without any direction from the demon lord. The human wizard was creating a web of deceit and within the parameters of his own free will.

"I don't want to use a shape-shifting demon," Neltus continued. "That would be direct influence from a demon, and I want to avoid that."

"You are correct in that regard," Rul enthusiastically acknowledged, "but you should know that hunters do have the ability to shift their appearance."

"I still don't think that's what I want. I'll think about it. What I really need to do is figure out a way to send a demon out into Dark Spruce Forest and cause a degree of havoc that would make the elves believe their camp is in danger. I think I also need to create some kind of link to the delver so that the elf leader believes Ryson is involved."

Neltus walked around the dry, dusty grounds of Rul Saattan's crater. He knew a great deal of the delver's history, but he didn't know everything. There were certain battles that were a mystery to him.

The human wizard considered where he was and what Rul had already revealed to him.

"This pit contains echoes of history, at least the history of certain actions, right?"

"I have already explained that fact to you," the demon lord growled. "I don't know how I can make it any clearer."

"It's clear enough. I'm just thinking out loud. The delver has stood at the center of your realm. He faced you here. That means his entire history should be contained within the echoes of this crater."

"The delver's history is not one that brings me great satisfaction," Rul admitted with a slightly louder snarl. "I prefer self-serving inspiration. Yours, for instance, is far more to my liking."

Neltus immediately dismissed the significance of the demon lord's claim. He did not see himself as the problem. He admitted his motivation was often, if not always, based on his own desires, but he believed that was the natural course of things. People always acted in their own best interest. It's what allowed for progress in nearly all endeavors, including casting magical spells.

If anything, individuals like the delver were the ones who caused the real problems. Ryson was continuously involving himself in the lives of others, and many suffered for it. Neltus lost his core because of the delver.

"I'm not concerned with my past," Neltus acknowledged, "but Ryson's history is still captured here, right?"

"Yes."

"Let me see everything you have."

The request surprised the demon lord.

"You wish to feed upon the echoes of history?"

"No, I don't wish to feed on anything, but I need to see Ryson's connections with the elves. I need to understand them so I can use them to create the proper circumstances back on Uton."

"I do not offer such privileges without a price," Rul hissed.

"In this case, you don't have a choice. You have to. You want to use my free will to trap the delver. I'm fine with that, but I'm not going to put myself in your debt. If I do, then it's basically the very bargain you wished to avoid. You'll be influencing my decision, and we might as well go right back to allowing fate to decide what happens."

"What do you hope to accomplish?" the demon lord demanded. "You have sufficient experience with the delver to understand him."

"I need more. I need to find the key piece of history that will tie what I already know about the delver to his past experiences with the elves. I need to make the elf elder and the elf captain believe that something has occurred that requires their intervention. It has to be connected to the delver, but it also has to be real."

"I do not allow demons to feed freely on the echoes of history," Rul grunted. "You ask too much."

"Then I'll leave."

Rul hissed with fury, but in the end, he relented.

"No, I will give you what you ask."

A Final Note from the Author

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

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

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