

Delver Magic

Book IV

Nightmare's Shadow

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

Fantasy:

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Delver Magic Book II – Throne of Vengeance

Delver Magic Book III – Balance of Fate

Delver Magic Book IV – Nightmare's Shadow

Spiritual Thriller:

Soul View

Soul Chase

When Do I See God? (by Jeff Ianniello)

Science Fiction:

Alien Cradle

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Important Note

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

Nightmare's Shadow is the fourth 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>.

My first trade paperback of *When Do I See God?* is now available at bookstores and online merchants. If you enjoy *Delver Magic*, please consider purchasing a copy.

Thank you.

To Joan, for making the struggle infinitely easier

Christine Bell deserves a great deal of credit for generously offering her assistance. Her willingness to help proves that noble qualities do not simply rest within characters of fiction.

Chapter 1

Magical energy inundated the land of Uton like water. It pooled in the valleys and swept across the plains like a flash flood. It drifted across the sky like swollen rain clouds and rushed beneath the surface through caverns like an underground river. It was in the soil as well as the leaves of every plant. It was the steam from heat and the ice of cold. It could reflect the sky and the mountains like a clear lake, create illusions as incredible as any dream. Disturb it and it would send ripples of turmoil as far as the eye could see.

Ryson Acumen sensed such a disturbance—something in the wind, something off to the west. A mix of impressions fell upon his delver senses. He could smell fear, hear haste, and feel desperation. Definite physical properties defined each sensation, but the magic wrapped itself around each and added mystery to the mayhem.

He tried to understand the magical energies that flowed over, across, and through the land, but the concept remained mostly foreign to him. He was no spell caster, and although Enin insisted that magic was inside every delver, the energy seemed to move beyond his instincts. It felt both natural and unnatural at the same time, like a familiar face that arrives uninvited at a late hour.

His inherent delver abilities, however, allowed him to hone in on even subtle changes to the land. His heightened senses fed his curiosity, but they also often warned him of danger.

The west was a constant source of upheaval for him lately. The magic casters experimented with spells of unknown power in the isolation of the desert. It seemed easier to control the magic in the barren land, as if—like water—the energy hastened to leave the sand and rock to its own devices, and thus—unlike water—it was easier to collect.

And yet, the wind that carried this new sensation did not seem to originate from the sands of the Lacobian Desert. The direction was true, but not the distance.

Ryson placed greater attention on the anomaly, focused his senses on what he could not quite see or touch. One of the attributes became very clear to him. He actually smelled a desire... a wish to leave the forest that surrounded him.

Odd.

Dark Spruce Forest had become a haven for creatures that utilized and depended on the magical energies. Most beasts viewed Dark Spruce as the ultimate sanctuary.

Ryson, however, could not dismiss the sensation. It was fear mixed with the desire to flee, as opposed to the gripping terror that might leave one unable to move, frozen in a dazed stupor.

The delver leapt silently to a small clearing among the trees and narrowed his sight to the shadows off to his left. He held his breath and his ears quickly picked up the rustling of leaves and the snapping of twigs.

Something was moving in his direction, but he was not the target. Whatever it was seemed to be running at a constant speed with escape being the one true objective. The form coming at him was fairly large—he could tell that just from the sound—and somewhat nimble, moving with an agility somewhere between the effortless grace of an elf and the persistent forward thrust of a shag. The movement matched the desire of flight that Ryson could almost taste. The motivation for such emotion?—still unknown.

The delver focused on the shadowed form that finally came into sight, and he matched its outline with his growing knowledge of dark creatures in the area. The size and motion made the identity clear. It was a swallowit—a powerful creature that combined the features of a buffalo with those of a human, but instead of hair, it was covered with thick strands of matted vines. Swallowits could run swiftly on all fours or maneuver with great mobility on just their hind legs while standing upright.

Swallowits remained rare in Uton; very territorial and more secluded than river rogues. Not many had crossed over to the land, or at least Ryson had encountered very few. They did not pose much of a threat to humans, but they remained dangerous. It was difficult for humans to outrun such creatures, but delvers were much more elusive than humans and Ryson did not fear the charge of the beast.

Unwilling to dismiss the situation as a random encounter, Ryson remained more concerned over the monster's intentions. Most predators did not openly hunt swallowits, and for good reason. Swallowits were not quite the most cunning of dark creatures—nowhere near as daring as serps—but they were leagues ahead of most goblins in the areas of critical thinking. They could also cast spells, or so the lore revealed. Ryson had never actually witnessed a swallowit utilizing magic, but the lore had proven accurate in its descriptions of other monsters and Ryson found no reason to doubt this particular attribute.

Still, the delver knew he could communicate with the beast. He just had to get its attention.

Ryson unsheathed the Sword of Decree and the forest lit up around him as if noon time. The blade reflected starlight a thousand times over and the delver stood at the center of the light. He called out and demanded the creature acknowledge his presence.

"Swallowit! I'm a delver and I want to talk to you."

At first, the creature veered away, but as if realizing it could not escape a true delver, it swerved back around and quickly circled the figure holding the blazing sword.

"Ryson Acumen?"

Hearing his name uttered by a beast of the dark lands caught him by surprise, but Ryson recovered quickly.

"You know me?"

"You hold the sword."

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Ryson's exploits were becoming well-known by human and dark creature alike. With the Sword of Decree in hand, he had destroyed the Sphere of Ingar, which ultimately unleashed the magic across the land. He had saved the dwarf city of Dunop from shadow trees with the glowing blade and cleaved the dark wizard Baannat in half. He could not deny that the shining weapon was becoming legendary.

"Yes, I hold the sword, and I need to know where you're going."

The creature would not answer at first, but Ryson would not accept silence. The creature was headed east—toward Burbon, toward his home—and Burbon was now somewhat vulnerable. Creatures like the swallowit would normally avoid Burbon for it was the home of a wizard who was becoming much more legendary than the Sword of Decree. Unfortunately, that wizard's attention was currently divided.

On that night, as on many other past nights, the wizard Enin remained in Connel, helping to rebuild a city that had seen two major conflicts. Connel had fared badly in the

return of magic. Dwarves had almost decimated the city, and what was left intact temporarily fell into the hands of a goblin horde. The city endured both hardships, but not without great loss, and the wizard vowed to guide the city back to prosperity.

Still, Enin had not abandoned Burbon, had not simply left it to its own devices. He had cast many spells to serve as mystic barriers against invading hordes, and he remained ready to return to the small town if the need was urgent. He would not leave Burbon—so close to Dark Spruce and the last true town before the Lacobian Desert—defenseless.

Ryson understood that these defenses might keep away most invaders, but not all. The most cunning and cruel creatures sensed the presence of magic casters. They would know of Enin's departure, and though Burbon was protected by walls and towers, as well as a finely trained militia, it remained a ripe target so close to Dark Spruce Forest.

"You're headed east, toward Burbon. Is that where you're going?"

The swallit released a throaty cough as if to grumble.

"I will bypass Burbon."

"Then where are you going?"

The swallit finally came to a stop. It rose up on its hind legs and walked slowly toward the delver.

"Does it matter to you? I do not threaten Burbon and I do not threaten you. If what I know of you is accurate, that should be enough."

It should have been enough, and it was to relieve concerns of danger, but Ryson remained a purebred delver, and there was his curiosity to consider. It could not be so easily satisfied.

"You're running away," Ryson stated. "What makes a swallit run away?"

"Am I required to answer a delver's quiz?"

"No," Ryson replied, making it clear he would not threaten the swallit with reprisal should the creature refuse.

"Then I shall go my way, and you can go yours."

And the beast turned to leave.

Ryson might have been unwilling to intimidate the creature, but he was not so willing to give up on the questions goading his delver spirit. He also wanted to ensure Burbon's safety. If the monster refused to answer a simple question, then the delver would not trust its stated intentions of bypassing Ryson's home.

"You can go your way, but I'll follow you to make sure you stay clear of Burbon."

"Then follow if you will, but sheath that sword," the swallit demanded, turning back with a growl and glancing uneasily at the glowing blade.

"Why?"

"Because you will offer me up like a beacon. Why not simply whistle for a goblin raiding party or a hook hawk?"

"You're too big for a hook hawk and I doubt goblins would be brave enough to tackle you."

"So you won't sheath the sword?"

"I'd need a better reason. You might be trying to leave me defenseless."

"And you are beginning to irritate me," the swallit grumbled.

"It's not my intention, but you won't tell me what's going on."

The swallit looked back to the west, and clearly grew impatient.

"I wish to leave and I don't want you blazing a trail behind me. Is that so difficult for your delver mind?"

"No, but you still haven't explained any of it."

"And since when does a swallit need to answer to a delver?"

"You don't. You can go about your business and I'll go about mine."

"But you will continue to follow me?!"

"Only as long as you're close to Burbon. I have people to protect. You should understand that."

"I only understand that you might endanger me with that sword lighting up my path for anyone to follow."

"Is someone following you?"

"No, and I intend to keep it that way. Now be gone and realize I have nothing to gain by lying to you."

"Danger cuts both ways, my friend. You're running from something, that's pretty clear. You could be bringing danger to my home. Tell me what you're running from and if it makes sense, you can go your way."

The swallit lost its patience, unwilling to explain itself to the likes of a delver, even the delver who held the Sword of Decree. It dropped back down to all fours and charged Ryson Acumen, hoping to crash its massive head into the delver's midsection.

Ryson leapt away, but made no attempt to counterattack. He kept his sword held high and the blade away from the enraged monster. It was not his intent to harm the creature by design or by accident. The Sword of Decree could burn the soul with but a touch, and Ryson did not wish to inflict such pain. Still, the delver would not simply relent. A fleeing swallit in the early dark of night was a strange sight. The beast's unwillingness to explain itself was understandable, but only to a degree. In Ryson's curious mind, the mystery deepened with the swallit's attack.

"This isn't going to help," Ryson offered. "I know you're fleeing from something, just tell me what it is."

The swallit swung around, stood up once more, and brought its front legs together. It mouthed a few words and a yellow pentagon appeared at its hooves. The yellow energy then flew out from the creature and crashed across the blade of Ryson's sword.

Ryson now knew for a fact that swallits could indeed cast powerful spells.

The yellow magic appeared to turn to liquid as it bubbled down both sides of the blade. It brightened at first, then turned dark gray. As the energy encased the weapon in full, the light of the blade died away.

The display of power shocked the delver.

"What did you do?"

"What you would not. I doused the light. Now follow if you wish, but your sword will blaze no path for others to travel. You might as well sheath it."

Ryson looked at his weapon in shock. The blade could magnify the dimmest starlight on a cloudy night. Nothing ever before had brought darkness to this sword of light while Ryson stood upon open ground. He had held the sword aloft under the thickest clouds of terrible storms in the darkest of nights, and still the blade magnified what little light existed. For the first time out of its sheath and with a path to the open sky, the sword looked as dull as rusted iron.

The delver brought his hand to the blade. He tried to rub clean the magic energy, but to no avail. The gray covering could not be pushed away.

"You can't remove it," the swallit offered, displaying no pleasure in the effectiveness of its spell, "but do not agonize too much. The shadow that covers it will fade away in short time."

"You shouldn't have done that! I wasn't going to hurt you." Ryson declared.

"And you should have listened to me," the swallit shot back. "I asked if I had to answer a delver's quiz, and you said no. You should have left it at that, but you wouldn't relent. Your foolish curiosity got the better of you."

Ryson, at first, found anger in those words, believed he had done nothing wrong other than to ask the swallit its reasons for racing out of the forest. It was a harmless question, a reasonable request.

He could not, however, maintain that anger. Ultimately, he considered what he would have thought if their roles had been reversed. What if he had been traveling through the forest and happened to cross the swallit's territory? Did that give the swallit authority to question him, to perhaps impede his progress, or endanger him? It did not, and he would have used his abilities just as the swallit had used its own.

"You're right," the delver said, and he sheathed the sword. "I deserved that."

The swallit marveled at Ryson.

"You actually mean that, don't you?"

"You're not a threat to Burbon. You wouldn't get past the walls or the guard even if it was your intent to attack the town. I don't know why you're running, but that's your business."

"Then why didn't you just sheath the sword when I asked?"

"Because I want to know what would make a swallit flee. I still want to know, but threatening you isn't the way to find out. I would have hoped you would have told me."

"I owe nothing to you," the swallit grunted.

"No, you don't, and that's why I should have let you be. I'll try to figure out what you're running from in some other way."

The swallit almost appeared to grin.

"The stories of you, Ryson Acumen, seem to be true. You are a complex creature. It is not well to have you as an enemy, but you do not apparently make enemies without cause."

Ryson did not know exactly how to respond to such words. He simply nodded and turned his attention to the west as he dismissed the swallit.

"Well, I won't follow you now. Just remember that Burbon remains well guarded. Keep to your word and stay away from the town. I doubt anyone else will challenge you tonight."

The beast turned to leave, but paused. It swung its massive head back toward the delver one last time to offer its respect, if nothing else.

"I will return your honor with two favors. The first is that you should never trust what you see when yellow magic is cast. While it is very powerful in its own right, it is also the power of illusion. Light and shadow—one or the other, or both in concert—can be utilized to misdirect even the senses of a delver. Your blade still glows bright, but you believe the light to have been snuffed out."

Ryson looked over his shoulder at the hilt of the sword now sheathed across his back. He did not draw the blade out of respect for the honesty he was shown.

"It was still shining? All that time?"

"Your eyes saw what the magic wanted you to see, a covering over the light, but to those who know to look beyond the magic, the light will appear as bright as ever."

"Just a trick," the delver allowed, with a slight chuckle.

Then, the swallowit grunted.

"Be careful not to dismiss such magic as simple deception. Illusions can be the greatest of powers because they can hide the truth, all truth. Yes, it can deceive you into believing lies, make you imagine peril when no such threat exists, but it also can disguise danger. It can make hazardous ground appear safe, camouflage pitfalls and traps. Think about that the next time you pursue a spell caster who utilizes illusion."

"I will," Ryson conceded.

"As for my second point, if you are determined to seek out what I hope to avoid, do not be surprised if you find nothing on this night. Yes, you are a delver, but the threat is not a danger to you or your kind. Even with your great delver senses, I doubt you will locate the menace I know exists. It does not seek you, even if you seek it. That's all I will say."

The swallowit's words did little to diminish the delver's curiosity.

"Good luck to you, Ryson Acumen. If our path's cross again, I do not believe it will be as foes. You have my respect, as I hope I have earned some of yours."

The creature said nothing more. It dropped back down to all fours and bounded off to the east.

Ryson was left with a deeper mystery. The peril that made a swallowit flee would elude him, or so the swallowit said. These were not words that a delver could simply accept. Even though he did not doubt the swallowit, he would not give up so easily.

With the monster on its way, Ryson turned to the opposite direction. He traced the beast's path further back into the forest. He followed it carefully. He kept vigilant for any sign of danger, hoping to gain some new insight to the mystery and the questions in his mind, but he found nothing within the trees.

The swallowit's path led further out toward the badlands that separated Dark Spruce from the Lacobian, but Ryson stopped before leaving the forest. It was not for lack of desire, for he very much wanted to solve the mystery. He stood for long moments watching and listening—feeling the winds from the west. He had thought it odd when he earlier sensed a strange desire to flee. He felt it again—along with an emptiness—as if many creatures had already acted on that desire.

Had it been just up to him, he would have ventured onward, would have followed the sensation to its origin, but he was no longer just a delver on a hunt for answers. His obligation as a scout for Burbon outweighed his delver curiosity and he felt it necessary to turn back. In the end, he could do nothing more than return to Burbon and alert the guard to what he had seen and heard.

Chapter 2

The magic could not touch Linda, and so, she felt neither aversion nor attraction to the energy. She did, however, have a sense of people. She had it all her life, a natural ability to assess character and perceive intentions. Working in a tavern nourished that gift. She dealt with people from all walks of life and her openness with others often invited them to be more open with her. As she came to discover her initial impression of people usually proved accurate, Linda learned to trust her instincts and her judgment, and although the magic was completely foreign to her, she knew it ran strong in the woman before her.

The young woman was a stranger to the inn, to the entire town of Burbon for that matter. She said she wanted to see Linda, but that wasn't her ultimate goal. Linda could tell that almost immediately. The stranger was happy Linda agreed to speak with her, but it was clear it was only a first step. It was very much like a thirsty soldier waiting at a table. He was pleased when the barmaid approached, but it was whiskey or ale he truly desired.

Linda wanted privacy for this conversation, though she didn't know why—another instinct—but she also didn't want to risk being alone with the stranger. She summoned the woman to the far corner where they could be seen, but not so easily heard over the clamor of the crowd.

"I don't know you," Linda stated as more of a warning than an admission. She wanted the young woman to understand immediately that her trust was not given so freely to strangers, especially to this stranger.

"No, you don't," the woman replied, as if it didn't matter. "I am Heteera."

Linda immediately corrected her.

"That's your assumed name. You're a sorceress."

"I do not hide it."

"You might want to around here."

"Here? In the town of the wizard? The home of Enin?"

"We know Enin. We don't know you."

And that was true. Burbon was not a large city. It was a small town, a town that sat very near Dark Spruce Forest, and it thrived on order and control. That's one of the reasons why the people of Burbon survived the return of magic while towns like Pinesway decayed into the mere skeletal remains of abandoned homes and ransacked shops.

"My given name at birth is Heather," the woman admitted, "but I wish to protect the friends and family of my previous life. They shouldn't suffer for my choices, so I would prefer it if you call me Heteera."

"Maybe you shouldn't put them in danger in the first place."

It came out as more of a rebuke than Linda intended, but she did not withdraw the remark.

"It is not my intention," Heteera replied with a solemn tone that indicated she might not have been totally successful in that desire. Regardless, she would not relinquish her aim. "In fact, I've hoped to do the opposite."

Linda didn't sense any true malevolence within the sorceress, but the stranger carried more than danger with her, she carried a sense of concern that clearly weighed upon her request.

"Very well, Heteera, I don't think you're here for a drink or a room for the night. What is it you want from me?"

"You are married to Ryson Acumen. I was hoping you could arrange it so that I might speak to him."

It was not a secret that Linda was the wife of the delver. Others had asked about being married to an individual whose name was becoming part of the legends. Over time, she learned to deal with it.

Still, Linda recoiled at this particular request. The sorceress was not here to offer good news, that much was clear. That fact left Linda more than cautious, it made her unsympathetic.

"It seems many people want to talk to Ryson, but he's rather busy. If you have some kind of concern, you should go talk to the guard. I can direct you to the closest post, or I can even summon them. I can have a handful of soldiers here in a moment."

"Guards and soldiers are of no use to me."

"That may be, but they may have some questions for you. A sorceress comes to town and starts asking to see Ryson. They're going to want to know why."

It was not such a veiled threat. Linda was growing more suspicious, and Heteera noted the animosity.

"Are you always so hostile to strangers?"

"No, but you asked about Ryson, and I know you're a sorceress. That has me concerned. I won't deny it and I won't apologize for it."

"I understand," Heteera nodded. "And I also know you don't fear me. The magic can't touch you, and even if it did, you are under the protection of two legends—your husband and the wizard. It would be foolish to try and harm you in any way."

"I'm not worried about myself, I'm worried about why you want to see Ryson."

Heteera paused, as if to internally debate her next response. When she finally replied, her words suddenly seemed painted with a desire for mercy.

"I need to speak with the wizard Enin. It is... important."

"Then go see him. He spends more of his time in Connel for their rebuilding than he does here."

The sorceress let out a heavy breath, as if to acknowledge a truth she already accepted before even entering the tavern. She revealed that truth without apparent embarrassment.

"I'm afraid."

That's not a statement most people will make, and Linda was impressed by the honesty behind it.

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of what he will sense, or of what the elf guard will sense."

"You know about Holli?" Linda asked. The sorceress seemed to know quite a bit, and that was also surprising considering she was a stranger to Burbon.

"She is the wizard's protector and he has trained her. It shouldn't be that much of a surprise for you. Anyone who touches the magic can in some way sense the wizard."

"Well, I *can't* touch the magic, and I still don't know what this all has to do with Ryson."

"The delver and the wizard are beyond friends. There is a trust between them. If Ryson Acumen will listen to me, he will understand and can relay my message to the wizard."

"Ryson isn't a messenger. Go speak to the wizard yourself."

"Believe me, I would if I could, but..."

Linda sighed with growing frustration. "But you're worried what he might sense about you, or that Holli might prevent you from seeing him. I know you said that, but it doesn't make sense. Enin speaks to spell casters all the time. Why should he avoid you?"

Here, the sorceress was not as quick to make an admission. She paused, as if calculating how to speak of her concern.

"I have made a misstep... a miscalculation."

Linda was not as impressed by this statement. The stranger's hesitation seemed almost to mute the confession.

"You're not helping your cause with me."

"I realize that, but to reach Enin, I first must convince the delver, and to convince the delver, I first have to reach you."

"Why?"

"Because you are immune to the magic. If you understand, then Ryson will know that my cause is true, that I am not manipulating the truth."

"So you want me to trust you?"

"In essence, yes."

"Well, you have a problem there."

"I know."

Linda was baffled and she made it clear. "Look, all I know is that you asked to see me and now you want to speak with my husband. You obviously know more about me than I do about you. What is it you really want from me?"

"Take me to your husband and listen to what I have to say to him."

It was a simple request, but not one without potential risks. Linda was not ready to simply guide a puzzling sorceress to her husband—to the delver who had proven to be a bane to many dark creatures that infested the land. Still, it seemed such a small request in light of the woman's mysterious nature.

"That's it?"

"That's it for now."

And so, alarm bells rang within Linda's core. Just like this meeting, it was all just a first step. The sorceress wanted something from Ryson, wanted something from Enin, and whatever the request ultimately became, it was not going to be simple.

"So there's going to be more?"

"I told you, it is not Ryson Acumen I ultimately seek. I need to get Enin to understand what I've done, so I will need your husband's assistance in that, yours as well."

"And how do I know you don't mean to harm Ryson?"

Heteera looked Linda dead in the eye.

"I cast white magic. Most people who know Enin understand what that means. I have equal power over the entire spectrum of magic. And I do have power, but I don't have the control of the wizard. I cannot cast in one circle, let alone two. Still, I have ability enough to cause damage to this town while Enin is away... if that were my goal. But it isn't. As I've already said, I don't want to harm anyone."

At that moment, Linda saw something in Heteera, something she sees often when people come into a tavern for all the wrong reasons. She saw guilt.

"You're afraid you've already done harm, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid of what it might turn into, yes."

"Can Enin stop it?"

"I believe so, if he listens."

Linda bit down slightly on her bottom lip and made her decision.

"Ryson is out on patrol. He'll meet me here at closing to walk me home. The best thing for us to do is wait for him to come to us."

"Thank you," the sorceress replied, grateful for the opportunity, but her appreciation was muted by the fact that her mission was just beginning.

Chapter 3

Ryson met Heteera and Linda in a back storage room. He looked over the sorceress and then turned his attention to his wife.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm a little worried about what's going on here, but beyond that, I'm fine."

The delver could not deny his curiosity. He turned back upon the stranger.

"And you are?"

"Heteera," she replied.

"You're a stranger here," Ryson stated.

"Yes, and we've never met."

"And you're a sorceress."

"You are as perceptive as your wife."

Linda decided to add information she felt was quite important.

"She says she casts white magic. I don't think she's lying."

Ryson gave the sorceress another look.

"That would be a stupid lie, especially around here."

Heteera agreed without hesitation. "Yes, it would be, but I *can* cast in white magic. My control is somewhat limited, but my access to all energies is quite exceptional."

"So you're a powerful sorceress, and you're here to talk to me. What is it you want?"

"I have already told your wife this, I need to warn the wizard Enin."

"He's in..."

"Connel, I know. I can't approach him."

"Why not?"

"He will sense a presence upon me. Actually, I believe even the elf guard will sense it and she might kill me before I say a word."

Making his suspicions clear, Ryson considered the statement more revealing of Heteera's character than Holli's. Ryson held nothing but respect for the elf guard. He knew that Holli would not endanger anyone without reason.

"Holli wouldn't kill you unless you were a threat. *Are you a threat?*"

"No, but I'm afraid I've created one, one that has to be dealt with before it's too late."

"What kind of threat?"

"One that uses the magic for malevolence."

"That's not being very specific."

"That's because it isn't a specific threat, not yet anyway."

Ryson had obtained nothing from the woman, no information that could assist him in any way. It was much like his encounter with the swallow. Yes, he was curious, but he was also growing frustrated.

"Why don't you start with what you can tell me?"

Heteera almost blurted out her fears, but she took hold of them—wrapped them up and swallowed them, as if a bitter herb.

"I'd rather show you than try to explain it."

Ryson and Linda shared a glance, revealing their surprise. Surely, the sorceress couldn't expect Ryson to simply let a stranger lead him off into the unknown without some kind of explanation. The request defied reason.

"So you just want me to follow you?"

"I believe it's the only way."

"I'm not sure I accept that."

Linda added her own clear viewpoint of the matter.

"I know I *can't* accept that." She then turned to her husband. "You can't just go off with her without more of an explanation. She thinks Holli might kill her on sight. She admitted that herself."

"She's right," Ryson nodded to Heteera. "If you want my help, you have to tell me what's going on. You have to give me something."

At this point, the sorceress appeared prepared for such a response, even from a curious delver. She spoke with a newfound confidence, as if she could make her reluctance understandable.

"Believe me, I would if I could, but my request is not so simple. I do not wish to lie to you because if I do, I can't obtain your help. I can't risk that. And while I have to remain honest with you, at the same time I have to remain credible."

"You're saying I'm not going to believe you?"

"That's part of it."

Ryson found the explanation feeble, if not totally inaccurate. Bizarre creatures and events were common throughout Uton. He accepted them just as he accepted the legitimacy of the legends. No one could accuse him of being so shortsighted as to disregard possible threats, no matter how fantastic.

"I've seen some things..."

Heteera cut him off.

"I can imagine what you have seen, and I understand the power of the magical energies. Events beyond sanity have already taken place in this land, and you have been much in the center of it. I imagine there is very little that would truly surprise you, but even the curiosity of the most open-minded delver has limits." She looked upon both Ryson and Linda and could see they remained skeptical. "Let me ask you this: If I told you a colossal giant with three heads—taller than a dozen houses stacked one upon the other—stepped out of the western seas and took prisoners of port cities, would you believe me?"

Ryson didn't answer.

"You've seen incredible things since the return of the magic," Heteera continued, "but that sounds a bit much, doesn't it?"

"A monster like that wouldn't be able to hide. Stories of it would fly across the land. I haven't heard anything about..."

"What if I was simply the first to make it through from the coast, the first to tell the story? Maybe news of the encounter just hasn't reached you."

"But it would eventually."

"And you wouldn't have to take my word for it, correct?"

"Well, it doesn't hurt to confirm things."

"And if I wait for you to get some confirmation of the danger I'm talking about, it will be too late."

"Are you saying that there is such a monster?"

"No, I'm not. I'm using it as an example. I'm trying to explain that some things are difficult to explain. Sometimes just words of a problem aren't enough, especially in this case. There are certain topics, certain descriptions, that would, by their very nature, invite reservation. And that is only half of my dilemma. Part of the threat that is coming has not taken any form. I'd like to be specific about the danger, but at this point, I can't be sure. That's the other part of my problem in explaining it to you. Without form, I cannot give you an honest appraisal of the threat."

Ryson acknowledged there was some merit to the sorceress' concern. If she, in fact, did not want to lie or embellish her concerns about an unknown threat just to get the delver's compliance, then perhaps it would be difficult for her to be more accommodating. He searched for other answers that might be easier to obtain.

"Where is it you want to lead me?"

"To the southwest—not terribly far, but beyond the forest—to the border lands between Dark Spruce and the Lacobian."

Mention of the location sparked Ryson's curiosity. He had just been very close to those badlands, and he had felt something strange in the distance. If the woman hoped for credibility, she had just gained some, but only to a degree. The delver also understood the power of magic. His interest in the area had remained fresh in his mind and a powerful sorceress might just be feeding his own curiosity, using it against him. Thus, he remained cautious.

"But you can't give me any kind of indication of what's there?"

"I'd rather not. I don't know how else to explain it to you. If I try, I'm worried that you will either misjudge the problem or me. It's better you see for yourself and come to your own conclusion."

Ryson looked away. He was given so little information, and yet, so many things pulled at him. He had indeed seen many incredible sights over the past few seasons. And it seemed that every new day brought something beyond the previous spectacle. Whether it be monsters or miracles, the magic had reshaped the land in countless ways.

This story, however, had no true substance, only a plea for assistance by a sorceress who claimed great power and warned of some shadowed threat. It was not a request that could be validated in any way. He couldn't pick apart the facts from any possible embellishments because he had no true description from which to start.

He had heard so many other stories in that tavern, mostly exaggerated yarns or inflated half-truths. And yet, there was now an underlying reality to even the most outlandish tale. If you wanted an adventure, you did not have to travel far. Dark Spruce Forest was a gathering point for dark creatures of varied types, as were the Colad Mountains. The Lacobian Desert was becoming even more mysterious than the other two combined, with spell casters utilizing the barren lands as a stage to manage their new found abilities.

Was the sorceress exaggerating the threat?

She said that was what she hoped to avoid, but sometimes leaving things unsaid did more to heighten a conceived threat than by describing it in the most inflated fashion.

Again, Ryson thought of his earlier encounter with the swallow. The creature used illusion against the delver's sword, a trick to make him sheath the weapon. Was this just another trick?

What did he know of her? She stated she could cast white magic. If that was a lie, it was a risky one. If it wasn't, she had power and she shouldn't be ignored.

Ryson shook his head and then focused on the floor. He placed an imaginary flame—very small, that of a candle—on a blank space. He wiped all the thoughts from his mind as he concentrated on his greatest concern. He finally spoke, but would not look up from the floor at Heteera. He kept his mind on the practical, on the measured response of logic, and kept his curious instincts in check.

"I have to tell you, I've been through this kind of thing before—all my life, in fact. People know I'm a delver, and if they want something from me, some will try and use it against me. They throw one mystery after another at me. They usually do it because they want to trick me."

"I'm not trying to trick you."

"I don't know you, but you came to see my wife first. You tell me you need to speak to Enin, but he won't see you. Even so, you say you cast white magic. If that's true, I would think he would want to speak with you. You're afraid Holli will kill you, and I have no idea why. You sum it all up with a notion that there's a threat that has to be stopped. It's a delver hunt, one mystery after another."

"And that's why I came to your wife first. I was hoping that she would look upon my words in a different manner. I couldn't entice her on a delver hunt. As for being mysterious, it's not my intention. I'm not trying to offer a mystery that needs to be solved or some treasure that needs to be discovered. I'm trying to get you to simply see for yourself what it is that I can't explain. Let your own eyes be the judge. It's not going to seem any more plausible to you if I explain the danger. You know I'm a sorceress. You're going to wonder if I'm manipulating you."

And with that said, Ryson made an admission, and once more looked upon Heteera.

"I think you might be trying to manipulate me now."

"If I was using magic to manipulate you, why would I want your wife present? The magic can't touch her."

A valid question, and one that met Ryson's logic with wisdom of its own. He faced Linda.

"Do you believe her?"

"I believe she's afraid of something out there and I believe she feels terribly guilty about something. That's all I can say for sure, but I still don't want you going out there with her unless she tells you what she's afraid of."

Ryson nodded as he returned his focus to the stranger.

"I believe you're not trying to trick me, but she's right, it's not enough. The simple truth is that I'm not going to just follow you unless you give me something more to go on."

"I do not think it will help to tell you anything further."

Ryson frowned as he came to his decision and revealed it with blunt honesty.

"That's no longer your decision to make. I'm not going to follow you based on what you've told me so far. In fact, I'm going to ask you to leave Burbon. Beyond that, once you're on your way, I'll be in Connel before you get deep in Dark Spruce or wherever it is you're going. I'll tell Enin what happened here. He's going to want to talk to you. If you really want to speak to him, you won't have to worry. You can bet he'll find you."

Ryson could see the fear explode in the sorceress.

"You can't speak to the wizard until you know the truth!" Heteera implored.

The outburst was surprising, but it did not sway the delver.

"I'm waiting for the truth."

The stranger covered her face with her hands, as if hoping to hide despair. She brought them down to her chin and pressed them together as if praying.

Ryson remained alert. He watched for any sign of white magic to appear, but the sorceress would cast no spell at this point. Instead, she blurted out the truth.

"The sphere is a threat again."

Ryson said nothing, but Linda demanded clarification.

"You mean Ingar's sphere?"

"Yes."

Ryson stiffened. The woman was lying, she had to be. He thought this was all some kind of twisted game, or something worse. The battle at Sanctum Mountain over the sphere would always remain fresh in his mind. He knew on that day that the magic could never be erased again from the land, that the sphere would never return.

"No, that's not possible," Ryson responded.

The sorceress could not mistake the look in the delver's eyes. She knew even the curiosity of a delver would not allow him to accept her story.

"You see!" Heteera shot back. "This is why I didn't want to try and explain it to you. I knew you wouldn't believe it."

"I don't believe it because I destroyed the sphere."

"I know you did, but you did not destroy the idea."

To Ryson, the idea and the sphere were one and the same. The sphere was magic contained, and that idea was just no longer possible.

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about, but I know that Ingar is gone and so is his sphere. The magic is free."

"Yes, it is, but not all of it. Part of it is being captured again."

"Are you saying there's another sphere?"

"Not exactly. It's difficult..." and her voice trailed off, unable to explain anything further.

"You're not making sense. If the magic was being captured, Enin would know about it. You wouldn't need to warn him."

As Heteera understood much about the magical energy, she found her voice once more to explain Enin's lack of awareness.

"Enin thinks the reversal of magic is due to his battle with Baannat."

"Baannat?" Ryson asked.

"Yes, Baannat was extremely powerful. He could store enormous amounts of energy. That energy was released in a battle with Enin, a battle in a dimension outside of this land."

"I know what happened. I was there. It was my sword that cleaved Baannat in two."

"I was there, too," Linda added. "Baannat was destroyed and the magic was taken from him."

"Taken where?" Heteera demanded.

Both Ryson and Linda thought of the dimension where dark creatures bred and lived until they could walk upon the lands of Uton. They thought of the monsters that

ultimately tore Baannat apart after Ryson defeated the wicked slink ghouls, monsters that eagerly ripped the magical energy from Baannat before they returned to their own realm.

"I'm not sure where it went," Ryson finally answered, "but what does that have to do with Ingar's sphere?"

"Not the original sphere, not a sphere at all!" Heteera claimed, "But the idea behind the sphere. Remove the magic—that's the concept—but this time remove it from the monsters, remove it from their realm. Enin would not notice this unless he was told."

"And that's the threat?"

"That's only part of it. You have to see the rest."

That was enough for the delver. Ryson was convinced this was no trick, no manipulation of magic. He could not believe the sphere had returned, but there was something to the sorceress' words. His instincts could lead him now and they spoke loudly within him. He needed to follow Heteera.

Unfortunately, he needed to convince his wife as well. And by looking at her, he knew she remained skeptical. She would not want him to go on such little information.

"I need to speak to my wife alone."

Heteera asked for a different approach.

"Use the sword," she said.

The Sword of Decree held a strange power after the elves gave it to the delver and Ryson explained it simply.

"It won't really tell me if you're lying, if that's what you're hoping. It doesn't reveal intentions. It will only give me direction and I have no idea to what point."

"That's all I'm asking now, for you to take direction, not from me, but from the sword."

Ryson moved his hand to the sword cast from elf magic. Before he pulled it from its sheath, Heteera called out one last request.

"Before you take hold of the sword, I want you to know it's not just you who has to follow me. Your wife must come with us."

Ryson dropped his hand away from the hilt as if it were suddenly poisoned.

"I'm not going to put her in danger!"

The delver's outburst drew an equally emotional response from his wife.

"But you'd put yourself in danger?" Linda demanded.

"I don't want to put anyone in danger," Ryson remarked almost harshly.

"I'm not asking you to debate this among yourselves," Heteera intervened. "Leave it to the sword."

"I'm not going to base a decision like that on the sword," Ryson declared.

"Why not?" Heteera asked. She was so close, and now appeared desperate to get her way.

"Because I don't understand why she would even have to go in the first place."

"I need another to witness this. You'll understand when you see what it is I have to show you. You have to come with me, there's no doubt in my mind about that, but when it comes to convincing Enin of what you will see, we'll need another voice."

"Then we can bring someone from the guard. I can even get Sy to go with us."

"The Captain of the Guard will not help. I need it to be Linda."

"Why?"

"Because the magic can't touch her. It's the only way I can be sure to get the message across to Enin. And he's the only one with the power to stop this."

"Forget it," Ryson stated.

"Then maybe you have doomed us all."

"I haven't doomed anyone."

Linda was watching Heteera. She saw the truth in her eyes and heard it in her words, and it was she who would break through Ryson's concern.

"Ry, I appreciate what you're saying, what you're doing, but I don't think it's up to you."

"Who's it up to? Her?"

"No, and if you listened to her you'd know that. She's leaving it up to the sword. She's putting it all on that. How many times did the sword point you in the right direction? Is it suddenly going to let you down?"

"But we don't have any idea what's out there."

"But you're willing to go. You *want* to go now. I've seen that look before. I'm not going to try and talk you out of it. I'm willing to accept what you're willing to risk. You might have to do the same."

"But I'm a delver."

"And I'm immune to magic. Leave it to the sword."

Ryson knew he could not win this argument. Linda was right, the magic could not harm her, not directly. She might be vulnerable to a shag's fangs or a goblin's crossbow, but he could protect her from those threats. The true danger near the Lacobian was the magical energy and how it was being used. Truth be told, he would be in greater danger than his wife.

As for the sword, he could not deny its power. It was as he said. It did not so much point to the truth as it pointed the way. It decreed what needed to be done. How it would be done was up to the holder.

Ryson grabbed the hilt of the sword and pulled it from its sheath. The windows of the tavern let in starlight for the blade to reflect, enhance, and magnify. The clamor of other patrons died away as everyone looked to the shining blade. The light would not harm their eyes in any fashion. If anything, it was almost pleasant to behold. The blade showed the way... and it did so for Ryson Acumen.

"We have to go with her. I'll get two horses and we'll leave at first light."

Chapter 4

With Ryson running alongside the horses—guiding them through Dark Spruce, avoiding danger, and finding the clearest paths—they crossed the forest quicker than Heteera ever hoped. They broke through the dense trees of Dark Spruce and reached the badlands that would lead to the outer reaches of the Lacobian Desert while the sun still hung fairly high in the western sky. The horses moved even faster upon solid ground with fewer impediments. The brush and thicket which covered the edges of Dark Spruce diminished and eventually disappeared in the harsher, dryer climate—just as the trees became scattered, standing more like distant sentries spread too thin to cover the horizon sufficiently. The land opened up before them to reveal large clearings surrounded by boulders, bluffs, and intriguing rock formations of intricate design.

Ryson remained vigilant for threats, understanding that despite their abilities—a delver, a sorceress, and a human immune to magic—they still might invite an ambush from a desperate predator. The presence of any such threat, however, continuously eluded him, and that in itself invited concern.

The badlands did not harbor as many dark creatures as Dark Spruce—the forest offered more prey and more shelter—but many beasts still preferred the open and dry regions. The badlands were also the last refuge before the totally inhospitable desert. Ryson would normally sense at least some predators in the distance, smell or hear them even if he could not see them. As if to present more of a puzzle, he could not sense any threats in the area. What he did perceive confused him.

"It's empty, but it's not," he revealed aloud.

Heteera understood, but Linda could not grasp the seemingly inconsistent revelation.

"What do you mean?" his wife asked.

"There are plenty of caves, crevices and ravines along the land, but there's nothing there. No creatures. There's plenty of hiding places for them, but they're just not there. It's like they all just left." He paused for a moment to sniff the air and turn an ear to the warm breeze. "But something else is here. I felt it in Dark Spruce, but it's stronger out here." He turned to the sorceress. "This is what you want us to see, isn't it?"

She simply nodded.

Linda, who could not utilize the magic in any way, pressed Ryson for details.

"What do you feel?"

Ryson tried to put into words what he could not completely describe.

"It's like water going down a hole. Water goes in, air gets pushed out. I'm getting the same feeling, but it's not water and air. It's like something's rushing in and out of... I'm not sure where it's coming from. It's there and then it's not."

"It's magic," Heteera offered, "but it's not just being pulled from the land. It's crossing dimensions."

"Is it going in or out?" Ryson wondered.

"Both," Heteera answered. "That's why Enin wouldn't notice it from Connel."

"But you said the threat was like the sphere. The sphere absorbed all the magic."

"Only in the beginning. At the end, it was emitting the energy, but as poison."

"That's right, poison to the elves. Is that the threat?"

"I believe the elves will be the last in danger," Heteera replied.

Then Ryson considered his encounter with the swallit, and more of the puzzle came together.

"I ran into a swallit during a scout. It was heading east, away from this place. It was trying to escape what's out here, wasn't it? That's why there aren't any creatures around."

This news did not sit well with the sorceress. As it was, she fought off waves of discomfort. The predicament she could not speak of openly weighed upon her as they now closed upon their intended destination. She also was not comfortable on the back of a horse, not a natural rider or a seasoned expert with much time spent in the saddle. This new revelation offered by the delver added to her troubles.

"If that's true, then he's adding to it," she claimed with little explanation.

"Adding to it? Adding to what?" Ryson demanded.

"He's seeking other creatures, expanding the reach."

"Who?"

"You'll have to see."

"You know, I have to admit, I'm getting tired of hearing that."

"You will not have to wait long. It's just ahead, by that rock formation to your right."

The delver leapt quickly ahead of the horses, took to the lead even as he moved on foot. He spied nothing ahead.

"There's nothing there."

Heteera pulled back on the reins and slowed her horse.

"We have to stop here."

"There's nothing here," the delver repeated.

"Give it time. It does not stay open or closed indefinitely. It fluctuates. We shouldn't have to wait long."

As if in response, the air shuddered. The afternoon light at first grew brighter and then dimmed, with no passing cloud the cause. The ground itself appeared to sway in and out of focus, like a mirage that would fade and return.

"What's happening?" Ryson demanded.

"The portal is reopening. As I said, it won't stay open or closed, not for long."

"A portal? To where?"

"To nightmare," Heteera responded with a pained expression. "To a place you have seen before... a realm where dark creatures breed."

It was as if a hole opened in the very air, a shallow tunnel that turned and twisted in every direction at once, but existed in a controlled space only slightly taller than the delver and perhaps three times as wide.

Looking upon it produced a sensation of incompleteness, as if it was not possible for such an opening to actually exist. It was a tear in reality.

Ryson peered into the opening, but only for a moment, and then he looked away. It was a nightmare, and he had seen it before.

Another such opening was created by Enin in the magical dimension during their conflict with Baannat. It was a gateway to a tormented world, a gateway from which monsters leapt.

"Why didn't you just tell me this was here? I've seen this kind of thing before. I would have believed you. We need to get Enin here to close this."

Heteera stared into the anomaly.

"Would you have believed *that* if I had not brought you here to see?"

Ryson did not want to look again, but he had to follow the sorceress' gaze. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes fell upon a figure exiting the rent.

Immediately, his hand flew over his shoulder to his sword as he crouched low. Any creature crossing over from the dark lands would be a danger to them all, but Ryson never drew the Sword of Decree. The single form who stepped out of a nightmare was a friend to him.

Despite the fact that the figure was all shadow and no true substance, was of a single gray pallor, Ryson recognized him immediately. He knew the elf, Lief Woodson, very well.

"Lief?"

The apparition tilted his head as it looked upon all three. It seemed to glare at the sorceress, but then drew a softer expression as it glanced upon Linda and finally Ryson.

"You look well, Ryson Acumen."

"You see?" Heteera managed, while struggling to keep her horse calm. "It's not the portal. It's who's using the portal."

"But you're dead," the delver exclaimed, disregarding the sorceress but unable to believe what, or rather who, was before him.

"And you are surprised in what you see now?" the ghostly form asked with an expression of both surprise and amusement.

Ryson could not answer. He was beyond shock. He had lost this friend only a short time ago, less than a full cycle of the seasons. The loss left him less than whole, slightly hollow. He looked to the sorceress as if to demand confirmation of what could not be true.

"Is this possible?"

Heteera simply nodded in assent.

He then looked to his wife.

"Do you see him?"

"Yes," Linda replied with wide-eyed wonder, unable to say anything more.

"Is it such a surprise to you, Ryson Acumen?" the specter called out. "On Sanctum Mountain you spoke with the spirit of Shayed and you fought the ghost of Ingar on the same ground."

"But the sphere brought them back, and the sphere is gone."

"The magic brought them back," Lief corrected him. "And the magic remains."

"That's not what I mean," Ryson replied, trying desperately to take hold of his emotions.

"Are you not happy to see me?"

"Of course I am, but..."

"But? You have reservations about seeing an old friend? Consider what we have been through together. I would have expected a happier greeting."

And Ryson did want to be happy. He wanted to rush to the side of his lost friend, take his hand if he could grasp the palm of a spirit. He wanted to believe Lief Woodson had returned, but even with all the joy that would generate, there remained caution... concern.

"I *am* happy to see you, but I didn't expect this."

"The sorceress didn't tell you?"

"She didn't think I would believe her. She was probably right." Ryson admitted.

"Is that why you are so hesitant to greet me?"

"I guess... I don't know. I just can't believe it's you. I didn't think I would see you again. You were..."

"Killed. By a lightning bolt from another sorceress. I could not dodge something so large. Apparently, I lack a delver's skill in that regard."

The description of Lief's death was accurate, and only a select few were there to see it. Still, Ryson's thoughts swam with confusion. He expected danger. He expected a threat. Not this.

"What are you doing here? Is it supposed to be this way? I mean this isn't a land of the dead."

"That is true, but what we are does not die when the body ceases to be. The spirit lives on."

"But everyone moves on, they don't stay here."

"And as I said before, others have returned. You saw them yourself. I remember when you first spoke with the spirit of Shayed. At first, you couldn't believe she had returned, but after all you have been through, I am surprised you remain doubtful."

At that, Ryson recalled his first meeting with Shayed. Yes, he had previously spoken to a spirit, but even Shayed had explained it was a rare occurrence.

"Shayed came back because of the sphere, as did Ingar," Ryson recalled. "It was a special circumstance, she admitted as much. The sphere summoned Ingar back from the dead, and Shayed returned for the higher purpose of saving the land."

"And you think it's not possible that I have returned for a higher purpose?"

"Is that why you're back?"

At that moment, the spirit form of Lief Woodson gazed back into the center of the dimensional breach. His eyes narrowed on something within the tunnel and then he turned quickly to those still living nearby.

"We can talk further of this later. We must move quickly away." He pointed up an incline that led to a bluff that overlooked the portal opening. "There! Make your way to that cliff. Quickly now!"

Ryson heard the threat of danger in the elf spirit's voice and he grabbed the reins of Linda's horse without hesitation. He then called to Heteera.

"Follow me!"

The delver raced up the slope, leading Linda's horse to a full gallop. The sorceress struggled to keep up, holding on to the reins of her horse as if her life depended on it.

Ryson pulled Linda's horse around as he guided them to the edge of the bluff that overlooked the dimensional doorway. He watched in awe as the specter of Lief Woodson simply floated through the air to the elevated position.

"What's going on?" Ryson asked.

"Something is coming out."

Ryson wanted to ask what it might be, but he did not have the time.

The first creature was another swallit, smaller than the one Ryson had previously encountered. It looked about in confusion, then looked back into the opening, back to the twisted land that spawned it. It clearly did not like what it saw. It dropped down to all fours and began to dash. Unfortunately, it never reached its full running speed.

A second figure sprang out from the dark break in reality, a large and hairy beast. Ryson recognized it immediately as a shag. Not the largest he had ever seen, but a big

one nonetheless. It was already in full pursuit of the swallow and it leapt through the air in a desperate attempt to reach the creature before it could escape.

The swallow screeched as the shag's now protracted claws ripped through the vine-like mass of its pelt and into its skin. The beast hit the ground and it rolled over, trying to dislodge the larger predator.

The shag held tight and in the tangled fray, its jaws clamped down on the rear leg of the swallow. Fangs tore through muscle and tendon, rendering the leg useless.

The swallow shrieked once more, but this time it brought its front legs together. At its hooves, a crackling deep orange energy formed an uneven square. The beast coughed out strange words and flung the energy toward the head of the shag.

The energy instantly turned to bright orange flame that streaked down upon the shag in long tendrils. The shag ducked its head, but the fire erupted around its shoulder and down its back. The matted hair twisted and shrank back in massive black streaks. The shag released its grip as it tried to beat off the flames with its own thick paws.

Up above on the higher banks of the bluff, Ryson immediately smelled the burning fur. The scent was strong and sickening, like maggot infested wood burning over a fire fueled by decaying corpses.

The swallow tried to bolt once more, but as it placed weight on its wounded leg, it collapsed. Knowing it could not escape, it turned about and prepared to cast another spell. Orange energy again appeared at its hooves, but this time the energy grew to a massive ball of fire. The swallow held to the flame as long as it could and then hurled it at its target.

The ball of fire wavered in the air, flew in an unsteady manner. The flames struck the shag, but only in a glancing fashion. Hair upon the monster's hip was singed, but no further damage had been done.

The shag backed slightly away, clearly measuring the distance between it and its prey. The threat of fire would keep it at bay, but only for the moment. The shag would not relent. With the swallow badly wounded, time was now in its favor.

Ryson found the scene more than unsettling.

"We have to stop this," he stated aloud.

It was Lief who replied first.

"You would interfere?"

And then Linda chimed in.

"You can't go down there. Either one of them could kill you."

"So we just let the shag kill the swallow?"

Lief almost laughed.

"The swallow would kill you given half a chance."

Ryson didn't believe that was the case. Swallows were dark creatures, that he could not deny, but he had spoken with a swallow, faced one in Dark Spruce, and while the beast at one time did attempt an assault, it showed respect for the delver as well.

"I don't think so," Ryson refuted. "They can cast magic. They have intelligence, they deserve respect as much as you or I. I have to do something."

"Yes, you have to let things sort them out for themselves," Lief responded in an admonishing tone. "This is between a swallow and a shag. It will be decided between the two of them."

"No, it won't. The swallow's hurt. I can send the shag back where it belongs."

"And maybe it will just kill a different swallow. It has to eat."

Ryson didn't like that response. There was truth to it, and maybe by saving this swallit he was, in fact, dooming another, but he could not simply standby and do nothing.

As if sensing the delver's decision before he made it, the elf ghost spoke the only words that could keep the delver still.

"Would you leave your woman unprotected? Who knows what might come out next? Perhaps a hook hawk looking for prey. While you are busy engaged with those beasts, will you be able to keep track of other threats?"

Ryson looked back at Linda and knew he could not leave her side, not so close to a doorway to such danger.

He was about to give up, but then he thought of the sorceress.

"You can cast white magic! Send the shag back!"

Heteera hesitated. She sat motionless in the saddle.

"Do it!" Ryson demanded.

The sorceress threw her hands together, closed her eyes in concentration. A distorted shape of white magic rolled about her wrists. There were points and curves in the oblong contour of magic that would not hold a steady form. Heteera opened her eyes and shouted strange words.

The white magic exploded from her fingertips. It was a blunt force spell that was meant to crash into the feet of the shag and hurl it backwards into the dimensional opening. It missed its mark.

It hit the rocky ground between the two monsters and the stone exploded in far greater force than the sorceress intended. Sharp broken rock burst apart in a wave of deadly debris. The shrapnel ripped through both monsters, dropping them to the ground in bloody hulks.

Ryson just stared at the mayhem below.

"I'm sorry," Heteera responded with a mournful whisper. "The power got away from me."

"Do not fret, sorceress," Lief replied stoically, as if the bloody display meant nothing to him. "You finished them both off quickly. That's more than they should have hoped for."

"The swallit didn't have to die," Ryson finally said.

"And what of the shag?" Lief asked. "Did the shag deserve less? If so, for what reason?"

"Neither of them deserved it." Ryson then looked upon Heteera with sympathy. "You didn't mean it. I know that. It wasn't your fault."

"I would agree with that," Lief added. "*Fault* had nothing to do with any of it." He then fixed a stare upon the delver. "Where are you going?"

Ryson had turned to move back down the slope.

"I want to check on them, make sure they're dead."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"What? You still think something else might come out of there?"

"Something definitely will. And I wouldn't get in its way."

"I can handle a hook hawk now. There's nothing to distract me."

"You might be able to handle a hook hawk, but not this." And Lief nodded to the gateway.

Ryson stopped and refocused his gaze upon the distorted opening.

Indeed, another figure did emerge from the passage, but it was something Ryson could not identify. It did not walk, leap, stagger, or even crawl out into the dying afternoon light. Instead, it dragged itself across the ground on several twisted, distorted limbs.

The thing seemed to have several heads, but none appeared complete or easily distinguishable, just as it had several limbs that could not be identified as truly arms or legs. It was as large as a full grown man, but had no discernable form. In some areas, it was pale white, like the bleached skin of a corpse left in the sun. At other points it was dark brown and purple, oozing as if in decay. The mass pulsed in a labored manner as it edged forward.

"Dear Godson!" Linda cried, and she looked away.

She would be thankful she did when she learned the aim of this mutated mass. The thing fell upon the swallit and began tearing away at the vines that served as the beast's coat. When it reached the skin of the swallit, it peeled a portion back in one long sheet. In a most disturbing fashion, it then tore at its own repulsive hide. It pulled away at the newly broken edges of its misshapen body, making a huge gap. It quickly placed the swallit hide over its own open wound, and the new skin fused into place.

Once this macabre operation was complete, the strange mass of disproportionate flesh spun backward into the gateway, its limbs twisting and turning, quivering in disorganized imbalance. With all the grace of misshapen rock rolling down an uneven hill, the horrible mutation disappeared out of sight back into a darker land where it clearly belonged.

"The danger is gone for now," Lief announced. "I doubt anything will be coming out for quite a while. Creatures on the other side tend to steer away from my creation."

Ryson could not stifle his surprise.

"You created that?"

"With the help of your sorceress friend," Lief admitted without hesitation.

Ryson's gaze shot over to the spell caster sagging forlorn in the saddle.

"That's what you were talking about, wasn't it?"

"It's not what I intended," she pleaded, but could not look upon the delver.

Where Ryson was more than willing to forgive the errant spell that killed both the swallit and shag, he found this difficult to conceive, let alone excuse, and so he pressed for those intentions.

"What did you intend?"

She would not speak, or rather could not speak.

"She intended to remove the dark creatures from the land," Lief offered in response.

"Is that so surprising to you?"

Ryson spun around to face the elf ghost.

"And how is that... that... thing! how is that going to accomplish that?"

"By collecting the magic from the dark creatures."

"Just like Ingar's sphere!" Ryson added, and to some extent the sorceress' earlier plea for help was becoming clear.

"In one way yes, but we made some alterations," Lief acknowledged.

"*You* made the alterations," Heteera suddenly accused the apparition. "I didn't want this. You knew what I wanted."

"Yes, and you did not want to go far enough." Lief then shook his head as if admonishing a small child. "That is why you lack control of the magic. White energy and yet you are weak where it matters. You don't see the whole picture."

"And what's the whole picture, Lief?" Ryson asked.

"You have to ask me? The dark creatures are a bane to this existence. They must be removed. The sorceress and I agreed on that point, but she did not want to go far enough. She wished to simply close off the dimension, to stop portals from opening, to keep the dark creatures from entering our land. It's not enough. They'd find a way around it, they'd find another way. And there is of course the matter of the creatures already here in the land. There is but one solution to the problem. Destroy them all, everywhere!"

"But what you created is going beyond that!" Heteera managed. "It's collecting the magic, just like Ingar's sphere. It's going to lead to greater misfortune. You have to know that."

"You concern yourself with the wrong problems," Lief said, almost with a snarl. "You look ahead to troubles that do not exist, while you ignore those that do."

"What exactly is that thing?" Ryson interrupted.

"It is a vessel," Lief explained. "And yes, it is like Ingar's sphere in that it was created to collect magic, magic that allows the dark creatures to exist. Ingar's sphere was made of the skins of the five races; elf, delver, human, algor, and dwarf. This vessel is made of the hides of dark creatures, and so, it focuses upon them. It feeds on their magic."

"Magic is magic," Ryson noted, but then did not appear so sure. "Isn't it?"

"Magical energy has more properties than you can imagine. Still, you should understand some of this. It is not so difficult to grasp that the vessel can be tuned to magic that has been utilized for a specific purpose. You have seen those who cast spells with different hues. The color of the magic matches the intention of the spell and the natural ability of the caster. There is magic of the air, of water or fire, of death."

"But what's that got to do with that thing?" Ryson demanded.

"That thing, as you call it, is tuned to the magical energies inherent in the dark creatures, the magic that allows them to cross over into this land and remain here."

"And that's all it was supposed to do!" Heteera interrupted. "It was only meant to serve as a deterrent, to keep them away, but now it hunts and kills, both here and in the dark realm. And it's storing the energy, becoming stronger!"

"As I said, you do not want to go far enough. It has to get stronger, much stronger. That's why it needed that swallow. It already lost one not long ago, and so today our little creation forced two creatures through to this side, the swallow and a shag. The shag would hunt the swallow and kill it, or injure it. Either way, the swallow would not be able to escape, and it didn't. With the swallow skin added to its shell, the vessel can now feed more efficiently on those dark creatures. It has to expand to match every dark creature that stalks the land."

"So what's going to happen?" Ryson interrupted. "Where's all this headed?"

"Headed? It's not headed anywhere. The mission has begun, and with great success. The number of beasts and monsters walking this part of the land has already diminished greatly. The creatures back in their native realm cringe in fear at my device. Eventually they will shrink back from this existence, never to return."

Ryson understood Lief's desire, but only to a degree. There was danger in this plan, that much was clearly evident.

"And what happens when all the dark creatures are destroyed? Where does that thing go next?"

"Dark creatures are like a plague. They never go away completely. They will continue to breed. The realm on the opposite side of that portal will spit them out continuously. It will never stop, and so, there will always be something for the vessel to hunt."

"That's not what I'm worried about. Have you completely forgotten about Ingar's sphere... what we went through? Godson, you were with me at Sanctum Mountain. You saw what the sphere had become. You've created another one."

"You now sound like the sorceress."

"If she's worried about your creation, then I'm glad I sound like her."

"And you would dismiss the benefit of removing dark creatures from the land so easily?"

"But you're not stopping there. You're destroying all the dark creatures and storing the magic."

"Not all the magic. That was Ingar's mistake, not mine."

And that seemed to be true. According to lore, the sphere focused on all the magic. It threatened to absorb it all and even led to an alliance between loathsome creatures and magic casters of every kind. Lief was speaking as if the magic could be divided, and Ryson lacked the knowledge to argue.

For a moment, the delver did not know what to do. Still, he did not come there alone. The sorceress had brought him. He turned to Heteera.

"Is he right?"

"No, he is not. The device is a threat, and I think he knows it, but will not admit it."

"She is foolish. She lacks the control to understand," the spirit fired back.

Ryson ignored the elf ghost. He focused on Heteera's concern.

"You know this thing is dangerous. That's why you brought us here. What are you really worried about?"

"The sphere will grow in power. It will feed on magic that was bent on evil intention, magic that is tainted by the stain of darkness. It will become a great reservoir of twisted power. I'm not sure what the end result will be, but I'm responsible for it and I can't let it just continue to expand. That's why I said the threat had no form."

"You don't think it can be controlled?"

"Do you? Would Enin?"

And so the sorceress' request became clear. She needed Enin to heed this dilemma and Ryson agreed. The magnitude of this problem was beyond a delver.

Lief eyed Ryson suspiciously.

"What are you thinking, Ryson Acumen?"

"We have to talk to Enin about this."

"I thought the wizard did not engage in such activities. He is passive and will allow others to make decisions of destiny."

"He'll want to hear about this."

"And if you tell him, what then?" Lief demanded, his tone becoming harsher. "Are you going to request that he interfere?"

"He'll know better what to do than me."

"Fire upon you, delver! Then go! Go to your wizard and tell him what you have seen here, but know this, I will not give him a chance to destroy my creation. Tell Enin I will keep the vessel in the dark lands. I will let it feed on the magic there. I understand Enin's power and if he tries to enter that dimension, the dark creatures will sense his great

magic. Those that don't hunt him in great numbers out of hunger will flee from their realm. They will enter these lands in a wave beyond your reckoning. If you wish to destroy the vessel, it will not be by Enin's hand, of this I vow. This will be between you and me."

The apparition said no more. The ghostly form flew back down to the portal and disappeared into the dark lands.

A Final Note from the Author

Nightmare's Shadow does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many third party vendors. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit www.sitelane.com.

Thank you for reading my work. I have tried to make my ebooks available in as many formats as possible. If you encounter any difficulty with the formatting, please let me know. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. If you enjoyed this book, please consider my other novels, including *When Do I See God?* and *Soul View*.

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