

Delver Magic

Book V

Chain of Bargains

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Important Note

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

Chain of Bargains is the fifth 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.

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*To Joan, for helping me find the answers...
and the dog park!*

Chapter 1

"We still have a cahltof tracking us," Holli Brances reminded the delver.

"I know," Ryson Acumen revealed, "but we have a problem ahead of us, too. The pass is being watched."

"Guards?"

"Not human. Not even goblins."

"Describe what you see," Holli requested.

The delver and elf stood near the edge of a wide path that wound through the lower foothills of the Oachet Mountains. Their position upon higher ground on the eastern side of a ridge gave Ryson a clear view of the pass ahead as it descended into the southwestern region of the Great Valleys. The delver scanned the horizon to the east, taking in the entire scene, and then narrowed his sights upon the unknown group of apparent sentries that waited near the end of the pass.

Leaf filled trees covered the majority of the landscape. Most of the ground within the hills was completely blocked by the swaying, green canopy. The path to the valley, however, was extremely wide and cut a clear trail through the woods. While weeds and thick grass grew high within its boundaries, the broad pass remained visible to the delver as it snaked a passage through the remaining foothills to the east. Above the trail and nestled within the forest, a few rocky glades rested on hillsides throughout the region, and it was on one of those clearings that Ryson spotted creatures with interest in the wide path below.

It was the height of the high sun season. The days were long with the sun making a high arch in light blue skies, and while the glare off the hillsides was strong, Ryson's eyes adjusted easily to the increased light. After pinpointing the exact location of his quarry and marking points of reference in his mind, he retrieved a spyscope from the pouch at his side. He focused in on the grouping of several forms, and he detailed what he could see.

"Thick, sturdy creatures, but slightly smaller than an average dwarf. About a dozen. Black armor, but it looks light and flexible. They're not moving much, but when they do, they look pretty nimble. Very pale skin from what I can see of their faces. I can't see any hair. Their heads are covered with helmets, but they don't have beards."

Ryson lowered the spyscope and considered his findings. He made a quick but fairly decisive conclusion.

"I think they're inferns."

Just as Ryson's expression revealed the seriousness of his declaration, Holli's level of readiness jumped. Her internal alarms went off with raging clarity. Inferns were dark creatures of considerable power... and very dangerous.

"How certain are you?" she requested, not in a dubious voice, but with a tone that marked the gravity of the matter.

The delver made one last look through his spyscope and then offered it to the elf.

"I've never seen one, but I've read about them in the legends. The pale white skin, their size, the armor... and they're all holding javelins. I'm pretty sure they're inferns."

The elf did not wish to doubt the delver, but the presence of inferns was significant. It had to be confirmed and the delver's description could have matched dwarves that

dwelled in the region. Holli strained her elf eyes in the direction of the pass, but even with the assistance of magnified lenses, her vision could not match the depth of a delver's.

"Where do you see them? How far?"

Ryson pointed in the proper direction and gave a verbal description to assist the elf in locating the sentries.

"They're just above the pass beyond the second hilltop to our left. They're out in the open on high ground... very near the peak. There's a small rock formation that looks kind of like a broken wagon wheel sticking out of the ground that's just below them."

Finding the proper spot, Holli could make out only shadows of movement. She could see the figures, but not with enough detail to confirm the identification.

"They are beyond my sight, but something is clearly there," she agreed.

"If they're still there when it gets dark, you'll see them better. They glow hot."

"Glow?"

"It's like they have an aura of heat around them. It's hard to see in daylight, but it's there. I'm sure of it. Even in the bright sun, I can see it. Their skin is doing more than just reflecting the sunlight. It's like I said, they have a glow. I think at night they're going to stand out like flares."

Holli knew it was beyond foolish to doubt the delver's senses, and she was now certain of the identity of the figures in the distance. Very few creatures gave off a glow of any sort—dwarves certainly didn't glow—and only inferns matched the full description given by Ryson.

"Definitely inferns," the elf noted, and then considered the implications.

Holli placed the revelation in context with both their situation and their mission. They needed to get into the Great Valleys, but risking a confrontation with inferns carried great peril. It was a risk that altered her perspective of their ultimate task. She knew she was operating on limited details, and the reason for their journey was to shed light on certain mysteries. Inferns, however, only added to the puzzle, and one word summed up the discovery.

Unexpected.

"None of the settlers in Connel said anything about inferns guarding the passages out of the valleys," Holli continued.

"I don't think that many settlers came this way."

"That is true, but why would they guard *this* pass and not Pride Gap?"

"I can't say," Ryson answered, "but I don't think it's a good idea to walk right under them."

"No, it is not. I have already disregarded any such tactic."

More than happy with that decision, Ryson inspected the landscape as he offered alternatives.

"We could break to the northeast and bypass them by cutting around this next hill. We can take to the trees. There's plenty of cover."

Holli considered the option, but then turned to gauge the progress of the cahltof behind them.

The beast began trailing them near the end of the Osak Plateau and it followed them through the Oachet mountains. It had been very persistent as well as diabolical in

revealing its presence. The creature wanted its prey to know that they were being followed, to sense just enough danger so that rest became impossible.

The cahltof wasn't going to let them escape, that was clearly its intent. It would rely on its incredible endurance and hope to wear out its prey. It would be a long hunt, but cahltofs were relentless.

Despite the qualities of its pursuer, Holli believed they could outdistance it. The cahltof might follow them through the foothills, but it would not enter the lower regions of the Great Valleys where humans were much more common. She was certain the monster remained out of striking distance but believed it was closing. She had sensed the creature through the magic, but only barely, and she had to augment her senses with a deliberate spell.

Turning back to the inferns, the elf attempted to trace a magical signature back to the figures in the distance, but she could not reach that far without actually casting another spell of her own to actively follow the magic. She did not wish to take that chance and alert the inferns to her presence. It was better to remain silent and unseen.

"Why inferns and why here?" the elf asked aloud, as she wrestled with the implications. "It makes no sense."

"Maybe it does," Ryson offered. "If goblins are settling in the Great Valleys, why wouldn't inferns? If they are, they would want to guard the passes. Wouldn't elves do the same thing in Dark Spruce?"

"Yes, but elves are trained to be guards. We watch passages to protect our camps. Why would an infern wish to protect the valleys?"

"Maybe it's not so much protecting the valleys as searching for prey."

"Perhaps, but I still do not understand the presence of inferns in these hills. They are foot soldiers, pawns of draevols."

Ryson knew a great deal of the legends, but he had not yet dealt with a draevol and wished to confirm their threat.

"Death mages?"

"Not death, but plague mages," Holli corrected. "They are demons that cast spells of rot and decay, sickness and disease. Brown is the aura of their magic, not black. There is a great difference. The power of death is not in shadow, but in change. The magic of plague is meant only to weaken and ultimately destroy. Draevols spawn from the depths of the dark lands, but thankfully they are somewhat limited in their ability to crossover from one realm to another."

"That's how they're described in elflore?"

"Yes, and that is also why they utilize inferns. While draevols are pure demons, the inferns are only half demon and half gnome. They have little will of their own but make a formidable army. While draevols cast plagues, inferns utilize fire. They move with speed and have great endurance, almost as much as a cahltof. My question remains as to why would such creatures guard this pass into the Great Valleys?"

"Maybe they've been ordered to by the draevols."

"We have heard nothing of demons by the settlers and their presence would be hard to miss."

"No, but the refugees from the valleys talked about a lot of unsettling things. Draevols and inferns may be just another part of it."

"Still, this pass is inconsequential. It breaks over rough terrain and is used mostly by loggers bringing resources into the Great Valleys."

"Could they be watching for elves possibly coming out of the trees?"

"Believe it or not, there are more dwarves in these hills than elves. Not many elf camps in this region, if any at all."

"Even with all these trees?"

"The dwarves laid claim to these lands long ago with underground cities. They did not relish the idea of elves camping over their heads and made as much known. The elves did not care for the area anyway. Too many human towns at the edges of the valleys, too many loggers entering the forests cutting down the trees. That is why this pass is so wide."

Ryson considered these facts and applied them to the sentries in the distance.

"Maybe that's what they're doing, just watching the pass in hopes of spotting loggers."

"Which returns me to my question of why use inferns for that? Draevols have never been concerned with hoarding treasure. They would only wish to spread plague across the land. As for inferns, they burn and kill. If they were here to set the forest ablaze, I would understand it."

Ryson considered the idea and took another look at the grouping of inferns.

"No, they're not starting any fires. They're just standing there watching the pass, not causing any damage at all."

"For whatever reason, we have to assume they are waiting for something," Holli determined. "Which means, we have to avoid them."

"If you don't want to head northeast, we could..." Quickly turning his head to the north, Ryson stopped in mid-sentence and sniffed the wind. He shook his head as if he smelled some terrible odor. He then lifted his ear to the same direction.

"We have another problem," he alerted the elf in a guarded whisper. "Something's coming at us from the north. The scent is goblin, but it's not right. It's too strong. I can hear them. Sounds like a grouping of six to ten... but it smells like fifty. They're also moving heavy, too heavy for goblins."

Holli sniffed the air. "You are right. The odor is strong. How close are they?"

"Just around this hilltop. We'd both see them easily if we had a path of clear sight."

"How did they get so close?"

"I have no idea," Ryson revealed with confusion of his own. "The scent just appeared, but it's very strong."

Ryson gave Holli a single moment to digest the news, then offered what he saw as the only alternative.

"We have to go south. We can climb the trees, move from branch to branch and..."

Holli cut him off.

"No."

"No?" the surprised delver responded. "We can't get caught here."

Holli scanned every direction and then set her sights to the hills behind them. She already had contingency plans set in her mind, and she chose the one that offered the greatest chance of success given the alternatives.

"We are being directed south, and it is usually a bad idea to take the bait. You know that. Whatever is to the north is disguising their true scent with goblin scent. That means they must know you are a delver or that I am an elf. Why disguise scent for two humans?"

No, humans would not recognize the smell—they rely too heavily on sight. Whoever is coming at us is moving like this for a reason... to send us in the opposite direction. Heading south is a mistake."

"Then what do we do?"

"We head back west... for now."

"We've got a cahltof back..."

"I know," Holli cut him off, and then quickly issued her directives. "I'm going to take the lead. I want you to travel ten paces behind me. Match my speed." She looked directly into Ryson's eyes to make her next point very clear. "Understand, I *want* the cahltof to attack me. Trust me and be ready with your sword. Unsheathe it now."

Ryson almost argued, but they were running out of time. Holli asked him to trust her, and so, he would.

The delver pulled the Sword of Decree from its sheath across his back. He looked to the north with the glowing blade in his hand, then he eyed the grouping of inferns. Before considering the power of his sword, he looked to the east where the cahltof waited in the distance. With his attention divided among many concerns, he gripped the handle tightly as if to entice a message from the weapon. The sword would, at times, produce an image in the mind of its holder, revealing not necessarily the full solution to some puzzle, but expose facts and offer guidance.

Ryson hoped for some magical insight, but with so many questions, he lacked focus. He received no further information from the weapon. He shrugged it off. He had learned to live without assistance from the sword, and if the blade failed to offer further enlightenment, so be it.

Just as the delver drew his sword, Holli prepared herself to deal with the cahltof. She concentrated on a single spell that would mix her inherent power over nature with the spell of storm. She pressed her hands together, but only allowed them to touch at the fingertips. A small emerald octagon of magical energy appeared between her palms. The green magic spread across the back of her hands, down her arms and around her entire body. She glowed bright green until she pulled her hands apart, and then, all evidence of the magic faded.

Ryson could not contain an observation.

"With you lighting up green and my sword glowing like a bon fire, I'm guessing anyone and anything near us now knows exactly where we are."

"We will not be here long," the elf replied. "Follow me and be prepared to strike if necessary."

Holli did not wait for an acknowledgment. Just as Ryson trusted her, she would trust in him. She knew he would do as she asked, and she would stake her life upon that confidence.

She raced westward, back along the path they had traveled. She did not alter her course or change her pace at any time. Instead, she ran straight down the middle of the pass with a clear indication of reckless flight. It was an obvious act of desperation that almost any predator would recognize, and it was certainly the kind of frantic dash for escape that would draw out the cahltof.

Holli prepared herself for a long run. The air remained hot and heavy with humidity. Still, it was the kind of element she could adapt to easily as opposed to the scorching dry winds of the Lacobian desert. She focused on breathing in steady time with her

movement, and she measured her stride to keep from overexerting herself. The pace matched the full sprint of most humans, but she was an elf.

She believed the cahltof would quickly alter its own strategy to match the escape attempt of its prey. She was certain it wouldn't allow them to pass it by. The beast wouldn't want to fall behind at this stage of the hunt. Previously, it was content in following them and pressing them onward, but with a hasty change in direction, the cahltof would adjust its tactics. She was sure it would strike from a forward position as they ran directly into its path, but she couldn't be certain how long it would wait before it decided to pounce.

Cahltofs, with their sleek bodies, ran gracefully and effortlessly on all fours. They could not quite match the speed of an average horse, but they could come close and they could maintain their top pace for a much longer duration.

Holli attempted to spot the predator as she ran, but she knew cahltofs blended in well with the shadows of the trees. Short thick fur covered their entire bodies, usually colored light brown, but sometimes dark gray. They appeared like a cross between a mountain lion and a timber wolf, but with an elongated body that was almost snake like in its flexibility. It was this long and supple core that allowed it to strike with such deadly proficiency.

With Holli leading the way, she and Ryson rounded the base of several hills. The terrain suited both of their natural abilities. Although the Oachets were called mountains, they stood more as gently, rolling hills. The altitude was that of a high plain, but was no where near the height of the Colad Mountains where the air was thin and peaks rose above the tree line.

Holli didn't even have to look back to gauge Ryson's condition. She knew he could handle the pace she set without difficulty, and the clear path along a hillside was a terrain where Ryson Acumen thrived. She would tire long before he would.

Her only concern latched upon the stamina of her spell. While the dash was no true test of her physical endurance, her pool of magical energy was not of equal standing. The spell she cast upon herself constantly drained her reserve of magic. The spell would fade if the cahltof showed much greater patience than the elf expected.

Behind her, Ryson called out a quick warning that relieved her of that worry.

"It's still ahead of us, but it's getting closer. I can smell it."

Unfortunately, his warning carried an additional caution Holli did not expect.

"There's more than one!" Ryson exclaimed.

"What?" Holli responded in disbelief. "They do not travel in packs. Are you..."

She was unable to complete her question as five cahltofs broke from the trees ahead of her. They were still quite far in the distance, but they sprinted in a full charge. As Holli did not slow her own pace, the space between them quickly diminished. Three came at her from the left and two from the right. At first, all five focused on Holli and angled their approach to keep her from escaping between them. One of the beasts, however, broke ranks and lined a path toward the delver.

Two of the fastest cahltofs widened their lead on the other three. When they reached the proper range, each launched itself at Holli, though they sprung at her from opposite sides. It was an attack the elf expected.

A cahltof would pursue its prey to exhaustion, and when it believed its victim was sufficiently fatigued, it would leap at the head and throat. The long sleek body would

wrap around its intended meal, choking the prey or snapping its neck. It was a usually a quick fate, but not one Holli intended for herself or Ryson.

One of the beasts slammed into Holli's chin and attempted to wrap itself around her throat just as the second leapt into her midsection and hoped to crush her lungs. Both, however, received a daunting surprise in the form of a magical disruption.

Like the seeds of a dandelion scattered in a burst of wind, small fragments of tiny magical particles exploded off of Holli's body. They landed upon the thick coats of the cahltofs that attempted to wrap themselves around the elf's body. Once the particles made contact with the beasts, each shard of magic discharged a burst of electrical energy. Quick flashes of lightning exploded across the bodies of both cahltofs. The electric bursts dislodged both creatures and sent them flying away from the elf. The pain was severe enough to convince the creatures to make a hasty retreat back into the woods.

The cahltof that altered its path to hunt the delver forced its attack on Ryson with a similar leap toward the delver's head. The creature never made contact. Once in the air, its path was set and there was no way for it to redirect its course.

Ryson simply twisted his upper body the moment after the cahltof launched itself toward him. He dropped his head and shoulders low to one side and allowed the beast to pass harmlessly by. Instead of turning to face the creature, he increased his speed and passed Holli. With his sword in hand, he moved toward one of the two cahltofs that remained in front of the elf.

With a quick but shallow thrust, he jabbed the point of the sword lightly into the shoulder of the beast. The Sword of Decree held many enchantments and the glowing blade burned the essence of the creature. The cahltof shrieked and followed two of its previous companions back into the woods.

Ryson turned with another flash of speed and rounded back at the cahltof that had failed to hit him on its initial assault. As expected, the creature had spun about and was preparing to strike at Holli from the rear. With another jab of his sword, the delver convinced it to retreat as well.

With but one predator remaining, Ryson turned back and moved to Holli's side. The elf and the delver came to a halt and prepared to fight off the single attacker. They watched the beast carefully as it had also pulled to a stop. The cahltof returned the stare of the elf and the delver as Ryson considered their next move.

"Is that spell of yours still active?" Ryson asked.

"It is," Holli advised, but she did not reveal that its potency was quickly fading.

Ryson wondered how long the standoff would continue as he also knew the traits of cahltofs. Patience and persistence were their strongest attributes and he did not want to remain there for long. He kept an ear out for the other four beasts that had run into the forest, but he knew that they were far off in the distance.

Holli was just about to take the bow from her shoulder, but her hand stopped before it could reach the bow's riser.

"Go home," the cahltof snarled, as its gaze passed back and forth from elf to delver.

It said nothing further. It simply turned with total disregard and stalked slowly back into the trees.

Chapter 2

"Did you know they could talk?" Ryson wondered.

"No, I did not believe they could," Holli admitted.

The delver glanced back at the cahltof's path into the trees. He could no longer see it, but he could still hear the creature moving away at the same steady pace. Despite the otherwise peaceful setting of the serene hills, the delver felt his uneasiness—and his curiosity—grow. The raspy growl of the cahltof echoed in his mind.

Go home!

That was the beast's message—or perhaps its warning. Maybe it was sound advice, but the delver found it unpalatable. His delver spirit soared at the thought of uncovering unknowns, and a warning from a cahltof added to the mystery surrounding the Great Valleys.

"Well, what should we do now?" he asked in an almost giddy tone, like a child wondering which lavishly wrapped present to open first.

"We are not going home," Holli responded.

"I didn't think we were. We still have to check out what's going on in the valleys, but the inferns are guarding the pass, something was coming at us from the north, and now this."

Holli quickly appraised the situation. She understood the delver. It was more of a delightful dilemma for him to have so many mysteries thrown at him at once. For an elf guard, however, too many unknowns crafted a dangerous path.

"We no longer have to worry about cahltofs trailing us. That concern is now gone. As for the inferns, we can examine the question of their presence with greater care in due time. That can wait... as can the valleys. They are not going anywhere. The mystery to the north involving the goblin scent is now our immediate concern."

"Actually, they're probably more to the east of us by now. We went a pretty far distance and I doubt they could have kept up with us." Ryson nodded down the clearing that curved around the hills. "If they're following us, they're back there on the pass between us and the inferns."

"With the heavy scent of goblin upon them, I am sure you can pinpoint their location once we get closer, but we will not use the pass."

"What do you suggest?"

"Let us take to the trees, but move in a northeasterly direction." Holli pointed to the closest hilltop. "We angle up around that peak. Once we get to the other side, we move parallel to the pass but remain in the trees and on higher ground. When you sense them, let me know, and we will choose the best route to gain a better perspective."

"Fair enough," Ryson agreed as he sheathed his sword.

Holli took the lead knowing Ryson would follow. The elf took several strides along the open pass before approaching the tree line, placing some distance between them and the passage used by the last cahltof. She then turned north and moved into the woods. Quickly scampering up a large ash tree, she climbed two thirds of the way up the trunk before stepping out upon a branch strong enough to hold her weight.

The limb bent low as Holli moved further out to its edge, but it would not break. The leaves rustled with agitation as the branch bounced with each step of the elf. When Holli

leapt over to a neighboring tree, the limb snapped back upward, bobbed up and down several times, and ultimately settled back in its previous spot, reaching for the bright sunshine.

Ryson moved with even greater ease through the trees. Though he was not as accustomed to that form of travel, as a delver he could quickly adjust to his surroundings. His instincts and his agility served him well as he danced through the trees at a much faster pace than his companion.

The delver still allowed Holli to set the direction of their travel, but he circled about her position, never getting too far ahead or lagging way behind. He barely had to watch his footfalls as the tree branches simply became an intertwined system of bridges and paths.

Utilizing all his senses, he sniffed the wind for foreign scents, listened for hints of travelers, and scanned the lands around them. Through the varied trees of oak, ash, hickory and basswood, he noted the natural trails of the regional wildlife as well as the recent signs of humans and dark creatures alike. He caught several traces of goblin scent as he traveled, but he believed they were nothing more than the residue from old trails. After passing the third hilltop, however, he caught a fresher scent that definitely matched what he had noticed before the incident with the cahltofs.

"We're getting closer," he whispered over to Holli as he leapt back to her side. He pointed to the southeast. "It's coming from over there. I haven't heard them yet, which is kind of strange."

Holli examined the location of the pass from where she stood in the trees and then matched it to the area pointed out by the delver. She surveyed the hills in the distance and quickly fixed upon the hilltop where the inferns were spotted.

"If they are near, they have not moved far from where we first encountered them."

"If they're not moving, that would explain why I haven't heard them."

The elf guard weighed the additional information and made a quick decision.

"Let us remain on this course and see what else we can discover."

Holli moved slower, even allowed Ryson to take the lead. She continuously scanned the surrounding lands and reached out to touch the magic that flowed freely in every direction. She utilized her inherent ability to take hold of the energy, and she examined it closely to sense any danger in the vicinity. The magic, however, remained pure and untouched. She sensed no magic caster attempting to exploit the energy.

Ryson silently glided through the trees, making no sounds and focusing all of his senses on the signs he could find. After passing another hilltop, he announced his new discovery.

"They're dwarves," Ryson offered.

"You are certain?"

"Look at the tracks," he stated with confidence as he pointed to the forest floor.

"Those are dwarf footprints. There's eight of them... and they're very close by." He paused to listen and sniffed the wind once more. "They're not moving, I think they're just waiting in the pass. I can't see them, but it's around this hill."

Holli looked across the horizon, noted the position of the pass in the distance and its relation to their current position.

"Right where we were when you spotted the inferns," Holli declared. "They didn't follow us at all."

"What should we do?"

"Can you see if the inferns are still watching the pass?"

Ryson quickly retrieved his spyscope. He had to climb higher up the tree, but he found a position with a clear view. After a brief moment of peering into the east, he leapt silently back down to the elf.

"Still there. They're not moving, either, and they don't seem to be concerned with what's going on over here. They're just focused on the pass as it drops down into the valleys."

Holli nodded.

"Let us get a better look at the dwarves," she advised.

With fluent grace, the elf and the delver slipped through the trees like silent shadows. Holli led once more and chose a path that remained elevated above the clearing of the pass. Ryson stalked through the trees very near the elf as opposed to circling her. He knew exactly where the dwarves were, even as they remained out of sight around one last hilltop.

Once the two circled the last peak, they found a spot deep within thick leaves that covered their positions, but allowed them to review the dwarves from a safe distance. Holli brought them to a halt and took great care to pinpoint the location of all eight dwarves. She could not understand why they carried such a strong scent of goblin among them, but she was relieved to see their relaxed state. All eight stood within the clearing of the pass, and though they kept watch in all directions, they showed no sign of aggression.

"They are armed, but probably not a war patrol," Holli whispered as she continued to evaluate the situation.

The elf guard immediately spotted a female dwarf who turned her head in their direction. The dwarf made no other move, but stared directly at Ryson and Holli's position. By her armor, Holli judged her to be an officer. The dwarf would not release her gaze. It was clear they had been discovered.

"One heard me," Holli revealed in a slightly lower voice. "Might as well not pretend. Let us greet them in the open."

"You're sure?"

Holli nodded. "Best way to handle the situation. We are going to ground level and we will move into the pass. Stay on guard and do not stray too far from the trees. Leave your sword sheathed, but remain prepared to retreat back into the woods."

Ryson agreed and again let Holli take the lead. He followed her to the ground and they broke through the thick brush at the edge of the clearing together. When she stopped after but two steps into the open pass, Ryson took a position by her left side. He took one quick scan of the horizon and then noted the movements of the dwarves. They did not appear at all surprised to see them.

The female dwarf who had turned her head stepped up deliberately to meet the two new arrivals while the other dwarves remained several steps behind and showed little distress. The dwarf officer had a wide chin and large eyes, and she looked upon Holli with what appeared to be simple curiosity. When she turned her attention to the delver, she smiled broadly and her large chin seemed to expand even wider.

"Ryson Acumen, it is an honor to welcome you to the Oachets."

"You know who I am?"

"You are the delver with the glowing sword and a friend to all dwarves, no?"

The delver agreed with the sentiment. Though his relations with the dwarves of Dunop had been at one time strained by certain circumstances, any hostilities had been settled. Still, he was not at all familiar with the dwarf before him, and Dunop was a great distance to the west.

The dwarves of the Oachets were of another city, another region. He realized tales of a delver carrying the Sword of Decree were spreading, but he remained uneasy over such fame—and uncertain on how to react to his growing prominence among strangers.

"I guess so."

"You guess? Are you not the delver who destroyed Ingar's sphere? Though we dwarves are not thrilled with the return of magic, we understand how you saved all the land. Did you also not save the dwarves of Dunop from the shadow trees? And did you not work with those same dwarves to save the humans of Connel and build growing relations between the two races?"

"There are others that had a lot to do with all of that."

The dwarf released a hearty chuckle.

"Ryson Acumen, now is not the time for modesty. You're in a strange land, greeting a dwarf warrior you have never met. Are you a friend of the dwarves or not?"

"I've always thought so, well, at least for as long as I knew dwarves existed."

"We have always existed," the dwarf laughed a bit harder, "but I understand. The time before magic remains in most of our memories, even if it now seems a distant thought. My name is Ulet Bulharp. I am a battle commander in the dwarf brigade of Sterling."

"Pleased to meet you," Ryson responded.

The smile remained on the dwarf warrior as she turned to the elf, but it diminished a degree or two.

"And may I ask the name of the elf who accompanies you?"

Holli introduced herself, but stood firm and made no other acknowledgement.

"I am Holli Brances. My original camp was of Dark Spruce Forest—among the elves that oversaw the region below Sanctum Mountain. I am now in the service of the wizard Enin of Burbon... and Connel as well."

The dwarf's smile drifted away, but she responded with respect.

"Holli Brances. You also entered Sanctum in service of the land. Now you work side-by-side with the great wizard, and the deeds of Enin are almost as legendary as that of Ryson Acumen."

The dwarf warrior then placed her hands together and rubbed them strenuously as she announced her intentions. "I wish to speak with both of you, but not here. There is a cave entrance to Sterling just to the southeast... near the base of the neighboring hill. I would ask that you follow me there. It is a more secure area. Agreed?"

Holli would have preferred to stay in their current location. The trees remained in reach and there were only eight dwarves before them. Moving into a tunnel that served as the entrance to a dwarf city would definitely alter the advantage and limit her options, but she had to accept the fact that she and Ryson were the ones traveling through dwarf territory. She did her best to appear congenial but also acted in a fashion to mitigate the potential hazards.

"I would ask that we do not move far into any tunnel. I am uncomfortable in confined areas."

Ryson appeared somewhat surprised, but the dwarf appeared unfazed by the request.

"I understand. We shall stay at the entrance. I'm going to leave six of my party here to keep watch over the pass."

"Can you have them take that sack with them?" Ryson asked, as he pointed to a large bag that exuded an overpowering scent of goblin. His delver curiosity almost made him inquire as to the contents of the bag, but then he feared they might open it to show him, and he believed the stench might render him unconscious. He never asked.

The dwarf warrior agreed and gave her orders to the surrounding dwarves. A half dozen moved off to the north with the foul smelling sack in tow. Only one other dwarf accompanied Ulet, Holli and Ryson, and the dwarf commander bade that sentry to guard their flank.

Ulet Bulharp led the delver and elf across the clearing and into the woods of the adjoining hill to the south. Once past the thick brush that filled the border between the pass and the trees, they stepped upon clearer grounds that were deep in the shadows of the thick canopy of leaves overhead. The dwarf turned west and followed the lower base of the hill. After several paces, she made one last turn back to face the hillside. With but a few steps, they came across an opening that broke through a massive chunk of limestone.

The dwarf at the rear remained just outside the opening as Ulet guided Ryson and Holli several steps into the tunnel entrance. The path widened slightly after the initial opening and then angled into a fairly steep downward grade.

Ryson's vision immediately adjusted to the lower light, but he realized it remained brighter than it should have been. He quickly noted the angled position of several reflective rocks at the cave opening that sent beams of light down the tunnel. He also recognized several scents coming up from the passage. He wondered how far below ground the dwarf city of Sterling rested and what it might look like.

He had only seen one dwarf city in his lifetime, Dunop, and it remained one of the grandest spectacles he had ever witnessed. The thought of exploring another dwarf city was almost intoxicating. It took tremendous strength of will to douse his delver curiosity and keep from racing down the tunnel path.

The dwarf warrior pulled to a halt and turned to the elf.

"Is this acceptable?"

"Yes, thank you."

Ulet took a moment to review both the elf and the delver before her. She smiled broadly again at Ryson.

"You wish to see our city?"

"I would love it," but then Ryson saw the stern expression on his companion's face. "Unfortunately, this isn't the best time."

"It is a strange time, indeed," Ulet confirmed and then focused on the point of the meeting. "I assume you were headed into the Great Valleys?"

Holli saw no danger in admitting that fact.

"Yes,"

"May I ask why you are heading into the valleys through this pass?"

"We thought it would be the least conspicuous," Holli admitted without hesitation. "It seems we attracted more interest than we expected. Cahltofs trailing us, inferns watching the pass ahead, and a dwarf scouting party crossing our path."

"We were not on a scout. We were there to intercept you." Ulet saw the questioning expressions on both her guests faces and did not hesitate to explain. "We did not want

you to charge unwittingly into the inferns, but then again, we did not know that a delver was among you. I had known you were an elf, but from a distance, I guessed your partner was half-elf. A miscalculation that was corrected when we saw the glowing sword he held as you retreated back down the path."

"If you weren't out scouting," Ryson wondered aloud, "how did you know we were there?"

"Listening posts below ground across the Oachet range," Ulet revealed. "We have been monitoring the pass for some time. We picked you up, as well as the cahltofs behind you, and followed your progress. When it became clear you were heading into the valleys, we hoped to persuade you to take a different path. That is why we used the goblin scent. We believed two elves would take to the south in hopes of avoiding a large group of the monsters. You surprised us when you turned back on the cahltofs. A cunning move, if not somewhat foolhardy."

"I thought there was only one," Holli replied. "I believed they were solitary creatures and did not hunt in packs. I also did not think they spoke."

Holli watched Ulet closely at this point and the dwarf could not hide her surprise.

"The cahltofs spoke to you?"

"Only one. It told us to go home. You have not experienced this before?"

"No, but then again as I said, these are strange times."

"Care to explain what you mean by that?" Ryson asked.

"What you have seen on this day has been happening for some time. Inferns guarding a little used pass, goblins entering the valleys from all directions but in small parties, cahltofs traveling in packs and now talking—little of this makes sense. We know the valleys are experiencing turbulent times, but it seems the turmoil is now spreading into our range. This has our king and queen concerned."

"What is the status of Sterling?" Holli inquired.

"We remain secure, even thriving. The disorder has not reached our underground borders or those of our neighboring dwarf cities. Whatever is creating the havoc in the Great Valleys remains above ground. May I now ask what brings Ryson Acumen and the elf guard of Enin out of the western lands, across the central plains, and into these hills?"

Holli did not hesitate. She believed Ulet had been open and forthright in describing the circumstances of their region, and the elf felt honor bound to reciprocate.

"Many settlers have come to Connel, far more than we ever expected. Most have come not from the outposts throughout the plains, but further east, from the Great Valleys. Stories have come with them, stories as to why they have left these fertile lands. What we have heard has been... confusing and disturbing."

"And so you have come here to investigate for yourselves?"

"Enin made the request. He would have come here himself, but with so many new humans entering Connel, he could not risk leaving the city. Balancing the needs of all concerned is a delicate matter and his guidance is needed."

The dwarf warrior considered the new information as she rubbed her chin with the thick, powerful palm of her right hand.

"I see. We, too, have followed the migration of the humans to the west. For the most part, they are utilizing Pride Gap, which serves as the gateway to the central plains from the far eastern edge of the Great Valleys. That point is quite a distance north by northwest of here. As to the reason for the exodus, we cannot be sure. The dwarves keep watch over

the borders between the valleys and the foothills, but we have no reason to interact with the human towns. They have completely inundated the valleys and we leave them to their own business."

"So you have no idea of what's going on within the human towns?"

"We try not to speculate," Ulet replied without taking insult. "We know many humans are leaving, but we also know the valleys are not emptying out completely. We have seen no indication of wars or even signs of skirmishes. What we have seen is the increased activity of dark creatures all around the borders of the Great Valleys, but they do not appear to be taking any hostile action. Most seem to be entering the valleys with an almost casual attitude. Others have staked out positions at the borders. It's almost as if they are simply keeping watch over who enters and who leaves the area."

"So the inferns further down the pass are simply monitoring activity?"

"It would seem so. They have not acted in any hostile manner, but then again, we have done our best to make sure they are left alone. A skirmish with inferns could lead to unnatural forest fires, and that is something we hope to avoid."

"I see."

In her mind, Holli reviewed all that had happened. Many mysteries remained, but the dwarf warrior did not appear to be withholding any information. She had but one last question that needed to be asked.

"Why did you remain in the pass when we returned?"

"Because I was hoping you both would return. Once we saw the sword and understood it was Ryson Acumen, I believed it best to show absolutely no sign of hostility or distrust. I wished to understand your purpose for being in these hills. We could not hope to catch an elf—let alone a delver—racing through the hillsides, but a delver's curiosity is renown. I believed you would come back with questions of your own, as you obviously have."

"And I thank you for answering all those questions," Holli noted.

"I have told you all I know, but we welcome you to Sterling. I am certain the king and queen would be happy to host you at the palace if you wish to stay here for the night."

"Thank you, but I would prefer to reach the valleys before nightfall."

Ulet frowned slightly. She seemed ready to argue the point, almost insist, but in the end, she deferred to the elf's wishes.

"Then I will not delay you any further, I only ask that you avoid any confrontation with the inferns. Their magical fire remains our concern. The trees of this forest are not as resistant to it as dwarves."

"A conflict would be in no one's interest. We still aim to enter the Great Valleys, but I understand your concerns and I will honor your request. We shall move to the southeast and remain in the trees. Ryson will ensure that we enter the valleys without incident."

The dwarf warrior offered a simple salute, acknowledging both the delver and the elf. She then offered her own warning.

"Take care entering the Great Valleys. There might not be signs of battle, but something is not right. I realize that's why you are here, but know that most dwarves are blessed with a certain gift for seeing their way through the dark. We have a sense for danger and a nose for trouble." She chuckled for a moment and then continued with brazen honesty. "We ourselves often dismiss such warnings and go headlong into battle with the unknown, but we are a stubborn race. To say an ill shadow covers the valleys

would be much too melodramatic for my taste. Still, almost every dwarf in Sterling realizes that something is amiss with the humans. The valleys are changing."

Chapter 3

Pushing through the last heavily forested section of the Oachet Mountains, Ryson led Holli to the edge of the Great Valleys. He guided them down one of the steeper slopes where he made a path away from the eyes of the inferns. He also avoided contact with other dark creatures he detected guarding several smaller trails out of the hills.

The Great Valleys encompassed many large and small vales that spread far to the north and east. Numerous rivers, fed by abundant streams and tributaries, formed a series of byways for human travel and trade. While the valleys remained lush and green, vast stretches of land had been cleared for farming, and the entire area hosted hundreds of human towns and cities. It was not as densely populated as the eastern coastal regions, but it served as the true cradle for human expansion throughout the land of Uton.

Humans had long dominated the Great Valleys, and they employed the land for their growth and gain. They spread themselves across the region and filled the lowlands all the way to Pride Gap—the end point of the last western valley where the land opened up to the central plains. Protected by the rolling hills to the southwest and another majestic range of mountains to the east, the fertile lands provided everything the humans needed.

With farmlands, several towns, and even the Aranka River within sight, Ryson and Holli remained in the trees. They crouched in a sturdy ash that grew from the rich soil at the edge of the Oachet Mountains. Their path had brought them to the border of one of the southern valleys, and they both looked upon the amazing expanse with a mix of curiosity and awe.

The sun was setting to the west. The hills behind Ryson and Holli began to cast long shadows across the valley. Still, a deep orange glow lit up many of the taller tree tops in the distance, as the sun had not yet dropped fully below the horizon. The amber light filling the space above the shadowed ground offered a haze of warmth, as if the trees had been blessed with divine glory. Leaves reflected the orange and red aura of the sunset, and it almost appeared as if the harvest season had come early to the valley. Both the delver and elf watched the display with immense appreciation.

"This is my first entrance into any part of the Great Valleys," Holli noted, as she found a great sense of contentment in watching the natural display of beauty.

"Mine, too." Ryson announced.

The revelation surprised the elf.

"Truly? A full-bred delver never exploring this area?"

"I could never get out of the hills," Ryson admitted. "The valleys are farms, towns and people, not a great deal I ever wanted to see. There wasn't much here that ever really called to me, but the hills..."

Ryson looked backed upon the rolling slopes to the west. The hills themselves were covered in shadows, but the sky above them was painted with the glorious sunset. Even with the expansive valley ahead waiting to be explored, he could still feel the tug of each rounded peak behind him. His delver spirit ached to uncover mysteries in the crevices of limestone rock, to explore the forest at its floor and throughout its intertwined branches, and to examine the trails, dens, nests, and markings of every creature that inhabited the rolling high grounds.

"Before the magic returned," Ryson explained, "I would come as far east as the Oachets, but I never even got close to the valleys. Once I got in those hills, I could explore for entire seasons. I love the hills."

Ryson turned his attention back to the valley, and as the light began to fade, his eyes adjusted to the growing darkness. His delver vision enabled him to see as if it were still midday, but the coming night allowed him to view the valley from a different perspective.

Lanterns in the distance revealed the nearest farmhouses and towns. The land before them was not quite as expansive as the central plains they crossed before they reached the Oachets, but there was so much more activity in the valleys, so many more people.

"How should we approach this?" Ryson asked, deferring the decision of strategy to his companion.

Holli responded as if reciting from an elf guard handbook.

"Scouting and surveillance first. We need to become familiar with the landscape, and we should remain out of sight in order to limit our risk. Care to our safety and thoroughness to our investigation remain paramount. There is no sense in being careless. We are not constrained by time. There is no pressing concern, no immediate crisis which must be addressed. Let us use the first few days to explore the surrounding areas and witness for ourselves the true extent of the predicament."

The thought of a long exploration should have thrilled the delver, and in many ways, it did. There was, however, another part of him that was now anchored to his home in Bourbon. He thought of his wife, Linda. She understood the need for him to be gone, but she would miss him, and he would miss her.

He wondered how long it would take them to gather enough information to suit Holli, and to quell his own curiosity. The Great Valleys stretched over an expansive distance, and it could take several cycles of the seasons to explore the entire region. From the information they already obtained, he knew it would not be necessary to visit each valley, but there was no guarantee that the turmoil was spread evenly throughout the area.

"We have the reports from the settlers that left the valleys, but what exactly should we be focusing on?" the delver requested.

"We are here to determine the extent of the infestation, its purpose, its influence, and hopefully, its origin. We will focus on the farmlands first. Better to understand what is happening out on the edges before we enter the center."

"Okay, so a concealed scout of the outlying farms. Will you use any sight spells?"

"Not at this time. I do not want to alert anyone to our presence, and a sight spell that would go measurably beyond your senses might reveal us to a powerful mage in the area."

Ryson looked back over his shoulder to the west, but this time he did so to gauge the dying light. The sun had disappeared behind the hills and dusk had begun. The sky remained dark blue overhead, but the far edges in the east were already tinged with gray.

"Well, soon we should be able to set out under cover of darkness, but until then, I suggest we move around the surrounding woods to get a better look at what's going on here before we hit the farmlands. We might be able to pick up a few trails and check on some of the dark creatures that were watching the borders of the valley."

Holli nodded and the two set off to explore the area in greater detail. They quickly located another group of inferns in the distance. They were easy to spot as they did, in

fact, glow. The heated nature of their bodies radiated through their pale skin, and their faces lit up the night like round lanterns held on armor pedestals. Their iron javelins appeared as long red staffs encased in molten metal. They stood as silent sentinels in a clearing on a nearby hillside—demon imps offering themselves as beacons to light up the night, perhaps warning the curious to stay away.

As a deeper darkness spread across the valley and the night advanced with a moonless sky, Ryson and Holli expanded the scope of their scout. They leapt from the sanctuary of the trees and moved through the fields at ground level.

Carefully, they spied into farmhouses and barns and examined the roads to determine the level of activity that occurred throughout the outlying regions. They noted the location of a few towns, but never got close enough for any detailed inspection of the activity in pubs, taverns and inns.

They traveled quickly and quietly, covering huge distances. Despite the lack of sleep, neither tired and they never paused. Blending into the night, they stayed in shadow and kept away from large clearings where their movements might be detected. They went unspotted despite the tense nature they sensed.

Moving carefully through fields, along fences, and down gullies, Ryson and Holli noted the apprehension of all those they crossed. It seemed every farmhouse remained well lit, and several armed soldiers on horseback moved along roads far from the outskirts of nearby towns.

The guards remained cautious and alert throughout their patrols, and they rode in groups of larger numbers than seemed necessary for the region. Even their mounts revealed a skittish nature, as the horses stepped across gravel and dirt roads with a cautious gait and a wary eye. The guards stopped often and peered for long moments into the darkness. Even sentries at the gates of small towns appeared tense and apprehensive. The night was not a friend to any of those on patrol.

Holli and Ryson kept silent, but knowing glances between them revealed their awareness to the tension. They also observed oddities within the farm fields they could not explain. It was the height of the growing season, and most fields were carefully planted and yielding great quantities of crops, but some appeared disheveled and disorganized. These fields lacked clean planted lines, as crops and weeds mixed together across swaths in haphazard fashion. The ground was packed hard under foot, not the softer mounds of recently plowed fields.

Once the night passed, they returned to the trees in outlying areas and continued their reconnaissance from afar. They watched the roads and noted the pace and direction of wayward travelers and merchants. There were far fewer than they expected.

There were, however, a great number of other travelers on the roads—travelers they did not expect to see out in the open in broad daylight, but they were there nonetheless. Goblins moved along roads without hiding their numbers and with little regard to humans they passed. They acted as if they belonged there, and even more surprising, the humans that spotted them simply passed as quickly as they could. No one called for help, no one shouted an alarm. The presence of goblins seemed to be accepted.

After several days of careful reconnaissance, Holli decided to approach a farmer working in the fields. She hid her pointed ears under a forester's cap and counseled Ryson to appear as nothing more than a human logger surveying the land.

The farmer eyed them suspiciously. When the two strangers stepped off the road and onto his land, he abruptly ended his chores and intercepted them. He held a pitch fork loosely in one hand. He was big, but agile enough to use the tool effectively as a weapon. With more defiance than curiosity, he demanded the reason for the trespass.

"You need something?"

Holli nodded.

"Information," she said quickly. She appeared confused, as if they were lost. "We were out surveying the hills to the southwest for potential logging fields and we lost track of time... and our position. We saw some creatures that we decided to avoid, so we came down into the valley."

The farmer appeared to respect their caution, but then decided to question what they might have seen.

"The glowing ones or the big spiders?"

Holli and Ryson had located the presence of bloat spiders, so the farmer's inquiry was not a surprise.

"Actually, both," she replied.

The farmer expected as much, but then considered how common the appearance of such dark creatures had become around the foothills that bordered the valley. He could see the inferns every night. They were impossible to miss.

"And they surprised you?"

"Yes."

"You been around here long?"

"No, we are not from the valley." Holli answered with absolute honesty that rang clear in her voice.

"Where *do* you come from?"

Here, the elf was forced to bend the truth. She did not wish to lie, but her directive and intentions called for a level of secrecy.

"We usually stay in the logging camps in the woods. We just took this surveying job..." She let her voice trail off, as if to reveal the decision was a mistake.

It seemed a simple enough explanation, but the farmer remained cautious. Just because the two loggers got separated from their camp, that was no excuse for them to come on to his property. He had enough problems without worrying about lost loggers.

"So what information do you need? The hills are that way." The farmer pointed to the west, away from his land.

Ryson decided to enter the conversation and added more than a hint of confusion to his tone. He spoke with guarded apprehension, as if to convince the farmer they were truly unnerved by the appearance of so many dark creatures.

"If you don't mind, we'd like to know what's going on here. I mean, I've seen my fair share of strange things in the woods, but not like this. Is it like this all over the valley or is it just near the foothills?"

Ryson already knew the answer to that question. During their reconnaissance of the surrounding lands, they had already spotted the unmistakable signs of goblin parties. He knew the dark creatures were running wild through the area, he just wanted to hear the farmers viewpoint.

The farmer eyed Ryson and then Holli. He saw what he believed was genuine concern etched on their faces, and so, decided to speak openly.

"It's goin' on all over the place. And none of us are too happy about it. We got those little creepy things... what do they call them? Yeah, goblins. They've been taken over farms. I got 'em for neighbors now. Unbelievable."

The farmer's disclosure was no surprise to either Ryson or Holli. They spotted goblins occupying several farmhouses. The next revelation, however, was a surprise.

"Were many lives lost?" Holli asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When the goblins attacked the farms, were many hurt?"

"They didn't attack."

"How did they get inside the farmhouses, how did they gain control of the land?"

The farmer frowned. Holli could tell the subject did more than annoy him.

"It was given to them," he finally grumbled.

"By the previous owners?"

"No, most of the owners just abandon the land, and that's what I don't understand. My neighbors, they just up and left, and they didn't want to talk about it. I thought they could have sold their farm, but they just wanted to get out... as quickly as possible."

"So your neighbors abandon their land, but you said it was *given* to the goblins."

"It was," the man replied, as if he was spitting out a bad taste.

"Who gave them the land?"

"Land councils in the town that keeps track of ownership."

"You're kidding?" Ryson said, his shock apparent. He would have expected the goblins were nothing more than squatters. That he could understand, but land councils willingly handing over valuable farms to goblins was beyond lunacy.

"You think I'd kid about that?" the farmer shot back. "I would have taken over the land myself, but I never got the chance."

"Why in the name of Godson would the land councils hand over farms to goblins?"

"Cause they're jackasses!"

"There has to be more to it than that," Holli pressed.

"Oh, they give a lot of reasons, all of 'em garbage. They say we should try to work with the goblins, give 'em a chance, let them farm the land instead of tryin' to steal from us. It's a joke."

"The goblins are farming?!" Holli's level of surprise leapt to near staggering proportions.

"I don't call it farming. It's pathetic. They have no idea what they're doing. They don't prepare the land. I don't think they know what a plow is, let alone how to use one. I've seen them just throw seeds in fields that have been fallow for three or four growing seasons. And when I say throw, I mean throw. They scatter seeds around like they're having snowball fights. It's ridiculous."

"Does anything ever grow?"

"Some of it does, but they're not getting close to a quarter of what their fields should yield. It's a waste. A waste of seed, a waste of land... I'd say it's a waste of their time, but they don't seem to do anything productive. They're about the most disgusting things I've ever seen. Thankfully, the farmers that left either took their animals or turned them over to neighbors. These goblins just took over empty land... and the barns and houses. I wouldn't want to see how they care for livestock."

Holli considered the farmer's answers. She compared the information to what they had obtained from questioning settlers that arrived in Connel as well as from their scouts of the surrounding lands. A few questions were answered about what they had heard and seen, but more mysteries arose.

"And you have no idea why the original farmers just abandon their lands?"

"They said they didn't want to keep their families around so many monsters. That's the only answer they'd give."

"And what about you?"

The farmer stiffened, as if being challenged.

"You mean why am I staying?"

"Yes."

"This is my land. I'm not just going to give it up. Yeah, those things worry me, but I can't just walk away."

Holli saw strength and defiance in the man's eyes, but she wondered how long that would last if the man's farm came under siege by a horde of goblins. Then again, it seemed as if the goblins didn't need to take the lands by force. Someone was handing it over to them freely.

There was still the question of why some of the farmers were abandoning their lands. Even when Enin questioned many of those that reached Connel, he never got them to give a clear response. Many did indeed state it was for the safety of their families, but others spoke of strange rumblings from the land itself—not tremors, but almost groans of dismay. The escaping settlers couldn't explain what it was, but it unnerved them, left them feeling the land had become their enemy, and that was the worst feeling a farmer could have.

Holli believed there was little else she could learn from the farmer. It was time to turn her attention to the towns and look in on the land councils. Answers might be found there.

"Well, thank you for your time," she bowed her head slightly to the farmer. "We will be on our way."

"Good luck to you, and stay safe."

The farmer didn't go directly back to his chores. He remained at the edge of his property as he watched the two strangers turn around and apparently head back to the western hills. Not knowing that Holli and Ryson had no intention of leaving the valleys, he believed they were returning to their logging camp. He wondered if they would make it through. To his knowledge, the strange creatures stalking the rim of the valley had not attacked anyone... yet, but he knew they were there for some reason. Whatever that reason was, he didn't believe it was compassionate or benign.

Chapter 4

A shriek broke the relative silence of the evening. Curses followed. Shouts and calls rumbled across the motley collection of tents outside Burbon's wall. Men with staffs, pick axes, shovels—anything that could be used as a weapon—cautiously stalked away from their campfires and makeshift shelters. They headed toward the scream with a mix of hesitancy derived of concern for their safety and determination born from a desire to help a neighbor in need.

They moved warily, despite the urgency of the cry. They knew one of their own was being attacked and they understood the need to stick together to fight off the enemy, but they were not soldiers. They were farmers, merchants, and laborers. They lacked training and experience.

While many were accustomed to guarding flocks and herds, or dealing with ruffians and thieves, they had moved on from their fields, shops and homes. They made temporary camps in the most secure areas they could find. The predators that hunted them were beyond wild beasts hungering for their flock or men with devious desires. They knew the scream in the distance warned of more than just thievery or assault. The shriek kindled thoughts of monsters and mayhem, nightmare's they were hoping to escape.

At one of the gates, the town guard acted in a much more methodical manner. They immediately followed their standard procedure for responding to such incidents. Whereas the refugees outside the wall lacked experience, Burbon's guard faced various confrontations on numerous occasions and they had trained vigorously in dealing with such threats. They acted without hesitation, and with great reliance on each other.

Four soldiers on horseback and eight on foot bolted from their stations. They moved orderly through the western gate, which was then secured behind them. Additional guards waited in reserve by the entrance as they signaled their status to the tower guards that watched over the town.

Outside the gate, those on horseback broke into two separate pairs. Each pair moved in opposite directions, urging their mounts beyond the edge of the campsites that bordered the exterior wall. Once in the clear, the riders pressed their horses into a full gallop as they circled Burbon's borders until they met at the opposite end of the town to exchange reports.

The eight soldiers on foot proceeded immediately to the site of the disturbance. Two in the front moved with spears as they shouted for the civilians to clear a path. Tents, small fires, wagons, and bundles of various goods littered the way, but the guards had become used to navigating such obstacles. Four soldiers following just behind the trail blazers carried sabers in one hand and torches in the other to light the way. The final two soldiers brought up the rear with crossbows ready to fire.

Another shout for help—a man's voice and clearly different from the high pitched shriek—added to the confusion. The soldiers forced their way through the crowd of both curious onlookers and armed individuals. They reached a young girl masked in terror. She couldn't speak once her shrieks ceased. All she could muster were hollow sobs as she pointed to the shadowed opening of an isolated tent.

A farmer had a hold of the girl and tried to calm her. He passed the girl to his wife as the soldier approached.

"You called for help?" one of the guards asked as he moved toward the farmer.

"Yeah, she was just standing there screaming. She kept pointing at the tent."

"Did you see anything?"

"Nothing."

The soldier in charge stepped up to the girl as the remaining guards took defensive positions around him.

"What's wrong?" the guard asked with a tone of calm authority.

She said nothing as she clung to the woman who held her. Her eyes remained fixed on the darkened tent, wide in horror with tears streaming down her cheeks.

The soldier wasted no further time. He motioned for the guards to circle the tent. Two soldiers with torches moved carefully to the entrance. Before they could inspect the inside, one of the guards from the back of the tent called out.

"It's tore open in the back!"

Another soldier carefully placed his torch through the ripped section of canvas. The light shattered the darkness as the flames forged dancing shadows within the shelter. The tent was empty.

Sy Fenden charged up a ladder to the platform of the western guard tower. Before he completed his climb, he demanded information from the tower guard who watched the commotion at the wall.

"Report!"

"All gates secure. No reports of any interior breach. All other towers have reported in. One apparent incident outside the wall at the southwestern edge, directly between the western gate and the south road. Foot patrol is at the site. No indication of immediate hostilities. Investigation is continuing."

"Mounted patrol?"

"They've already completed their round. No signals of additional threats. They're moving back to the site of the incident to add support."

Sy had reached the platform and looked down at the throng of tents. Despite the number of people outside the wall, the area in question immediately caught his attention. A large group of citizens had gathered around the soldiers that had encircled a single tent. Upon reviewing the situation, Sy immediately issued new orders.

"Signal the reserves at the gate to assist. Tell them to disburse the crowd around our soldiers."

The tower guard followed the command without hesitation as Sy monitored all the activity near the wall. When the soldier completed the signal, Burbon's captain pressed for more details.

"Any casualties?"

"None that I can see from here. One girl screaming. A man reached the scene and called for help."

"What was it?"

"No report yet from the field."

"Any ideas?"

"Guards are inspecting the back of the tent. Something probably broke in and scared the girl."

"Did you notice any movement?"

"Sir, people are moving around the wall all the time. It's impossible to keep track of all of them."

Sy let out a heavy breath.

"I know. What about beyond the tents... the clearings further out. Did you see anything near the hills?"

"You can barely make them out from up here. Blasted campfires all around the walls. You can't see past them into the dark."

Sy tried to focus into the clearing, but he already knew the guard was right. He had been up in the towers many times at night reviewing the grounds. He ordered small campfires to be kept to a minimum, but there were so many that they created a radiant glow that made it near impossible to distinguish anything in the distance.

"Signal from the patrol, sir," the tower guard interrupted Sy's inspection. "Something ripped into the tent, but the area is clear. No hostiles found. They're going to question the girl."

"What do you think it was? Best guess."

"Could be a rogue coming down the river, but more likely goblins. A rogue would have attacked the girl. Goblins would run for it."

"You're probably right. Signal the western gate. I'm going out there and I want Sergeant Klusac with me."

As the guard made the signal and Sy climbed down the ladder, the soldiers outside the wall attempted to question the young girl. She trembled and sobbed through heavy breaths. It took long moments before she finally mouthed an answer the soldiers could understand.

"Goblins... tore into the tent. They took our food. My father... he went after them."

"Did you see where he went?" one of the guards asked.

"I... couldn't stay in there. I ran out. "

She broke down into more violent sobs.

One of the soldiers studied the tracks at the back of the tent and quickly called out his findings.

"Maybe only two goblins. Tracks in and out. They're gone, but it looks like they were followed to the south toward the hills."

The guard in charge shook his head, but then signaled to his companions. Two of the soldiers on horseback immediately took off in the direction of the tracks. More guards appeared and they quickly disbursed the crowd.

Sy reached the gate where he mounted a waiting horse. Sergeant Klusac was already on his horse and had the gate open. The captain took the lead as he trotted his mount over to the soldiers at the tent. After receiving a concise report, Sy and the sergeant rode after the guards on horseback that went after the missing man.

Before Sy and his companion reached the first hillside, the two guards guided their horses toward them with a man walking on the ground between.

"Any sign of the goblins?" Sy asked of the soldiers.

"None."

Sy nodded.

"Leave him with us. Make a quick patrol of the south road just to let them know we're looking for them. Don't go into the trees. Keep a fast pace. Don't stop for anything. I don't want you risking crossbow fire. Report back to me at the western gate when you're done."

After the soldiers acknowledged the order and pressed their mounts to a full gallop, Sy turned his attention to the farmer standing in the road. The captain dismounted and stepped up to the man. The farmer appeared slightly winded, a bit embarrassed, but mostly annoyed. Sy didn't let that stop him from issuing his own assessment of the matter.

"That was rather foolish."

"Yeah, maybe... but I'm tired of them taking everything I have."

"And you didn't want to let them get away with it."

"No, I didn't," the farmer responded with a sense of appreciation, as if he knew the captain understood why he did what he did.

It was true. Sy saw the anguish in the man's face when he said that he was tired of the goblins taking *everything*. He looked upon a farmer with no land. The man before him had nothing but a tent and the few possessions inside that tent. The goblins had forced him from his farm, or so that's what most of the farmers said. The man didn't want to give up anything more. The captain believed he understood... most of it anyway, but there were a few things that didn't add up.

"So you were willing to chase goblins into the dark... alone?"

"There were only two of them."

"There could have been a thousand behind the first hill."

The farmer looked over his shoulder into the rolling hillsides covered in the shadows of night. He just grunted as he turned back to face the town's captain.

Sy decided it was time to get a few more answers, and maybe he finally found someone willing to talk.

"Why'd you leave your farm?"

The man responded quickly, as if the answer had been rehearsed.

"You people know that. It's the same for everyone. The goblins..."

"You're right," Sy interrupted. "I do know that. The goblins were all over. And you wanted to keep your family safe. I understand that, too, but I don't understand why you'd run after them in the dead of night if you were really afraid of them. It wasn't just the goblins that made you leave the valleys. It was something else. What was it?"

The man looked away from the captain of the guard. The appreciation for finding someone that might comprehend his desperate actions quickly evaporated.

"You wouldn't understand," he finally offered.

Sy wouldn't allow that to stand as the final word.

"I understood why you ran off after the little thieves that took your food. I understand that you reached your limit. Try me."

The farmer decided to do just that. He had previously spoken freely of the goblins back near his home in the valleys. He used them as the reason for the abandonment of his farm. He almost made himself believe that was why he left. He was just protecting his daughter, but there was indeed more than the goblins. He didn't like to speak of the feelings that truly made him run. In a moment of pure honesty—both with himself and to a soldier he chose to trust—the farmer said more than he ever had before.

"Something was wrong... more than just the goblins."

"People have said that already. Rumbblings across the land."

"That's not what I mean. You could hear, even feel the rumbblings, but you couldn't really hear or feel this. It was something that just started rubbing you the wrong way. It's like when you know there are wolves nearby and you haven't even heard 'em howl. And I'm not talking about some black cloud over the land or some crazy magician casting spells. It was something deeper. You got monsters out here. We all know that, but there was something else back in the valley."

"I'm still listening."

"It was something with the land. Crops just died—not of insects, disease, or draught, but something else. That's what I meant when I said you wouldn't understand. You're not a farmer. You think crops die all the time, and they do, but not like this. And there was more to it than just dead crops."

"You haven't lost me yet," Sy noted, urging the farmer to continue.

"Whatever was killing the crops wasn't going to go away. It took hold, like a hand that makes a fist and starts to crush the life out of you and won't let go. That's really why I came here. You got that wizard that protects you."

Sy knew the farmer was speaking of Enin. It was the main reason most of the refugees came to Burbon, why they camped out under dirty canvas outside the town's wall.

"And you think he can stop it," Sy acknowledged.

"I don't know what else can."

"Anyone else talk about this to you? I mean the reason behind the dying crops?"

"I don't want to speak for anyone but me."

Sy respected that, but the anguish he saw in the man's face, he saw it before. He saw it in many of the expressions of the refugees when he pressed them for answers. They were afraid of something out in the valleys, but all they seemed willing to talk about were the goblins.

While that might have explained why many of the refugees left the Great Valleys, it did not go far in alleviating Sy's true problem. The people that camped outside his wall created danger for themselves and for Burbon as a whole.

"The wizard's name is Enin," Sy offered, "but he's not in Burbon now. Hasn't been here for quite some time."

"This is still his home. We know he watches over this place."

"Maybe, but if you're really looking for his protection, wouldn't it make sense to go where he is? He spends most of his time in Connel. They're building it up. There's room for you there... more room than here anyway. You ever think of going to there?"

"Connel's a city."

"Won't argue that."

"I'm a farmer."

"You're not doing any farming now."

"I haven't figured out what I'm doing yet, but it won't be in no city, especially a city that was once taken over by goblins."

There was no logic to that last response. Burbon sat within sight of Dark Spruce Forest, and goblins roamed that region in great numbers. The man knew that. Living in a tent outside Burbon's wall put him at far greater risk for a goblin encounter than living in Connel. His latest experience with two goblin thieves should have reinforced that truth.

Unfortunately, logic didn't always win the day. Sy saw nothing further to be gained by arguing the point.

"Head on back to your tent. We'll make sure your food supplies are restored, but do me a favor, don't go running into the dark after goblins again."

"No guarantees... but thanks."

The farmer walked solemnly back to the crowd of people at Burbon's wall, and as Sy watched him leave, he made a not so surprising announcement to the sergeant who remained on his horse.

"We have to get these people inside."

Sergeant Klusac didn't wish to argue with his commander, but he had to point out certain truths.

"Where can we put them? This is the third time the camp has grown this large outside the wall. The ones we've already let in are blocking half the streets. And don't tell me we can block the other half. No one will be able to move. We can't keep the town secure that way."

"I know," Sy sighed, "but we can't leave them out here, either."

"Some times you have to let people make their own choices. You've lived by that principle. You've told all these people what they faced. You told them there was room in Connel."

"They won't go," Sy then considered one last option, a plan he had kicked around in his mind the past few days. "What about the rooftops? Why can't we let them camp on top of the inns and merchant shops? Not the ones with the pitched roofs obviously, but there are enough with relatively level rooftops."

The sergeant shrugged. He knew his captain was grasping at straws, but it was at least a temporary solution.

"Might work, but it's not the safest plan."

"Safer than having them outside the wall."

That was true, but it didn't address the real issue, and the sergeant saw it as his duty to speak the complete truth.

"Captain, I don't want to talk out of turn, but we've brought them in twice now and each time the empty space around the wall just fills up again with new refugees. Okay, so we drop a bunch of ladders from the roofs and we let these people set up camp up high. Then what? All this open space will fill up in a few days. We're right back where we started and now we have tents on top of stores and inns. No one's going to be happy about that."

"Everyone will understand. It's not permanent. Maybe we get an answer in a few days. Ryson is out checking on the valleys. Maybe we just need time."

The sergeant shook his head.

"Captain, did you ever really consider what's different now?"

"Different how?"

"Different with Burbon."

"Things have changed a lot with the magic."

"Not what I'm talking about. We survived the magic, but now things are different. I know you understand why Burbon held together and towns like Pinesway just fell apart. Yeah, we owe a lot to you and the wizard, as well as the delver. We're still a town and other places like Pinesway are nothing but abandoned buildings. Having Enin helped, but

he's in Connel now. Ryson is a big advantage, but I think we could survive without him if we had to. He sure takes his chances to go exploring. I don't deny it for him. He's a delver. He's got to do what he's got to do. But we still survived."

"What are you trying to say, sergeant?"

"I'm saying what you already know. We survived because there was order here. It wasn't just the wizard or having the delver. It was having everyone understand what was necessary, keeping things within a structure... *order*. Problem is, we don't have it any more. You can let those people in and put them up on rooftops, but it's only going to make us weaker."

Sy didn't argue. He couldn't. The sergeant was speaking the truth.

"Well, I'm not going to make any decisions right now," Sy announced. "Why don't you go and get some sleep?"

"Sleep? What's that?"

Sy chuckled, but then spoke with a more serious tone.

"You're not going to be any use to me if you fall off that horse. I could make it an order."

"With all due respect, I'll sleep when you do."

"How about we both try? Nothing else is going to happen tonight. The goblins made their raid. They're done."

"Yeah," the sergeant agreed, and he nudged his horse forward.

Sy pulled himself up into the saddle. Before he set off after Klusac, he took a long look at Burbon's wall and the refugees that camped along side it. He couldn't leave them there, but was putting them up in tents on rooftops really the answer? No, that was absurd, the solution of a desperate captain made in the dead of evening. He had to acknowledge the truth, a truth that was just spelled out to him.

Burbon was spiraling out of control and despite his desire to help the refugees, he couldn't let that continue. It would be disaster for all of them.

A Final Note from the Author

Chain of Bargains 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 these 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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