

Delver Magic

Book VI

Pure Choice

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.

Pure Choice is the sixth book in the *Delver Magic* series. While it is a complete novel, it is recommended that the series be read in order.

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

Thank you.

To Joan, for being the optimist!

Prologue

It appeared harmless and ordinary, but if seen in direct light without shadow magic hiding its natural appearance, it would have frightened everyone in town, even the most hardened soldier. Unlike a pure shape shifter, the arasap lacked the ability to completely disguise itself, but it could manipulate its figure to match the contour of any number of creatures. Size was normally not an obstacle. The highly pliable property of its supple, liquid-like substance allowed it to expand to the height of an average tree or shrink to the size of an ordinary coin.

While proficient shape shifters could take on almost any identity and mislead the most critical observer, an arasap lacked the definition to mask itself on form modification alone. It could not physically arrange its features to appear as anything more than a transparent outline. To take on the full masquerade, it had to depend on magic.

As it walked through the town of Burbon, the lone arasap shrouded its identity by sculpting itself into a generic human form and then twisting the shadows around it. The creature relied on gloom much the same way the illusionist alters light. Though not a powerful spell caster, it utilized the gray magic to create the illusion it was nothing more than an ordinary merchant. It influenced the shades of light to contrive a face complete with aged lines and sagging skin, and it magically generated the image of thinning hair, as well as a full set of clothes.

The arasap moved through Burbon at dusk without raising the concern of the town guard it evaded at the gate or the citizens it passed on the streets. It moved with quick, deliberate steps, like a weary traveler bent from fatigue and hurrying to find cover before a coming storm. It looked like so many other traveling merchants who entered the town with the intent of making a fast sale and then heading back home.

To say the arasap walked on two legs would be somewhat deceiving. Its grease like substance gave it only the barest margin of solid form. With its profile shaped to include arms and legs, it was able to mimic the movements of a human. That, however, was where its similarity to the people of Burbon ended.

The creature did not have eyes for it did not need to see. Instead, it had thin and flexible hair-like growths that it could extend and contract at will. The tiny follicles covered its gelatinous body and served as sensory receptors. They picked up light, sound, and scent, and they allowed the arasap to gain complete awareness of its surroundings.

It also had no mouth... had no need for one. It communicated with a form of telepathy, and it did not need to eat to gain nourishment. Arasaps obtained nutrition from nonphysical sources and in a manner that defied sanity.

It was not quite the search for food that drove the creature down the streets of Burbon but an understanding that sustenance would be forthcoming if it accomplished its task. It normally would seek out novice spell casters or individuals unaware of their magical talents, but an arrangement of extraordinary circumstances persuaded the monster to seek a most unusual objective.

It would be the first, but it understood that more would come. It would prepare the host for others, make it easier for their arrival. It would have to share, but the harvest would be rich. It would not feed immediately, but it knew that when the process began, it would eat well. All it had to do was ensure it entered the proper host undetected,

It would not ask for directions in fear of revealing its presence, and so it relied upon what information it could pick up from the surrounding humans. A few words from an overheard conversation, a scent drifting from a chimney in the distance, and the recognition of street signs allowed it to hone in on its target.

The fading light assisted the arasap in its mission as it continued to stalk the shadows to avoid detection. Lonely alleys allowed it to reach its ultimate destination unnoticed, but the interior of the Borderline Inn was not quite as dark as the creature hoped. The arasap was forced to use more of the magic at its disposal to strengthen its disguise. Fortunately, it would not take long to complete its objective. It sensed the woman the moment it entered the establishment. It could not have missed her, for the total lack of magic within her was beyond repulsive to a creature that fed off incantation remnants.

It waited off to the side of the main room of the tavern. It appeared to check its pockets, but it was actually monitoring the movements of the woman before selecting a table in an isolated corner. When the timing was perfect, it quickly sat down and signaled to be served.

Linda Acumen walked up to the table. Something about the traveler unsettled her, but she had become accustomed to strange occurrences and odd visitors. Her immunity to magic kept her from touching the energy that others could use in a variety of ways, and she shook off the troubling sensation as she had done numerous times before.

"Room and a meal, just a meal, or something to drink?" she asked

"Just ale," the traveler muttered.

"I'll be right back."

As Linda swung around to return to the bar, the stranger called out.

"There is one more thing," the creature noted as it reached out and tapped Linda on the shoulder.

No one was watching, and even if someone had passed a glance to the lonely corner, another shadow spell concealed the entire table. Not a single patron of the inn noticed the disturbing sight as the arasap's masquerade slipped away and it became a thin strand of jelly that slid across Linda's neck.

Linda tried to face the guest to handle the additional request, but she could only do so as if moving in slow motion. It seemed to take forever to complete the turn, and when she did, the stranger was nowhere to be seen.

#

Someone or something was reaching into Baannat's realm, stealing his magic. The slink ghou almost harshly rebuked the attempt, but instead, he decided to allow the theft to continue. After all, there was little else that interested him at the moment. The rather bold incident might lead to an amusing distraction.

Baannat had been cast into a realm of nonexistence. He once held sway over more magical energy than any creature in Uton and even found a way to avoid death, but victory always eluded him. He had been defeated by the wizard, Enin, and by the upstart delver, Ryson Acumen.

As punishment, he was reduced to a form that was neither physical or spiritual. His essence was a mix of the two and as a result he was forced to maintain his existence in an empty void that was beyond life... and death. He was the ruler of a realm of pure nothingness and his only source of entertainment came from peering into worlds beyond his direct control.

There was magic in his realm—not the same kind that flowed through Uton or the dark realm—but a hollow energy that hung in lifeless strands across the shadows of infinity. The slink ghoul had developed a connection to the dead energy and when he felt it begin to trickle out of his realm, it caught his interest.

Baannat watched the flow carefully. When the pull became stronger, his annoyance grew once more. Despite the momentary diversion the pilfering allowed, it angered him that anyone would dare steal what he felt was his and his alone. But again, he held his wrath. Even as his disturbed emotions bubbled with fury, he could not dismiss the fact that the brazen act offered a diversion... and possibly an opportunity.

While he could not open portals to escape his prison of shadow, he had limited access into other existences. He could influence creatures outside of his shadowed realm, reach into the dark lands or even into Uton with subtle manipulations. Yes, the theft of his magic was an affront to his nonexistence, but the slink ghoul was always willing to take advantage of someone else's mistake... and misfortune.

Chapter 1

"It can't be the same one," Sy Fenden growled. "They're quick, but river rogues don't travel that fast, especially on dry land."

"How'd they get inside the walls?" the soldier who just offered the news of another sighting asked Burbon's captain of the guard.

"My guess? The drainage ditches that run under the walls," the captain offered without much doubt. "We have to let the water go somewhere... not too unreasonable to assume at least one of these things would eventually follow the water flow, especially with all the rain we've been having."

"But the ditches are gated at the walls," the soldier responded.

"The gates rust and these things are strong," Sy noted. "At daybreak, we'll check the grates. I'm betting at least one will have been pulled free. It's not a surprise. The only surprise is that more than one came in during the same time. Blast, I thought these things were more territorial."

The guard captain considered his options. His first concern was for the safety of Burbon's citizens.

"With two of them roaming around, we're going to have to issue an alarm. I was hoping to isolate the first one without causing too much clamor—didn't want to agitate it—but I can't risk it. Inform the tower guards to signal a breach warning. Immediate shelter... with no exceptions." That was all the soldier would need to send to the towers, but Sy expanded on his orders to make them clear. "Everyone goes to the nearest shelter and stays put. I want everyone inside as soon as possible. I don't want people trying to race home."

The soldier nodded, pulled a small red flag from his belt, and moved directly beneath a street lantern to be seen easily in the night. He waved the flag to gain the attention of the guards standing watch in the towers and then offered the signals to communicate the captain's orders.

Just as the soldier was finishing the first communication, Sy added to the message.

"Expand the alert to all guard posts and call for a security sweep of the entire town by foot soldiers only. No horses. All horseback patrols are to stand fast. I want both rogues accounted for as soon as possible."

Just as Sy finished the additional orders, Sergeant Klusac arrived. He directed his mount across the town street and to the captain's side.

"More bad news, captain," the sergeant offered with both sympathy for his leader's dilemma and concern for the growing problem. "A third sighting within the town... not even close to the other two. This one is to the east. There's definitely at least three rogues inside the wall. Tower watch reports additional sightings beyond the town borders as well. Another two were spotted outside the wall to the northwest."

"What the blazes is going on?" Sy demanded, not of the sergeant or of the guard finishing the signals, but of the dark skies above, hoping to get some stroke of clarity. "Five river rogues in the same area. What is this... some kind of conference I didn't know about?"

It was not meant to be a joke. The words were spoken with both frustration and bewilderment.

"I don't understand it, either," the sergeant admitted. "I thought they kept clear of each other."

Sy quickly turned his attention to addressing the calamity.

"Keep all gates closed. No one exits to deal with the two on the outside. I don't want anyone going outside the wall until we know what's going on. Get additional archers up in the towers and on the walls over every drainage ditch. I don't want any more of these things getting inside."

The sergeant motioned for the guard to signal the new orders to the towers and then updated his captain on what he knew.

"I just came from the northern section of town. I checked out both sighting locations, but the creatures have moved on. Third sighting occurred closer to the eastern gate. If I had to guess, I'd say they got in under the wall to the northeast."

Sy nodded. "There's a drainage ditch there that leads out to a nearby farm, but we have to cover them all until we know for sure."

"I won't argue," the sergeant agreed. "As for the rest of the town, all gates are closed and I told the gatekeepers to wait for additional orders. We'll keep the other two rogues out—and any others that might be skulking around out there—but there may be more than three inside." He paused as he took a sweeping glance at the dark skies. "Still cloudy, I think more rain is on the way... a lot more. Visibility is already poor, could get worse."

Sy gave another look to the blackened heavens. It seemed as if the skies were willing to add to his troubles.

"Blast," the captain cursed again, and then gave additional messages for the signal guard. "Alert the towers to switch to covered torches. We're not going to be able to see flags in the rain."

"It's also going to be harder to spot the rogues," Klusac noted.

Realizing his options were dwindling, Sy looked back up to his sergeant.

"Get Ryson for me."

The sergeant didn't wish to delay or question his superior's orders, but he had to point out the truth.

"If these things are inside, they're going to have to be killed. He won't be a part of that."

The captain sighed heavily. "I know. He's going to want to try and capture them. It's not the way to deal with the situation, but he can sense them without seeing them. Without Enin here, we don't have many choices." Sy paused only for a moment, and then revealed his expectations. "Maybe he'll listen to reason this time, but I doubt it. If we have to, we'll play it his way."

The captain knew that ended the discussion, but Sy offered more advice before the sergeant could turn away.

"Be careful on the streets. Rogues spook horses something fierce. You're the only one I want riding through the streets, but I don't want you getting thrown. Go to the tavern first. My bet is he's there waiting to walk Linda home."

Klusac nodded and directed his mount away without another word.

After peering down several streets and alleys to ensure the citizens of Burbon had taken the warning to find immediate shelter seriously, Sy moved back to the soldier who had signaled the towers.

"Signal the towers again. Cancel the order for the sweep. Have the foot patrols take positions at major crossroads and wait for further orders. Stay here and keep note of the tower communications. I'm going to the nearest barracks. I'll dispatch messengers back to you as soon as I get there. Use them to keep me apprised of what's happening here. When Klusac and Acumen return, send them to the barracks."

After the soldier acknowledged his order, Sy moved quickly across the darkened streets, stepping through dancing shadows created by the flickering flames of the street lamps. The wind picked up, and he could smell the rain in the distance. Nothing was going to be easy.

Tactical approaches to deal with the incursion flashed through his mind. The thick scales of the river rogues were durable, but not resistant to arrows. If he could find them, his archers could bring them down. Unfortunately, he knew the delver wouldn't allow the obvious approach.

Still, the delver was the best suited to quickly scout the town and locate any river rogues within their walls. He'd try to convince Ryson, but he wouldn't waste time arguing. Heavier rains were coming, and that would hinder his efforts and work to the monsters' advantage. The river rogues had to be neutralized as quickly as possible, even if he had to give into the delver's passive nature.

Fairly confident he could address the river rogues without casualties, he ceased isolating the problem and considered it with regard to his other worries. Five river rogues—three already inside the wall and two outside—were far beyond any rogue encounter they had previously experienced in Burbon.

With the Fuge River nearby, there was always the threat of one or two wandering in too close, enticed by the scents of food and hopes of easy prey, but three actually breaching the walls was a little too extreme for the captain to dismiss as mere chance. He faced the prospect of finding a connection between the incursion of river rogues with other occurrences happening around Burbon.

He considered all the activity at Pinesway. The neighboring town had once been abandoned and became a haven for bandits and thugs, but that was no longer the case. It was being rebuilt by dwarves and humans. The criminal element had been forced out, and settlers continued to repopulate the area. Humans were even logging again just beyond the outskirts of the town.

Sy believed it was possible a handful of rogues might have been alarmed at the increased activity... and especially the presence of dwarves above ground. River rogues might have been willing to hunt down humans, but the sturdy underground dwellers were another matter. Sy assumed that previous contact between rogues and dwarves had been limited at best. River rogues preferred hiding in the tall grass by the sides of waterways and dwarves remained below ground.

The captain pondered river rogue activity and their more likely adversaries. With that thought, he mulled over another prospect that troubled him, gave him an uneasy feeling like listening to an out of tune instrument played by an intense amateur musician. It had been several days since he had received any reports from the elves of Dark Spruce, and elves and river rogues were natural enemies.

When the magic first returned to Uton, elves and humans appeared to have the easiest time in reestablishing relations. Communication between his town and the elves of Dark Spruce Forest started out sporadically, but it had become more constant over the past few

seasons. There wasn't any official treaty between them, but a casual agreement to share information had burgeoned into a fairly stable structure of cooperation. He believed the elves, and certainly his own forces, benefited from the shared intelligence.

For some reason, however, all contact with the elves had ceased. He had sent scouts out into Dark Spruce, but he knew that elves could avoid detection if they chose to remain hidden. They had done so for countless cycles of the seasons when the magic was absent from the land. Avoiding human scouts in the deepest sections of Dark Spruce would be a simple task.

The question was, why? Why would the elves break off all communication? To Sy's knowledge, there had been no hostilities between them, not even a minor misunderstanding.

The loss of reports from the elves was more than a slight inconvenience, it quickly became a substantial concern. He wondered if the situation with the elves had anything to do with the appearance of so many rogues. To his dismay, he had very little information about any dark creature activity in Dark Spruce and his town was suddenly inundated with monsters. He didn't like the implications.

When he reached the barracks, he ordered several messengers to different outposts across the town. The guard station would serve as a temporary command post, and he would ensure he received sufficient information. He also placed a signal guard on the roof to establish immediate communications with each tower. He quickly reviewed the contents of the adjoining armory and then waited for the return of his sergeant and the delver. They arrived quicker than he expected.

"I found him outside the door of the tavern," Klusac explained. "He was guiding people inside while guarding the entrance."

Ryson Acumen moved lightly into the barracks with ease in his step, like a light breeze flowing down a mountainside. There was no stress in his eyes, no tension in his body, and no apprehension in his movements. Still, anyone who knew the delver recognized a raised level of vigilance.

"I heard the disturbance and I saw the signals," Ryson acknowledged. "The sergeant told me about the rogues. How do you want to handle it?"

Sy looked dead in the face of the delver and offered what he felt was the best way to approach the situation, though he already knew Ryson would object.

"I want you to use your senses to locate every rogue within the walls. Once you pinpoint them, I'll have archers dispatch them as quickly as possible. You can..."

Ryson didn't let him continue.

"No, I won't find them so you can kill them."

Sy made one last effort.

"They're already inside the walls... on the streets. They're dangerous and they're here to kill our citizens."

"We can handle it without killing them. The people have already been warned. No one is going to get killed tonight."

Eyeing the delver with frustration, Sy realized further argument was not only futile, but a waste of critical time.

"Fine, we don't kill them. We'll capture them. I'll send guards to different points of the town with iron chain nets. Rogues are strong, but they can't rip through iron. You hunt them down. Keep that sword of yours out in the open. I want the tower guards to keep

track of your progress. When you pinpoint a rogue, stop and wave the sword three times over your head. The tower guards will signal your position to my soldiers, and they'll take it from there."

"Maybe you should just let me take care of it. I can lead them out of the town. I would just need your guards to open a gate once..."

It was Sy's turn to cut off the delver.

"No. You won't let me dispatch them, as I should—and I'll live with that—but I'm not going to let you lead some kind of parade through town. I'm also not going to open the gates at night. There are more rogues outside the wall. We net those that are already inside, secure them so they can't get loose, and I'll have them released *very* far down river tomorrow."

"I have your word you won't have them killed?"

"You have my word." Sy frowned. He didn't feel it was necessary to affirm his order. He meant what he said, and the delver asking for some kind of confirmation added to his annoyance. He was already compromising with the delver—adding risk he did not think was necessary—and Ryson's apparent lack of faith was a jab he did not need... or like. He wouldn't waste time debating the issue at that moment, but he also decided that wouldn't be the end of the conversation.

"You and I are going to have to have a talk."

"Tomorrow," Ryson offered.

"That'll be fine."

Ryson was sorry the tone had become so unfriendly. He wished he could have cleared the air before he left, but he had rogues to find.

Turning about with a flash of grace, Ryson quickly exited the barracks with Sergeant Klusac and Sy following close behind. The delver pulled the Sword of Decree from the sheath on his back.

The blade glowed brightly as it magnified and reflected the surrounding light. Even with a night sky blanketed in clouds, the land was never completely dark. Light always managed to find its way through the land of Uton and the Sword of Decree enhanced that light with its enchantment.

"Not as bright as it would glow in the day," Ryson admitted, "but in this darkness, I doubt the tower guards will have any trouble seeing me."

"We *think* there's only three," Sy reminded the delver, "but there could be more. Find them all, and do it quickly."

Ryson nodded and sped off toward the northern section of town.

"I still can't get over how fast he can move," Klusac blurted out as he watched the glowing sword become a streaking flash through the night.

"It *is* amazing," Sy allowed. Then the captain offered a relevant consideration, for his benefit as well as Klusac's. "Maybe if he wasn't so blasted fast he'd understand why the rest of us are a bit more willing to remove these threats completely rather than playing around with them, especially at night. *I* wouldn't want to go running after rogues alone, but then again, I can't move like he does."

Klusac didn't verbally agree with the sentiment, didn't want to simply admit his own fears, but he knew he wouldn't want to chase river rogues hiding throughout the town in the dead of night, either. Rather than dwell on his own misgivings, the sergeant turned his attention to his duties.

"What do you need of me now?"

"I've got foot patrols waiting at crossroads throughout the town. Make sure they're armed with chain nets and they know to capture these blasted things as opposed to killing them. There should be plenty of nets in every armory. They'll get signals from the towers on what they need to do, but I'd feel better if you delivered the message personally to as many as you can."

"Done."

While Klusac mounted his horse and rode off into the darkness, Sy resigned himself to simply watching and waiting. He stepped back through the barracks entrance but stopped after only a couple of steps. He stood under an open trap door that led to the roof, and he turned to get a clear view of the nearest tower through the front entrance. Despite the delver's speed, he knew he would have at least a few moments of quiet.

The guard captain actually embraced the momentary silence that washed across the empty barracks. As he became more of a leader of the entire town and less of a soldier, hushed moments of contemplation grew in importance. He used such time to weigh his decisions, those already made and those he still faced. Finding the right balance between benefits and hazards became a greater part of his duties than facing down goblins, shags, and river rogues.

He considered Ryson, pictured him racing across the town—a blur of motion and a flash of light. The delver was doing what he loved to do, and Sy couldn't deny the advantage of having a purebred delver available to him; to scout the surrounding lands, to uncover enemies, and to help protect the town. Unfortunately, Ryson's unyielding moral compass created certain risks that potentially offset such advantages.

Sy silently cursed the situation. It would have been easier if it was just one or two rogues. He wouldn't have had to ask for the delver's help. His soldiers could have found the creatures and dispatched them. Problem solved. He just wasn't that lucky. There were too many confirmed sightings and too many unknowns.

He had given in to Ryson because he wanted the delver's help—needed Ryson's keen senses—but keeping rogues alive to release them down river began to sound like far too great a concession. The question he faced centered on the benefit of having the delver's aid versus the compromises he had to make, compromises he believed increased the risk to his town just to keep dark creatures alive.

It didn't make sense, not to a soldier and certainly not to a captain of the guard. He would have to speak with Ryson, and friend or not—delver or not—Sy would make his growing concerns known.

As for Ryson, the delver brushed the brief disagreement with Sy from his mind. He concentrated almost entirely on finding the river rogues as he raced away from the barracks. During his past scouts, he had come across several rogues in the course of his travels, but he always kept a safe distance. His remarkable memory and mind for detail allowed him to recall an accurate description of the monster.

They were odd looking beasts. He always thought of an elongated lake trout with arms and legs whenever he pictured one. Of course, it also had fangs and claws, and a viciousness that made it extremely dangerous.

A clear visual image of a rogue, however, was not essential in locating the ones that stalked the town. Holding the brightly glowing sword in front of him, Ryson relied little on what he could see. Instead, he focused on what he could smell. The scent of a river

rogue was strong and obvious, more so than that of a shag. Even as the smells of burning lanterns and late night cooking fires filled the air, he knew the rogues would not be able to hide their scent from him.

Sergeant Klusac had informed the delver of the locations of the rogue sightings, and Ryson rushed to the first location, near the northwestern section of the city. He found the scent trail immediately and he raced onward knowing the rogue was close by but probably waiting in some dark corner hoping to ambush its prey.

Sy's orders for the citizens to find immediate shelter as opposed to heading home probably saved at least one life. With no one on the streets, the rogue would be disappointed.

Careful not to step near any potential hazard, Ryson stayed to the center of the streets. After a few turns, he located a dark alley behind a candle maker's shop. He knew the rogue was hiding behind two waste barrels. The creature probably hoped the scent of the discarded oils and fat would mask its own presence, but Ryson had no such difficulty in locating the beast. He could hear its labored breaths.

Keeping his eyes on the alley, Ryson waved his sword over his head three times and waited stone still until a group of soldiers arrived bearing a long and wide net made from iron chains. The delver knew it would be dangerous for any of the guards to attempt to capture the monster in the narrow confines of the alley, and he didn't wish any injury to befall either the soldiers or the rogue.

"Let me bring it out in the open," Ryson offered before any of the soldiers could move into the alley.

The corporal in charge of the squad immediately disagreed and offered his own approach.

"If we stretch the net across the alley, we can rush in and wrap it up before it has a chance to move. That alley's a dead end. It can't escape."

"But if it runs up against the back wall," Ryson countered, "it's going to know it's trapped and it might panic."

"Let it."

"And if it flails out in that narrow passage? What then?"

"We know the risks."

"Why take any risks?"

"It's what we do."

Ryson didn't care for the soldier's disregard for danger and unwillingness to consider safer alternatives. He decided to paint a clearer picture for the corporal.

"You mean your job as a soldier? One that takes orders from Captain Fenden? He put me in charge of finding the rogues. I would think that means you need to defer to my judgment."

It was not quite an accurate statement. Sy Fenden had told Ryson to simply find the rogues and allow the guards to handle the capture. Ryson had no authority over the corporal, but he was not against taking on more responsibility.

The corporal appeared uncertain, clearly not wishing to bow to the orders of the delver. He also, however, understood that Ryson—though not an official member of the guard—held a special relationship with Burbon's captain. The corporal had hopes of obtaining the rank of sergeant, and falling on the wrong side of the captain's wishes

would not aid that cause. In the end, the soldier decided it was wiser to allow a the delver a measure of latitude.

"Fine. You force the creature out here in the streets, but once it's in the open, let us handle it."

"You're not to injure it," Ryson reminded.

"I know my orders," the corporal grunted.

Peering into the alley, Ryson watched the dancing shadows created by the surrounding torches and the much brighter light reflecting off his sword. The creature remained well hidden and apparently somewhat secure in its place of hiding. Perhaps it felt as if it was nestled under some fallen tree across a dry creek bed. It made no movements and showed no undue concern toward the gathering of soldiers just beyond its reach.

Ryson decided to use his speed to dash past the waste barrels and into the back of the alley. He did not leap. He simply burst into motion and raced past the rogue before the creature even realized the delver had entered the alley. As Ryson turned swiftly about at the back wall, he held the Sword of Decree out in front of him to ensure the monster would not lunge. He didn't want the rogue to think it suddenly obtained an easy meal.

For its part, the river rogue remained crouched behind the barrels but clearly confused at the drastic change in events. The shadows and darkness it used to conceal its presence vanished in the glow of the enchanted blade held by an invader to its sanctuary. The trespasser moved faster than the beast's limited mind could fathom and it appeared uncertain of its security. It did not charge the delver, but its agitation grew as it realized it stood trapped between a grouping of soldiers and the armed invader.

Ryson did not wish to antagonize the beast, but he knew the situation turned critical. If he allowed the rogue's uncertainty to swell, it might make the wrong choice and create an unhealthy situation for them all. He wanted the creature to move out into the open street, not further back into the alley. He worried the corporal might order an immediate attack if he saw the monster charge backward. With all of them gathered in such close quarters, the chances of an unnecessary injury to any one of them would expand greatly.

With another decisive flash of motion, Ryson sprung forward. He swung his blade with force, but it never touched the river rogue. Instead, he used the speed of his movements to add power to his swing. He knocked the waste barrels over and sent them rolling out into the street. He created a clear path for the rogue to escape and then shouted a command to the soldiers waiting just outside the alley.

"Back up! Give it room to come out!"

Every soldier quickly acknowledged the order, except for the corporal who hesitated, but even he complied as he saw the wisdom in the strategy.

The quick strike to its cover startled the rogue. It initially prepared to fight off its attacker. As the delver shouted words it could not understand, it readied its claws to slash at Ryson's throat. It never found the opportunity as its intended victim sprung out of reach far too quickly.

With the barrels rolling out the front of the alley, the river rogue peered over its shoulder to see the soldiers backing away. Moving surprisingly fast and with determination to escape, the beast bounded after the barrels, extricating itself from the alley.

The rogue almost found a path to freedom. Seeing the guards give way, it remained behind the still rolling barrels. When the containers slowed to a near halt, it leapt over them before the soldiers could close ranks. The monster saw a clear lane down the open street and moved with haste to find new refuge.

Breaking from the alley, Ryson took a path around the soldiers and simply rushed to a spot beyond the monster and blocked the once clear path of retreat. Still holding the Sword of Decree, he never stopped moving. He used his great speed to add to the dazzling glow of the enchanted blade that he twirled about in his hand.

The swerving, flashing light confused the beast, and the rogue lost any sight of escape. Its uncertainty brought it to a complete halt.

The soldiers did not delay. They had the rogue on open ground and momentarily disoriented. They threw the iron net over the creature and circled about it to wrap and entangle the monster. With the heavy iron chains draped about the rogue's arms and legs, the guards pulled tight at the net's edges to bind the creature within the folds of the mesh. With one coordinated tug, they succeeded in dislodging the rogue from its feet and rendering it completely bound and helpless.

"That's one, at least two more to go," the delver acknowledged with a smile. He thanked the guards and then dashed away, lighting up the darkness with his enchanted sword like a shooting star darting over the empty streets.

Chapter 2

"More on the wall," the goblin scout relayed to the taller and significantly bulkier goblin named Okyiq.

Okyiq had taken command of over two hundred goblins in Dark Spruce Forest. He did so in a very short amount of time with a force of will and the threat of physical punishment. He ordered those same goblins to prepare for a raid of Burbon. He directed them out of the trees and to the hills that covered the grounds just beyond the town's southwestern wall.

The large goblin didn't like planning and preparation—it was not a natural instinct—but he discovered that threats weren't the only way to control his army. Goblins enjoyed mayhem and chaos, but they also responded well to the orders of a disciplined leader. In order to maintain control, he found it necessary to utilize certain strategies, such as sending out scouts rather than blindly assaulting a target.

"More of what?" Okyiq demanded.

"Humans."

Despite his intended efforts to reveal the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, Okyiq only sent scouts to explore the southern portion of his target. He knew nothing about the river rogues at the northern edge of Burbon and beyond. He only knew he was hungry for human food. He could smell it—far more appetizing than anything the goblins could scrounge from the forest dirt—and additional humans at the top of the wall would not keep him from his intended prize.

"So?" was Okyiq's rather apathetic and somewhat annoyed response.

"Archers," the scout added with a note of foreboding, hoping to accentuate its concern without sounding as if it was admonishing its leader.

"So?" the commander repeated with a growing sneer. His eyes fixed upon what he began to view as an irritating subordinate, like a fly that kept landing on his face and didn't realize it was time to give up and annoy someone else.

"More archers means humans ready."

If it was the scout's intention to raise the level of its commanders concern, it failed to provoke the proper response. Okyiq brushed aside the activity as if it was nothing more than routine behavior. He knew of the human guards. They always appeared worried—moving around the gates, watching in towers—but it was all quite ordinary.

"Humans are never ready for goblins." Okyiq offered with a half grumble. "They are just afraid of the dark. They run around like ants in rotted wood."

The scout didn't quite see it that way.

"Not running. Watching. Arrows ready. Standing to fight. Different tonight."

Growing slightly more troubled by the news, Okyiq finally took the warning seriously.

"How many near us?"

The scout, lacking the ability to count, did its best to offer an accurate projection.

"Small group in tower, but more than usual. Walls have lots more. Uhhmm... size of goblin raiding party standing on wall supports."

"None moving?"

The smaller goblin shook its head.

Revealing a twisted and unpleasant frown, Okyiq almost called off the raid, but then a light breeze brought another whiff of cooking meat to his large nostrils. His stomach growled just as he waved off any reluctance to attack.

"Fah, not enough to stop us."

"We still raid?" the scout wondered aloud.

"The forest belongs to me!" the larger goblin roared, then added what he saw as an important detail. "With the elves gone, this part is mine!"

The scout decided, perhaps against its better judgment, to add an important detail of its own.

"Human town outside the forest."

The goblin scout did not wish to correct Okyiq, or point out such an obvious fact that would make its leader appear somewhat dimwitted, but the smaller creature clearly did not want to be part of a raid with so many human archers in position to offer significant resistance.

The hesitancy of the creature was almost understandable. Courage was not a resounding trait of the diminutive beasts, though they weren't complete cowards, either. Despite their lack of valor, they often threw themselves into violent and perilous situations, especially when the call of the horde overwhelmed and stifled their desire for self-preservation. While they might have joined gleefully in unrestrained acts of brutality, they also endured the insecurity of inadequacy, and they often chose to flee in the face of stout opposition.

It was a constant struggle for such small creatures that originated from a realm that demanded both aggression and caution just to survive, and it wasn't surprising that Okyiq would have to deal with at least some small sliver of reluctance. The bloodlust of battle had not yet taken hold, and a couple hundred goblins spread across the eastern border of Dark Spruce hardly characterized a sizable pack, let alone a horde.

As if to punctuate its sentiment, the scout pointed back over its shoulder.

"Forest back there!"

Okyiq's eyes shot open at what he saw as not only open defiance of his will but a mocking gesture of disrespect. He ascended to command because he was larger and stronger than the other goblins... and he did not take kindly to dissension. He struck with a closed fist at the top of the scout's head and sent the smaller creature sprawling into the dirt.

"You don't tell me what's mine and what's not! Humans cleared forest for their town. Forest here first. That makes them part of forest... part of *my* forest. I take what is mine. Humans have supplies I want. We raid tonight!"

The large goblin, however, would not completely disregard the anxiety of his followers. Certainly, the monster understood how to maintain discipline through terror. Okyiq's bulk gave him a natural advantage over those that followed him, but even with meager intelligence, Okyiq knew how to lead, at least to a degree. Too much fear of repercussions and too little regard for authority led to desertion.

As a few of his lieutenants cringed at the angry display, Okyiq used his scant wisdom just enough to follow the display of strength with minor appeasement.

"So you fear the human archers on the wall?" Okyiq demanded of the goblins near enough to hear. "You think they will shoot us all down? Do arrows fly only one way?"

The other goblins tilted their heads in apparent confusion.

The goblin leader continued with a devious smile.

"If they're on the wall, then they are open to us. What keeps us from firing at them?"

A few of the goblins began to nod, but not the majority.

"We have short bows, crossbows, and plenty of bolts and arrows. Should we forget what we have?"

Without waiting for an answer, the large monster picked up a stick and drew a small circle in the dirt and then a curve just below it. He called his lieutenants to gather around. He sneered but with slightly less hostility than he offered the scout. He demanded that those nearby try to pay attention—something difficult for any goblin, but not impossible.

"This is wall around human town. We raid here!" Okyiq used the end of the stick to point to a section of the circle which corresponded to Burbon's southern gate. "Door here is closed, but we climb wall, kill guards, open gate."

The hulking creature paused and waited to see if any of the surrounding goblins dared to object. His eyes narrowed and his fists clenched tighter. He allowed his expression to communicate his intentions if any decided to oppose him.

Knowing they would receive the same treatment dished out to the still dazed scout, the subordinate goblins held their tongues. They might not have wanted to face human archers, but they had no desire to face Okyiq's fury, either.

Pleased with the silence, Okyiq then threw out the only bone he would offer, the one adjustment to help ease his followers concerns, but he knew it would suffice.

"But... not all of us will go to gate. Only part of us will go here." Okyiq jabbed the stick further into the dirt. He continued to direct the goblins' attention to the bottom of the circle that represented the southwestern portion of Burbon's contiguous wall. He then pulled the stick back and pointed to the curve he drew below. "This the hill rest of us can hide behind. We have enough short bows and crossbows. Stay behind hill until I say, then go to top of hill and fire at humans on wall! They will die and not see what we really want."

With a grunt of satisfaction, the leader jabbed the stick into the ground back at the point of the circle that represented the southern gate.

"This is where small party goes first. We climb wall, open gate, get more of us inside, take supplies, leave. Humans die, we live. We get food and weapons."

Certainly it wasn't a grand strategy, just a simple diversion added to a basic raid, but for the group of goblins, it radiated with pure brilliance. Okyiq added one more tactical aspect of goblin genius.

"We wait for rain. Coming soon. When rain starts, I give signal. Harder for archers to see us."

In a downpour, it would also be harder for the goblins to target the archers on the wall, but even had they thought of it, none of the lieutenants dared to make the claim. It was safer to simply nod and snicker.

#

Ryson moved eastward to the location where a second river rogue had been spotted. Again, he found the creature's scent quickly. He tracked the monster as he moved along a rather straight path. The rogue must not have been concerned by its surroundings as its trail passed through the center of a wide road.

The delver still traveled near the northern gate, but the streets and alleys were darker in that particular region. The area contained the large storehouses for food supplies

brought in from the farms that covered the lands to the northeast. Lantern posts were not as common and most of the buildings were dark.

The second river rogue was easier to spot than the first, actually standing out in the open, banging against a locked warehouse door. It probably smelled the food stored within the confines of the structure and decided to force its way inside.

Ryson pulled to a stop and waved his sword high above his head to signal the towers. He remained a safe distance from the building which held the river rogue's attention while he scanned the area for any security personnel. Other than the rogue's poundings, the streets remained quiet and empty.

Unfortunately, his movement created a flashing beacon that caught the rogue's attention. The delver knew the guard towers would signal foot patrols to move into the area, but he couldn't be sure from which direction they would arrive. Not wanting them to unwittingly step into a dangerous situation, he decided to remain the new focal point for the beast.

Ryson raced forward and came to a halt about three arm lengths away from the rogue. He twirled his blazing weapon and leapt to his right and left. He kept calling out to ensure any arriving guards would hear him, though he knew they would not miss the flashing display of his sword.

The rogue found the delver's actions first distracting and then enraging. Like an angered bull, it charged at the sparkling blade. It slashed as it snarled and spit, but its claws found only empty air.

Ryson continued moving the sword in nearly every direction as he carefully danced backwards, coaxing the monster away from the building and out into the open street. The rogue was deceptively quick, even on dry land, but Ryson found no difficulty in avoiding every swipe. Once he managed to direct the beast into the center of a wide crossroad, the delver took quick glimpses in each direction and spied a group of oncoming soldiers.

Before the rogue could spot the guards, Ryson sidestepped to his left. By coaxing the creature to follow, he turned the monster's back to the soldiers' approach. He shouted louder at the rogue, making sufficient noise to block out any sounds that might alert it to approaching danger from behind.

To their credit, the guards understood the delver's intentions, quieted their movements, and prepared the iron net to swoop down upon the rogue from behind. They spread the strands of chain across the road, and once in position, they darted forward catching the creature in the center of the net.

Ryson leapt to the side and allowed the soldiers to wrap the mesh around the rogue with a sweeping motion. He helped secure the chains to ensure the rogue's arms could not break free. With the monster no longer a threat, he turned to the squad leader.

"Nicely done."

"You set it up for us," the squad leader offered.

"Any further sightings?" the delver asked.

"Last information I received was just three sightings of rogues inside—including this one—and two outside the wall."

"This is the second we've secured," Ryson offered. "That means only one left. If there was a fourth inside, it probably would have been seen by now. What do you think?"

The soldier considered the assumption, but found a small flaw in the logic.

"Probably, but the captain ordered all foot patrols to stand fast at crossroads. Everyone else is inside. You're the only one actively searching. If there were more, you'd know about it first."

Ryson considered the patience of the first rogue that had been hiding behind the candle maker's barrels. If there was a fourth rogue, it might have found similar refuge. One might be hiding behind some warehouse or in some dank drainage ditch. He realized he could not simply assume that there were only three. He would have to search the entire town after he located the third river rogue.

"You're right," the delver conceded. "All citizens were ordered inside, so I can't be sure of anything. After I locate the third, I'll keep searching. Well... if there is a fourth one, I should be able to find the scent pretty easily."

The soldier didn't doubt the delver's words, didn't view them as boasts, but wondered about the effect of the elements.

"Can you still locate scents in the rain?"

As if on cue, the first raindrop hit the ground between the guard and the delver.

"It's going to make it more difficult," Ryson admitted, "but these things smell pretty bad."

The guard took a big whiff, and though he lacked the delver's keen senses, he could not argue the assertion.

"They do stink," the soldier admitted.

"This one's not going to smell any better if it gets wet, and moving it in the rain is just going to make things more difficult. You probably want to get it off the streets before it really starts to pour."

"There's a guard post with a holding cell a couple blocks of here. We'll take it there."

"You'll signal the towers to let them know?"

"Absolutely. Captain wants to keep informed."

"Good. Please signal that I'm going after the third rogue and then I'll sweep the town to make sure there aren't any more."

"Will do."

#

"The rain is here," one of the goblin lieutenants boldly stated.

A steady sprinkle of raindrops hit the ground all around them, but Okyiq found the amount unsatisfactory.

"Not rain, not yet. This just spittle." The goblin leader looked up at the skies. He could see thicker clouds rolling in from the west, even in the dark of night. "Real rain coming soon."

"We wait?"

"We wait," the bulkier goblin grunted.

Rubbing his head, Okyiq groaned. The large goblin had spent time pondering the events of the night. Thinking was never easy for a goblin, and the consideration of tactics could produce headaches of excruciating intensity. Still, Okyiq believed the activities in the human town offered not so much of a dilemma, but a potential opportunity.

Okyiq struggled with how to utilize that opportunity based on limited information and his own restricted ability to reason. Rather than seek additional facts, he searched for possible explanations based on conjecture, not an easy task for any goblin.

The hulking monster remained certain of one thing: the humans were concerned with something at their wall. As to what it was, he could only imagine. He sensed something in the night... perhaps fortune, the same fortune that cleared the threat of the elves from the forest. Okyiq began to believe that luck was on his side and he did not wish to waste such an opportunity.

"When real rain starts, then we fire," the large goblin ordered. "Make sure goblins behind hill stay out of sight until ready to shoot. Must all shoot at once to kill as many humans as we can. For now, stay hidden... make certain all have enough arrows. We will shoot a long time."

That order confused the lieutenant.

"Won't humans run for cover?"

"Humans will hide, but will wait behind wall. We still fire at wall. Make sure all goblins understand."

The subordinate shook its head and admitted a dangerous truth.

"Don't understand."

Okyiq nearly exploded. In a fit of frustration, the bulky goblin grabbed the lieutenant by its armored breastplate. Spit showered upon the smaller goblin as the leader frothed with rage. Most of the frustration came from tactical struggles. The large goblin's head did indeed pound with pain from jumbled concentrations, and it didn't wish to waste time and effort explaining itself.

"You don't have to understand! You do as you're told! You're too dumb to understand. Why do you think humans on wall?"

The lieutenant didn't dare answer, too afraid to say the wrong thing that might lead to its death.

The release of anger seemed to ease the pain in his head, and Okyiq decided to continue his rant, even as it meant offering the explanation he felt unnecessary to offer.

"Humans react! Always react! Sometimes react to nothing, Sometimes react to something. Could be something big, could be something small, but always they react! Archers on wall means they react to something, but what?"

The commanding goblin didn't wait for a response, didn't expect one. Instead, Okyiq spelled out his own contemplations as if to clear his jumbled thoughts.

"Big wizard not there, almost never there anymore. Big wizard in big city. Big wizard wouldn't allow us this close, doesn't like goblins. Magic would find us, but humans put archers across whole wall. Why waste archers on long wall if big wizard could use magic to throw us back into trees? Magic not here.

"Maybe cursed delver behind the wall sensed us, but probably not. Delves in Burbon. We know that. But..." Okyiq struggled with the words to explain his reasoning, to exclaim why he felt they had not been uncovered by the delver's great senses. "...doesn't make sense. Does delver know we're here? If yes, then why not send out soldiers on horseback to scatter goblins before rains start? Why just stand there and wait? Humans hate to wait almost as much as goblins. And why wait in open if they know we are here?"

"No, not magic and not delver. Humans not on wall for goblins. Something else has humans' attention. Something going on inside their wall, that's what I think. And if something else going on, then humans already worried. We make them *more* worried."

The amount of speculation surprised the goblin subordinate. It was more "thinking" than it could have accomplished in an entire season, let alone one night. Still, its leader

was offering an explanation and the threat of retribution seemed to diminish. The lieutenant's curiosity got the better of it and pressed for further understanding.

"But why waste arrows by shooting at wall if humans hide? Why not shoot and stop? Save arrows."

"Because arrows will add to worry, will keep attention off gate. We kill as many humans quickly, but we don't stop. Not a waste if it helps us open gate. Once gate open, humans can't hide behind wall."

With the strategy somewhat clearer, the lieutenant offered a sinister smile which satisfied its commander. The diminutive monster even nodded and offered praise.

"Okyiq smarter than humans."

The large goblin appeared pleased with the compliment. He released his hold on the armored breastplate and allowed the lieutenant freedom to move.

"Now, go make sure goblins have enough arrows. Real rain almost here."

#

Linda Acumen was alone when the first wave hit her. She stood in a back storage room of the Borderline Inn, looking for extra mugs for all the additional people in the tavern. No one was ordering drinks at the moment—they were all too occupied, wondering about the alert and watching for additional signals from the towers—but she wanted to keep busy. She didn't want to stop and think about what was happening outside, didn't want to wonder what Ryson was facing at that very moment.

The initial contact rushed toward her, but couldn't touch her in any way. Linda didn't feel anything on her skin, but she could sense something all around her. She almost called out for help. She thought of Ryson, but for some reason she knew he could not help her. The same force that tried to take hold of her was also inside her husband, inside all delvers.

She turned to run back into the main room of the tavern, but then a surge of odd images rushed into her consciousness. A wave of emotions kept her in place. She felt everything at once; fear, sadness, anxiety, confusion, but mostly anger, and it raged within her.

She wanted to strike out at something, but there was nothing near that was worth her immense fury. She shook uncontrollably as she grabbed her head, clawing at her hair and trying to somehow reach the flood of foreign memories pouring into her mind.

For long, drawn out moments it continued. No one noticed, for she remained alone and away from the tavern full of Burbon's citizens. She grunted and snarled in a fit of pure rage. She never saw the two greasy puddles sliding toward her.

Two arasaps had entered the tavern by sliding through a back window well before the river rogues even entered the town. Both had waited patiently in a far corner near the stairs to the basement. They appeared as nothing more than two large drops of water that might have fallen from some boiling pot.

They kept in constant contact with the arasap that was already inside the human host. Through telepathic messages only the arasaps could understand, they knew to wait. An opportunity was coming soon, and they would not waste it.

When the first arasap began to feed, the other two creatures made their way across the floor. Their objective remained alone and far too occupied to notice their advance. When they reached her feet, they both rose up slowly, like expanding bubbles. They struck from opposite sides, each taking hold of a separate arm.

Linda barely noticed. The flood of images and emotions kept her angry and confused... and completely unable to comprehend her dire situation. She felt the greasy substances slide across her arms and into her neck near her shoulders.

At the same instant, the flood of images subsided and she could no longer feel the strange presence surrounding her. When she regained her composure, all traces of the arasaps were gone. The incident remained fuzzy in her mind. She wondered if she imagined the entire event.

There was one thing, however, that remained clear in her mind. She thought of Ryson and how he left her. He was not there to help her. Beyond that, she realized there was something between them, an obstacle that neither of them could overcome.

Linda stormed out into the tavern and took a seat alone at a back table. She ignored everyone around her. She focused on a single glass that was left on the table. It was empty, but she began to look at it as a symbol of her future. She wanted to toss it across the room, let it shatter into a thousand shards, but she held to it. She decided she didn't want to let go of it, at least not at that moment.

Those that waited in the Borderline Inn let her be. They imagined her emotional state was the result of the chaos outside in the streets. They couldn't blame her. Her husband was racing through the town, defending Burbon against horrible creatures, fighting for them.

Chapter 3

Ryson found the third rogue in a residential section of Burbon, roaming through shadows of the eastside. The beast appeared almost disoriented and seemed much more intent on fleeing as opposed to stalking the alleys for food. Several dogs were barking from inside locked homes, and the rogue moved frantically from one shadowy corner to the next, hopelessly trying to escape the noisy mayhem.

Rogues didn't like dogs, as dogs could smell them far in the distance—another reason why dogs had become so popular after the return of magic. Early warning and avoidance of danger became necessary in life throughout Uton, particularly so near Dark Spruce Forest, and dogs proved to be the ablest of alarms against shags, goblins, and especially river rogues. From the smallest terriers to the largest wolfhounds, the appreciation for canines grew as their natural ability to sense dark creatures saved almost as many citizens as the town guard.

Reeling from an alley to a dark porch and then to a lonely street corner, the rogue seemed helpless in its attempt to avoid attention. The moment it rushed away from one barking canine, it stepped too near the home of another. Soon, the entire eastside echoed with yaps and howls, and the monster could find no path to sanctuary.

Ryson closed to within a single town block of the rogue, but then slowed his approach. He continued to carry the Sword of Decree in front of him, but he made no attempt to wave it over his head. He had a clear view of the creature, knew there was only one in the area, but he delayed signaling the towers. He continued to assess the situation as he watched the rogues frantic movements.

Realizing the monster was extremely agitated, Ryson wondered if trying to catch it in an iron net remained the best alternative. He was very near the eastern town entrance. He probably could have coaxed the creature toward the gate, right through the passage, and beyond the wall in mere moments. He knew the rogue was simply trying to escape. Guiding it to just such a remedy seemed the best solution for everyone involved.

Unfortunately, Ryson knew the gate was closed and the keepers were under strict orders to leave it that way. They weren't going to open it for him, even if he had the rogue marching right in front of him. More than likely, they would signal the situation to the towers, and the captain of the guard would receive the message immediately.

Ryson thought of the agreement he had with Sy. The captain gave his word he would release the rogues unharmed, but it would be far from the town. Sy wasn't going to allow the beast to flee so near Burbon's borders. There was already tension between the two of them, and breaking their agreement would only add to the stress.

Still, the delver made no move to signal the towers. He followed the rogue for a few more blocks, which only served to strengthen Ryson's opinion that the creature was too unsettled to hunt for prey. If everyone stayed away from it and allowed the beast free passage, it would leave of its own accord. The only thing it seemed to care about was escaping the continuous clamor of the neighborhood dogs. The monster didn't even notice the delver's glowing sword.

The rain that had been little more than a very light shower finally altered the delver's decision. A smattering of drops here and there turned into a steadier downpour. The rhythmic beat of drops against the surrounding rooftops added to the chorus of barking

dogs. Several street lanterns dimmed or were extinguished completely. Visibility was dropping quickly, and Ryson knew the guards in the streets would have a difficult time keeping their torches lit.

With nothing to gain in delaying his decision further and growing anxious over the storm clouds to the west, the delver waved his glowing blade over his head. He kept a close watch on the river rogue, waited to see if the action might divert its attention.

It didn't.

The monster simply kept moving onward, trying to find a secure place to hide, but failing to do so. The only thing that seemed to offer it any solace whatsoever was the increasing rains.

#

Okyiq also welcomed the storm. The rain began to pour down upon the tall grass of the hills just as heavier winds rustled almost violently through the trees of Dark Spruce to the west. The large goblin nodded his head in approval as he made one last address to his surrounding lieutenants.

"See? This is why I lead. Told you the rain would be stronger. Humans will have hard time seeing us. What will they shoot at? Nothing. We have target. We can shoot at the top of wall and at towers without even seeing humans, but we know they are there. We will hit some. They will die."

None of the lieutenants answered, but a few nodded their heads in agreement with Okyiq's sentiment. The rain beat down upon them, splashed against their armored breastplates and substantially diminished what they could see. If they peeked over the top of the hill, they could still make out the outline of the wall in the darkness and rain, but just barely. The exact position of the humans was, at best, a guess, but that was all they needed. The same advantage did not hold true for the human archers. Even when the goblins finally began to fire, the dark creatures would remain quite hidden in the tall grass and the teaming downpour.

"We attack now!" Okyiq ordered. "When I tell you to fire, all goblins with bows must attack and continue to fire at wall and towers until raid is over."

The commanding goblin pointed to two of his lieutenants.

"You two stay here. You are in charge of all goblins at this hill. Make sure goblins keep firing. If they stop, you die."

The order was a double edged sword for the lieutenants. They were happy to stay behind as opposed to being part of the raid that would cross the clearing that surrounded the town. It also pleased them not to have to climb the wall, but the order was flush with other potential hazards.

They were given the responsibility of maintaining discipline among the goblin ranks in the hills, not a simple task. Both lieutenants knew that if the human guards charged the hill with cavalry, no goblin would stay at its post. Raid or no raid, the bow fire would cease entirely as every goblin archer would scatter and head to the safety of the forest.

Goblins hated humans on horseback. A single guard mounted on a large steed was a frightful sight to the meager-sized monsters. A charging horse was a vision of terror, a snorting and galloping colossus. Goblins did not fight cavalry on open ground. They would run in absolute horror or drop prone into the mud paralyzed with fear.

Thus, the lieutenants understood the risk attached to their duty. They could order the goblins under their command to continue to fire, but only for as long as the hills remained

clear. They lacked the force of Okyiq's stature and will. If the humans attacked, the goblin archers would certainly flee and leave the raiders to face their own daunting task without cover or diversion. If that were the case, the lieutenants themselves would run as fast and as far as possible as well, knowing that when Okyiq returned, he would rip them to shreds.

As for the goblin leader, he made his own intentions quite clear.

"I go with first raiders. I will make sure goblins climb the wall fast. Gate will be opened and all goblins not firing at wall must come into town. We will take much tonight. We will let the humans know this is *my* forest!"

It wasn't much of an inspirational speech, but it established Okyiq's desires as well as his resolve. He would lead the initial assault, putting himself in the greatest danger. He would be the biggest target, but the heavy rain worked in his favor. He believed it would be more than enough to protect him. He also believed that fortune remained on his side. The night belonged to him, the storm a generous gift. He would not accept he might die. He was too strong, and too smart... at least for a goblin.

#

Two groups of soldiers moved into position around the third rogue. One squad came from the eastern gate. The other band moved in from behind Ryson. It was the same group that had helped capture the first rogue.

In order to return to the fray, they had imprisoned the first rogue and obtained a new iron net. They were eager to be part of another encounter, especially the corporal. Leading the squad responsible for capturing two of the rogues would bring him that much closer to a promotion.

Ryson, however, was not thrilled at the prospect of dealing with the outspoken corporal again. He decided to address the first group, soldiers that clearly came from the east, to see if they might allow for a change in tactics.

"Is the eastern gate still closed?" the delver asked, but he already knew the answer. He was just testing the waters, trying to gauge their willingness to agree to an alternative plan.

"Yes," the squad leader replied with no true emotion that Ryson could read.

"Any chance of getting it open to let this thing out?"

"Town's sealed. All gates remain closed."

And that shut down Ryson's hopes for allowing the rogue to escape on its own.

"We have to be careful with this one," Ryson warned. "It's already spooked."

At that instant, the corporal decided to inject his own authority.

"We have two squads here and the creature is on the run... in the open. We can take it from here."

"What are you going to do?" Ryson demanded, not appreciating being dismissed so callously.

The corporal ignored the delver completely. He turned his attention to the other squad leader who arrived from the east. He outranked his counterpart and took command.

"Take your squad and circle around the block. Cut it off from the far end of this street. Once we have it between us, we can come at it from both sides with nets open. It won't be able to get away."

The eastern squad leader simply nodded and directed the soldiers under his authority down a side street. With one quick turn, they were moving to outflank the rogue.

Before the corporal could turn away, Ryson made his own concerns clear.

"That rogue is in a panic," the delver repeated.

"Irrelevant," the corporal replied, then swerved about—again dismissing the delver—to coordinate his own guards.

Ryson cursed as he looked down the street toward the rogue that was shuffling hesitantly from one hiding spot to the next. The squad circling around would have no difficulty in cutting off the monster, but he worried what might happen when the creature was caught in the middle of the street between two groups of soldiers and no path of escape.

Regrettably, he knew the corporal would not listen to reason, so he did not bother trying to recommend safer tactics. The rain had become quite heavy, and though there were no further reported sightings of rogues within the walls, he still had to search the entire town to ensure that there were none in hiding. He was about to take off to continue his scout when he heard several shouts in the distance.

Immediately, he issued a warning to the soldiers nearby.

"Something's wrong!"

"There's nothing wrong," the corporal dismissed. "I know what I'm doing. We can handle the rogue without further assistance from you."

"No, there's something going on to the south... near the southern gate."

At that very moment, warnings and alarms erupted across all guard towers. Signal torches revealed the outbreak of another attack.

"Someone is firing at the wall!" one of the soldiers announced after reading the signals.

There was not much more Ryson could determine from the tower messages. There were requests for reinforcements, estimates as to the number of enemy archers, but there was nothing to indicate who or what might be behind the attack.

Standing far from the center of conflict, Ryson drank in all the information available to him. His senses were tremendously powerful, but in the heavy rain, he still couldn't smell the goblins or hear the full extent of the clash. He was only able to pick up miniscule traces, meager bits of activity—an odd scent in the air, a yell or grunt echoing off a wall. He placed the details in context with the tower signals, and his experience pointed to one conclusion.

"Goblin raid," Ryson declared.

The corporal could read the signals, but that was all the information available to him. He lacked the senses of a delver and his viewpoint narrowed on his experiences within Burbon. Nothing in the tower messages revealed anything about goblins.

"How do you know?"

Ryson didn't waste time explaining. Too much was happening too quickly. The rain, the rogues, and goblins; the danger was growing and he had no idea if something else lurked in the darkness.

"Get that rogue captured as quickly as possible!" Ryson ordered.

The corporal suddenly lost his desire to capture the creature. The rogue seemed a minor threat, especially if there was a larger assault upon the wall to the south. He considered his location and wondered if other areas of the town might also fall under attack. He also reached his limit of listening to the delver's orders.

"No, the rogue is incidental. We have to ensure the integrity of the eastern gate! I'm going to recall the other squad..."

"You have to secure this area first!" Ryson sternly interrupted. "There's nothing going on at the eastern gate!"

"I'll know that when I see it for myself!"

"And if the rogue follows you to the gate and finds it closed, what's it going to do? It's trying to escape! It'll try to break through and then you really will have a problem."

During the argument, the other squad of soldiers came back into view and had cutoff the beast. They clearly knew of the conflict to the south, but their squad leader kept his attention on the pressing issue of the rogue.

"See?" Ryson asserted. "They're not running off to the east gate. The rogue is inside the wall. That's your immediate problem. Deal with it!"

Seeing the dark creature cutoff and between two groups of forces, the corporal could hardly argue the contention. He had the rogue where he wanted it. He just had to finish the job.

Speaking as if he had made the decision himself, he called to the guards under his command.

"Pull the net across the street and get that thing under wraps."

Believing the soldiers would handle the third rogue, Ryson was just about to leave to make a quick scout of the town. Turning his attention back to the towers, he read the signals to determine if any other issues warranted his immediate attention. The disturbance to the south appeared to be the only other concern, but a final look back at the corporal gave him pause... and alarm.

The corporal took a position in the middle of the street, holding the net at its center. He broke into a full sprint as he demanded the soldiers charge toward the rogue as quickly as possible. In essence, the corporal became the head of the wedge, the tip of the spear flying at the panicked rogue.

The squad further down the road also stretched its iron net across the street. They barred any path of escape for the rogue, but they wisely left the center of the net empty. There was no one in the middle of the road, just the iron mesh that blocked all passage. They also did not race toward the rogue, but moved steadily, and carefully forward, allowing the corporal the opportunity to ensnare the monster first.

With one quick look into the rogue's eyes, Ryson saw the folly in the corporal's maneuver. The monster panicked. The barking dogs continued their harangue all about the creature, heightening its distress. Previously, it only wanted one thing... to escape from the town, but its intentions quickly altered. It realized in an instant that it was trapped and in danger. Both its focus and rage centered upon the main threat, the corporal that charged toward it.

Even with all his speed, Ryson could not reach the rogue before it was too late. The soldiers were just too close to the river rogue. By the time the delver understood the looming catastrophe, he was too far away from the point of conflict. Still, he rushed forward even in a futile attempt.

The rogue, with no other choice, moved to attack. With an inherent quickness that clearly surprised the corporal, the creature leapt forward with its arms extended. The claws flashed outward but without any slashing motion that would have entangled the iron mesh.

The corporal saw the danger too late. He tried to stop in time, but he was running with all his fury and could not completely halt his progress. In one desperate action, he tried to toss the iron net forward as he released his hold of the chains. The act succeeded in catching one of the rogue's extended arms and bending it out of harm's way, but the creature's other arm slipped between one of the holes of the mesh. The corporal could not dodge the claws and found his left wrist in the grip of the beast.

The strength of a rogue rivaled that of a full grown mountain shag. Once it gained hold of a victim, it almost never let go. Its claws dug deep into the corporal's flesh, even as it pulled the corporal closer. The iron netting fell upon it, weighing it down and tangling its arms and legs, but it would not release its violent grasp on the human it viewed as the source of its predicament.

Pain erupted up the corporal's arm. He shrieked in agony as the claws ripped through the skin and sunk deep into flesh and muscle. Pulling away from the monster only increased the torment—and worsened the injury—but the corporal instinctively tried to escape the rogue's grasp. His eyes widened in absolute terror as the monster grappled and twisted against the iron net to draw him nearer to its razor sharp fangs.

As the soldiers worked to wrap the net around the beast and pulled against the strands to hopefully knock the fiend off balance, Ryson reached the side of the corporal. With one careful jab of his sword, the delver found an open space between the netting and slightly pierced the scaled hide of the rogue.

The Sword of Decree held many enchantments, and it would burn the spirit essence of any creature the blade cut. It might have been the only thing that would force the rogue to release its hold on the corporal.

The creature would not relent so easily. It screeched in pain, a shriek that matched the horrible cries of the corporal. As the rogue tried to pull away from the blazing sword that caused it incredible suffering, it made one last swift yank at the wrist still in its grasp. With a sudden twist, a deeper slice into tendons, and a final heave of fury, the rogue separated the corporal's hand from his arm, and the monster fell backward onto the ground. The beast hissed and growled as it thrashed violently against the iron chains that further entangled it with every angry thrust of its arms and legs.

The corporal also dropped to the ground, but he ceased all sound and movement. An expanding pool of blood spilled across deepening puddles as a deluge of raindrops splattered the dark red liquid in every direction.

"Get a tourniquet around his arm and stop the bleeding!" Ryson yelled. He turned to the eastern squad of soldiers that still held their net across the street. "Drop your net over the rogue! Make sure it's secure and then get it out of here!"

Not one guard hesitated as the delver's commanding tone echoed with authority. Ryson motioned to the guards that had been under the corporal's command.

"Get him medical attention as quickly as possible."

One of the soldiers didn't question the directive but wondered aloud about a rather macabre detail.

"What about his hand?"

Ryson gave one last look to the rogue that was being secured with the second iron net. It clasped the bloody hand with desperation, as if holding some sacred religious artifact. Ryson knew it was absurd to try and wrestle the dismembered body part from the creature.

"Nothing we can do about it," Ryson advised. He encouraged all the soldiers to move with greater speed. "Get them both out of here now!"

Just as the guards moved out, Ryson took off at near top speed. It wasn't the most efficient way to scout the town, but he was growing more concerned with the spreading turmoil. Sprinting might cause him to miss small traces of another rogue, but time was running short.

He took several glimpses at the surrounding towers to glean additional information regarding the conflict to the south. He realized the southwestern wall remained under fire. Though no confirmed identification of the source had been made, the tower guards were raising the alert. It appeared the soldiers in the area also believed goblins were behind the attack, and they warned the entire town of a possible horde assault.

As Ryson closed upon the eastern gate, he paused to call out to the gatekeepers and the nearest watch.

"Signal that the three rogues are all secured! I'm going to do a fast scout of the town to see if anything else is inside. Then I'll head to the south."

Once a guard nodded in acknowledgment, Ryson raced off and returned to his previous pace. He breathed deeply and quickly through his nose as he sprinted from one street to the next. He also concentrated on catching every sound that escaped each alley. The heavy rain and the growing winds made his every motion that much more difficult, but at least the residents of the town were all in shelters.

At the pace he set, he couldn't be absolutely certain, but he was relatively sure that no other river rogues had found their way inside the town walls. The scents he caught matched those of the other three creatures that had already been secured. It was possible he might have missed a small trail, but not probable.

Believing the rogue problem handled, Ryson sped off to the southern edge of Burbon. He could hear the conflict growing in the distance. It wasn't just arrows falling upon the southern wall. The delver caught the sound of shouts and clanging metal. Something other than a river rogue was already inside Burbon's walls.

Chapter 4

After Okyiq gave the signal to fire, he led over a hundred goblins away from those that rained bolts and arrows down upon the town's wall. With his hulking frame visible even in the pouring rain, he brought the small horde around the base of a hill to Bourbon's south. Near the border of the clearing that they would have to cross, he bid the pack to stop. Indiscriminately, he separated the group further, pulling a small contingent from the entire force that followed. About a dozen goblins surrounded him.

"You come with me. We get gate open."

He then turned to the remainder of the raiding party.

"You stay behind hill until gate is open. When gate opens, run inside! Anyone that stays here..." he paused to add emphasis, "...dies when I get back."

There was no "if" in the statement regarding his return. Okyiq didn't think there was any chance he would fall during the raid, and he would see to it that there would be dire consequences for any that didn't follow his orders. By sheer will alone, he would avoid death... cheat it, spit in its face.

The clarity of the order had its desired effect. Any goblin hoping Okyiq's probable demise would allow it to avoid retribution for misjudgments during battle quickly reassessed such convictions.

Peering around the edge of the hill, the huge goblin spied the wall. He could make out only a dim outline. The darkness conceived of the cloudy night sky and driving rain seemed to cover everything like a heavy wool drape that wavered only slightly against a fierce wind. Though Okyiq could not be certain of the guards' positions, he could see their signal torches. The fires remained lit despite the pounding rain, protected by canopies strung across the tops of the towers. The presence of humans remained apparent as shouts and screams from the wall followed the twang of bowstrings from the goblin ranged assault.

"We go now!" he shouted and took off in a furious sprint.

A dozen goblins followed Okyiq as they rushed toward the nearest gate. The goblin leader urged them forward through the clearing. The hail of arrows and bolts from goblins in the hills filled the air and continued to come down alongside the raindrops, falling hard upon the wall and guard towers. The projectiles were well off to the raiding party's left flank, creating no risk of the raiders falling to friendly fire. The same could not be said for arrows that might come from the human archers.

The driving rain, however, grew even harder, fell like glistening sheets across the clearing between the hills and Bourbon's wall. The goblins' gray skin and dark metallic armor allowed them to blend in with the night storm. Even as they raced across open ground, not a single arrow flew in their direction. They reached the base of the wall slightly to the side of Bourbon's southern gate without a single casualty.

"Up wall!" Okyiq whispered, but it still held the growl of authority and not a single goblin delayed in beginning the ascent.

They climbed over each other like excited ants on a pile of sugar. They were far from graceful or silent. During a clear and quiet night, several tower guards would have spotted them immediately, but the soldiers were not looking for goblins on that particular evening. If anything, a small goblin raiding party was the least of the guards' worries.

What goblin would be foolish enough to call for a raid when a number of river rogues hunted for prey both inside and outside Burbon's wall?

The hail of bolts and arrows that came from the hills confused the human sentries, and held their attention. As the guards dropped low for cover, they tried to ascertain the source of fire. They struggled against the elements and risked injury as they peered over the edges of the wall. Unfortunately, they could not identify the threat.

Even at the top of the hill, the goblins' short stature worked to their advantage. The surrounding tall grass bent and buckled with the wind and rain, but it swirled about and masked the silhouettes of their forms. They fired over and over again, unable to target their foes, but knowing they were expected to continue.

The most experienced soldiers of Burbon recognized the bolts that fell from the sky and quickly associated them with goblin crossbows, but even they failed to look to the base of the wall for an initial raiding party. The tactics didn't fit with usual goblin activity. Never before had the little cretins unleashed a continuous hail of fire for a simple raid. Why would they offer a warning?

Worried far more about a full scale attack from an overwhelming force, they looked to the hills for signs of a great horde. They listened for the thunderous rumble of a great host that could not possibly hide their numbers, even in the darkness and heavy rains. To their confusion, no such goblin army stood in sight, and beyond the pounding of the rain, no riotous commotion could be heard.

Struggling with the darkness and the volleys from the goblin archers, the human soldiers battled uncertainty. A goblin horde would rush its prey with near disregard, and yet the hills offered little more than shadows in the grass. The prospect of a major goblin assault seemed to dwindle, but the soldiers could not totally dismiss the possibility. The southern tower guards sent warning signals, revealing the ranged assault and placing the town into a stage of higher alert.

Okyiq's ploy worked far better than he could have imagined, but if he knew the facts, even the boastful goblin would have had to admit that fortune played a greater role than his simple strategy. He did not know about the river rogues incursion into the town, had no idea that soldiers were placed at crossroads to deal with a breach that had already occurred. The soldiers on the walls were looking for rogues, not a mere dozen goblins brazen enough to cross the open ground to the south. The rain and the rogues—even the delver's trek through the town with his sword blazing a trail—forced the soldiers' attention away from the southern gate, but it was there that Okyiq broke through Burbon's defenses.

At the very edge of the gate, the goblins crossed over the top of the wall and slid down the inner wall planks like snow ogres gliding down an ice covered mountainside. They hit the ground hard, but seemed to bounce, almost as if their bodies were made of some rubbery substance. They drew their short swords and immediately attacked the gatekeepers before any of the guards could call out for help.

Okyiq moved with unfettered determination to the center of the gate. A heavy wooden post crossed through iron brackets and held both doors locked in place. With far more strength than an average goblin, he took hold of the bar handle and wrestled against the weight of the post. The crossbeam fought against the pressure, and at first refused to budge. Eventually, Okyiq's own determination surpassed the stubborn shaft. The beam creaked and crunched, but began moving in its track. Struggling and snarling, ignoring

the pain in his back and hands, the fierce goblin lunged forward and slid the post beyond one of the brackets.

Three goblins ran to the freed gate section and yanked at the handles. They struggled against the weight as the iron hinges seemed to fight against their desires. When Okyiq joined them, they were able to force the gate open enough for the goblins still under the protection of the hills to see a clear passage into town.

Nearly a hundred goblins rushed across the clearing. They moved in one great mass, like a patch of filthy oil rushing forward upon the surface of an otherwise pure river. They did not try to hide their presence from the towers, did not try to mask their numbers. They simply drove toward the opportunity the open gate presented.

The racing pack did not go unnoticed. The tower guards, desperately searching for an answer to the odd assault, spotted the raiding goblins as they broke out from behind the hillside. Signals were sent of the attack, and several of the human soldiers fired their arrows, placing themselves in jeopardy from goblin archers who continued their bombardment.

Several goblins dropped from the counterattack, but the vast majority made it to the wall and threw themselves against the partially opened gate. The force shoved the door open wider and the full raiding force poured through the entrance. They were not surprised to see their commander alive and ready to order them into battle.

"Breakup! Swarm area and find cover! Force humans to come off the wall and then attack! When they are dead, take everything you can!"

As the goblins rushed passed him, Okyiq took the time to raise his pudgy distorted nose to the air. He sniffed several times and then gauged the wind. With a clear direction set in his mind, he took hold of one goblin after another and threw them to the side of the gate. Once he had another dozen goblins, he pointed to a building at a nearby corner. He could not read the sign that held the establishment's name of the Spruce View Tavern, but he knew it was a place that held the food he craved.

"You will come with me!" Okyiq demanded of the goblins he pressed aside.

The dozen creatures agreed without hesitation, their goblin blood flowing briskly from the excitement of the raid and the initial success of their endeavor. They hissed and snorted, chuckled in glee as they bounded after their leader.

In near unison, the small pack sprang across the road and toward a large wooden door at the front of the establishment. An even larger picture window stood to the side of the entrance, but the inside of the building was dark—all lanterns and candles within had been extinguished.

Despite the darkened interior, the goblins noticed movement inside the building. Humans appeared to be clamoring in all directions, but the apparent mayhem did not for one moment melt the goblins' desire to get at the food within.

Okyiq pushed at the entrance, but it held against his weight and his will. He pounded and kicked at the door, but it held firm. He cursed, but wasted no more time or effort on the futile attempt. He knew he was fighting more than a simple lock, and he decided to take a different approach. Grabbing hold of one of the goblins waiting impatiently at his side, he lifted the smaller monster off its feet and flung it violently through the center of the front window.

Suffering several deep cuts from the razor sharp broken glass, the smaller monster looked back in shock after it hit the ground and rolled to a stop. At first, it couldn't

understand why its leader had taken such an aggressive action against it, but it would soon comprehend.

"Clear the door!" Okyiq bellowed to the stunned goblin inside the establishment.

Before the goblin could get to its feet, Okyiq threw three more minions through the busted window, but they suffered no cuts as their bodies cleared the broken glass strewn across the tavern floor.

Several people within the Spruce View Tavern screamed and ran to the back exit. They didn't wish to be caught outside in the middle of a goblin raid, but their shelter had been compromised and remaining within the inn seemed an unhealthy alternative.

That consideration came to fruition for two muscular men that pressed their bodies against the locked front door. They had withstood Okyiq's initial assault, but they were unarmed and unprepared to face four snarling goblins with short swords drawn.

Rushing the men like hunting spiders leaping at prey, the four goblins within the tavern dove upon their targets in a tumbled mass of aggression. Their small but razor sharp swords jabbed and sliced with maniacal glee, dropping both men in an instant.

Covered in the blood of their victims, the twisted monsters shoved and pulled the corpses away from the door. The instant they called out to their leader, they were knocked backward by splinters and shards of wood.

Okyiq roared as he kicked at the locked door. Without the men supporting it, the wood burst into pieces as the burly goblin's foot crashed through its center. Okyiq pushed the broken pieces that hung on the hinges aside as he pounced into the Spruce View Tavern.

He saw several people racing out the back, or running up stairs hoping to barricade themselves in the rooms above, but they were not his concern. He looked to the assorted tables spread across the large tavern. He saw several plates of food, but the amount didn't match what he could smell. He knew there was more in the back of the building, and it was there he marched. He demanded all twelve goblins follow him into the kitchen to collect the ultimate source of his desires.

He pressed through two swinging doors and the aim of the raid waited for him like treasure piled before a conquering warrior. For the large goblin, it was like finding a city of gold. Heaps of food seemed to wait on every table and in every corner. Meats, grains, fruits and vegetables appeared in every direction. There were shelves and cabinets filled with delicacies, and he wanted them all.

"Fill your sacks!" Okyiq demanded.

The goblins did so without hesitation, save for one, the one that Okyiq threw through the wide front window. The goblin was leaving a trail of blood wherever it stepped, even sent waves of thick red liquid across the floor as it pulled its large cloth bag from over its shoulder. While it moved through the stash of food with nearly the same vicious glee as its brethren, its vision quickly dimmed and the room began to swirl around it. It fainted with its sack only half full.

Okyiq stepped up to the fallen goblin with fury.

"Get up!"

But the goblin had drifted off into unconsciousness from loss of blood.

Okyiq kicked at the creature. Unfortunately for them both, the fallen monster failed to respond. It died at that very moment. The larger goblin cursed, pulled the half filled sack from the dead goblin's grasp, and threw it to another creature nearby.

"Fill that one as well!" Okyiq demanded. He wanted a dozen sacks filled with food, and he would have it, even if one of his minions had to carry a double load.

With the looting complete, Okyiq led his goblin party back out onto the streets. He surveyed the scene with impatience. The rain continued to fall in great sheets and pound the ground all around them. The conditions were near ideal for his minions to prowl through shadows and create chaos.

The goblins had followed his commands. Many of them were hiding under the cover of porches or in small alleys, not allowing for archers to pick them off. Some were involved in small skirmishes with human guards that had moved in from the north, but the combat was limited, not what Okyiq had expected. He would have thought Burbon's soldiers would have rushed down from their elevated positions to meet the raiders head-on. He would have lost several goblins, but the threat of archers would have been eliminated.

To Okyiq's growing annoyance, the majority of human soldiers were not actively engaging his minions. They showed great patience and resolve, qualities he always believed the humans had in sparse supply. They remained at their posts on the walls and in the towers. Very few guards moved in from street level, and those that did advanced cautiously and avoided full engagement. The small conflicts that erupted were controlled and quickly fell to the guards' advantage. Rather than allow the goblins to goad them into one furious encounter after another, the soldiers were forming lines to cut his minions off from the center of the town.

Okyiq, however, didn't care about advancing further into Burbon. He wanted supplies, as much as he could take, but nothing more. He held no plans of conquering the human town, not with only two hundred goblins. He would never be able to hold his gains. Again, he was not an intelligent creature, but his considerations surpassed that of a normal goblin.

He needed to create more havoc, to engage the human forces in condensed but bitter street brawls. He wanted mayhem, chaos that would distract the guards and allow him to send more pillagers into nearby shops and storehouses. For that, he needed the human archers off the wall and out of the towers, and all the ground forces occupied.

Snarling with frustration, Okyiq looked about the streets, desperately searching for an answer, but his mind grew clouded. He had contemplated more strategy on that one night than he had done in an entire season. His mind was weary and irritation rattled his nerves.

He almost ordered an immediate offensive. If the humans would not come off the wall or down from the towers, he would send his minions after them. It would be a suicide rush, but it would also create the necessary turmoil.

Before he gave the order, he realized that his raiding party lacked any ranged weapons. Every short bow and crossbow had been left to the goblins still in the hills. Okyiq's raiders were armed only with short swords. They lacked the ability to attack the humans on higher ground unless they climbed to the higher elevations. If they did, they would be cut down by arrows and then outflanked by the soldiers in the streets. It would certainly be suicide, but it wouldn't be mayhem. It would be a quick slaughter.

Not wishing to give up or to engage in a futile battle, Okyiq shouted out the only remaining order he could imagine.

"Forget the soldiers! Take everything you find!"

The goblins in the streets did not wish to leave the safety of their cover, but they had no choice. If they did not move, Okyiq would simply leave them behind to the soldiers. They scurried out from their hiding places and jumped toward the nearest buildings. Some were caught outside of locked doors or windows and were quickly brought down by human archers. Many, however, broke through weak barriers and made their way into the surrounding shops and storehouses. Nearly fifty goblins shrieked with glee as they ransacked that small portion of Burbon.

#

Sy read the tower signals before the first messenger arrived at the barracks to inform him of the raid. He knew the goblins had broken through the gate, and he was already forming his own strategy as the messenger revealed the details of the goblin attack. He spoke out loud as if responding to the messenger, but he was really focusing his plan in order to ensure he was not making any error in tactics.

"Residents are already in secure positions. Civilian casualties will be minimal at worse, especially if we hold the goblins to the southern section of the town. The thrust of the attack is on the south gate. I don't think this is part of some bigger assault. I'm going to bet the river rogue incursion and the goblin raid are unrelated, but I'm going to hedge that bet."

He briefly scanned a map of the town.

"If there's another wave waiting to hit us, it's going to come from the west... from the forest, not from the north or east. Last we heard, Ryson took care of the two rogues in the north and had headed east."

With a practical plan forming in his mind, he called to the signal guard on the roof.

"Send a message to be relayed by all towers. Guards in the western section of the town remain at their posts. Send the cavalry forces to the western gate as well. Signal all foot patrols in the north to move immediately toward the south gate. Tell them to cut directly through the center of town. I'm going to risk that Ryson can handle the third rogue to the east and that there aren't any more inside the wall."

The signal guard on the roof relayed some welcome news in response.

"Message from the towers, sir. Third rogue secure in the east. The delver is about to complete his scout of the town."

The report slightly altered Sy's plans.

"Signal back to the eastern patrols. Tell them to divide in two. Half stay at their posts, half move to the south."

The captain took one pause to consider the forces he was deploying. He then issued his tactical decisions for dealing with the goblins directly.

"Order archers on the southern walls and towers to remain at their posts. They are not to force engagement. Foot patrols are to form secure lines. Containing the raiding party to the south is top priority. Limited engagement and only when necessary to contain."

Sy looked to the messenger. He explained his decision out loud in order to gauge the reaction of his soldier. An expression of doubt or confusion would offer him a chance to reassess his tactics.

"Eastern section is highly residential. I don't want to leave it totally unprotected, but if we can contain the raid, it's worth sending more soldiers to the south. The little cretins are fast and hard to see, especially in this storm. I don't want to be fighting them all over the place. We hold them to the south and then we push them back outside the wall."

The messenger showed not the slightest distress over the plan, and Sy believed he had utilized his forces without an oversight. He left the northern section of town vulnerable and cut his eastern forces in half, but he believed the tactic necessary. He could dispatch his cavalry fairly quickly from the west if a need arose to the north, and he doubted additional attacks would come from the farmlands to the east.

His priority centered on securing the town. For the first time in a very long while, goblins had succeeded in breaking his defenses. He wouldn't hide behind excuses. Yes, the rogues and the rains played a part, but allowing goblins to breach the wall was a monumental failure in his mind. If his troops were distracted, then he had not prepared them properly. He was determined to rectify that mistake, and to see to the battle personally.

Before he ventured out into the heavy downpour, he made one last call to the signal guard on the roof.

"Relay to all towers that command is heading to the south gate. Signal Sergeant Klusac to report to HQ. Then you can come off that roof, but stay by a window to keep track of all tower messages. It's getting harder to see the signals in all this rain."

"Yes, sir."

Sy turned to the messenger.

"I'm going to the south gate. I want you to go directly to headquarters at the town center and wait for Klusac. Tell him he's in charge of communications until I send a message differently."

The soldier nodded and headed off.

Sy watched him only for a moment and then hurried off to the south. He had to shield his eyes with a hand at his forehead to see through the pouring rain. He frowned at the poor visibility. It was bad, no doubt about it. He almost forgave the mistakes that allowed goblins to enter his town.

Almost.

Then he thought about the harm that goblins could cause. People might die that night because his guards were careless, because *he* was careless. Rain, no matter how heavy, was not a significant excuse. He was not happy.

#

Ryson reached the southern edge of Burbon just as Okyiq had ordered his goblins to loot the town. His delver vision cut through the darkness and heavy rain and he spied the little fiends rushing towards every conceivable prize in the area.

He noted the careful movements of Burbon's soldiers and how they formed defensive lines to keep the goblins corralled. The archers remained on the walls, staying low to avoid incoming arrows, but they carefully targeted any careless goblin venturing out into the open. He was pleased to see he would not have to worry about casualties to the guard, but the raid remained far from over.

Utilizing the darkness and the cover of the storm, the goblins scurried through every narrow passage like rats through sewer pipes. They broke into storehouses and shops, smashed windows and crashed through doors. They shrieked and squealed as they filled their sacks with everything and anything they could lay their hands upon.

Disgusted with the sight, Ryson almost rushed after each and every goblin. His speed would have allowed him to disarm most of them. He could force them to drop their loot

and retreat to the gate, but upon seeing Okyiq stalking across a narrow alley and leading eleven goblins heavily laden with plunder, Ryson decided to alter his plans.

The large goblin was the biggest Ryson had ever seen. Even in the heavy rains, the bulky form stood out against the other smaller creatures. Ryson was no longer surprised they had succeeded in unlocking the gate. The colossal goblin looked almost as strong and as sturdy as a dwarf warrior. The delver realized the monster could probably slide the locking post from the gate buckles by himself.

With his keen hearing, Ryson had heard the orders of the massive goblin and watched as the edicts were obeyed without delay. He realized the goblins were not acting in the fashion of a true horde. They did not rush forward recklessly like the incoming tide, unable to curb their instincts. They did not tear through Burbon with a group lust for violence and chaos. Instead, they had turned over authority to a single goblin and it was his voice they followed.

It was not completely out of the ordinary. The goblins had often been used as pawns, pressed forward by the twisted desires of wicked sorcerers or conniving dark creatures of greater willpower. Still, when the goblin threat was unleashed, it was shoved upon victims like a turbulent dust storm rolling forward with constant and frenzied violence.

The actions Ryson viewed did not match such characteristics. The goblins dashed through Burbon as individuals, single goblins following the orders of their master. Even as they clearly reveled in the thrill of the raid, they did so in a manner that reflected control and purpose.

With the nature of the assault unfurling before him like some scripted play on a muddy, flooded stage, Ryson realized that targeting the goblin foot soldiers was not the path toward successfully ending the conflict. He needed to address the real force behind the incursion, remove the very will that pressed each goblin into becoming a dangerous menace to his home.

With his decision made, Ryson raced toward the massive goblin. He readied the Sword of Decree in front of him as he became a flash of light and motion. In an instant, he was upon the pillaging group led by Okyiq.

The goblins froze at the sight. Even Okyiq stood dazed at the near incomprehensible vision. A blazing sword shot at them as if unleashed like a lightning bolt from the sky. Many of the smaller goblins were knocked immediately from their feet and left to roll through mud puddles, struggling with their heavy sacks of loot.

After stunning several of the smaller goblins with quick slaps of his sword to their swollen heads, Ryson turned his attention to the apparent leader of the raid. The delver had witnessed thousands upon thousands of goblins over the past several seasons, but the creature before him stood far more massive than any goblin Ryson had ever seen. A slap on the head was not going to achieve anything beyond incurring the wrath of the creature, and Ryson knew well enough not to grapple with the monster.

Weaving about the goblin, Ryson never slowed. He became a dancing shadow in the rain, moving as if he found the means to evade each drop of water falling from above. He did not strike the goblin with his sword, but he called out a dire warning.

"Recall your minions! Leave now!"

The dizzied motion bewildered Okyiq. He could hear the voice but never focus upon the face that issued the declaration. The glowing blade rushed about him as if death itself had come to take his poisoned soul with a spinning, skeletal finger of light.

The monstrous goblin almost issued the order to retreat. He had accomplished most of his objectives. He had entered Burbon and taken the human food. It sounded as if the humans were offering him free passage back to the hills, back to Dark Spruce.

The thought of the forest, however, reminded him of his burning desires. He had gained control of that portion of the woods. That corner of Dark Spruce belonged to him, and he viewed Burbon as part of *his* forest. The humans would bend to his will, not the other way around.

As his ambitions rekindled the motivation for his deeds, Okyiq found the clarity to realize that no human could move like the form that threatened him. It was another defender of Burbon, a more dangerous foe than a simple human soldier, and he was aware of the town's protectors. Without a shred of doubt, he realized he faced the delver and not the enormously powerful wizard. In that thought, he found courage. He called out to every goblin within Burbon.

"Attack this delver... or die by my hands!"

The order was roared out as if a lion had become enraged, and it brought a great pause to the goblin frenzy throughout the area. They ceased their shrieking. They stumbled to a sudden halt. Many dropped treasures in momentary confusion. They looked to their leader, saw that he was engulfed by the legendary movements of the speedy delver. Despite their fear of Okyiq, they were at a loss of what to do.

Attack the delver?

Did they dare? That was like attacking the wind... but that was the order. Okyiq frothed with rage, and the goblins could not deny the quandary before them. Attack the delver or face their leader's wrath—it was like a choice of trying to grasp rushing water or standing before an avalanche of boulders, a true dilemma that left the goblins dumfounded.

Ryson decided to break the momentary stalemate. He ignored the surrounding goblins. They were never a threat to him. Even with so many around him, what could they do? They carried short swords, not bows. They would have to get within arm's length to use their weapons. Even had they not carried sacks heavily loaded with plunder, they lacked the physical ability to match the delver's speed and quickness. No, the goblins throughout the streets posed no real danger.

Okyiq was the one real threat to Ryson's home. The large goblin orchestrated the attack, used his unnatural strength to its fullest potential. It was not the frantic call of the horde that urged the goblins forward, but rather the harsh voice of their leader. It was not the furious stampede of the dark gray host that pressed the goblin storm onward, but rather the raised fist of one titanic monster. If Ryson wished to end the conflict, he needed to neutralize the leader of the raid.

With surgical precision, Ryson stabbed at the monstrous goblin's shoulder. The tip of the Sword of Decree broke through the skin, but only by the smallest of margins. It was just enough to invoke the enchantment of the blade, a blade which was capable of burning the spirit, no matter how decrepit in nature.

Okyiq howled in indescribable pain. His eyes shot open wide as every fiber of his being felt as if it was being consumed by the fire of a white hot star. He tried to pull away from the sword, but the cursed delver could counteract his every retreat. Desperate, he swung a free hand at the glowing blade, hoping to knock it away.

Ryson countered by pulling the blade away at the last instant and then stabbing at another vulnerable section of the goblin's body. He danced about the monster's form, twirling about like a whirlwind constrained to a localized area. He stabbed with deft accuracy, always slicing the goblin's hide just enough to engulf the creature's soul with enchanted fury but never thrusting the blade to cause an egregious wound to its body.

As Okyiq wailed in absolute anguish, the surrounding goblins stared in disbelief. It appeared as if their leader was being consumed by magical fire, a flame of glory that caused the enormous goblin unimaginable pain. If their formidable leader could suffer in such a manner, they could only envision what they might endure if the blazing blade fell upon their own vulnerable bodies.

Unwilling to face such a fate, every goblin within Burbon raced toward the gate. They rushed forward, dropping their sacks, many even dropping their simple weapons. They wished only for the sanctuary of the forest and to free their ears of the horrible screams of their suddenly abandoned leader.

When the last goblin fled through the gate, Ryson pulled his sword from Okyiq's skin but held the sharpened tip menacingly toward the large goblin's face. The delver had a prisoner, one of great value.

With the raid over, Ryson's curious nature bubbled to life. Questions erupted upon his consciousness. He considered everything he faced on that turbulent evening, and he wanted answers.

"Why did you attack?"

Okyiq looked with grave misgivings at the point of the glowing blade, but he found the inner strength to ignore the question. He turned his stare to the delver and remained in stony silence. He did not wish to face the searing pain of the sword again. He would rather slit his own throat, but he despised the delver and would not submit to the demand.

Ryson ignored the monster's resolve. He realized the first question was too obvious. He saw the sacks, many lying around the large goblin, dropped by nearly a dozen goblins that decided to retreat without their leader. The delver could smell the contents, and so, he knew the creature was there to steal food. With questions still feeding his curiosity, Ryson turned his attention to the rest of the night's commotion.

"Did you send the rogues?" Ryson demanded in a voice just above a whisper, and he watched the monster carefully.

Okyiq had not known about the river rogues, but it did not surprise him. He was well aware that something had invoked the fear of the humans, something pressed them into greater concern. From the delver's question, he finally knew what forced the odd human behavior even before his raid began.

Ryson immediately noticed the goblin's sinister smile, but it only confused him further. It was not surprise or denial he sensed within the expression of the monster, but something more akin to sly satisfaction, as if Ryson had unwillingly revealed a secret. The reaction served to elevate the delver's curiosity.

"What do you know about the rogues?!"

Okyiq said nothing. He held up his chin in pure defiance, stared into the eyes of the delver with pure hatred.

Ryson feigned a light jab, but never touched the goblin with his glowing blade. He made the threat of his sword clear as he stared back with equal determination to learn the truth.

The bulky goblin did not even flinch. Okyiq inflated his chest as he snarled in total defiance. He would not answer.

Frustration exploded in the delver's mind. He knew he couldn't force the goblin to speak, but he wanted answers, *needed* answers. He decided if he could not compel the monster to respond to threats, perhaps he could persuade it... with the right incentive.

"Answer my questions and I'll release you into the forest," Ryson offered.

At that very moment, Sy appeared as he turned the corner of a nearby street. Despite the rain splattering in his face and the mud slowing his step, he moved with obvious authority to the delver's side.

"You have no right to make that offer!"

The delver did not take his eyes off the monster, but he recognized the voice. His expression revealed surprise at the rebuke. The goblin was his prisoner, and he felt he could do with it as he wished.

Sy did not even wait for Ryson to debate the issue. He made his point clear.

"That's a prisoner of Burbon. What happens to him is not up to you."

Okyiq kept his face turned to Ryson—still daring the quick handed delver to pierce him with the dreaded sword—but he took several quick glances toward the approaching soldier. He didn't care for the tone of the human, disliked the words even more. The delver had offered a chance at freedom, something Okyiq might have accepted, but that offer had been quickly withdrawn. Still, the goblin was smart enough to sense a conflict he could possibly manipulate for his own benefit.

"The offer has been made and I accept!" the hulking goblin declared.

"There is no offer!" Sy growled. He shouted an order up to the nearest tower. "Signal the cavalry at the western gate. Send them out into the hills to disburse those goblin archers. Have them cut off as many of the raiders as they can. I want prisoners."

The signal guard immediately sent the message, but then followed with a report from what he could see on his elevated platform.

"Most of the goblins have already passed through the hills. Only a few of their archers are still firing at the wall. They must think the raid is over."

Sy nodded and turned his attention to the large goblin still facing Ryson's glowing sword.

"They won't all get away. I'll get the information I need from the prisoners I capture. You're staying here."

Realizing that he faced the human with unmistakable authority, Okyiq decided to make one last grasp for freedom.

"You can ask them all you want, human, but they don't know what I know. I lead. They follow."

"Which is exactly why I'm not letting you go. You think I'm going to let you back out there and lead them on another raid? Not going to happen."

And then, Okyiq made a declaration that stunned both Sy and Ryson.

"You don't have to worry about that, human. Not going to lead them again. Going to kill them all, everyone that left me here. They're all dead."

The delver responded first.

"You're not going to kill anyone. You had your chance. You're staying here."

Sy, however, turned a more perceptive eye toward the large goblin.

"You'd kill them all? I don't believe that. You wouldn't have anyone to follow you."

"What good are goblins that follow if they run?" Okyiq grunted. "They didn't listen, didn't follow my orders. They're dead."

"But you wouldn't have to kill all of them. You'd only have to take care of a few to get your point across."

"Wrong, stupid human doesn't understand. They *all* ran, so they all need to die. You let any live and then they think they can do it again. Do it once... die."

"You're not going to listen to him, are you?" Ryson asked of the captain.

Sy ignored the delver and placed his complete attention on the goblin. He saw an opportunity, one that might give him both the information he desired as well as a chance to put a goblin to work for his own cause.

"You got a name?"

"Okyiq."

"Alright, Okyiq, here's *my* deal. You answer my questions first—all of them—if I'm satisfied, I'll actually let you go. I want you to go after those goblins. I'm not going to ask for your word, because I know what that's worth. Nothing. But I'm curious about you. You say you're going to kill all the ones you led. How many was that? A hundred? Two hundred? I doubt you can even remember."

"I remember," the goblin growled with growing dislike for the human.

"Really? Even if you do remember them all, you'd have to track them down. I don't think you've got it in you to find each one."

"Don't care what you think."

"It's not what I think that matters. It's what you do. You've just told a human that you're going to kill every goblin that followed you. If you don't, you will have proved you're not the leader you think you are. How do you think that's going to go over in the forest? Think anyone will worry about your threats again if you can't meet a boast you made to a human?"

"Not a boast," Okyiq sneered. "Goblins dead because I want them dead, not because I boasted to a stupid human."

Believing he had goaded Okyiq into a deal he could not break, Sy made his final offer.

"Well, Okyiq, you won't kill any goblins if I don't let you go. Like I said before, I want you to answer my questions. You satisfy me with the truth, and I'll make sure you get to the hills safely. What happens after that is up to you."

Okyiq sneered, but then nodded.

Ryson couldn't believe it. As much as he wanted to hear the answers, to learn about the details of the raid, he saw that Sy was turning Okyiq into a tool of death, an assassin to kill hapless creatures.

"You said you wouldn't let him go," the delver asserted.

"I said I wouldn't let him go to take control of those goblins for another raid. He's not going to do that."

"You're going to believe him?"

"He means it."

Okyiq confirmed it.

"Always mean it when I say someone going to die."

The delver was about to object again, but Sy cut him off, and directed pointed questions at the brawny monster.

"Did you send the rogues?"

"Didn't even know about rogues."

"Rather convenient they were in town right when you attacked."

"Lucky."

"I'm not sure I believe in that much luck."

"You believe river rogue would listen to goblin?"

"No, but someone or something else could be controlling you both," Sy offered.

"Then why are you wasting time with Okyiq?"

It was a valid question, but only to a degree. Sy didn't think he was wasting any time at all. The goblin before him was stronger and craftier than any goblin he had ever met. He left the topic of the rogues and focused on the purpose of the goblins.

"Why did you attack?"

"Wanted human food and supplies."

"So you came here to steal?"

"Not steal... take what is mine. Forest is mine. Human town is part of forest, so human town belongs to me. I take what I want."

Sy found the main thrust of Okyiq's argument rather curious. It wasn't so much that the creature claimed Burbon, but that it would stake a claim to the forest. That was a very large assertion. Even a goblin as ferocious as the one before him would have a hard time claiming rights to Dark Spruce. Sy decided to press that issue.

"Why do you think this is *your* forest?"

"I'm the biggest and strongest."

"I think a shag might argue that claim."

"Shag's too stupid."

"What about the elves?"

"Elves gone."

A very simple statement, but one that brought surprise to both the captain and the delver.

"What do you mean 'gone'?" Sy demanded.

"Simple word," Okyiq noted with scorn. "Elves gone."

"Gone where?"

"Don't know, don't care. Disappeared. Didn't come back. Elves gone, forest mine."

"That's not good enough. I told you I would let you go only if I was satisfied with your answers."

Surprisingly, Okyiq kept calm, did not argue the semantics of the bargain. Instead, the goblin responded with near brutal indifference toward the captain's dissatisfaction.

"You said you wanted truth. You have truth. Don't know where elves went. Just know they're gone."

Ryson entered the interrogation out of driving curiosity. He wanted no part of the deal between Sy and Okyiq, but he could not ignore the goblin's contention. He posed the question in a different manner.

"Do you mean they moved out of the forest? Did they head south or west?"

"Not move... disappeared."

"You're not making sense," Sy asserted.

"Making sense. Human—and delver—just too stupid to understand. Elves disappeared. Gone! What so hard about that?"

"Because elves don't just disappear," Ryson argued.

"This time they did."

As for Sy, he was done with the goblin. He believed the monster actually told the truth. There was no reason to trust the creature, but it never wavered in its conviction. The captain actually gained more information than he expected. Contact with the elves had ceased. Why? Because, as Okyiq stated, they were gone. River rogues set their attention upon Bourbon. Why? Because the elves were gone.

Regarding the goblin raid, Okyiq admitted it himself. The large goblin was able to gather a small army of goblins together in the eastern portion of Dark Spruce Forest. It was hardly a horde, but enough to cause problems. Okyiq believed the forest was his, because in his own words, the elves were gone.

Sy nodded at the goblin and revealed his intentions.

"Alright, Okyiq, you're free to go." The captain decided to give one added incentive to the goblin. "You go out and kill all those goblins that abandoned you... if you can, but to be perfectly honest, I think you'll be lucky to find half of them. I just don't think you're that good."

"Will kill them all," Okyiq snarled.

"Good luck."

The captain turned to the tower guards. Without much else to gain in questioning Okyiq, he very much wanted to set the goblin loose. Anything that reduced the number of goblins in the forest was a benefit to Bourbon.

"Cover him, see that he makes it to the hills."

"You're really going to let him go?" Ryson asked in disbelief.

Sy frowned but declared a very simple truth.

"You offered to let him go if he answered your questions. I didn't do anything different."

"But I didn't know he was going to kill every goblin that followed him."

Sy didn't answer immediately. He simply watched as Okyiq rambled to the open gate and then disappeared beyond the wall. The captain turned his attention to the surrounding grounds and saw a few of his soldiers injured from the goblin crossbow attack. Luckily, there were no fatalities, the goblins were never very accurate, but they were extremely poor shots in the rain.

The captain moved his gaze to the front of the Spruce View Tavern. He stepped slowly toward the broken door and gazed upon the two dead bodies laying on the floor. It seemed as if luck had a limit. Sy's annoyance with the delver began to turn to anger, and when he spoke, he did so in obvious hostility.

"Before, I said we had to talk. Well, we're not going to wait until tomorrow. We're going to talk now, but not here. Come with me."

A Final Note from the Author

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

If you have a comment about this book or any of the previous Delves Magic adventures, don't hesitate in sending me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. Please consider my other novels, including *Soul View*, *Counterproductive Man*, *When Do I See God?* and *Alien Cradle*.

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