

Delver Magic

Book VII

Altered Messages

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Delver Magic Book VII – Altered Messages

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Soul Chase

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Science Fiction:

Alien Cradle

Humor:

Counterproductive Man

Important Note

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

Altered Messages is the seventh 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 sending me the best of messages!

Prologue

"Why are we here?" the serp asked plainly enough. He offered no dramatic pause, but continued in a forthright manner to avoid any misinterpretation of his words. "And I am not referring to the reason why I called you all to this inn. It is a much broader question that I ask. What do we hope to gain from our existence in this realm?"

Desiv did not rise from his chair when he addressed the five other serps gathered in the back room of a coastal tavern. His long, scaled tail remained tucked between his legs as he sat with clawed hands folded in front of him upon the wooden table. His snake-like head turned to the left and then the right. He looked to each serp with genuine sincerity and a complete understanding that any attempt to influence those around him would not only fail, but would be met with angry rebukes. While treachery between serps was an accepted principle of life, direct spellbinding was not to be tolerated. Serps did not expect honor among their own, but none would endure being treated as a common goblin.

"We are all serps," Desiv stated the obvious. "We all have plans—cunning schemes and devious desires—plans to obtain power and riches. There is no shame in what we are, but what is our ultimate purpose?"

The serps gathered around the table returned Desiv's searching glances with annoyed gazes of their own. Their time was valuable and meeting with other serps was a dangerous proposition. They were not prepared to listen to abstract questions or offer theoretical musings.

They had been told that a recent alteration in the structure of magic shifted the balance of power and created a condition which presented a path toward enormous reward. Such an occurrence offered interesting prospects, and they all knew of recent events that had indeed altered the flow of magic. The very realm from which they had sprung, an existence of darkness, had been nudged away from nightmare and closer to the light of a more hopeful reality.

The serps did not care for such twists of optimism, but they appreciated that such events often swung the pendulum of opportunity. They wished to hear about lucrative prospects, not impractical ravings.

"You actually wish to discuss the meaning of our existence?" one of the serps interrupted with exasperated surprise.

"You waste our time with human questions," another responded with a hiss of dissatisfaction.

"Do I? I think not. Every serp here understands the need to scheme. We navigate... we set goals."

"Goals, yes. Philosophical nonsense? Absolutely not."

"I am not grasping for some idealistic understanding. Let the humans seek out some higher truth. I am simply asking what it is we hope to accomplish. Being a serp means to scheme, but schemes require action and purpose. That is the focus of my question. I do not wish to walk the meandering path of a human, agonizing over the complexities of existence. My intention is much more blunt."

"Then be blunt!"

"Very well. In order to scheme effectively, we must understand both our methods and our objectives. I will use my own ambitions as an example. I exist to manipulate others,

force lesser beings to do my bidding. The very essence of subtle control is as important as gaining access to unlimited authority. I do not seek fame or recognition. I prefer the shadows and to savor my victories in unseen appreciation. But I also strive for greater and greater influence. What satisfaction can I possibly obtain from controlling a small pack of goblins? None. But what if I gained domination over an army of dark creatures and an untold number of human cities?"

"So you speak of grand desires? This is nothing new."

"No, it is not. I seek only to obtain agreement of our underlying purpose. We, as serps, exist to manipulate others in order to gain dominion over lesser creatures. We wish to be conquerors, but not through direct combat. Manipulation is our weapon of choice; not the fist, not the sword nor the arrow, not even the magical spell of ultimate destruction."

"A serp that wouldn't agree would be lying," yet another serp noted, and then revealed his own impatience. "This is an absurd waste of my time."

"Is it? I have brought us together—six serps, individuals that would willingly thrust a dagger in another's back without hesitation—and I have managed to bring us to an instant agreement."

The other serps failed to appreciate the magnitude of such a simple act.

"And you expect by stating obvious facts you can somehow gain our trust?"

"No, I do not. I state the obvious to create agreement. That is something very different than trust. Which of us here would form an alliance and not mistrust the so-called ally? If we are to be honest, which of us here would not try to manipulate the agreement for our own advantage? We would break a contract or a promise in an instant if it was to our benefit. Betrayal is as much a part of our nature as manipulation. If we were to join together, I will admit that I would still look for my gain and my gain alone, and I would strive to twist any pact for my own profit. You would not trust me and I would not trust any of you. Agreed?"

"Are we supposed to be impressed with this absurd show of honesty? Honesty is the worm on the hook, nothing more. You are serp. We are all serp. You say nothing that surprises me."

"But once more we are in agreement, are we not?"

"We would agree the sky is blue. We would agree the sea is filled with salt water. I could go on. What is your point?"

"My point is to find common ground between us. That is all. Once we find that common ground, I hope to utilize it for my benefit."

"So you intend to use us?"

"Absolutely, as you will use me. That is the common ground we must establish. I understand two principles, but they arise in direct opposition to each other. The first is that we, as serps, share common desires. But again, as serps, we are unable to trust each other. We are alike, but our own deviousness prevents us from joining together."

"You are actually suggesting an alliance?" one of the serps asked in clear astonishment.

"That is the purpose of this meeting."

Three of the serps cursed in absolute disgust. The other two sneered silently but with obvious contempt.

"You truly do waste our time," a serp named Samk professed with near seething anger. "These are simple observations, yet you pretend to reveal some great secret as if to... what?... impress us? And you think this foolish display will convince us to allow you to lead us? You insult us. You insult me!"

"No one will lead. We will all be equals. We will form a council. There will be no serp higher than another."

A different serp pointed out an obvious fact of history.

"An alliance of serps has always failed. The very truths you profess are the reasons any such agreement is doomed from the start."

"That is undeniable," Desiv revealed, "or at least it was. Allow me to complete my explanation. If you feel I have truly insulted you, there are enough of you to deal with me here and now. In essence, I have put myself at your mercy."

"Then speak quickly," Samk hissed. "Your life depends on what you say next."

"Then I will continue to be blunt. It is possible for a serp to grow in strength. I have seen it happen, but it occurred through an alliance. You have all heard of Sazar. He joined with a sorceress and used her spells to grow his army. But Sazar forgot he was serp. He relied on the strength of his army, and when it was defeated, so was he."

"I thought you were going to be blunt. You continue to speak in circles."

"No, it is not a circle. It is a direct line, a line to the advantage that awaits us. Sazar formed an alliance, but then placed himself in a vulnerable position. We can form a similar alliance but maintain a position of stealth and security. Working together, we can manipulate several armies, even armies larger than the one Sazar controlled."

"We cannot work together!" Samk shouted. "You admitted as much yourself. I would not trust you any more than you would trust me."

"You do speak in riddles," another serp noted. "You state the obvious when you say we would only utilize a pact for our own individual purposes, and yet now you propose to create the very thing which by your own admission cannot succeed. If your life depended on this scheme, then I would advocate that it is now forfeit."

A serp named Macheve surveyed the bickering serps. She had said nothing to that point, but she began to understand the scope of Desiv's plans. She wished to hear more, but she could not disregard the clear inconsistency in Desiv's own words.

"Give him one more moment," Macheve decreed. "There is something he has yet to tell us. I know him well enough to sense something in his words. He would not place himself in jeopardy so recklessly."

She then eyed Desiv carefully and offered him but a slim chance to remain alive.

"You know we cannot trust each other, admitted as much. How do you propose we overcome this mistrust? I hope you realize that your life really does hinge on your answer."

"A sorcerer named Ansas," Desiv replied, finally coming to the crux of his scheme. "He revealed the way. I watched him from a distance. Not an unreasonable action, for most of you knew of the magic caster and his power."

"What does Ansas have to do with your proposal? Is this the alteration in magic of which you spoke? Speak quickly, for you are very close to death indeed."

Desiv displayed no fear, even as he realized just how close he was to an untimely and probably very painful end. With one quick comparison, he made clear the ultimate path for them to travel.

"Despite the sorcerer's great power, Ansas believed he could be even stronger by allying himself with other magic casters. He understood the benefits of an alliance, even among wizards and sorcerers of questionable integrity—a situation not unlike our own. He, however, found a most ingenious solution. I saw how he placed his pure magic into other spell casters. He linked himself to the others with a connection beyond a word of honor or a signed parchment of agreement. Trust was no longer an issue between him and those who would join in his quest for power."

"Linking to others with magic is no alteration. Magical links have endured for ages."

"No, not like this," Desiv argued. "Ansas took pure magic of his own and placed it in the core of other casters. This was the step that alters the way magic can bind those willing to join together, for it was not a link created by some spell that could be manipulated. This was a direct connection into the depths of each caster's core. Under such circumstances, nothing could be completely hidden."

Macheve began to see the direction of Desiv's scheme.

"Go on," she allowed.

"We will do the same. We will find a single magic caster who will be used for our benefit. We will each take a piece of pure magic from the core of that caster and place it within ourselves. It will bind us together in a way that treachery would become impossible. Our thoughts, plans and desires would be obvious to each other. There is no scheme that would be hidden."

While comprehending the benefits in such an arrangement, Macheve also noted the detriments.

"Such a magical connection would reveal our inner most contemplations," Macheve argued. "As serps, it is in our nature to be devious. We would not be able to control our thoughts of treachery. A magical binding of such strength would only keep them from being hidden. We would remain deceitful and underhanded. None of us could avoid thoughts of betrayal."

"Your honesty proves my plan would work."

"How so? The magical link would not alter our devious nature. With each stray thought, we would still be at each other's throats."

"Would we? Overcoming that obvious barrier is at the heart of my plan. If we all understand certain undeniable truths, then our deviousness could be handled in the open. We would have to accept that we each might wish to betray the alliance, but we would know that any such move would be rendered impossible. None of us could act against the other without the rest knowing. We would simply have to agree that the notion of treachery was an acceptable transgression, but the act itself could never be forgiven."

"Thoughts of deceit would be disregarded, but actions would be punished?" Macheve asked, intrigued by the proposal.

"Exactly."

"Interesting."

Desiv turned to the others who were contemplating the suggestion.

"You see? We admit simple truths and then we can deal with them. We accept we are an untrustworthy lot, a group of thieves and murderers, but we create the means to prevent our own failings."

The other serps no longer wished to kill Desiv on the spot. Some even found the concept captivating, but Samk retained his suspicions.

"Your scheme is still flawed. A magic caster needs to be utilized. Who shall we trust to pick that sorcerer? You?"

"He has a point," Macheve acknowledged. "If this notion is to work, we must all accept a slice of pure magic from a spell caster. That in itself is a risky proposition. While we can utilize safeguards to ensure the magic is pure—to guarantee that no spell has been placed within the magic—we would still be linked to the magic caster as well as each other. How are we to know the spell caster has not already entered a bargain of his own... perhaps with you?"

"If such a bargain existed, it would be revealed the moment the link between us was created. Who would make such a bargain knowing that the revelation would lead to immediate extermination?"

Macheve nodded with even greater interest in the plan. If their thoughts were all magically linked, betrayal would become virtually impossible. While it once seemed an unattainable goal, she began to believe she could actually work with other serps. She would never trust them, but she wouldn't have to. She would know their thoughts, as well as their actions.

Desiv could sense her grudging acceptance, as well as the hesitant concurrence of many of the others gathered in the dimly lit room. With growing confidence, he set out the first step of his plan.

"With complete consideration for Samk's reservations, I believe that the selection of the magic caster must be the first consideration of this council. Once we can agree on this matter, then we can move forward with much more profitable designs. You see? We accept what we are, and then, we find the means to overcome it."

Samk frowned, but the other serps revealed a growing inclination toward Desiv's proposal. Doubts, however, remained and they needed to be addressed.

"Your scheme deserves consideration," Macheve admitted, "but there remains questions and obstacles."

"Such as?"

"Why six serps? Why not five or seven? With six, we could easily come to a stalemate, three against three."

"It is exactly for that reason six is necessary. Our plans must never come down to one deciding vote. Our own selfish nature would entice us to manipulate such a situation. Even if our thoughts were magically linked, we would instinctively grasp for an advantage, and it would be an act that would not necessarily reveal pure treachery. With six members, four must come to an agreement for us to advance any plan, and it would take more than one vote to change our direction. Anything else?"

"How would we divide our gains?"

"Equally."

"Easier said than done," Macheve pointed out. "What is of value to you may be of more value to me. Determining equal value could lead to considerable arguments."

"You forget about the connecting magic. We would all know exactly what we wanted and how badly. These would not be some delicate negotiations where bluffing would be rewarded."

All of the other serps appeared to lose their reluctance, save for Samk. He remained not only unwilling to trust Desiv, but openly defiant to recognize the advantages of the scheme.

"Even if you have devised some way to overcome our own natural tendencies, why should we bother? What is it a group of us can do that we cannot achieve on our own?"

"Are you jesting?" Desiv shot back. "Do you really believe that the combined guile of six serps would not be an overwhelming force? If the six of us worked in concert, who could stand against us? Even the wizard in Connel would eventually fall to us. Could you make that same claim on your own?"

"Of course not, but why would I want to challenge a wizard on the other side of the mountains? And even if we conquered more, it would still be split among the six of us."

"Of course it would, but we would have more than six times the spoils. In fact, I believe our potential is nearly unlimited. If we work apart from each other, we would also be competing against one another... at the very least, duplicating certain schemes. Efforts would be wasted."

"But I would not have to share my victories."

Desiv's eyes narrowed as he considered the statement. He chose the five serps carefully, but he began to worry if he had made a mistake about Samk. The dissenter's mistrust was not a surprise, nor was his greed, but Desiv took notice of Samk's seeming insecurity and that trait was very uncharacteristic of a serp.

"You seek some kind of independent glory?" Desiv asked. "I understand that sharing is a disgusting concept for us, but dividing plunder is a necessary evil. Are you actually concerned with your own reputation? Is that what feeds your reluctance?"

"I seek what benefits me the most. We all *share* that desire. You admitted as much yourself."

"Very well. If you honestly believe you can do better on your own, then by all means leave us now. You can be replaced by another serp who will understand the overwhelming benefits of pooling our talents."

Samk almost left. He even walked to the door, his tail thumping angrily against the floor as he stomped toward the exit. With his clawed hand on the handle, he paused. He realized if he left and the others agreed to join forces, eliminating him would be one of their first acts as a united council. They would have to silence him. Several serps joined by magic would be a force he would never wish to face. And in that, he finally understood the benefits of Desiv's offer.

In a display of pure capitulation, he turned about and returned to his chair.

"Does this mean you accept my proposal?" Desiv asked.

"It means I will accept what this council decides," Samk snarled.

"Very well put," Desiv responded, realizing he had almost reached his goal of creating a council of serps. It might not last, but it seemed he had achieved initial formation.

Desiv then looked around the table at the other serps. He placed the burden of rejection upon the others, made it clear they risked the very same fate Samk undoubtedly decided to avoid.

"And what say the rest of you? Samk and I are willing to place our futures in the decisions of this council. Are you also ready to accept what this council decides?"

It was Macheve that spelled out the way forward.

"Let us begin, as you said, with deciding upon a magic caster. If the six of us can come to an agreement on that issue, then I believe you will have proved your case. If not,

we will disband without ill will toward you or anyone else. This shall determine our ability to exist as a council. Agreed?"

Each serp accepted the proposal.

#

Macheve arranged the meeting with the spell caster, for he was not her first choice, but one that ultimately met with her approval. The other serps believed that her initial desire for a different sorcerer made her the appropriate choice to approach the candidate.

She decided to discuss terms with the magic caster in the common room of a large tavern. Walking through the front entrance, she kept the hood of a cloak over her head, but did nothing else to hide her identity. She had no desire to create a violent confrontation, but she doubted her appearance would raise anything beyond the usual repulsion to her snake-like features.

The humans would know she was serp, but the vast majority of citizens in Portsans—the coastal city that enjoyed a moderate climate throughout the seasons—wouldn't rise up against her. People of the coast grew accustomed to dark creatures. The sea called to the more intelligent and less violent escapees from the dark realm. While goblins, bloat spiders, shags, and river rogues filled the forests to the east, serps, swallits and rogans roamed the coastline with much less desire to cause death and destruction.

Their initial appearance certainly caused apprehension to the point of panic, but since the dark creatures that flocked to the coast remained much more restrained in their violent tendencies, they eventually gained grudging acceptance among the human citizens. They were not trusted, but humans had learned to deal with the cunning elements of their own race. If there was profit to be made—and serps and rogans were always ready to work a bargain—then the humans willingly adjusted their tolerance to deal with such creatures.

Waiting impatiently, Macheve sat at an open table near the very center of the expansive room. Other patrons shunned her, as she knew they would. Very few risked public contact with a serp. Deals with dark creatures were usually made in lonely and shadowed corners, not in the middle of a bustling tavern.

Eventually, the spell caster entered, and Macheve recognized him on sight. She almost laughed at his untidy appearance, round belly, and long unkempt hair. To her, he looked more like an extremely well fed beggar than a powerful magic caster, but Macheve understood that not all illusions were magical.

She did not motion to him. She sat silent and unmoving, appearing very much like a snake poised to strike some helpless bird. She kept her hands apart and resting on the top of the table before her.

The wizard grinned as he spotted the serp. He found the scene amusing. A snake sitting alone in a crowd of humans... waiting for him.

"I received your message," the magic caster announced boisterously. "I assume it was from you. I was told to meet a serp here."

The wizard looked about with an animated head turn.

"Don't see any other serps about, so it must be you."

"You are Neltus?" Macheve asked, but in a much lower tone and less energetic manner.

"Shhhh! I don't want people here to know my name." The wizard, however, spoke loud enough for people across the room to hear him clearly. He was amused by the entire

spectacle, and he had not a care for what people in the tavern thought of him. "Not when I'm meeting serps."

Macheve had studied Neltus, and she was not surprised by his juvenile actions.

"Please sit down."

"Will you pay for the drinks?"

"Of course."

"And the food?"

"Yes," Macheve replied with a sigh.

"Excellent," the wizard joyfully proclaimed and threw himself with a lunge into a chair opposite the serp. He called over a server and demanded an immediate ale as well as the most expensive meal available.

Macheve said little. She listened to Neltus' poor attempts at humor and his inane stories. She was only slightly surprised the wizard failed to immediately demand the reason for the meeting. He was much more interested in enjoying the moment. She knew the wizard was only cautious when he felt threatened. In an open setting such as a tavern, he was jovial to the point of exasperating. She waited patiently as the drink and food was served, and she allowed the interest that Neltus had caused to die down.

As Neltus shoveled the food into his mouth, the serp eventually cast a minor spell.

The wizard knew the composition of the spell before she completed the incantation. He allowed it to be cast, but questioned the motives.

"You haven't been shy about our meeting to this point, so why did you cast a curtain spell around us?"

"People can still see us, and they think they can hear us, but the words will have no meaning."

"I know what the spell does. I want to know *why* you cast it. Why meet in a tavern if you suddenly want secrecy?"

"What I have to say is meant only for you. You will understand that shortly. But I wish our meeting to be known by many. It is simple subterfuge. When someone whispers, others wish to hear. If you meet in the open, it removes the sense of mystery. Curiosity evaporates."

"And what of my reputation?" Neltus asked with a feigned expression of concern. "Don't you care what meeting a serp might do to my standing in the community?"

"You have dealt with much worse than a serp."

"That's true. I don't really mind the company I keep."

"Shall we come to the point then?" Macheve pressed.

"Absolutely," Neltus agreed but then shoveled another forkful of food into his mouth.

"I belong to a council of six serps..."

"A council?" Neltus interrupted while still chewing. "Of serps?"

"Yes, we have actually managed to agree on something."

"I find that hard to believe."

"You might find it even more difficult when you hear that it is *you* upon which we have agreed. We know of how you were once joined to Ansas."

Neltus swallowed. He continued to smile, but it dimmed slightly just as his curiosity grew.

"Don't make it sound like it's some great secret. I never tried to hide my association with the sorcerer."

"It's not just your association we know about. We know how you shared slices of pure magic."

"And how did you find out about that?"

"We are serp. It is our business to know about important events. It is how we take advantage of certain situations. Ansas gave away the information freely. He himself explained his intentions to over a dozen elves when he hoped to solicit allies."

"Listening in on that sorcerer was a bit risky."

"We do not always eavesdrop. We have many ways to learn information."

"That's right," Neltus agreed through a slight laugh. "You are sneaky little buggers, aren't you?"

"We have many qualities, but we agree we cannot trust each other. That is where you will be utilized. Just as Ansas shared slices of his pure magic with his own allies, the serps of the council will be joined by slices of a pure magical core... from you."

Neltus smile remained, but he sat silent for a moment. He looked upon the serp with interest as well as delight. Eventually, he asked what he believed was the crucial question.

"And do I have something to say in the matter?"

"Absolutely. Just as Ansas did not force his choice upon those to which he made his offer, we will not force the decision upon you."

"If you are going to take something from me—it seems my magic in this case—I assume you will offer me something in return?"

"First, let me state clearly that you will not be part of the council. You will not be considered an equal among us."

"That's telling me what I *don't* get."

"I felt it necessary to be clear on that issue. I didn't want you to misunderstand the offer in any way."

Neltus wasn't surprised by the assertion. Serps did not think highly of humans, even humans capable of casting crimson energy in a near perfect circle.

"No misunderstanding here," Neltus replied, "but what is it I *do* get? What are you going to do for me that will make me willing to give up six slices of my magical core?"

"You get to be on our side... on the side of the conquering army."

"That's it?" Neltus asked in both utter surprise and growing amusement.

"No, but it is the most important. We will offer you a portion of our plunder to keep your passions satisfied. We will also strive not to place you on the field of battle."

"I'm not quite sure I understand the benefit of all this. I can satisfy my passions quite well on my own, thank you. As to being part of the conquering army but not being placed on the field of battle, that just downright confuses me."

"It shouldn't. I know much of your past. Others have placed you in uncomfortable situations. Once you were actually put upon the battlefield to fight against Ansas himself. That was before your alliance with him. He let you escape, and you gladly ran."

"Is that supposed to embarrass me?"

"No, it is meant to explain the benefits of our offer. I know you're not always afraid of a fight, but I understand your tendencies. You only fight battles you know you can win. When you believe you are outmatched, you immediately run or surrender."

"You think there's something wrong with that? You must like to lose."

"No, but I know the reward of victory. The greater the odds against victory, the greater

the reward. The one who can reach well beyond her standing is the one who will gain the most. Perhaps you understand that?"

"I understand that I like sure things. Never gamble what you don't want to lose. I don't like risk. It gives me a headache."

"That's not true. Never try to lie to a serp. I know what you desire. I can read your whims. You crave power, and that lust will drive you. But you are also motivated by fear."

"So you think you can scare me into joining you?"

"Not completely. I realize that threats alone will not work, but they do help. You have joined others in the past because you were afraid. That, you cannot deny."

"I was afraid of more powerful spell casters. I'm not ashamed of that. But I'm not afraid of a serp."

"What about a council of serps? You seem to forget what I said earlier. I saw your surprise when I told you that six had come to an agreement. A powerful force is coming together, whether you help us or not. I believe you understand that."

"I'm not sure I understand any of this. I haven't heard anything that really interests me... or even concerns me."

"Then listen to this... I acknowledge a serp could never match you in a battle of magic, even six serps combined would lack the raw magical power to overcome you in a battle of spells, but what about a battle of will? You must know how a serp fights. We scheme, we manipulate. We take those with even more power than you and put them to our use. Imagine the armies that six serps could raise. Consider the alliances we could make and the treachery we could unleash. We can turn this land into pure chaos and let loose abominations that would devour entire fortresses. Could your magic stand up against that?"

"Why would I have to make a stand?" Neltus questioned with an ambivalent shrug, but his tone revealed a growing anxiousness his smug smile could not hide. "I could simply avoid the entire mess."

"It is much too late for that now. If you wished to avoid us, you should have never come here. You can't simply walk away and expect us to forget about you. You know our intentions. Defy us, and we will remember."

The discussion seemed to take a quick turn. It was no longer simply about whether Neltus was willing to join forces with the serps, but rather whether or not he was willing to cross them. The once jovial spell caster finally lost all attempts at humor and the smirk that went with it. He realized the serp wasn't trying to influence him, wasn't trying to twist his thoughts with treacherous mind control. Neltus suddenly understood that he was facing yet another decision of the type he seemed destined to face over and over. He wondered why he always found himself in the middle of such struggles for power.

"Do I have time to think this over?"

"No."

Neltus did begin to feel fear, and he didn't like it. He reached for the answer that appeared to offer the least resistance.

"Okay. I'll let you use my magic, but I'll hold you to your promise... that you'll keep me out of any battles."

"Do you know what the promise of a serp is worth?" Macheve snickered. She understood she was baiting the wizard, but she already knew she had Neltus right where she wanted him. She could sense his growing fear.

"I do," the magic caster replied, and he suddenly regretted eating and drinking so much. His stomach churned, but he held down his meal.

"And yet you will come with me anyway, won't you?"

"Yes."

Chapter 1

Ryson raced around the outer wall of Burbon with his dog, Stomps. To a degree, they were testing each other, hoping to challenge each other's natural abilities. They varied their pace as they traded the lead. Neither tried to simply outdistance the other, for they did not wish to be separated, but both hoped to keep the contest interesting.

The clearing which encircled Ryson's hometown was the perfect racetrack. The ground was dry and free of obstacles. The guard maintained the area, kept the grass low. It was meant to offer clean lines of sight for the archers and tower guards who needed unobstructed views to ensure against goblin raiding parties. With the space near the wall clear and well protected, both dog and delver could run without worrying about crashing into some merchant cart parked on the side of the road or into some shag hiding in tall grass.

Stomps, a medium sized mutt with a brown coat, ran with glee and seemed to wear a grin of pure joy. He focused completely on Ryson and ignored the guards they passed at the gates or the archers standing watch near the top of the wall. Stomps ran over the short grass with boundless energy and a mind toward Ryson's movements. It was as if he knew exactly the type of game the delver wished to play.

At times, Stomps would chase the delver with abandon, even flash past in one mad dash. He would then slow and eye his master carefully, allowing the delver to regain the lead. With a quick burst, the dog would then break to the outside and hope to outmaneuver the delver to the next gate.

For the delver, it was nothing but fun, like a game of tag between young children who played only for the thrill of the chase. Ryson loved the activity almost as much as he loved the dog. He was running free without a care, without any purpose other than enjoying the moment. He wasn't worried about danger or tracking some dark creature. His attention remained completely on interacting with his furry companion... his best friend.

As they rounded the northeast corner of the wall, the game ended abruptly. Stomps caught the scent first, even before Ryson. The dog came to an immediate halt, stared off to the west, toward the trees of Dark Spruce. He had disregarded other smells, but this one was much too strong to simply ignore. It was the scent of danger.

Ryson noted his dog's apprehension and moved immediately to Stomp's side. He placed a reassuring hand on the dog's back.

"You okay, boy?"

Ryson looked in the direction that Stomps stared, but he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. His keen delver vision cut across the clearing and toward the line of trees that represented the border of Dark Spruce Forest. The grass was clear right to the trees, but he quickly noticed the smell that had caught his dog's attention.

It was a mix of scents, all bad. It was death and decay, but also goblin. It made very little sense, but the delver knew it could not be ignored.

If he were alone, he would have crouched low and picked a safe path to investigate further, but he would not risk putting Stomps in jeopardy. Not wanting to be caught in the open with his dog vulnerable, Ryson made a quick decision.

"Good boy! You did good, but we have to go. Come on."

Ryson started to move toward the northern gate but made sure Stomps would follow.

The dog seemed reluctant, as they had to head west and closer to the source of the smell, but he would trust his master. He trotted along behind Ryson, and they passed through the gate together. Stomps seemed relieved to be back within the walls of the town.

Moving quickly to a guard shack by the gate, Ryson called out a warning.

"Something's out in the trees... due west of our northwest corner. I think it's goblins, but something's not right."

A soldier moved without hesitation to address the issue. Every guard recognized the delver and knew of his keen senses. His warnings were never to be ignored.

Ryson recognized the guard as well, a woman named Abby, and he quickly explained his findings.

"My dog and I both smelled it, so there's definitely something out there."

To her credit, the guard at the post did not hesitate in taking command of the situation. She did not doubt the delver's ability to smell perils in the distance, but she needed details to assess the degree of danger.

"Any humans near the point in question?"

"Not as far as I can tell. It's clear all the way into the trees."

"You're certain about the goblin scent?"

"It's definitely goblin."

"Were you able to see anything?"

"No."

"Then they're still in the trees."

"Probably, but as to how far in, I can't say," the delver admitted.

"Any idea of how many?"

"That's the problem. It smells like a lot, but it doesn't smell right."

"Explain."

"I know there's more than one, a lot more, but there's also a lot of decomposing flesh out there. It's all melding together."

"Do you think an attack is imminent?"

"I really can't say."

Realizing there was an unknown threat large enough to raise the level of alert, the guard made a series of decisions. She called out orders to the surrounding soldiers.

"Archers ready on the wall and close the gate," Abby shouted. She then called up to the tower watch guard. "Do you see anything at the edge of the forest... to the northwest of town?"

The soldier on the elevated platform brought a hand to his brow to shield away the glare from the sun.

"Nothing," was the simple response.

Abby didn't like the uncertainty, but she continued to act with conviction. She issued another order to the guard in the tower above her.

"Signal the other towers. Suspected goblin activity—edge of the forest to the northwest. Numbers unknown. Get everyone inside. Close all gates."

While the soldiers around her focused on their duties, she called over a messenger and continued with her instructions.

"Inform command that Delver Acumen has discovered a strange scent of goblins and we request further instructions. Go."

She watched him leave, estimated his speed, and calculated in her mind the time it would take to receive a reply from the command post at the center of town. It would have been faster to send the delver, but she had other plans for Ryson.

"We won't have to wait long to establish direct communications with the captain. He's going to want more information."

"You have all I know at the moment."

"I realize that, but I want you to go back out and scout the area. We need to know what's out there."

"I was planning to, but I have to get my dog home first. I don't want to leave him out in the open."

Abby felt the delay would be unacceptable and offered another option.

"I know how fast you are, but I don't want to wait for you to go home and come back. Leave your dog with me. I'll see to him."

Ryson hesitated. He wanted no harm to come to Stomps and leaving him felt like too much of a risk.

"It's not a good idea," he admitted. "I'll worry about him more than about what I have to do. You won't get a good report, give me just..."

"I appreciate your concern," the guard replied without animosity but rather with a clear understanding toward the delver's concerns. "I'd feel the same if it was my dog. What's his name?"

"Stomps," Ryson noted somewhat impatiently, as he wanted to move as quickly as possible.

"I'll take care of Stomps. He'll be better protected with me than he would be somewhere else. Trust me."

Ryson could see that Abby meant exactly what she said, and he realized she was right. His wife, Linda, was already at work, and he would have to leave Stomps alone at home.

"Alright. You take care of him. I'll return here when I finish my scout."

"I'll signal a request for Captain Fenden to come here directly to hear your report first hand. Do you need us to reopen the gate?"

"No, I can go over the top."

"That's what I figured."

Before leaving, Ryson patted Stomps on the head.

"You stay here with Abby. I'll be right back."

Abby gently took hold of the dog so Stomps wouldn't bolt after his master.

Watching how the guard acted, Ryson knew Abby would be true to her word. He could focus totally on his scout and not worry about Stomps in the least.

With his concerns alleviated, he bolted toward the wall and scaled a support column in the blink of an eye. Without slowing, he leapt over the top ledge and dropped to his feet in the clearing outside. He shook off the great fall as if he had only descended a single step of a low rising staircase.

Rather than move directly to the source of the foul stench drifting across the clearing, Ryson dashed due north, parallel to the tree line. There was very little cover between him and Dark Spruce until he reached the edge of a farm field. A crop of corn had grown

high, as the harvest season was fast approaching. The tall stalks would allow him to approach closer to the forest without being seen. Of course, the long green stems and thick corn husks would also block his own vision, but he was a delver and could rely on his other senses.

The wind was blowing from the west and the breeze would bring every scent from the area in question right to his delver nose. He kept the bizarre, overpowering odor centered in his mind as he navigated a path through the cornfield. The smell grew stronger as he moved, but it did not change in composition. He detected no other dark creatures, but he could not separate the scent of goblin from the smell of decay. The odor also became more pervasive, an indication that the source had become stationary.

While the breeze would ruffle the stalks all about him, he could tune out the distraction and hone in on any sounds coming from the trees. He heard nothing that would indicate the presence of goblins. There were no guttural whispers and no clang of metal chest plates.

The cornfield did not reach to the very edge of the forest, as the farmer who tended the land did not wish to plant too near the trees. There was a sizable gap that Ryson would have to cross, but the grass between the corn and the forest was tall enough to offer cover of its own.

While Ryson could use it to his advantage, it might have also offered cover to a small raiding party. The delver, however, dismissed such a peril. The scent from the forest revealed far more goblins than could possibly hide in the swath of grass, and the penetrating odor was much too concentrated for him to suspect the diminutive monsters had spread out.

Just before reaching the final edge of the cornfield, Ryson stopped to gaze into the forest. He saw nothing but trees and brush, but in examining the branches with greater attention, he realized the forest lacked the normal movement of birds and squirrels. Only the breeze moved the leaves of the trees, for the small animals had sought refuge elsewhere. Something had raised their alarm.

He was very near a narrow footpath that led deeper into the forest. It was Staffer's Trail, a pathway that allowed local farmers to collect firewood for the dormant season. It didn't receive a great deal of traffic, but it was used often enough to allow for clear passage. The opening enabled Ryson a clear view somewhat deeper into the forest, and yet he still found nothing to explain the strange conditions within the trees.

With the mystery deepening, Ryson could no longer contain himself. He needed to find the answer, discover the source of the heavy odor. Even if it meant heightening the risk to himself, he had to enter Dark Spruce.

He did so with the speed of a purebred delver. He understood it was the safest approach. Slow caution would never serve him as well as rapid motion, and he leapt from the edge of the cornfield like a deer jumping a farmer's fence. In two quick bounds, he crossed the tall grass and reached the trees. He never stopped moving, never allowed himself to become a target for a goblin crossbow. In a relentless blur, he bounded up a wide maple tree and raced across the branches to jump to the center of a tall elm.

It was the high vantage point that allowed the delver to immediately understand the source of the strange odor. The discovery whisked a cold shadow across his soul as he viewed it from up high. He scanned the grounds below in all directions, but he knew

there was no imminent danger, just a message... a ghastly communication of a task completed, and perhaps more treachery to come.

Dropping to the ground, he surveyed the path. An understanding of the situation seemed to bring a greater darkness to the forest, as if someone had pulled a heavy shade down across a large window. He cursed under his breath, but there was little he could do. He gave one last listen to the forest, one last sniff to the wind, but he knew the perpetrator had left. There would be nothing gained in trying to pick up the trail of the goblin responsible, and so he took the only option left to him. He returned immediately to Burbon's north gate.

After bounding back over the wall, Ryson found Sy Fenden waiting beside Abby and Stomps. Seeing his dog almost erased the gloom that dampened his spirits... almost. He placed a hand on the dog's head and nodded to Sy.

The captain noticed the dark expression of his friend and needed to understand the full scope of the threat.

"What did you find?"

"A message... for you... maybe for all of us," Ryson responded almost grudgingly.

"What kind of message?"

Ryson looked to the guards who waited nearby. He wasn't sure if it was a good idea to share the information in front of others before Sy had a chance to review it. It would lead to rumors, bleak and dangerous rumors, and he didn't want to be the one who started brewing that pot of potential controversy. He thought it was best if Sy decided exactly how much to share with the town guard.

"It's better if you see it for yourself," Ryson explained. "I don't want to try and describe it on my own."

Sy sensed Ryson's meaning and he almost thanked him. He knew the delver was allowing him to make the final judgment, deferring to the captain's authority. Still, Sy was operating on limited information. He knew a threat existed outside of Burbon's wall but remained uncertain as to its full extent.

"Any immediate danger I need to be aware of?"

"No."

"Do we need additional support? Or can we go alone... just the two of us?"

"We're good on our own."

"Very well." Sy then turned his attention to the guards. "Keep the alert status where it is. No one is to exit the town until I return."

Ryson made a request of his own to Abby.

"Please keep watching Stomps, okay?"

"Not a problem. Should we leave the gate open after you leave?"

Ryson looked to Sy. He didn't believe he should make the decision, but he was ready to offer his opinion.

"Well?" Sy asked, as he returned the delver's questioning glance with one of his own.

"Is there something out there that's going to try and enter the town?"

"I don't think so," the delver replied.

"I need more than that."

"It's a message, not a raiding party or anything else that wants to get inside. That's the best I can say. You'll understand when you see it."

"I'm guessing I won't see it until I get to the trees, correct?"

"That's right."

Sy considered the facts before him. He trusted the delver's instincts, but caution was usually the wiser path when information remained limited. He issued his orders directly to his soldiers.

"Things could change fast," the captain explained. "Until I know exactly what's out there, we play it safe. Close the gate after we leave. Keep the archers posted on the wall. Also, send a signal to the western gate, relay it through the tower signals. Have them ready to open the gate for us if we need to alter our return."

"Yes, sir," Abby replied.

Sy stepped toward the wall as the soldiers opened the gate. He moved out into the clearing first, but paused to allow Ryson to step up to his side. Before proceeding any further, he called out to the tower watch.

"Anything in sight?"

"All clear to the trees," the soldier announced.

Sy looked toward the forest and then requested direction from the delver.

"Where exactly are we heading?"

"Staffer's Trail," Ryson responded. "It's on the path."

Sy looked to the cornfield. He considered taking the same path as Ryson had utilized, but then changed his mind. He believed there was nothing to be gained in stealth. The delver had stated there was no immediate danger, so he headed toward the entrance of Staffer's Trail by crossing the barren clearing that surrounded Burbon.

As they drew near the trees, the captain noted the pungent odor that had led to the alert. He didn't have Ryson's tremendous senses, but he couldn't ignore the overpowering smell that lingered heavily in the air like some trapped cloud that hung over the scene of a very grisly battle. The stench was so disturbing that he began to breathe through his mouth to limit the effect on his senses.

At the start of Staffer's Trail, Sy stopped again and peered down the path. He could only see a few paces forward. The passage banked downward slightly but also curved to the north. The trees and brush blocked his sight further down the trail. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, but the stench drifted out from the trees stronger than ever.

"How far in?" Sy requested of Ryson.

"About thirty paces. It's not hidden."

"Now that we're alone, can you tell me what to expect?"

Ryson hesitated, but then revealed what he had seen.

"Goblin fingers, separated from the hand apparently by a sharp knife. They've been set across the trail in a deliberate fashion. That's the message. When you see it, you'll know what I mean."

Understanding more of what he faced, Sy marched down the path. When he turned north, he could finally see dozens upon dozens of small, gray fingers scattered along the trail, only they weren't thrown haphazardly upon the ground. The oozing and decaying digits were arranged to spell out a series of words. They formed a message that Ryson was able to read easily when he was high in the trees, but the words were still discernable for those who stood on the ground.

Sy walked along the trail reviewing the gruesome message. His disgust was matched by his growing unease. He read it over several times, always silently in his mind, never speaking the words out loud.

I told you I kill them all.

Burbon's captain didn't need to guess at the author of the ghoulish message. Sy immediately recalled the large goblin that had successfully breached Burbon's wall during a heavy rainstorm not too long ago. His name was Okyiq, and the brazen monster led roughly two hundred goblins in a deadly raid.

Okyiq actually made it past the wall, even began looting, but he was stopped before he could escape. The other goblins abandoned him once he was captured. Sy released Okyiq after obtaining valuable information, but also after the immense goblin vowed to kill each and every goblin that had fled the town.

Sy grimaced at the chilling message before him and then turned to Ryson.

"Has to be Okyiq," the captain revealed.

"That would be my guess," Ryson agreed.

Sy didn't waste time counting each individual finger, but he made a rough estimate in his mind.

"There's certainly enough here to account for most, if not all of the goblins that followed him. He said he'd kill them all. I'd say there's close to two hundred here. Godson, I can't believe he caught them so fast. I would have guessed once the goblins knew he was hunting them, they would have scattered. I thought he'd be deep in the forest for almost forever trying to catch them all."

"Maybe he did catch two hundred goblins," Ryson allowed, "but maybe they're just the first goblins he came across, not necessarily the ones that followed him."

"I don't believe that," Sy declared. "No, he caught the ones that were with him on the raid. He wanted to punish them and prove to me he could do it. It's the message he wanted to send. It doesn't work if he just killed any goblins in the forest. He's letting the goblins know never to turn on him again, and he's letting me know he succeeded... leaving me the proof."

Sy paused to look further down the path.

"Do you think he's nearby?"

"He's probably in the area, but not that close... I'd know," the delver answered. "These fingers were put down very recently, so he couldn't have gone far. I don't think he's hanging around, but if I start searching, I can find his scent trail. I just have to go deeper into the forest, away from this stench. I could follow him if you want... see where he went. What do you think?"

"Maybe," Sy replied.

The captain wasn't ready to release the delver until he developed a better plan for what to do next. He had a few ideas, but he knew Ryson would probably resist what the captain ultimately believed needed to be done.

"I don't want to just send you off until we get a better grip on this," Sy continued. "Okyiq knew I would find this. Actually, probably figured you'd smell it. Godson, I was able to smell it before we even got near the trees. He took a risk with that. If you were on a scout earlier, you would have found him before he finished."

"He wasn't here that long. He did it pretty quick. I'm surprised he was able to spell as well as he did."

Sy looked down at the positioned digits. He recalled his previous encounter with the monstrous goblin and revealed his own belief.

"I'm not."

"He was pretty smart for a goblin, wasn't he?" Ryson allowed, as he reconsidered his doubts about the large goblin's abilities.

"He's a devious one, no doubt about that. If learning to spell a few words could help him get what he wants, he'd do it. We just have to figure out why he'd go to all this trouble. He cuts off the fingers, carries them around with him, and then leaves them here. What's the benefit to him?"

"Well, you did challenge him."

"So you think he's just bragging?" Sy wondered. "Could be. I told him I didn't think he could do it. He could be rubbing it in my face. Or... he could be telling us something more. He thought this forest was his, thought Burbon belonged to him. Maybe he's just reasserting that claim."

"He made that claim when the elves were taken from this part of Dark Spruce," Ryson reminded the captain. "The elves are back."

"That's true, but Okyiq got a taste of control. I think he liked it, and I think he's ready to go for it again. Maybe he's afraid of the elves, but I don't think he's afraid of us. I think we're the target. Doesn't that seem more likely?"

Ryson didn't like the thought of Okyiq endangering Burbon again. The monster was strong and crafty, and he represented a grave threat.

"Yes," the delver reluctantly admitted.

With that admission came the need to address the situation. Burbon's captain believed that Okyiq couldn't be ignored, but there weren't too many options available. He had no intention of trying to capture the enormous goblin and then hoping to imprison him. Sy wanted the threat eliminated, but he also knew of the delver's personal beliefs.

"I don't want to start an old argument with you," Sy acknowledged, "but he's going to be more than just a small problem."

"I know."

"I'm going to need a tracker to find him. I was hoping I could depend on you."

Ryson considered what that meant. He could find Okyiq, as long as he concentrated on the goblin and didn't allow other enticements to distract him. Despite their great senses, delvers weren't always the best trackers. Their curiosity over new mysteries could lure them in different directions, but if they kept their focus, they could do the job.

It wasn't the tracking, however, that raised doubts within the delver. It was the ultimate objective. Ryson knew Sy didn't just want to find the massive goblin, and the delver declared as much.

"You're going to want him killed, aren't you?"

It was the issue that had caused a conflict between the two friends before. Sy wished to protect the town at any cost, but Ryson always looked for less destructive means, even when dealing with dangerous beasts. It was the argument that Sy wanted to avoid, but looking at the decomposing goblin fingers, the captain knew the immense goblin wasn't going to just leave Burbon alone.

"You think there's an alternative?" the captain asked.

"We could leave him be."

Sy would have liked to avoid the goblin, but he simply didn't believe that was going to be possible.

"Look at the ground. Did he leave *us* be? Or did he intend on us finding this? He went to a lot of trouble here. If you honestly think Okyiq would do this just to prove he won

some kind of challenge, then I'll accept that, but you have to be honest... with me and with yourself. Do you really think he's going to leave us alone? Would you bet your life on that? Would you bet Linda's life on that? I know that's not fair to ask, but I'm facing the same question with every life in Burbon."

Ryson agreed it wasn't a fair question, but he understood that life in Uton wasn't meant to be fair, not with dark creatures running wild through Dark Spruce. He couldn't just ignore what was written out right before him. The decaying fingers pointed to a very clear truth.

"No," Ryson admitted. "He's not going to leave us alone."

"Then what do we do with him? Do we just wait for him to strike again? I can't do that. If one civilian dies in a goblin raid led by that monster, I'd never forgive myself." Sy then pointed to the message on the ground. "Because of this... because of what he left for us... I have to deal with it. Now, I won't ask you to break your moral code—we've been through that before—but I need to know if I can count on you to find him and do what has to be done, or if I have to hire a tracker. I don't have a lot of time here."

Ryson grasped at one last hope.

"What if we let Enin handle him? I can find Okyiq but we can let Enin deal with him."

"Enin's not here. He lives in Connel now."

"I know, but I can reach Connel quickly and talk to him. We can work something out together. When I find Okyiq, he can send the goblin back to the dark realm. He might even have a better idea of what to do with him."

"Do you think Enin really has time for this?"

"I won't know until I ask him."

Sy almost gave Ryson the chance, but he couldn't take the risk.

"I'm sorry, but I can't wait. The trail is fresh. It has to be followed now. You know I've been working with other scouts. Actually, it was Okyiq that forced my hand on that. When he broke through the gate, we both agreed we had to do more. I'm going to let one of the other trackers handle this."

Ryson wanted to argue, but he remembered his agreement with Sy. They would work together whenever possible, but they would each respect the other's point of view. The captain was honoring that agreement and Ryson had to do the same.

"I understand. Who are you going to send?"

"Pru Fallo, he's a half-delver."

"I know him. Can I ask why you think he should go?"

"Being half delver, he can follow the trail better than my human scouts, but the human half will keep him focused on the goblin. But mostly, I think he's more than able to take on the big goblin, and that's what I need."

"Well, I doubt he'll have any problem with the thought of killing Okyiq," Ryson responded with an obvious hint of sadness.

It seemed such a waste. He looked down at the lifeless fingers one last time. Close to two hundred goblins already dead and Sy was going to send out a tracker to hunt down their murderer. Maybe it was justice, maybe it was a rational defense, or maybe it was all just pointless violence.

Chapter 2

Pru Fallo stepped carefully around the amputated fingers. He noted every mark along the pathway and committed the tracks to memory. After matching the various trails to specific individuals, he identified certain movements and considered their meaning. He noted Ryson Acumen and Sy Fenden's footprints when they first uncovered the message and then dismissed them as irrelevant to his cause.

With each trail analyzed and understood, he asked the guards to remove the severed fingers. The overwhelming stench from some of the more decaying digits created a sickening blend of odors that interfered with the next step of his task. He needed to pinpoint Okyiq's scent, and the stinking cloud nearly choked him to sickness. The odor of death and decay would still linger in the air and on the ground, but at least it would begin to diminish.

Once the putrefying digits were removed from the site, the half-delver found it easier to concentrate on the unique scents in the area. He eyed the ground and the condition of the brush as he followed the smells in the air. He picked through them one by one, isolated and then categorized them.

While his senses were not as strong as a purebred delver, Pru's human half allowed him other distinct advantages. At times, a delver can be overwhelmed by surrounding sensations or distracted by new surroundings, unable to concentrate on a single objective. Finding a single path through a maze of stimulus could leave a delver confused and agitated. Such was usually not the case for those of partial delver heritage. For Pru, it was fairly easy to dismiss signs that did not have anything to do with his mission.

Setting aside all other markings, Pru concentrated upon one specific trail that did not belong to a guard or the Delver Acumen. With an inherent ability to create an image of the past based on everything his senses could absorb, Pru developed the scene of Okyiq roving across the forest floor to spell out the ghastly message. He followed the careful but quick movements of the large hulking creature, and he saw deliberate purpose in the precise actions. The half-delver knew the monster had moved into the area without indecision or concern, placed the goblin fingers upon the ground, and then departed.

With a strong grasp of Okyiq's intentions, Pru focused on scents and signs away from the ooze and blood stained dirt. He began to prowl across grounds farther down the path. He did not race away, but slowly stalked deeper into the forest as he studied tracks that most humans would never notice.

After but a few moments, he stopped stone-still and peered off into the forest. He had the path Okyiq had used to escape, and it was a trail he knew he could follow. Pru quickly returned to the spot where Sy waited with several soldiers.

"I've got him," the half-delver revealed. "I know everything he did and I know which way he went."

Sy nodded. He had permitted Pru to review the scene undisturbed, but he wished for additional information before he allowed the half-delver to complete his mission. The captain of the guard pointed down the section of forest where Pru last examined.

"He went that way?"

"Yeah, moved pretty fast. Arranged the fingers and then took off. Doesn't seem he wanted anything else."

"That matches what Ryson told me."

Pru knew of the purebred delver. They weren't friends, only spoke to each other on a few occasions, but Pru respected Ryson's abilities.

"It's a difficult scene to examine," the half-delver admitted. "Some of those fingers were older than the others, pretty rotten and really smelled up the place. But if both Acumen and I are in agreement, then I'd say it's pretty definite Okyiq just wanted to leave the message and get out."

"Was he alone?"

"Yeah. He did all of this himself and he left by himself. I'm sure of it."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"Nothing you don't already know. He's big... large tracks for a goblin. Hard to believe. Heavy, too. Moves pretty quick for his size, about as agile as a regular goblin. He doesn't let his bulk encumber him, at least not from what I can see of his tracks. He maneuvered through certain sections of the forest without any apparent problem."

"You're right," Sy revealed. "I *am* aware of all that. He's hit us before and I've seen him in action. But I am surprised he was alone. He knew how to lead a raid."

"This wasn't a raid," Pru responded. "He was just leaving a message. He didn't need anyone else for that. Other goblins might have got in his way."

"But they could have watched his back. He was vulnerable here, at least for a while."

"Can't argue that, but he was careful. He scouted the area before he left his little message to make sure there were no patrols. Once he started, he didn't waste any time."

"There might not have been patrols, but Ryson was running outside the walls with his dog. If Ryson came out a bit earlier, he could have caught Okyiq in the act."

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean Okyiq would want to bring other goblins with him. I'm not saying he's still on his own now. If he's everything you say, he's probably already rounding up a new batch of goblins to lead. I just understand why he wouldn't want them with him for this. He didn't mess around. He came in quick and got out."

"You're probably right. Any other opinions?"

Pru paused to give one quick look across the grounds and peered off in the direction he knew Okyiq escaped. He considered all the facts and then revealed his only consideration.

"No, just a question. You still want me to go after him?"

"I don't believe there's much of a choice."

"There's always a choice," Pru pointed out. It wasn't out of apprehension or moral conscience that led the half-delver to make the remark. Pru simply believed nothing was carved in stone.

Sy understood Pru's contention, but he spelled out the facts.

"Like I told you, he's hit us before. He thinks this part of the forest belongs to him, thinks Burbon is part of what he owns. He's not going to leave us alone, so in that regard, I don't think there are any choices."

"Sure there are. You could increase patrols and wait him out. You could draft most of the citizens into the guard and put them on the walls with bows. You could even tell the elves what happened here. They won't be any happier about this than you are. You could let them deal with it."

"I don't like handing my problems over to somebody else."

"You're handing them over to me," Pru responded bluntly.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Sy shot back, slightly annoyed by the remark. "I'm dealing with the problem with the resources I have. That doesn't mean I'm willing to throw it in some elf's lap and just walk away. I'm paying you a pretty sizable sum. If you don't want the money, fine. I'll find someone else that does."

"Oh, I want the money. You know my price, and it's not cheap. I'm just pointing out your alternatives. I don't want you to think I'm cheating you."

Whenever a discussion with mercenaries turned to payment, Sy always gained a greater appreciation for his dealings with Ryson. The captain may not have always agreed with the delver, even had a few heated disagreements, but Ryson was never about money.

"None of those options are acceptable to me," Sy stated firmly. "I want this goblin taken care of. So to answer your question; yes, I still want you to go after him."

"Then I'll leave now. I've got his trail and everything I need."

Sy, still somewhat unhappy about some of the half-delver's remarks, decided to offer up a question of his own regarding Pru's abilities.

"This goblin's not only big and quick, he's also very strong. And you're right about him wanting to lead more goblins, which means he may not be alone for long. Are you sure you can handle him?"

"I have no intention of getting close to him," Pru replied, seemingly unfazed by Sy's doubts. The half-delver used his thumb to point over his shoulder to a sturdy crossbow draped over his back. He then pulled an iron bolt from a quiver tied to his hip. "I don't care how big he is, he'll go right down with one of these in his ear. As for any of his followers, I have no intention of being seen by any of them."

"How long?"

"A few days at most. There's no way he can outrun me. He doesn't use magic, does he?"

"I sincerely doubt it. If he could, he would have tried it when we captured him during his first raid. No, I saw it in his eyes. He was caught and all he could do was bargain his way to freedom, no other options, no magic."

"Then, like I said, just a few days."

Sy considered everything before him; the message from Okyiq, the way it was presented, the information he gained from Ryson and Pru, and finally Pru's estimation for completing the job. Something about the situation bothered him, made him feel like he was being maneuvered or led to a decision that was already made for him.

While he trusted his instincts, he still didn't believe he had much of a choice. The message from Okyiq was more than just a boast. It was a warning. The large goblin had plans for Burbon, and if the captain didn't do something, the town was going to suffer. It was almost as if he was being offered two very bad choices, and he tried to decide which one held the least danger for the people of Burbon.

Sy didn't wish to waste any more time. He believed that certain actions were necessary, but he decided to leave the door open for other alternatives.

"I'll give you seven days to take care of him and then get back to me. Longer than that and I'll assume you failed."

Pru shrugged, but the delver within him needed to know more.

"Won't take that long, but why are you setting a deadline?"

"Because I think this goblin is bad news, and I need to be sure that someone takes care of him."

"I'm coming back for the money. You're going to know when I get him."

"How do I know if you don't? If something happens to you in the forest, I'm not going to hear about it. I can't leave this as an unanswered question. Like I said, you've got seven days."

"Well, if I don't get him, what are you going to do? The only one that might be able to track him after that long would be Acumen, and he's not going to take care of Okyiq the way it needs to be done."

"I'll take your other suggestion and call on the elves. It's like you said, they aren't going to be happy about this."

"Isn't that handing your problem to someone else?" Pru questioned.

"No, that's asking for help when I need it. Nothing wrong with that."

Pru shrugged again and decided it was time to go.

"I guess I'll see you in seven days or less," the half-delver acknowledged.

Chapter 3

Four gluuns carefully lowered themselves down one of Dunop's hidden airshafts. The slight and agile creatures moved with astonishing stealth and precision. Making their way through the extremely narrow tunnel offered little challenge. They could scamper through much smaller passages, and the lack of ropes or handholds within the steeply descending channel did nothing to impede their progress. They twisted their thin bodies into bizarre contortions to overcome several barriers. They moved through the constricted space very much like the faint whispers of a light breeze.

While the passage presented a meager obstacle, the agile invaders glided cautiously downward. They slunk deeper into the bowels of the land with wary eyes that could penetrate the darkness. They were careful to choose one of the few shafts that did not utilize gemstones to reflect light below ground, for the ultimate success of their mission depended on secrecy. Absolute concealment of their approach was as important as the timing in which they completed their task.

Even as the enveloping darkness and the gluuns' own magical abilities aided their secretive descent, it was no guarantee of avoiding detection. They were essentially invisible, light and shadow twisted ever so delicately around the space they occupied. Despite being able to cloak themselves entirely in a gloom which hid their very existence, they needed to remain vigilant for dwarf guards.

Gluuns feared dwarves even more than delvers, for it was the stout underground warriors who had developed the vision that could penetrate their shroud of darkness. The gray magic of the gluuns absorbed any light that struck their lean and nimble bodies, but dwarves living underground—and at times in total darkness—could detect the merest shift of shadows. Whereas a delver's eyesight was much stronger than that of a dwarf, a delver focused more on what he could see as opposed to what he could not.

Even a delver's other senses would not help pierce a gluun's cover. The shadow magic erased their tracks, and because the slight creatures lacked any scent at all, even the most sensitive delver would have been hard pressed to locate them. The eyes of a dwarf, however, focused as much on shades of darkness as they did on light.

For that reason, infiltrating a dwarf compound was actually one of the few tasks that gluuns normally chose to avoid. The magnificent underground cities were tempting targets with great riches in gems and precious metals, but being caught by a dwarf warrior, and facing the inevitable consequences, elevated the risks well beyond the possible rewards. A gluun caught by a dwarf could look forward to an extended stay in a dungeon of stone, or even an executioner's axe.

Despite the possible consequences, the four gluuns pushed onward, even as they noticed more light reflecting from the passage below than from the opening above. They all realized the stakes, but they would be rewarded well beyond what they could possibly steal from Dunop. They also believed most of the risks had been minimized.

They received assistance in planning and preparation from individuals even more cunning than themselves. Their new masters provided them with a wealth of information. They knew the layout of Dunop without having to previously scout the city and risk exposure. They knew which passages to avoid and the location of dwarf sentries before they even began their descent.

The one risk that could not be eliminated stemmed from the dwarves' ability to judge darkness as if it was a commodity like gold or silver. The gluuns had been warned over and over again; every dwarf was a possible threat and there was no way to account for simple chance. One wayward dwarf stumbling into the wrong place at the wrong time could jeopardize a complex plot of grand design. Such a mistake was unacceptable, but if the gluuns could avoid a disquieted dwarf stare, they knew they could accomplish their objective.

At the end of the shaft, the four darkened forms came to a complete halt. The gluun nearest the opening to Dunop's alleys lowered its head at a snail's pace with staggering patience. Slowly it gained a greater perspective of the underground passage. It turned its head with the same painstakingly deliberate motion. It looked up and down the path before it finally dropped as softly as a feather to the hard ground below.

The remaining invaders exited the shaft in quick succession. Once upon the stone ground of an empty alley, they moved with the grace of an elf. They walked in total silence, never making a single sound even as they stepped across loose collections of gravel and through shallow puddles of water.

Much shorter than humans, the gluuns found the passages simple to traverse. The empty alleys they traveled matched the information they had received. Each gluun had memorized the expected route as well as several secondary paths, and they stepped confidently along a predetermined course. They advanced along ancient corridors and lonely tunnels nearly forgotten by the average dwarf. With insight regarding dwarf sentries and guard posts, they easily avoided every patrol.

While navigating their way toward the center of Dunop, their pace slowed considerably, but their lack of speed would not jeopardize their plans. They understood that even at a turtle's pace, they would reach their goal well before it was time for them to act. Patience and care remained the primary elements of their mission. Carelessness was their enemy, but gluuns were nothing if not profusely vigilant.

Indeed, it took near monumental concentration to edge forward without ever appearing to move, but each gluun tenaciously gripped the one thread of safety in their perilous pursuit. They allowed the darkness of the underground city to merge with the shadows of their gray magic. As a group, they became one with the surrounding stone, allowing their magic to turn away the light and make them invisible.

As they traveled toward the center of the city, the gluuns moved past the towering landmarks that symbolized Dunop's very heart. They were surrounded by ancient dwarf sculpture, and they stepped lightly on roads that had been constructed at a time beyond their understanding.

Carved from the rock, the imposing structures shared a common bond with the cavernous hollow that served as Dunop's underground setting. Every building, every alley, and every signpost merged together with the surrounding gray stone. The billowing shadows, both in the distance and high overhead, served as the backdrop for the dwarf city's intrinsic splendor. The darkness did not cover the magnificence of the sprawling architecture, it magnified it. Dunop gripped its very foundation with the dignity of acceptance to both stone and shadow, a testament to an overwhelming strength that could not be matched in all of Uton.

The gluuns, however, dismissed it all. They cared little for the wonders around them, rejected any momentary reactions of awe. Viewing the inspiring surroundings as a

distraction, or worse, a hazard to their success, they kept their mind upon their goals. They simply ignored the stunning views of carved splendor even as they neared the stronghold that served as the very core of the underground city.

Dunop's castle majestically filled the absolute center of the cavernous hollow with its staggering towers and its overwhelming keep. The fortifications stood anchored in the granite foundation like the determined feet of giant guardians. Those same monolithic towers reached all the way to the massive rock barrier overhead that formed Dunop's upper limits. The very tips of the spires acted as the determined hands of titans that would never allow the expansive stone ceiling to collapse on the glorious city or its rugged inhabitants.

With the invaders' target in sight, the lead gluun came to a complete stop. The final path to the dwarf castle would prove to be the most treacherous part of their journey, perhaps even more dangerous than exploring the interior of the keep itself. The number of dwarf sentries reached its maximum just outside the gatehouse and the amount of patrols increased exponentially.

The dangers went beyond the increased dwarf presence. There was greater light directed toward the castle, more areas that might shift a shadow and reveal the presence of the intruders. It was here the gluuns knew they would have to rely as much upon their own guile as the information they received regarding Dunop's passages.

The lead gluun said nothing at first as it inspected several silver lined mirrors that served to direct light toward the lower levels of the castle. It examined the angle of reflection of a single beam sent toward the stone wall and then noticed a small opening in the rock foundation. Finally, it whispered its finding to its cohorts.

"As we were told, light from the tunnels and airshafts are reflected into the castle. Follow the angle and you will see there's an entry point through the outer castle wall. The light beam from this region cuts into the stone foundation several lengths above the ground."

The other gluuns looked toward the mighty fortress. In order to assist their stealth, their eyes were capable of detecting different concentrations of light. Where the beams were invisible to ordinary humans, the gluuns could actually follow the distinct rays reflected from one mirror to the next and finally to an opening through the exterior of the keep.

"Small channel," one gluun observed.

"Tight fit," another agreed.

The lead gluun viewed the comments as a rejection of their original plan to gain access into the inner sanctuary. Accepting the dismissal without wasting effort on argument, it immediately offered a counterproposal.

"We could wait for a change of the guard and attempt to make entry during the transition," the lead gluun offered.

"Too risky," one of the others responded.

"Too many eyes to avoid while having to move too quickly," agreed another.

"The gatehouse?" the lead gluun offered. "Several openings."

"No. It would only allow us entry beyond the gate. We would still be barred from the main keep."

The lead gluun revealed no frustration as they debated the issue. Instead, it continued its own appraisal of the situation. It eyed the higher parts of the castle. There were wider

windows at the peaks of the towers. The gluuns could climb the outer stone walls with ease while allowing minimal exposure to dwarf eyes below, but entering the castle at the highest levels would only add to their difficulties in reaching their ultimate destination. Entering the keep at such a high point could create more risks than walking up to the front gate.

"Any other proposals?" it asked.

The others said nothing, so the lead gluun returned to the initial plan.

"Then we will have to utilize the opening for the light. We were told it would be large enough. Information has been accurate to this point. We should not begin to doubt it now."

The last gluun in line voiced its one vital concern.

"We can fit, but we will block incoming light. It will be noticed. Look around. Light is an important resource to these dwarves. The interior of the castle will dim and they will investigate."

It was a concern that could not be dismissed. The gluun at the lead realized additional action was necessary. Once more, it examined the distinct line of light that was reflected into the castle. Following it back to its source, it understood the process by which the light was gathered.

All the mirrors in the area directed their reflections to one final silver lined plate erected high on a nearby pillar. Through ingenious dwarf construction, the large reflective surface merged the incoming light fragments into one concentrated beam and directed it toward the opening in the keep wall.

"That can be solved. Find cover."

The other gluuns did not argue. They believed they were all equals and did not relinquish authority to the lead gluun, but they all understood the need for immediate cooperation.

Once the others had taken suitable places of hiding to avoid probing dwarf eyes, the lead gluun pulled a stone from the ground and effortlessly scurried up the pillar that supported the final mirror. Once within arms reach of the silver plate, the gluun smashed the rock against the reflective face. It took extreme effort, for gluuns lack great physical strength, but the gluun allowed the weight of the rock to do most of the work.

With the surface of the mirror cracked in several places, the creature quickly retreated back down the pillar. Before it rushed to its own hiding place, the gluun tossed the rock to the ground. It said nothing further to its companions, made no explanation of its actions. It did not need to, as the response of the dwarves explained it all.

After long moments of waiting, two dwarves ambled down the alley and moved directly toward the pillar that supported the broken light reflector. They eyed the smashed face with clear annoyance.

"Young'uns causing mischief?" one asked out loud.

"Probably," the other replied. "Let me take a look."

The dwarf took two diamond pointed metal hooks from his work belt. Utilizing his great strength, he swung one of the hooks high above his head into the rock pillar. The diamond head bit into the rock, anchoring itself deep enough to support the dwarf's weight. The dwarf pulled himself upward, taking his feet off the ground. He swung the second hook much higher up the column, transferred his weight, and then pulled the first

one free. Placing one hook above the other over and over again, the dwarf climbed up the shaft with almost as much ease as the gluun.

Once the dwarf reached the mirror, he inspected it and gave a dissatisfied shake of his head.

"Can't fix it here. Looks like a rock hit it."

The dwarf on the ground looked about and picked up the stone the gluun had discarded.

"Probably this one. Young'uns alright. Throwin' stones and actin' like ogres. Should be put to work."

"Indeed," agreed the dwarf on the post as he dislodged the reflector and carried it down the pillar. Once he climbed off the pole, he joined his partner and they moved back toward the castle.

With the dwarves far out of sight, the gluuns came out of hiding.

"Risky!" one of the shadowed creatures stated.

"Less risky than breaking the light beam while we crawl through the castle wall."

"True," another acknowledged, "but we need to enter before they return."

"The way to the wall is clear. Let us move now."

The gluuns moved in unison, carefully avoiding additional dwarf guards and creeping under and over walls and gates that served as the outer boundary and perimeter of Dunop's mighty stronghold. They reached the base of the keep's foundation directly below the opening and deftly climbed up the castle wall, clinging to the stone like squirrels darting up a tree.

The lead gluun looked back over its shoulder to where the mirror had been broken. Once certain it had not been replaced and no beams of light entered the channel, the gluun pushed its head through the gap.

It was indeed a tight fit and the circular walls of the narrow passage pressed against the gluun on all sides. Through perfect skill of motion, it managed to slither through the opening that was slightly longer than the gluun's extended body, and for one brief moment, the creature was completely encased in the outer rock wall of the keep.

Just as it had done at the airshaft, it carefully pressed its face slowly through the exit hole and then surveyed the long, dark corridor. After confirming the passage remained clear of dwarf sentries, the gluun popped out and moved across the floor to deeper shadows. It waited patiently and served as a lookout while the other gluuns gained entry into Dunop's castle.

With the first phase of their plan complete, the gluuns quickly engaged in the second and most uncertain stage. Whereas they were provided with detail maps and plans of the city's roads and alleys, they lacked credible information regarding the castle's interior. They received limited insight involving the passages of the keep and even less regarding the dungeon prison below.

Each gluun was aware of its responsibility. With simple, simultaneous nods, they split up. They moved in pairs and in opposite directions, clinging to the stone walls of empty corridors. Like phantoms in a foggy graveyard, they slunk through shadowed passages seeking main halls, back entrances, and most importantly, descending stairwells.

They believed they had to reach the very bowels of the stronghold's dungeon, for that was where they would have placed the target of their search. It wasn't guaranteed, for it was possible their objective might have been held in a high tower prison. That alternative,

however, seemed unlikely at best, and it was the reason the lead gluun dismissed entering the keep at its highest point.

They sought an elf who had committed an atrocious crime against the dwarves. The elf had been handed over to the dwarves by his own camp and his cell would be as much a punishment as a source of containment. The further the elf was placed from the surface, the greater his suffering—or so the gluuns believed.

After a thorough reconnaissance of the castle's ground levels, the gluuns met back at the empty and dark corridor where they had gained entrance to the fortress. They quickly and quietly reviewed the information they obtained and set on a path that would bring them to the lower levels.

They encountered several barriers; locked doors, barred gates, patrolling sentries, and a maze-like collection of tunnels. Despite the numerous obstructions, they never doubted their success. They had already conquered the most difficult portion of their assignment. They had gained access to the keep and discovered the way to the dwarf dungeon. The remaining challenges were easily defeated by master thieves such as themselves.

The doors and gates were the simplest obstacles to overcome. Though gluuns lacked any formidable strength, for their forms were mere wisps of substance, their dexterous nature allowed them to manipulate nearly any obstruction. They did not break down locked doors, they coaxed them open. They did not bend bars or smash gates, they slipped through and under them.

The maze of tunnels proved to be nothing more than a minor inconvenience. The bleak passages with several forks and wayward paths could not frustrate creatures that avoided light and thrived on confusion. The only surprise was the width of many of the tunnels. While a few side passages were tight and cramped—barely tall enough to let a dwarf through—most of the main corridors were tall and wide enough for sand giants or snow ogres to gain access to the dankest part of the dwarf dungeon.

The twists and turns allowed them to avoid passing dwarf sentries. Crawling across ceilings like centipedes or turning temporarily down drainage shafts, the silent creatures easily avoided every patrol.

Several levels below the main entrance to the castle, the gluuns located their objective. They could not smell him, for gluuns could not differentiate between the scents of elves and dwarves, and the dank smell of the dungeon overpowered all other odors. They could not even hear him, for at that particular moment, the elf slept and did not stir. They could not really see him with their eyes, for he was locked behind a heavy iron door, but they could sense him in the shadows of their magic.

Elves were magical beings themselves, not as magical as delvers, but enough of the energy flowed through their bodies to vibrate through the very shadows of magic. It was the same gray energy that gluuns used to avoid the light, and thus, they could almost see the reflection of the elf trapped in the gloom of his prison.

The elf prisoner was the sole occupant of a block of cells. Every other chamber was empty, and a deep silence hung about the entire area. The heaviness of that solitary confinement was as monumental as the surrounding rock.

When the gluuns neared the elf's cell, there were no dwarf sentries standing guard. They slunk past the station where keys hung on the wall. The gluuns ignored them. Keys were unnecessary to their task and taking them would only alert the guards to possible

intruders. Instead, they made their way into an empty cell some distance from the elf prisoner.

"We will wait here," the gluun that had taken the lead noted.

The other gluuns nodded in agreement and crawled off into separate corners to wait for the appropriate time. They became as still as the rock they clung to and appeared as part of the stone walls. They could not have been seen even if a dwarf guard entered the cell.

The gluuns never entertained the idea of making immediate contact with the elf, for they did not wish to raise any suspicion. They cared little for the criminal, only for their expected payment. They were very close to succeeding in their mission, and each one started counting their expected reward in their heads. They would not risk any of it by offering hope to the lonely prisoner. No, the elf would remain very much in the dark until it was time for him to be freed.

Chapter 4

"The entrance to Dunop is just ahead," the magic caster advised.

"I know where it is," Okyiq grumbled. "Why you act like my mother?"

Rivira almost laughed at the question until she took another look at the gruesome and enormous goblin before her.

"Believe me, I would never wish to be your mother. Even the thought is painful."

"My mother more of a pain than me."

"Was she bigger than you?"

"Bigger mouth."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Fah, what do I care what you think!"

"Really? Even though I'm the one keeping you ahead of the half-delver? You're just lucky it wasn't the Delver Acumen following you. My magic wouldn't have been enough to keep you running ahead of a purebred delver. I would have had to pushed you through the forest with a sweeping current. It would have been a messy trail, enough to keep the delver curious, but it would have been quite painful for you."

"I thought serps wanted Acumen involved?"

"They do, but only to a degree. They really didn't believe the delver was going to follow you at this point. They told me to watch for Acumen, but they actually said it would probably be someone else. They planned for contingencies, and that's why I'm here... to make sure you get where you need to be before you're seen. I think you should be thankful."

"Still don't care what you think," Okyiq grunted.

"You best care what I say now," the sorceress warned. "The tunnel is guarded by two dwarf sentries."

"Not afraid of dwarves."

"Whether you're afraid or not is irrelevant. You must not be seen."

"All these tricks," Okyiq grumbled. "Everything we do is complicated. We go here. We go there. Do that. Do this. All because serps want to change how people think. Too many games. Snake faces get carried away."

Rivira didn't agree completely. The complications certainly existed—as did several monumental risks—but the serps were plucking at strings of mistrust that ran deep. Their schemes were as grand and as complex as their desires. She understood they were masters at manipulation, but their designs reached beyond controlling the minds of simple monsters.

The council was prepared to twist the lives of many powerful individuals all across the heart of Uton. They charted a course that would merge the past with the present, all of which was designed to take hold of the future. The sorceress believed that kind of detailed deception deserved credit.

"I've seen some of their plans. They're actually rather brilliant, but this part won't work if you're spotted. Now be quiet while I concentrate on expanding the spell that hides my presence so that it might hide yours as well."

Okyiq grimaced, but made no further complaint.

Rivira's inherent power ran dark blue. Her influence over the element of water was nearly unmatched in all of Uton. She had used her skill to keep her and Okyiq well ahead of the half-delver who followed, gave them both the speed of falling rain and the endurance of a sea tide. The spells of water served them well to reach Dunop before being seen by their follower, but to enter the dwarf tunnel successfully, she had to coax additional assistance from her azure magic, assistance that would have been more easily obtained through the use of light or shadow.

Despite the difficulty she faced, it was not a futile effort. She had already cast a screen of water that allowed her to move through the forest without leaving a trail the half-delver might discover. Her scent and her tracks were flushed away immediately by her casting. The half-delver would never find a trace of her in the brush, but the spell did nothing to hide their appearance from dwarf eyes.

To complete their task, they needed to become invisible, only for a brief moment, but it remained a necessary component to achieve their objective. Casting such an illusion would have been easier utilizing yellow or gray magic, but with the proper concentration, she could shape a similar spell with blue energy. The properties of water included the ability to absorb, disperse and reflect light.

Just beyond the sight of the dwarf sentries, she summoned a curtain of mist, shaped it to fully encircle her and the enormous goblin. With supreme focus, the light fog came together and formed a solid canvas that moved as they moved. She commanded the sheet of moisture to create false images on all sides that would match their surroundings. The illusion was almost perfect, but she was not overly concerned with minor faults. In the harsh light of day, dwarf eyes that were more accustomed to underground shadows would never notice the slight aberrations.

As they closed upon the dwarf guards, Rivira instructed the magical canopy to suppress all scent and sound coming from the goblin. She was already masked, but Okyiq's heavy odor might alert the sentries.

With one last wave of her hand, she also cast a spell of levitation. She lacked the ability to fly across the skies at will, but slightly suspending herself and another while maintaining a forward motion was within her power. She could lift both herself and Okyiq far enough above the ground to avoid leaving tracks upon the soft dirt. They became undetectable as they passed the dwarf sentries and into the darkened tunnel.

Once beyond the mouth of the cave, the sorceress adjusted the canvas of mist that surrounded them to become more of a dark shadowy pool than a surface reflection. She knew the dwarves would be able to detect them if they drew too close to guards further down the passage, but that was never her intention. She needed only to get Okyiq through the entrance and into the cave. The serps never wanted them to actually enter Dunop.

"This is far enough," Rivira announced.

"I can see that," Okyiq growled, but he considered his circumstances. Great riches waited further down the passage... if he could get to them. "Maybe you should keep your spell up. We could raid the dwarves and they would not see us."

"I have no desire to raid Dunop," Rivira responded with disgust.

"I do."

"We are not here to steal from the dwarves. We are here to create confusion."

"You don't think stealing gems would add to confusion? I can think like a serp... when I need to. Shouldn't be just about elves and dwarves. Snake faces thinking too

small, thinking only about stupid old elf leader. Elf prisoner gets freed. So what? Who cares? But we take gems and dwarves start to wonder just how many made it inside their city. They start to think maybe human thieves decided to use magic to get rich. Humans not above getting rich. Isn't that the way dwarves... and humans think?"

It was indeed, and the sorceress almost gave Okyiq credit for the idea. Dwarves did not take kindly to thieves, and they always mistrusted human miners, but she quickly dismissed the idea.

"It's not part of the serps' plan. If we start acting on our own, we could cause problems. You have no idea how the serps want to use the humans against the dwarves. The one that's following us is part human. That should be enough to add to the mistrust. Besides, we would never get past the dwarf guards at the city's edge. All we've done is entered the access tunnel, not Dunop itself. The city is much better protected. To enter Dunop would be suicidal. Now be quiet. I have to cast one more spell and our mission will be complete."

Rivira ignored the large goblin's curses as she focused on another casting that would allow the moisture in the ground to work for their cause. When entering the cave, she had to ensure the dwarves did not notice them in any fashion. Once levitating, Okyiq's trail had ended out in the forest, close to the cave, but it wasn't enough. She had assured the serps that the goblin tracks would lead all the way into the tunnel, even if they were only seen by the half-delver.

She held a single hand in front of her and pointed to the ground. She whispered words of a spell that gave purpose to the sparse amounts of moisture all about her. Pressing her will into the water, she forced it to move silently along the ground—undetected by the dwarf sentries—until it found Okyiq's last set of footprints. Droplets of water formed an illusion that matched the large goblin's tracks. The false bending of light cascaded across the ground back to the tunnel. Reviewing the markings, Rivira found the results acceptable.

"We are done here," she whispered to Okyiq.

With another wave of her hand, she teleported herself and the large goblin out of the tunnel and deeper into Dark Spruce Forest. They were well west of Dunop's entrance, but they had succeeded with all their appointed tasks regarding the dwarf city.

Canceling all spells, she and Okyiq dropped back to the ground and stood in the middle of thick brush. She did not sense any immediate danger, but their position was not without peril.

"Do you sense anything about?" the sorceress asked of the goblin.

"Trees," Okyiq noted with a satisfied grin. He was actually quite happy with their surroundings.

"I'm talking about bloat spiders or shags. There's no river rogues. We're too far from water. I can tell that."

"Spiders and shags wouldn't dare attack me."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"I'm sure as I need to be."

Rivira did not wish to argue the point, but she couldn't afford any ill-timed interruptions. She still had work to do.

"They may avoid you, but that won't help me, and I still have to contact the serps. If I don't, then we did all this for nothing. Now, do you sense anything or not?"

"Nothing near."

She accepted Okyiq's assessment of the surrounding forest and turned her focus to links of communication with the serp council. She informed them of everything that had been accomplished. In response, she received a telepathic and authoritative message.

"You are done... for now. Return to Portsans. Both of you."

"We're finished," Rivira relayed the message to the large goblin. "They want us to return to the coast. I can teleport us there, but I'll need a few moments to gather sufficient energy."

"What if I don't want to go back to the coast?" Okyiq asked defiantly.

"I suppose that's your choice, but do you really want to walk away from this?"

The goblin took a few moments to reflect upon the question, rather than disregard it completely. After a very brief consideration of certain details, he revealed a brutally honest admission.

"Not sure what all *this* is. Bunch of snake faces making complicated plans. Don't look like they accomplished much. What is it you think I'm walking away from?"

Rivira considered the goblin's rather abrupt judgment, as well as his direct question, and began to wonder herself about the serp council. Trusting serps was not a wise decision, but she understood power. Six serps who managed to merge their talents should not be ignored.

The serps had indeed revealed some of their plans to her. She had no doubt that their schemes would cause confusion and ultimately conflict, but she couldn't say with certainty where it would all lead. At first, she believed it was wiser to be on the side of the serps as opposed to being left out of their plans.

The goblin, however, blatantly admitted he did not appreciate the intricate schemes. While Okyiq was no serp, his fundamental ability to grasp basic tactics was somewhat impressive, and Rivira decided to gain the goblin's perspective.

"Well, what did they promise you when you first joined?" she asked.

"The forest, but it was already mine."

It was a boastful claim, but Rivira saw nothing to be gained from debating the issue. She had no desire for the forest. As far as she was concerned, Okyiq could have it. She did, however, wonder what the enormous goblin might do if the serps decided to punish him for not following their order to return to Portsans.

"Aren't you worried they might take it away from you?"

"How? They going to make it disappear?"

"I doubt that, but maybe they would give it to someone else."

"They could give it to anyone they want. Doesn't change anything."

"I think it would change a great deal. Someone else would have claim to the forest, someone that had the serps' blessing."

"How would that stop me from taking what's mine?"

"The new owner could hunt you down... kill you."

"Good luck."

"I'll give you credit. You're definitely an independent thinker."

Rivira eyed the goblin more carefully and then quickly reconsidered what she just claimed.

"Actually, I'm not so sure about just how independent you are. If you aren't worried about the serps," the sorceress wondered aloud, "then why did you agree to follow them this far?"

Okyiq grimaced but actually revealed the truth.

"Because of stupid human and stupid delver."

"I don't follow you."

"I told captain of human town I'd kill every goblin that once followed me. Told delver same thing. Goblins left me during a raid. They had to be punished. Delver and captain didn't think I could do it, but I didn't care. I would have found them all. Don't care how big forest is."

"So you joined with the serps so you could prove the captain and delver wrong?"

"You listen like a human."

"And you talk like a goblin," the sorceress responded to the obvious insult. "Why don't you try explaining it so it makes sense."

"Makes perfect sense. I didn't need serps to find and kill goblins. Didn't need serps to prove delver and captain wrong. Would have done it all by myself."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because forest is big and goblins that once followed were afraid. Would have taken long time. Didn't want to wait, but could have done it myself. Serps just made it faster. They use the magic. Weaker goblins just listen to snake faces. Walked right up to me. I didn't even have to look for them. All I had to do was collect fingers and send message to humans. Thought it was a good idea. Enjoyed letting delver and captain know they were wrong. But didn't need serps, just wanted to get it done faster and didn't have to give up anything of importance. Understand now?"

"I think I do."

"You think too much, just like serps."

"Speaking of the serps, they want us to return. Do you want to come with me, or should I give them your regrets?"

"Don't care what you give them. Staying here... for now."

#

Pru lacked the staggering speed and unyielding stamina of a purebred delver, but he possessed far more of both than the average human. He would eventually need to rest, but he could maintain a robust running pace long enough to catch up to Okyiq... or so he believed.

The half-delver estimated Okyiq was racing through the forest at a staggering pace, especially for such a large goblin. Pru believed the beast would have to rest before very long, and when he did, the distance would shrink between them. The half-delver would simply have to keep moving at a quick pace of his own and remain focused on the trail he followed.

Following the large goblin's trail was far simpler than Pru expected. He lost little time in analyzing the tracks, barely had to stop to search for clear signs. The trail broke through the forest with a clarity that matched the sun in a clear blue sky. The half-delver couldn't miss it, but understanding it was another matter entirely.

The large goblin did little to hide his tracks. There were few turns, only slight detours to avoid deep streams or over encumbering brush. Pru never lost Okyiq's scent, either.

Following the trail was as easy as tracking a goblin horde through the snow, even as the half-delver kept alert toward potential threats.

Pru never pressed ahead into a full sprint, as he had no intention of blindly walking into a trap or failing to notice other hazards stalking the forest. Shags, river rogues, and bloat spiders all called Dark Spruce home and nearly every monster had learned how to take advantage of a careless adventurer.

Pru understood the threats, and even as the delver portion of his heritage enhanced his senses to help him avoid danger, he also used magic that was more willing to bend to his human side. He cast spells more than most other delvers—certainly utilized magic far more than Ryson Acumen—and he sent out waves of magic to help identify dark creatures waiting in the forest.

There were none hiding along the trail he followed, of that he was sure. That in itself confused the half-delver. Pru would have guessed that Okyiq would have begun assembling a new goblin army or at least set obstacles to cover his tracks, but nothing interfered with Pru's progress.

As the race continued far longer than Pru expected, he had to face other considerations as well. The half-delver was pushing the limit of his own endurance. Soon, he would have to stop to rest. He could accept that, but he could not accept that a goblin of any size could sustain the pace needed to keep ahead of him for so long. Okyiq should have collapsed long ago, and yet the chase continued. His quarry was receiving aid, probably magical aid.

"I thought Okyiq didn't cast spells," Pru grumbled to himself, remembering Sy's estimation of the goblin's abilities. The half-delver could no longer accept such assumptions. There was no other way the goblin could have kept moving so fast for so long. "Well, this is going to cost them more."

While the pursuit continued in an almost endless fashion, Okyiq's trail ultimately led to another surprise. It appeared that the big goblin's destination was as bewildering as the extent of the journey.

It wasn't his magical spell that alerted Pru to the appearance of the dwarf guards. Dwarves were magically resistant and the half-delver's spell failed to detect the stout warriors. He spotted them with his sharp eyesight before he himself was seen. He pulled to a halt and used a large pine tree to hide his presence from the sentries.

Trying to comprehend the situation, Pru gauged the direction of Okyiq's path from his secured position. He could see that the goblin's footprints created a trail directly toward the dwarves. The dwarves, however, showed no sign of concern. They were simply mulling about.

Nothing made sense. Pru couldn't understand why a goblin would wish to head directly toward dwarf guards. Even more perplexing, the sentries appeared totally unfazed by the situation. They couldn't have missed the goblin, and even if they had already subdued Okyiq, Pru would have expected greater signs of alert or at least some indication of a light struggle. To the half-delver's amazement, the dwarves appeared totally disinterested in their surroundings.

Pru was baffled. With nothing left to lose and no where else to turn, the half-delver called out to the sentries.

The gluuns received the message through a magical link established by the serps before they were sent to Dark Spruce Forest. They knew it was time to free the elf.

They crept out of the empty cell and moved silently to the only occupied chamber in the dank dungeon. The dwarf guard who manned the prison post had not yet returned from a scheduled patrol, and so, the gluuns could move through the corridors without worry. The iron door was locked, and even though the gluuns could have easily picked it, they did not wish to waste the effort. There was a small opening at the bottom of the iron slab which allowed for the passage of food and water buckets. It was too small for even a thin goblin to pass through, but not for a gluun.

One at a time, the stealthy creatures slipped through the opening and into the cell of Petiole the elf. The gluuns remained invisible as they took their first clear look upon the disheveled form.

The elf appeared aged and worn, washed out from the emptiness of his cell and the bitterness over his punishment. His eyes lacked any spark and the wrinkled skin sagged around his cheeks. He moved around the cell in slow, shuffling steps, walking the same circular path over and over again.

"Petiole?" one of the gluuns whispered.

The elf stopped and turned to face the door. He saw nothing at the small opening and wondered why a dwarf guard would call for him. Out of an unwillingness to respond to his captors, he remained quiet.

"Petiole, we are here to free you."

The elf heard the voice with greater distinction and knew it came from within his cell. Petiole's head swiveled about, looking from one corner of darkness to the next. His elf eyes saw nothing but barren rock.

"So, I'm finally hearing voices," the elf replied to himself with just a hint of a smile. "I wondered when that would start. Took longer than I thought."

"You are not simply hearing empty voices. There are gluuns with you now. Do you know what a gluun is?"

Petiole broke out into an old elf folk song,

"You can't see a gluun,

but they can see you.

Cover 'em with dust,

They'll put up a fuss.

Throw 'em in a sack.

They'll never come back."

The elf did not sing with joy. There was no lyrical or even whimsical grace to the tune. He spat out the words as if he was reprising some ancient battle song, and he growled like an angry badger at the end of each line.

"He is mad," one of the other gluuns remarked.

"We were told to expect as much. It changes nothing." The gluun returned its attention to the old elf. "Do you wish to see the light of day again?"

Petiole looked up at the rock ceiling over his head. When he was first imprisoned, he imagined when and from where the sun would rise. He tried using his meals as indicators for the time of day. Eventually, the darkness won and he stopped caring whether it was light or dark outside. Still, the thought of daylight brought a small spark of hope to the old elf, hope that had been long extinguished.

"Daylight?"

"Yes, we are here to free you."

The concept of freedom pressed away the lingering spark of hope. From the first day Petiole entered the dungeon, he knew escape was impossible. Dwarves were not only resistant to magic, they never trusted it. They built their underground cities to deflect and stifle the energy. They used stone, metal and gems to absorb, reflect and defy magical spells. Their jails were constructed with even greater resistance. He felt the oppression when they threw him in his cell.

Petiole was elf and there was magic within him, but he could not use it in any fashion. He was not strong enough to overcome the burdens placed upon the magic through dwarf construction. Magic was useless, as was his elf heritage.

"No freedom," Petiole muttered and then began pacing the cell again, his elf shoes tracing the well worn path in the rock. "Just voices in my head, trying to ruin everything. No hope, no magic... no freedom."

"There is magic," the gluun countered, "enough to free you. We have brought enchanted stones with us. They contain enough magic to free us all from this place."

With that said, each gluun placed a stone in the middle of the cell, forming four points of a square. The four rocks did not glow, did not appear as anything other than simple stones from a riverbed.

When the rocks were removed from the gluuns' possession and left upon the cell floor, Petiole could finally see them. He stopped his pacing and stared at the stones he knew did not belong in his dwarf prison. He had been in his cell for so long with nothing to do, he had memorized every curve of the surrounding rock and every loose pebble. He could not ignore the sudden appearance of something even so ordinary as a handful of stones.

"Stand in the middle of the square created and they will send you to freedom," one of the gluuns advised.

Petiole did not move. He could not deny the appearance of the stones, but his thoughts became engulfed with torments of the past. He relived seemingly ancient arguments with Lief Woodson and the council of elders. Images from twisted nightmares danced in his head. He remembered the faces of the elves that guided him in chains to the dwarf sentries at Dunop's entrance. He felt weakness in his knees and he wished for a staff to support his feeble frame. The thought of a staff brought back more memories, the face of Mappel, the elder he succeeded to lead the elf camp... the legend he could never replace. He started to laugh and cry at the same time.

Despite Petiole's meager frame, even four gluuns would not have been able to move him into position if he resisted. They needed him to move of his own free will and they were suddenly running out of time.

"This is your only chance," one of the gluuns whispered. "Take it now before it's too late. You can return to the forest."

"Return?" Petiole hissed. "Return to what?"

"You prefer darkness?"

"Over what? What am I going back to?"

One of the gluuns saw the sheer hostility and tried to invoke even greater anger in the elf, add incentive to the idea of escaping the dwarves.

"Take vengeance on those who betrayed you. Laugh at the dwarves who thought you were their prisoner."

Had the gluuns made the offer when Petiole was first imprisoned, he would have eagerly sought escape. He was vindictive once, would have leapt at the chance to get even with those who questioned his leadership. There would have been no hesitation.

But Petiole had sunk into something beyond despair. He still had his anger, but he had lost control. He was no longer a leader of anything, no longer the center of his camp's destiny. It was not dementia that took hold of his mind, for he could remember everything. It was frustration above all else; the kind of frustration that bred contempt for life, contempt for existence.

Vengeance required purpose, and Petiole had lost his in the shadows of his cell. A quest for revenge could not motivate the elf to step forward. He revealed the truths that tortured him.

"I do not have to leave to laugh at dwarves. I laugh at them here. I laugh at them all. And they still don't care."

"You can make them care."

"No, they won't. They have all forgotten me."

As time was quickly fading, one gluun finally struck the proper chord.

"Then forget them. Step into the square and be done with all of them. They have discarded you. You can do the same. All you have to do is leave them."

"Leave?"

It was a simple question, tinged with neither hope nor anger. Instead, it held a deeper desire, a wish to escape everything, to withdraw.

The gluun that had made the final proposal realized he had finally found the proper motivation.

"Yes, leave! Walk into the square and prove your worth. Let them know you can forget them as easily as they have forgotten you. Free yourself from every concern, and at the same time, show every dwarf and every elf that you are beyond them all. You can leave, but you must go now."

Without another word, Petiole stepped into the center of the square as outlined by the four enchanted stones. He started to drop to his knees, but before they could touch the ground, he disappeared, as if a curtain made of shadow was pulled around him.

"We must all leave now," the lead gluun advised, and one by one the gluuns entered the space between the four stones and vanished in a similar manner.

When the last gluun was teleported from the cave, each rock exploded. A flash of lightning lit up the entire block of cells and a blast of fury blew the door from its iron hinges. A rumble of thunder rocked the very foundation of the dwarf palace, and the trembling of stone could be felt at its highest tower.

Dwarf guards stormed into the dungeon and raced to the site of the blast. No one was hurt, but they knew the elf who had once unleashed shadow tree seeds upon their city had escaped.

#

Pru could not understand how the dwarves could not see the tracks. They led right into the access tunnel and were obviously the footprints of the large goblin he had followed through Dark Spruce Forest.

"They're right there," the half-delver exclaimed as he pointed to the ground at the mouth of the cave.

The two dwarves looked at the ground, then at each other, and finally back at the half-delver who was, to their ears, weaving a strange tale. They both wore expressions of weary annoyance.

It was no secret; they hated guard duty, especially patrols at entrances to access tunnels. The caves were all well hidden in heavy brush. Very few knew of the tunnel's existence. Elves knew about the main entrances, but they also knew not to enter unless they were invited.

The only real threat was a bloat spider trying to cast a web around the entrance or a shag seeking a new den, but dissuading such mindless dark creatures was a thankless task. Unfortunately, the growing relations with humans led to other trials. It suddenly seemed dwarf sentries needed to deal with insane half-delvers as well.

One of the dwarves questioned the entire story.

"You say a large goblin ran through the forest at a speed that matches your own—and you are half-delver—passed right by us, and into the cave?"

"That's right."

"And you can see the tracks right here... on the ground before me?"

"They're right there. Can't you see them?"

"I see nothing," the dwarf revealed with a stern expression.

Pru looked to the second dwarf.

"What about you?"

"Nothing there," the second dwarf grumbled.

"And we saw no goblin enter our cave," the first dwarf added.

"Maybe you were looking in the wrong direction."

That assumption drew an unhappy snarl.

"Are you stating we are so incompetent we would not notice a goblin of unusual size racing toward our position?"

"You said you didn't see him."

"We also don't see the tracks that are not there. Have you been downing the ale a bit heavily, half-delver?"

"You think I'm drunk?"

"I'm not sure what you are, but there are no goblin footprints on this ground."

Pru could not understand it. He could see the tracks as clear as day and they led directly into the tunnel to Dunop.

"Look, maybe you think I'm drunk... or even crazy, but will you at least let me follow the tracks to see where they lead? I think the goblin was using some kind of magic. Maybe that explains why you can't see anything. I think it explains why he was able to stay ahead of me."

"Even with magic, a goblin would not be able to enter Dunop unnoticed through this tunnel. We are aware of the tricks of magic, and we have devised ways to deal with it."

"Maybe he's still in the tunnel." Pru offered. "It's worth checking, isn't it? I'll tell you what; I'll leave my crossbow and hunting sword here. I'll be unarmed. You can escort me. Actually, I'll need you, because I'm not going in there alone without a weapon. I think he's still in there."

The sentries did not know why the half-delver wished to follow a trail that did not exist, but the degree with which he pleaded his case surprised the dwarf guards. They agreed to his request, but only one would follow Pru into the cave. The second guard remained at the entrance, alert for any new surprises.

The dwarf escort allowed the half-delver to lead the way. He could not understand what Pru was looking at as the ground remained clear of any foreign tracks.

Pru moved slowly down the tunnel. He sniffed the air and listened intently for signs of the half-goblin. He sensed nothing and his surprise expanded when the goblin tracks ended before they had even begun to descend into the depths of the deepening tunnel.

The dwarf noticed the half-delver's alarm.

"Something wrong?"

"The tracks end here."

"The tracks I can't see?"

Frustration was beginning to bubble over for Pru.

"Yeah, the one's you can't see! They stop here."

"Do you see a goblin here that I cannot see?"

"No, I don't!"

Pru dropped to the ground and inspected the tracks with both his eyes and his hands. He could see great detail in the footprints, but his fingers could not detect the hollows or edges of the tracks. He could feel moisture in the ground, but nothing else. He realized the trail was nothing more than an illusion.

"It's a trick."

"You are admitting this is all some kind of game?" the wary dwarf questioned with growing impatience and annoyance.

"No, no... that's not what I mean. The tracks are an illusion. They're not real."

"Of course they're not real, they're not even there."

"You don't understand. You weren't meant to see them... only I was. But it couldn't have all been an illusion. The tracks in the forest were real. I know that. The illusion must have started before the cave."

"Are you saying there is no goblin?"

"No! There is a goblin, but I don't know where he went anymore. This trail is fake. I have to go back and see if I can find if there's a new trail somewhere around here."

The dwarf was willing to oblige and almost began to escort the half-delver back to the forest when a group of dwarf soldiers rushed up the tunnel from Dunop.

"What is going on?" the dwarf sentry demanded.

"All entrances are to be sealed," the lead soldier shouted. "No one gets in and no one gets out. The elf has escaped."

The dwarf soldier running up the tunnel did not need to reveal the name of the elf. Every dwarf in Dunop knew there was only one elf prisoner within the city. The dwarf sentry immediately recognized the severity of the situation. He took hold of Pru's arm with an iron grip. He would not give the half-delver a chance to escape. There were suddenly too many questions... and answers were required.

"You need to come with me!" the dwarf guard said to Pru.

It was not a polite request. It was an absolute demand.

A Final Note from the Author

Altered Messages 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 Delver 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*.

Jeff Inlo lives in New Jersey, USA with his wife, Joan, and their dog, Jilly.