

# **Delver Magic**

## **Book IX**

### **Joint Intentions**

#### **Sample Chapters 1-4**

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By Jeff Inlo

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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](http://www.sitelane.com).

*Joint Intentions* is the ninth 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 her unquestionable loyalty!*

## Prologue

Within Demonspawn—an existence both part of and separate from the dark lands—waves of the past carved their influence deep into the gray mist which engulfed the region. History shaped the realm, but it was not through the forces of nature such as wind, water and fire. Thoughts and deeds born of twisted and malicious desires echoed across distant horizons and found their way into the pit of misery. The burning domination of such malice forged the substance of Demonspawn.

No matter where deceit or cruelty occurred, the underlying emotion broke from its point of origin and cascaded toward a welcoming home. Vibrations of hate floated across time and space, ventured over the dark lands, and slipped through the curtains which separated the domain of demons from the rest of existence.

Those same curtains formed the very essence of Demonspawn, a place of layers and boundaries. The shroud of gray incompleteness swirling over bleak ground served as evidence that the future of the region would always remain dominated by its past.

Throughout the realm, thick magical energy flowed endlessly across the tainted landscape, created a staggering well of power for those who knew how to reach into the depths of history. Twisted and spiteful magic inundated the domain of nightmares and allowed demons to breed and fester.

The complex structure of the beastly breeding grounds formed barriers which limited the movement and influence of the dreadful monsters. Demons found themselves mystically anchored to Demonspawn, a covenant which proved a blessing to other lands. The narrow containment of powerful beasts allowed for a certain degree of security. There were always exceptions, but for the most part, creatures of full demon heritage remained within the borders of their origin.

The intricate boundaries extended within the region as well and formed the foundation of the layered rings inherent within the enclosed realm. Echoes of petty sins—a litany of casual lies, minor thefts, and stubborn grudges—formed the outer layers of Demonspawn. At the veiled edges, lesser demons prowled in relative obscurity away from the far more corrupt beasts which stalked the tormented grounds deeper within the realm.

Closer to the center of the tortured existence, eons of warped and diseased choices twisted the region into a haven for demons too hateful and grotesque to describe with any accuracy. The cumulative transgressions of extreme magnitude weaved their way through the deep recesses of the land. Pulsating evil raged through the magical flows like the incessant beating of a deformed kettle drum.

At the heart of Demonspawn, a being of pure iniquity—the daokiln—basked within the vibrations of past malevolence. Reiculf, the master of all demons, embodied the history of all depravity. Every wicked indulgence committed throughout the course of time fed the beast's insatiable desire for destruction. The vast pools of malice flowing across every region of existence eventually found asylum within the tremors of Reiculf's repulsive essence and formed the basis for his overwhelming presence.

Perpetually gaining strength from the ever expanding tide of selfish desires, Reiculf's influence filled the very core of Demonspawn. So colossal was his thirst for torment, no creature within the condemned land dared challenge the daokiln for supremacy. With

unconscionable cruelty, the lord of rage wielded uncontested power, demanded absolute subjugation, and punished the slightest whisper of opposition. Throughout the ages, his presence at the center of the realm embodied complete domination, but as if to signify an incomprehensible alteration in the strings of time, the master no longer stood unopposed.

A single human sorcerer, Ansas, dared to battle Reiculf at the very heart of the demon lord's domain. The arrogance of the spell caster was colossal in its own right. The sorcerer sincerely believed that, over time, he could eventually match the demon master's hate with his own inherent dominance of ebony magic.

Ansas knew how to tap into the pure black magic flowing within a multitude of realms. Even in Demonspawn, he could absorb the energy, strip the ebony power away from the twisted echoes of ancient transgressions. Eventually, he would utilize it to assault the beast, bring the lord of the realm to his knees, but first, the sorcerer needed to withstand Reiculf's assaults. He could not become the aggressor until he learned to neutralize the daokiln's endless attacks.

In his initial struggles against the beast, Ansas utilized every spark of energy he could muster to suppress the waves of violence which pelted him from seemingly every angle. The sorcerer could heal his wounds, which were many, and such healing became an incessant necessity.

"You are a tiresome flea," Reiculf muttered as he sent another wave of blistering fire at Ansas' prone body.

The flames turned the sorcerer's limbs to ash, but ebony magic eventually restored them to a relatively healthy state. Ansas' refusal to die did not appear to frustrate the daokiln. If anything, the beast professed his own contentment with the continuing struggle.

"Then again, I do find some amusement in battering you over and over again."

Ansas screamed in torment, but he remained unrelenting in his own efforts. The pain was excruciating and beyond anything he had ever experienced, but at least he had access to his magic, and with that, he always had hope.

"I defeated you once before," Ansas managed to assert through tortured breaths. "I'll find a way to beat you again."

"You never defeated me."

"What about the delver?"

Reiculf responded with a wave of pure force which obliterated Ansas' bones, turned them into near dust.

The sorcerer shrieked, but he did not die. He could not, saved both by his magical essence and a simple truth regarding Reiculf's power.

The demon master's abilities were influenced by actions of the past, and Ansas, in his own twisted manner, had assisted Ryson Acumen in defeating the demon lord. Though the ebony casting sorcerer had his own history of arrogant and selfish acts, that single success limited Reiculf's ability to vanquish Ansas completely.

After the ebony magic restored Ansas once more, the sorcerer coughed out another admonishment.

"You see, you can't decimate me completely. There will always be a shred of my existence left to claw at your miserable hide. With the magic that runs through this realm, I can restore myself no matter how badly you injure me. I will grow stronger with each challenge."

"And who says I wish to remove you completely from my realm?" the daokiln questioned through a snarl. His massive gray form towered over the sorcerer, his essence shimmered with the sum of his hatred. "To release you would mean allowing you to escape my wrath. I have no such desire. Torturing you amuses me, and my pleasure is all that matters in this realm."

"Then obliterate me completely if you disagree," Ansas challenged. "Prove that I'm wrong!"

"Prove?" Reiculf growled. "I have nothing to prove to something as lowly as you. You speak as if you are somehow my equal. You're not even close."

"Perhaps not now, but in time, I will overcome even you."

"You have no concept of time. In this realm, *I am time*. The present is irrelevant, the future is less than a dream. It is only the past which nurtures power, and the past is an incalculable cesspool of indecency and decay. That is what feeds me... has fed me since the first dishonorable deed was ever committed. Do you actually believe your feeble skills can ever match the sheer magnitude of such festering malignance?"

"My skills are based on similar aspects," Ansas countered. "You speak of the past and focus on the decisions and acts of the misguided. I concentrate on the consequences of those actions. Each deed which brought you strength trembles with a ripple of transformation. Whether the acts themselves are good or evil is irrelevant to me. All that matters is the resulting change. The corrupt acts that embolden you also generate a pulse of transformative magic tuned to the purity of my core."

Despite the obvious disparity in strength between the two combatants, Ansas held firm to that one simple belief. Demonspawn might have been a region dominated by the past, but the sorcerer concentrated on a growing spark within him, a unique and deep link to the black magic which inundated the fabric of his essence.

Ebony magic was more than just shadow, or even death. It encompassed alteration. It lived within the essence of change, and as such, it remained powerful in any region where transition occurred.

While in some ways, Demonspawn was a stagnant pool of hate. It was also, as Ansas realized, the culmination of warped intentions and malevolent deeds. Such characteristics often created the most dynamic changes throughout all existence, and alterations of any kind were the very basis of black magic.

Despite Ansas' claims, Reiculf believed the sorcerer was delusional, but the daokiln did have reason to hold Ansas in contempt.

"You talk about purity as you hold to your pathetic ebony power. My energy is colorless. It has no limitations."

"Wrong again!" Ansas accused. "You cannot reach beyond this realm. That in itself is a limitation."

"My influence can go anywhere. I command all demons, no matter where they prowl. And they are not all restricted to this dominion. Despite the limitations and boundaries of my domain, there have always been demons willing to pay the price to escape my wrath or to venture into lands of greater light... and easier prey. Throughout the ages, demons have spread through all of existence. That means *I* am present in all of existence."

"Passive influence is not the same as direct involvement," Ansas declared. "I can cast my magic anywhere, but you are bound by the borders of this cage."

There was a spark of truth to the assertion. Without the use of heralds, the daokiln could not send his magic directly into other realms. The veils of Demonspawn prevented Reiculf from exerting anything other than indirect influence beyond his domain.

The demon lord, however, chuckled at the misguided exaggeration of the sorcerer's own powers. Ansas had once been locked away in a realm where he could not utilize his magic, and Reiculf felt the need to remind Ansas of that particular failure.

"Anywhere?" the daokiln questioned with a sour grin. "Not in Baannat's realm, or are you forgetting when the slink ghoul held you prisoner? You had no power there. Isn't that the true reason you decided to remain within my realm? You had a choice; leave this place and go back to being a tortured soul in a region of nonexistence ruled by Baannat... or stay here. You chose to remain here. You thought you chose the lesser of two evils, you were wrong."

"No! I was not wrong. In this realm, I have access to pure ebony magic, and it is with that energy I have been able to endure your attacks."

"You only endure what I allow you to endure."

"Your claim rings hollow to me," the sorcerer declared. "I know what happened here. You used my vision of alteration to reach out into other lands, even found a way to bring your energy and consciousness directly into Uton. You utilized my concepts of alteration to place your essence in magic casters once controlled by me. Master of demons... lord of hate... fah! You are the ruler of a cesspool, nothing more. Without my understanding of ebony magic, you never would have broken through the barriers of your own prison."

"What you call a prison... and a cage, I consider a kingdom. I freely admit I am the sum of misdirected arrogance across every existence, but your tiny contribution to my power is barely noticeable, a drop of rain in an ocean without borders."

"And yet, it was I who took Ryson Acumen's magic and placed it within you, cut off your reach, kept you from obtaining the vengeance you seek."

Reiculf unleashed a ball of colorless magic which erupted at Ansas' center and tore the sorcerer to shreds. Slivers of the spell caster's body scattered all about the dark gray dust surrounding Reiculf's feet.

Waves of ebony magic rolled out of the gray mist which swirled across all of Demonspawn. The energy took hold of each mangled piece and reestablished the sorcerer's form.

Once Ansas was whole again, the daokiln made his own declaration of an undeniable fact.

"Your arrogance is laughable, and it only strengthens me. Do you understand? You are caught in an unbreakable trap. I admit your power over alteration will grow in my realm, but the very conceit which enables you to remain sane and heals your body adds to my own expanding strength. Every empty grasp you make at more power comes back to me amplified in sheer force. The very desire within you to beat me will only make the task that much more impossible."

Ansas refused to bend, let alone break.

"That would only be true if your powers were limitless, but they are not. There is also the matter of Ryson Acumen's magic within you. As long as it remains there, you are helpless against the delver. You cannot seek vengeance against him in any way."

"Continue to speak of the delver, and you will continue to suffer greatly."

Ansas found the strength to smile as he mocked the immense beast before him.

"You admit to another weakness, and each admission is another alteration to your very being, another monumental element of the change which diminishes your power and increases mine."

"Diminish?!! You think I am diminished by you... or by the delver?!"

Reiculf plucked Ansas from the ground with his massive fingers, held him like a rag doll, and shook him viciously.

Ansas was unable to respond. The violence of the attack sent incredible waves of nausea through his consciousness, and the dark mist swirled around him like a tempest of gray smoke.

"I never diminish!" the daokiln roared. "The delver did not beat me! He only managed to save himself and his wretched mate. What do I care for them? They are ants, just like you. They scurried back into their pathetic lives. They are just as insignificant as when they were first born."

Reiculf stopped shaking his victim and allowed the black energy to restore Ansas to a semblance of awareness.

"Tell me, sorcerer," the daokiln growled, "are you really so blind that you fail to see why your existence here is to my benefit?"

"Benefit?" Ansas struggled to respond.

"Yes, to *my* benefit. Your magical core served as a key for me, a key to open doors beyond Demonspawn. You yourself admitted as much. Do you really think I wish to lose such a key? Would I simply toss it away, or would I keep it within my grasp?"

Ansas stared at the demon lord in near disbelief. He assumed it was his choice to remain in Reiculf's realm, but he could not dismiss the doubts which began to grow within him.

"There are those who thought I would remain locked within my domain forever," the daokiln continued. "They were wrong. You allowed me to reach into other existences. There are others who thought by locking you in here with me that the barriers would be restored... that they would hold firm in the future. They are also wrong. You create an opportunity, and an opportunity is all I have ever needed."

## Chapter 1

Ryson Acumen smiled broadly as the spirit of Sy Fenden appeared at the north gate of Burbon. The apparition reminded him of why he needed to leave, but the ghost warrior also offered comfort regarding far more important matters.

"You'll keep an eye on Linda and Stomps for me?" Ryson asked of the spirit.

Sy nodded, but then turned to Captain Klusac. Burbon's captain of the guard could perceive the words of the spirit even while the delver could not.

After a long pause, Klusac explained to Ryson what he had just heard.

"Sy says they'll be safe as long as they remain in Burbon. He'll protect them, just as he protects the entire town, but his influence is bound by these walls. They'll be secure, but when *you* venture beyond Burbon, your well-being is in your own hands."

Ryson took a quick glimpse at the wall stretching out from both sides of the northern gate. It was his intention to pass beyond the barrier which protected Burbon. He would be leaving the safety of a town guarded by a warrior spirit, venturing out into a land tainted by magic and dark creatures, but his attention remained on those whom he held most dear.

"My wife knows not to leave, and she'll make sure Stomps doesn't take off on his own. That dog loves to run around the wall with me and into the forest, but he'll stay close to home when I'm not here. As for me, I'll be fine."

The captain turned again to the ghost of his predecessor, as if he heard a call from the apparition which was otherwise silent in the breeze. He appeared somewhat surprised by the message which flowed directly from Sy Fenden. The captain of the guard could not be certain of the exact meaning behind Sy's counsel, but he would relay it as directed.

"Very well," Klusac finally replied to the apparition. "I'll tell him."

Ryson watched curiously as the focus of both the town's new captain and the specter which previously held that position fell upon him.

"What is it?" Ryson asked of Klusac.

"Sy told me he understands why you're leaving. He knows you can't quell the curiosity within you, but you may be asking questions which have no firm answers in this land. He said—very clearly, in fact, and with great emphasis—that conviction requires trust. A belief in something beyond substance cannot be confirmed with investigations based in a physical existence."

After revealing the message as it was given to him, the guard captain had to ask his own question.

"Do you know what that means?"

Ryson believed he understood Sy's point, but his quest had taken on a unique substance in a place where he, as a delver, could see beyond the physical moment. In Demonspawn—an existence built more on the past than on the present—he saw a reflection beyond a memory. In the shimmering echoes of his trail, he had witnessed the totality of his full existence, and within that existence, he saw his own soul. Whereas others might rely on faith, he had observed the inner and true essence of his being with his own eyes.

Rather than attempting to explain such aspects to Captain Klusac, Ryson faced the apparition of his dead friend.

"Your return to Burbon is a testament to the substance of what I'm trying to understand. More importantly, what I see of you now, I saw of myself. If I was able to see that much, then I have to be able to comprehend its meaning."

Ryson paused to gauge the position of the sun. It was still early, and the mist of the morning had barely burned away. He could afford a few more moments before he had to leave, and he professed his own outlook about Sy's ghostly existence.

"The return of magic and the use of spells might confuse us about what's real and what's illusion, but there's more to you than magic. Let's be honest about this; you're not just a nameless ghost, an apparition empty of identity. And you're not some illusion. I realize the people of this town are overjoyed at your return, but they might not be considering the full significance of your existence and what it ultimately means."

Sy offered nothing in response, but Klusac became curious at the delver's suggestion. For the captain, Sy Fenden's return meant many things. The ghost warrior offered protection for Burbon beyond what any mortal could provide. The presence of Sy's spirit boosted morale for the soldiers of the guard. And for Klusac personally, the willing participation of the apparition in the defense of Burbon validated his own role as leader of the town.

To all the citizens, Sy Fenden had been viewed as far more than the commander of Burbon's forces. He was the embodiment of the structure and commitment which allowed Burbon to survive after the return of magic. Sy was the personification of security, the foundation for order. When he was killed in a goblin siege, Burbon had lost more than a leader and a soldier; the town and its people lost the essence of their identity.

Captain Klusac had assumed command, but he had grown anxious over whether or not he could gain the respect and trust of those he led. He never doubted his abilities as a soldier, but he openly wondered if he could replace Sy Fenden and hold the town together.

When Sy's spirit returned, those doubts disappeared. He didn't have to replace the respected captain, he only had to hold to the courage and duty of a true soldier.

Ryson, however, never considered himself a soldier, and the delver's perspective was often foreign to the captain.

"What does his return mean to you?" Klusac asked of the delver.

"The substantiation of a new perspective," Ryson responded without hesitation. "Sy died. No one can dispute that fact, yet here he is. We know it's him. You can communicate with him, even if I can't... at least not directly."

"We all agree on that matter. I don't think there's anyone in Burbon who doubts this is truly the spirit of Sy Fenden. Surely the soldiers know it's him. We felt his presence in battle."

"And that's exactly what I'm talking about. Sy filled your soldiers with courage and determination, not through some grand speech or battle cry, but through a fashion that can't be described in physical terms. He reached them through his spirit."

"Again, I don't think there's anyone who would argue that point, either. We felt his presence before we even saw him."

"But you're not matching his arrival with your own circumstances. That's the perspective I'm talking about. His very presence here now confirms what I saw in Demonspawn."

"I'm not sure what you mean. You've told me about what you saw, but you just said the people of this town may be failing to understand the significance of Sy's return. What does your experience have to do with the rest of us... the rest of the town?"

Ryson decided to try and make the connection more apparent, even if it meant asking a rather dire question.

"Have you considered what will happen to you when you die?"

Klusac frowned.

"It's not something I dwell upon," the captain admitted.

"Even as a ghost stands right next to you?"

"You think that after my... demise, I might return to protect Burbon as well?"

"I have no idea what will happen to you... or me... or anyone else. I'm just pointing out a simple fact. A spirit stands before us right at this moment. Sy is actually listening to our conversation. With all that the return of magic has brought, I can almost understand how such a thing could seem almost trivial, but I can't dismiss certain implications."

"And they are?"

"There must be more to life than our current existence in this land. If not, how could Sy be standing here now? And if there is more, what do I need to do to understand it?"

"Maybe you should be more focused on the life you have now," Klusac offered.

Ryson knew he couldn't explain his considerations to the captain, and he didn't wish to try. Klusac had not seen what he had seen.

"For me, I can't separate the two," Ryson offered. "Not anymore."

Klusac realized debating the delver was a pointless effort. Rather than argue, he decided to focus on minimizing the danger to both Ryson and Burbon.

"I've never understood what drives a delver," Klusac admitted. "Do what you have to do, but don't leave us too long. You're still a valued member of this town... and of the guard. Sy can protect us against many threats, but your services as a scout in the surrounding lands add to our defenses."

Ryson considered the request. He knew he was just beginning his search, but it was not a quest that would be completed in a single trip. With the harvest coming to a close and the dormant season nearing, he believed the first leg of his journey could be completed fairly quickly and he could return to Burbon in a few days.

"I won't be gone long. I want to be back for the Harvest Festival."

The Harvest Festival was one of the few times the citizens of Burbon allowed themselves a small break from order and structure. For several days, the town would celebrate with parades, feasts, and parties. Children would create masks and wander through the streets hoping to scare treats from neighbors and merchants alike.

It was a time the delver enjoyed, a time when he could race through town at top speed and add to the fun of a little bedlam. As Ryson considered that part of the festivities, he placed a request on the apparition before him.

"Sy, I think you should make several appearances during the festival," Ryson suggested. "Think of it... a ghost captain leading the late night haunts. The kids will be thrilled."

Sy Fenden smiled and nodded but offered no further words for Klusac to relay to the delver.

Ryson found the spirit's eagerness to comply with the request beyond comforting. The essence of his friend had been separated from his mortal body, and yet, Sy remained

willing to participate in celebrations such as the festival. Ryson felt such a connection bolstered his desire to seek more information regarding spiritual existence.

The delver would have liked to question Sy directly, but such efforts were cumbersome at best. Even though Sy could speak through Captain Klusac, previous attempts at asking detailed questions failed to generate suitable responses. Frustration rose quickly in both Klusac and Ryson as the apparition avoided certain issues which were at the heart of the delver's curiosity.

"Eventually, we're going to have to find a better way to communicate," Ryson acknowledged.

Sy nodded one last time and then disappeared.

With the ghost gone, Ryson considered the spirit captain's appearance. Sy did not materialize often, but many had seen him. The town had accepted the bizarre circumstances without hesitation, for the unyielding spirit of Sy Fenden had saved them while he was living and again after he had died.

It was a challenge to their ordinary lives, but Sy's return came after the return of magic to Uton. With the energy creating so many spectacles across the land, the ghostly appearance of their protector was not quite as demanding on their collective perspective as it might have been in earlier times.

Ryson, however, questioned almost everything, and he could not help wonder about Klusac's ability to communicate with the apparition.

"How is it *you* can hear him?" Ryson asked, his curiosity temporarily delaying his departure.

"I have no idea," Klusac admitted. "Actually, I'm not even sure I would say that I *hear* him. He talks, but then again, he doesn't. There's a voice that comes into my head. It's kind of like when you read words in a book. They're not your words, but as you read them, you understand them one word at a time, and they become a voice. That's what it's like. I get a message from him one word at a time."

"Do you have to focus on him?"

"No, I don't have to do anything. The words just come to me."

"But they don't come to me. I think he's trying to talk to me, but I can't hear him, not with my ears... and not with my mind. As strange as it sounds, he's not even the first spirit I've come across. I've dealt with others... and I could hear *them*."

"I don't know what to tell you. It's not like I understand it. I just accept it."

"Do you think that maybe that's my problem? That I'm not completely accepting it's him? That maybe I believe he should just remain dead?"

"Do you?"

"No, not at all."

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Because I still think there's something that I'm missing. When he first appeared in Burbon—as a spirit I mean—I knew it meant something more than just some ghost returning to protect his home. I understood more when I went to Demonspawn. I saw how the present could turn into a reflection of the past. I still think Sy's past is influencing his existence here, but I can't be sure. I'm also not sure why he was able to return and others aren't. People across this town have lost family and friends. Why has Sy been allowed to return while others haven't?"

"I've asked him that for you before. He can't explain it."

"Or maybe he won't," Ryson offered as another possibility.

"If he chooses not to tell us, it's probably for our own good."

"That still doesn't explain why I can't hear him."

"Maybe you can, but you're not paying attention," Klusac suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"People hear things all the time, but they don't always listen. If you stop listening long enough, you don't even realize you can hear something."

"That's an interesting perspective," Ryson allowed. "Maybe you're right. And if so, it's even more reason for me to do what I have to do."

He looked up at the sun once more. The days were growing shorter, the sun setting earlier. He was losing daylight and he didn't want to delay his departure any longer.

"Time for me to go."

"Be careful and take care," Klusac offered.

Ryson looked first to the west, to Dark Spruce Forest. He would not be venturing near the heavy woods—a sanctuary for dark creatures—and he worried more about the citizens of the town than for his own safety.

"Since I'm not going to be scouting the forest for a while, you should probably limit any excursions into the woods. River rogues were pretty active the last time I went out. Sy can protect the town, but the woods are still dangerous."

"There's little need for us to go into the forest. We've collected all the wood we'll need for the dormant season. We'll leave Dark Spruce to the elves."

"Good idea," Ryson agreed with a nod, and he took his leave of the captain.

With graceful ease, the delver moved through the gate, across the clearing which surrounded the town, and over a dirt road which cut through the farm fields to the north. He immediately turned east. In order to gain the answers he sought, he knew he had to speak to individuals more willing to delve into spiritual matters.

He had to leave Burbon, a town of order. The citizens had their individual beliefs, their faith, but they kept it to themselves. Such discretion was understandable, but it would impede the progress of his quest.

He had to return to the place he had previously called home. In Connel, a growing city with an ancient history, there was a place where he could discuss certain elements with greater ease.

As Ryson raced eastward, he recalled when the magic first returned to Uton. The Sphere of Ingar released a burst of energy which breached Sanctum Mountain. The freed magic caused a rolling tremor which signaled a new beginning. Everyone's life changed on that day, including his own.

After the quake, he had gone out to explore the lands, to determine the cause of the upheaval. That quest began in Connel, specifically at the steps of an ancient building, a place where he needed to return. In order for him to move forward, he knew he had to go back to where it all began, to the Church of Godson.

## Chapter 2

Sy Fenden's influence did not end with Ryson Acumen. The return of Burbon's captain as an apparition had greatly affected another, though not in a positive way.

Neltus once cast spells of great power. Crimson energy had crackled through his essence as he sharpened his focus over rock and dirt. There was a time when every grain of soil and sand bent to his wishes. His distinct connection to the land offered him power and insight which stretched over every mountaintop and reached below the deepest dwarf mine.

He lost that connection when Sy Fenden's ghost removed his magical core. The removal saved the town of Burbon, and perhaps all of Uton, but it left Neltus powerless, unable to cast spells with his own magic. It was a condition Neltus chose not to endure. A decision made, he would risk everything and anything to restore his power.

It took a great deal of effort and money to find what he needed. And while Neltus was not used to hard work, he had wealth to spare. After a long search and a little persuasion, it seemed he was finally nearing the end of his own quest.

The boy before him was old enough to take care of himself, but still inexperienced in many facets of life. He was easy to manipulate, and more importantly, blessed with a substantial core of the magic Neltus craved.

Neltus cared little about the boy's well-being. He only wanted what was inside the novice spell caster. In making his proposal, the coreless wizard had briefly explained what he desired and offered a large sum of wealth in return.

The boy, Dimi, had found the proposition enticing, but as they neared the final moment of completing the bargain, he worried about the cost.

"Will it hurt?" Dimi asked, wondering if he had accepted too little in return for giving up a portion of his magical core.

"You'll hardly notice," Neltus lied.

If he told the truth, Neltus believed Dimi would back out of the deal, and that was not an acceptable course of action. He would not allow for any change of heart.

The boy thought otherwise.

"Before you start, I want more gold."

Neltus rubbed his forehead in frustration. The boy's simplistic request was almost insulting. Dimi had the power to find all the gold he needed, if he just learned to focus his power. The foolish boy cast in dark crimson, and the land would give up all its secrets to him, just as it had once done for Neltus. Fortunately for Neltus, Dimi lacked the desire to hone his craft. The boy cast in a misshapen loop with angles and twists. His spells lacked direction, and his incompetence diluted any influence or power.

When the magic had flowed through Neltus, he had managed to cast in a near perfect circle. It was pure red and concentrated enough for spells of tremendous power. With such spells, Neltus developed a tight bond with the land, and the very ground had revealed to him deposits of great wealth; gold, silver, and various gems. Though the magic was no longer within him, his memories remained intact. He knew the locations of many vast treasures, and he would use such wealth to regain the power that was taken from him.

Neltus reached into his pocket and removed a small sack tied at the end. He pulled at the strings, loosened the opening, and poured out half its contents. Several gold nuggets rolled across the table before him. He also retrieved two diamonds of considerable size. He put one of the gems next to the loose pile of gold.

"That's more wealth than some people see in a lifetime. You can add that to what I have already given you. I will also give you the remainder of the bag and the second diamond once we have completed this task."

Dimi quickly gathered up the precious rocks and shoved them into his pocket. The additional payment calmed most of his concerns, but not all.

"You're only going to take a small portion of my core, right?" the young and misguided spell caster questioned.

"You'll barely notice what I remove."

The response was mostly accurate. Neltus planned on removing half the boy's magical core, but since the young spell caster was so inept, he believed Dimi would barely notice the sizable loss.

"And you're sure you know how to do this?"

Neltus fumed, but he needed the boy compliant in order to complete the task. He lacked magic of his own and Dimi would supply the power for the deed. If the boy remained skeptical of the undertaking, he might hold back, and such doubts could jeopardize the process.

"You have heard of Enin, yes?" Neltus asked.

"He was the most powerful of all of us," Dimi declared, "but I heard he lost his power as well."

"He lost it in the same fashion I did. It was removed during a battle between the two of us. Do you understand what that means? I was skilled enough that I fought the most powerful wizard in the land. Only the interference of a ghost led to my loss."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"The reason we fought is because I once took a slice of Enin's core. Do you think I could have succeeded in that if I didn't know what I was doing?"

"Is he the one who showed you how to do this?"

"No, it was another, a powerful sorcerer. His name was Ansas. Have you heard of him?"

The boy's uncertainty turned to apprehension.

"Ansas was evil!"

Neltus almost agreed, but he had come face to face with absolute malevolence, felt ominous wickedness throughout his essence. Reiculf, the daokiln, had invaded the totality of his being, and at that moment, Neltus appreciated true evil. Though Ansas was certainly devoid of consideration for others, the sorcerer was not quite in the same category.

"A mischaracterization," Neltus replied. "He was arrogant, powerful, self-absorbed, but I wouldn't necessarily call him evil."

"He wasn't good!"

"No, he wasn't."

"And I've heard rumors he's stuck in Demonspawn."

"They're not rumors... and he *chose* to remain in Demonspawn. He wished to fight Reiculf. Reiculf is evil. Pure evil. Would evil fight itself?"

"Evil fights everything."

"And so does arrogance, and that's what Ansas was. Arrogant! So arrogant in fact, that he made sure he perfected every spell. He cast pure ebony magic in a perfect circle. You're aware of that, yes?"

"I heard he was obsessed with purity," Dimi admitted.

"He was. That's why he chose me, and it's why I chose you. When the magic was inside me, I could cast in pure red magic, and so can you."

"But my spells are terrible."

"That's due to your skill, not the magic. Unlike you, I didn't lack skill. That's another reason Ansas chose me. He realized I knew what I was doing. Do you think a magic caster as conceited and as powerful as Ansas would teach his spells to someone who didn't know what he was doing? Put aside your fears. You've been paid far more than is appropriate for the magic I will take from you... magic which you are clearly incapable of utilizing properly."

Dimi could not argue. He was a horrible spell caster, so incompetent he tended to avoid using the magic which flowed within him. He did not wish to discuss his inadequacies, but he feared his shortcomings might lead to catastrophe.

"What about me? Even if you know what to do, I don't. Like I said, my spells are terrible."

"But that's the point. You're not going to cast a spell."

"But I'm still not sure what I have to do."

Neltus dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his face with both palms. He knew Dimi was immature as well as incompetent, but he didn't think the boy was as dense as the gold in his pouch.

In previous days, Neltus would have made incessant fun of the boy, insulted him with overflowing joy, but Neltus' days of irritating, aggravating, and infuriating others with unparalleled glee ended when he lost his magical core. Unfortunately, life was no longer a game for the powerless wizard. His irreverence was replaced with frustration, and that frustration was quickly turning into desperation.

In order to avoid striking the lad, Neltus turned away. He cursed silently over and over. Eventually, he released enough anger to face the boy once more.

"Do you know how to pour water out of a jug?" Neltus demanded.

"Of course."

"Then you know what you have to do. The magic is the water. Your core is the jug. You don't have to do anything else with it. Pour the magic out of your core and let me shape it."

"So I pour it into you?"

"No! Absolutely not!"

The rebuke shocked Dimi and the boy stepped back. He considered leaving, but then he looked upon the sack of gold and the second diamond. He didn't want to give up what he had already gained, and he wanted more.

He didn't mind losing the magic. It never served him as he hoped. Every spell he cast fizzled. If anything, the magic flowing within him caused him far more grief than contentment. The wealth Neltus offered would allow him an easier life, a life where he wouldn't have to work on enhancing his skills.

"I don't know what to do!" Dimi wailed.

Neltus steadied himself. Building trust and communicating was difficult for him. He would have rather mocked the boy, but he couldn't afford to lose the opportunity. He could see Dimi wanted money, that was beyond apparent. Wealth in the form of gold and gems remained easy for Neltus to obtain. It was the magic he wanted, and spell casters with a deep red hue were difficult to find. He didn't wish to start his search all over again, so he pressed down his natural tendencies and actually sounded comforting.

"I know it's hard for you, but you can do this, really. Your deficiencies do not lie in the magic itself. They come from your inexperience with spells, but you are not casting any spell. Your previous... difficulties... have no bearing on what we're about to do. To put it simply, your spell cannot fail because you're not casting a spell. Do you understand?"

"I think so, but where do I send the magic?"

"Just push it out of your core without specific influence. You need to focus on one thing and one thing only... allow the magic to spill into my spell, not into me. Without a core, I can't hold it, not even for a moment. There will be no magical link between us because there's nothing to connect us. But you have to maintain focus. If you don't concentrate, the energy will break away and dissipate."

"But how do I focus on a spell that I don't cast?" the young man wondered.

If Neltus still had his magic, he would have buried the boy in a mound of dirt and debris, but somehow, he managed to contain his anger and offered an answer.

"I've explained it to you. You don't cast a spell. You don't try to create a link. You just push the magic out of your core with a desire to be bound to a spell, any spell, the closest spell. It will hover around you waiting for direction. I might not be able to absorb the magic, but I can shape it as long as its source allows it. That's what you have to do. Send out the magic and let me shape it. Nothing more. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Just give it a try. If it fails, the magic will just end up flowing back into you. Alright?"

Dimi nodded.

Neltus placed both of his hands on the boy's shoulders. He could not cast a spell to reach into the boy's core. There was no magic within him to mold into a spell and no core to attract the energy that flowed freely across the land. If he was to succeed, he had to take hold of the magic offered up by another. He had to wait for Dimi to create the opportunity.

Despite Neltus' condition, he still knew inherently how to shape magic, and he, just like anyone else in Uton, could use enchanted items. In essence, he believed the boy would work in the same measure.

"Begin," Neltus commanded.

Dimi pictured a jug of water, and he placed that image in the center of his being. In his mind, he allowed the water to turn into magic and then he began to tilt the jug. Magic began to spill out of his essence, but he did not shape it in anyway. Surprisingly, it was far easier than he imagined.

"I can do this!" Dimi shouted with delight.

"Of course you can," Neltus allowed. "I told you, you're not casting a spell, and it's the crafting of spells where you are weak. Now, I will start directing the energy with my own spell. It's going to feel a bit strange, but don't fight me."

Neltus could not absorb the magic in any fashion, could not make it his own energy, but he was able to shape it. It was like he was placing his hands in another artist's clay. He could not possess it, but as long as the magic remained clear of Dimi's influence, Neltus could mold it as he wished.

For the first time since the ghost of Sy Fenden had stolen his core, Neltus felt the energy bend to his will. He felt almost rejuvenated. Magic was his to command. Even as he could not drink in the energy, he could finally cast a spell of his own design.

He shaped the magic so that it would reach back into Dimi's essence. He continued to pull at the energy in order to strengthen his spell even as he probed for the boy's core. When he made contact, he could barely restrain his emotions.

The heart of Dimi's magic was far more substantial than Neltus had hoped. It was pure red and pulsing with power. Neltus knew that once he took a portion of it for his own, it would form a solid foundation for his newly developed center, a strong core deep in dark crimson hue.

With the magic creating a conduit to Dimi's essence, Neltus extended the necessary connection to complete his task. Within the flow of energy, he fashioned a growing red blade to slice the boy's magical core in half. With growing hunger, he thrust the crimson blade into Dimi's magical heart. As he did, the boy screamed.

Dimi felt more than a stabbing pain, he felt a splintering of his very being, as if he was being pulled apart.

"You said it wouldn't hurt!" he screamed.

Neltus did not reply. His fingers dug deep into the boy's shoulders and would not let him pull away. He continued to mold the magic even as he ripped it from Dimi's essence.

Frantically, the boy tried to break free, but he could not resist Neltus' grip or the hold of the magic that pulled at his core. The room began to swirl, and Dimi's knees grew weak.

Neltus struggled to hold Dimi upright as he continued to slice away at the energy in the boy's essence. When it finally split, he attempted to take hold of it. No longer needing Dimi, he allowed the boy to fall to the ground.

The moment Neltus' hands broke free from the lad, the slice of magic he had cut from Dimi began to break apart in his fingers. He tried to shove the shaven core into his own essence, almost as if he was swallowing an entire pie at once. He pressed it into the very center of his being, but it passed right through him.

The remnants of Neltus' spell allowed him to hold the core for a few precious moments, but there was nothing he could do with it. Without a foundation of his own to hold it in place, he could not take permanent possession. At every attempt to stabilize the core within his being, the pulsating mound of magic slipped away. It was like trying to grasp a slimy fish with oiled hands.

As failure became inevitable, Neltus released his hold. The freed section of Dimi's core broke apart into a burst of magical energy and ultimately returned to the boy's center. Dimi's magical foundation was whole once more and Neltus was left empty.

Dimi had crumpled to the floor after Neltus released him. He had lost consciousness during the process and never saw Neltus surrender. After long moments, his eyes fluttered opened and he took one long, deep breath.

For reasons unknown to him, he could feel the magic within him as he had never felt it before. He knew his core remained completely intact, that Neltus had not succeeded in taking even the smallest slice. For some reason, he was greatly relieved.

As he came to his feet, he found Neltus sitting in a chair with his head propped up in his hand.

"You didn't take it," Dimi stated the obvious.

"I couldn't hold it," Neltus admitted.

"What happened?"

"Without a core of my own, I had no way to contain it. I tried. Godson, I tried. But there's nothing within me now. I am completely broken, like a pail with no bottom. I could grab a hundred slices of magic, but I have nothing inside me to hold them."

The boy was even further relieved, as he knew they would not try again. He wouldn't have allowed for it, even if Neltus insisted. He still, however, wished to be paid.

"It's not my fault. I did everything you asked. I shouldn't have to give back your gold."

Neltus leapt to his feet and grabbed Dimi by the collar. His anger and frustration erupted.

"You think I care about gold?! I can replace what I gave you in the blink of an eye. The land and I were once connected in a way you cannot comprehend!" He sneered at the boy as he lowered his voice, but he continued to seethe with rage. "You may cast in red magic, but you have no idea of the power I once had. The land kept no secrets from me. It revealed deposits of gold and silver you can't imagine. Do you think I would forget such a thing? I could be the richest man in the land."

"Then why do you care about the magic?"

"Because wealth is nothing without power! And I had power! More power than you could possibly conceive. What good is it to have all the gold in Uton if someone can take it from you?"

"So I can keep what you gave me?"

The boy still did not realize what Neltus was saying. There was enough magic within Dimi to do whatever he wanted. The lad could have taken everything and walked away. A wizard without a core was powerless to stop him.

Neltus looked at the boy with disgust. He was about to tell Dimi to take the gold and leave, but he realized there was one last path for him to travel, one last chance for him to regain what he had lost. He would take that course of action only as a last resort, but he realized he was out of options.

"You can keep what you have and take the additional amounts I promised... if you fulfill one last request. I may not be able to hold your magic within me, but you can still enchant inanimate objects."

Neltus looked about the room. He found a small book. He then pulled a single coin from one of his pockets and removed a ring from his finger. He placed all three items on a desk which stood against the wall.

"You will pour as much magic as you can into these three objects. You can handle a simple enchantment spell, can't you?"

The boy considered the appeal and confessed confusion over the request.

"I think so, but don't I have to weave a spell of influence as well? The enchantment should allow the holder to do something specific."

"That's only if the holder has no idea how to mold the magic. I have no such limitations. All I need you to do is enchant the items so they store the energy. Leave the spell to me."

"But I don't want to give up my magic anymore," Dimi confessed.

Once more, Neltus lost his patience.

"Idiot! I'm not asking you to give up any of your core. I'm telling you to enchant these items with magical energy. The discharge will be renewed. You're not giving up anything you won't regain over time. Now, if you want to keep any of the gold I have given you, you will do as I say."

Dimi did not have the courage to ask the consequences if he refused. He understood he would not be giving away any of his essence but only utilizing the energy within him for a spell of enchantment. He had cast spells before, discharged energy. Even as his spells failed, he had always regained strength as time passed.

"Alright," the boy yielded, "but my spells aren't very good."

"Just make sure you fill each object. I don't care how much energy you waste."

The boy looked upon the three items, grimaced, and then lifted his arms. A distorted loop of red energy appeared at his wrists. The misshapen mass of magic was both laughable and pathetic. It held no true shape, nothing close to the circle which once symbolized Neltus' abilities.

Neltus shook his head as he watched large flows of magic wasted in the inefficient spell. Fortunately, there was enough magic within the boy to fill the objects despite the loss of energy.

When Dimi finally finished, he was essentially empty of magic. He would eventually recover what he had lost, but it would take a substantial amount of time. He was, at that moment, as powerless in magic as Neltus.

With the boy magically exhausted, Neltus could have overpowered Dimi and retrieved any payment he had already offered the boy, and he certainly couldn't be forced to pay what he promised. Neltus, however, fulfilled his portion of the bargain; not out of honor but from a desire to keep his options with the boy open.

"Here," Neltus grumbled, as he threw the half-filled sack of gold and the second diamond at Dimi. "You really didn't earn it all, but I said I would pay you. Remember that. In fact, I think you still owe me."

Neltus picked up the ring first and inspected it carefully. Despite the fact he had lost his magical essence, he would always recall what it was like to feel the energy surging through his being. He could feel it again in the ring.

He then picked up the coin. It held roughly the same amount of magic. The simple piece of silver would contain the power until he willed it free and shaped it for a spell that would be necessary to take him to a place he did not wish to go.

He placed the ring on his finger, put the coin in his pocket, and finally picked up the book and leafed through the pages. The book held the greatest amount of magic among the three objects, and it would serve as the key to open a very dangerous door. It was a door Neltus would have rather kept shut, but if he wanted his magic back, he would need to seek a creature who had also lost his magic but found a way to retrieve it.

## Chapter 3

After Neltus sent Dimi on his way, he saw no reason to delay his decision. It was time to take a course of action formed of sheer desperation and to hastily head for a harbor of last resort. Cowardly in many ways and yet bold in others, he allowed his selfish desires to prod him forward. Struggling against his inherent weaknesses and his craven instincts, he buried his fears. He did not wish to face the creature he knew waited beyond the curtain of reality, but he could not deny the monster's connection to his own dilemma.

He took the coin from his pocket, placed it in his palm. With his free hand, he fingered the warm metal. He could feel the current of crimson magic rotating within the edges of the silver chip. The enchantment was exceedingly plain. No spell, no direction or influence, waited within the energy. It was there simply to be used for whatever purpose the spell caster saw fit.

The thought of casting another spell pleased him beyond measure, but he couldn't allow eagerness to override diligence. If he simply pulled the energy from the coin, it would break free from his grasp. As he had already learned, the lack of a core would keep him from absorbing it in any fashion or storing it for even the briefest of moments. To utilize the energy, he had to shape the spell in his mind before he unleashed the enchantment.

The incantation would be far more intricate than a basic portal and more powerful than fundamental teleportation. He needed to reach through certain boundaries and into the edges of another realm. The complexity of the destination required him to consider commitments of his own past.

Neltus called on memories of a time he once held not only his own crimson core but also a slice of ebony magic. The powerful spell caster Ansas had honored Neltus with a portion of the sorcerer's purity. Ansas had hoped to mold others in the shape of his own arrogance, and the indelible links of energy burned certain incantations into Neltus' recollection.

Together, he and Ansas had created a grand spire that rose from the bleak grounds of the dark lands and stretched to the very limits of that realm. The top of the spire, a flat plateau with a frightening precipice, waited at the borders between physical existence and an emptiness which extended beyond both life and death.

In order to achieve his goal, Neltus needed to reach that plateau. The magic within the coin would easily allow him to create a portal into the dark realm, but he required more than a simple rift between dimensions. Arriving upon the tower's peak required transcending through the boundaries of existence and reaching the very edge of physical limitations.

As he continued to probe the magic within the coin, he feared it would be insufficient to bring him to the top of the rock tower. He considered pulling additional energy from the book or his ring, but he couldn't risk it. The magic within the book would allow him to make the necessary contact once he reached his destination. If he survived the encounter, the power within the ring would return him home.

As he mulled over the spell, he attempted to create a crisp connection between the incantation and the magic. He knew he had to be as efficient with the energy as possible. If he miscalculated, he would most likely face dire consequences.

He recalled the height of the tower. An insufficient attempt would mean entering the dark realm high above the bleak lands but short of the extended plateau. If so, he doubted he would be able to save himself from the fatal plummet which would result from such a failure.

Such a fate, however, would be far better than if he overshot his destination and ended up swimming through the void of nothingness beyond the dark lands. Even his enchanted items would be useless within the emptiness. His consciousness would remain trapped as his physical properties slowly collapsed. He would be rendered into nothing more than the echo of a painful scream, and his consciousness would remain tortured in that wretched state forever.

The risk was indeed great, but he could no longer live as an empty vessel. Regaining sway over magic by recovering his core was all that mattered. If he fell, if he became a tormented whisper lost in emptiness, it was no worse than his current condition.

He lifted the coin up high as he whispered a spell based on intuition and memory. Deep within his mind, he seized the solid grounds of two dimensions. He willed them together, connected the two separate existences with a rift which would act as a narrow tunnel through the combined grounds. The portal would also serve as a rushing force, like a landslide that would propel his body to the heights of the dark land and to the very limits of that realm.

Finally ready to enable the spell, Neltus pulled at the magic in the coin. He struggled greatly to maintain control of the energy. He had been so used to shaping magic from within his core that he almost lost hold of the power which refused to remain stable within his essence.

Fueled by desperation, he let his spell take command. He endured the strange sensation, almost like allowing someone else to breathe for him, and he made no attempt to take personal hold of the energy. He strung the magic through the loops of his spell and allowed the incantation already shaped in his mind to complete the actual work. The spell quickly forced the portal into existence.

Without stopping to further consider the consequences of his decision, Neltus enabled the incantation to carry out its directive. He allowed the force of the spell to get behind him, to cradle him, and then thrust him through the portal.

Instantly, he found himself rising through the thick hot winds of the dark lands. He faced the heavens, and he saw stars twinkling in a black sky. The spots of light offered small beacons of comfort, but any reassurance was quickly dashed as a hook hawk broke across his upward path and reminded him of the dangers he faced.

As the force of the spell continued to propel him through the humid and stench-filled air, Neltus wondered if the winged creature would alter its course in an attempt to intercept. He looked back over his shoulder and could not ignore the dreary landscape of the dark realm. Pools of fire blazed throughout the gray valley beneath him, and the silhouette of the hook hawk appeared like the twisted shadow of a bent and corrupt hand soaring through pockets of glowing amber.

The large bird veered back and forth like an unbalanced pendulum swinging in a brisk wind. Its unnatural form and twisted feathers forced the bird into bizarre flight patterns, but it used such deviations to its advantage. It had spotted the human soaring through the sky, and though it could not contemplate how such a phenomenon was possible, such

considerations were irrelevant to its basic desires. It viewed the intruder as a possible meal, nothing more.

Neltus watched with growing apprehension as the winged beast utilized its awkward movements to circle back and follow his own upward trajectory. He believed the creature attempted to gain both speed and altitude at the same time, a difficult prospect under normal conditions, but the creature appeared to find the proper currents within the heavy winds. Even as he continued to rise through the air, Neltus realized the hook hawk quickly erased the distance between them.

Neltus wondered if being snatched up in the claws of the monster would be as painful as he imagined. He also wondered if it would be worse than his spell faltering and his body falling to the jagged rocks far below. He was still hurtling through the air, and the gray lands beneath him looked like broken teeth ready to chew him into pieces if he ended up descending into their midst.

Turning his head back to the stars, he finally saw the rock tower ahead of him. Due to its immeasurable height, it stood out from the surrounding grounds like a single gray reed growing up into the black sky. Nothing upon the horizon could come close to matching its size. It stood alone, like the only acceptable alter to an angry and malignant presence which demanded absolute homage.

As such, it did not offer any great comfort for the man who was hurtling past the gray clouds of the dark realm and directly toward it. The upper platform might have been his intended target, but he held no preconceptions of sanctuary at the top of that lonely spire.

The circular plateau had become a platform of transition in its own right. The spire was more than a rock tower. It signified a decision to reach into an emptiness that was better left alone, an emptiness ruled by a beast of incomplete substance. It was a bridge to a monster not known for compassion or even tolerance.

As the plateau drew near, Neltus gave one last look to the trailing hook hawk. The winged creature reached the zenith of its flight. It sensed the upper limits of the dark region, and it felt the waiting chasm of nothingness beyond the realm's borders. The monster would not risk its existence, even for such a tempting meal. It veered away from Neltus and back toward the gray valley below, hoping to find easier prey.

Neltus' eyes grew wide as he closed upon the top ledge of the spire. He no longer worried about overshooting his mark. He could feel the power behind the spell weakening, and his velocity began to diminish. He would not sail beyond the precipice, but he wondered if he would reach the top of the spire or slam into the rugged cliff face which supported the plateau.

As his speed continued to dwindle, he tried to urge his rather rotund body higher than the waiting ledge. Unfortunately, there was no magic within him to amplify the spell, and he could not replenish a nonexistent core with the twisted energy that flowed throughout the dark lands.

Instinctively, he pulled his legs up into his chest. Not an athletic individual by any stretch of the imagination, he struggled with the simple maneuver. Before reaching the ledge, he rolled up into a ball with his knees tucked near his chin. He closed his eyes as he believed his body would smash into the side of the cliff face. He hoped the impact would render him unconscious. He did not need to stay awake for what he believed would be an inevitable and long plummet to a grisly end.

Luckily, his hip made first contact with the wall of rock, and rather than bounce backward, he had enough forward momentum that his body rolled up and over the top of the precipice. He came to a halt a mere two paces from the plateau's ledge.

Exhaling deeply, he sprawled out on his back, stretching his arms and legs out from his large body. A stabbing pain made it clear he had not died. His hip ached, but he had reached the top of the spire without further injury.

Neltus slowly rose to his feet. He didn't bother to wipe the gray dust from his clothes. Instead, he took one small step, with a bit of a limp, to the ledge of the spire. From that dazzling height, he peered out over the dark realm.

The land remained as he remembered it, dreary and depressing, a fitting home for the dark creatures which occupied it. It was an existence he never wished to visit. He had spent time there because of Ansas' desires, not his own. He preferred a lively tavern, with plenty to eat and drink.

For a brief moment, he imagined himself lounging at an inn, drinking heavily and eating even more. As the pleasant thoughts of comfort and excess brought a warmth to his body, he sensed a throbbing from the ring on his finger. It had the power to return him to Uton. Leaving the spire would require a far simpler spell. But the magic which tugged at his finger was no longer within him, and that hollow sensation urged him onward. He would return to a tavern only when that emptiness was filled with crimson power.

Despite his strong desires, he considered the inherent risks of his plan. The tower ridge held its own dangers, hazards beyond plummeting to the rocks below. The plateau might have been his destination, but it was not his ultimate objective. It served as a staircase upon which he still needed to take one last step.

As he considered his options, he realized leaping over the ledge remained a very possible alternative to the scheme in which he had placed his hopes. Not having any idea how his intended encounter would ultimately unfold, he would retain a quick leap and long, soul-wrenching fall as a contingency plan.

He then looked to the nothingness above the plateau. He could almost feel the emptiness, but it was not complete. A window had opened in the heavens, a gap for a view of stars which somehow defied the void. The twinkling points of brilliance appeared as an aberration, a direct contradiction to the desolation of the dark realm.

That window had been created and opened by Ryson Acumen, and memories of the delver forced Neltus to consider his choices. The stars he shouldn't have been able to see offered him a glimpse at possible liberation, a chance for comfort in a realm of misery.

He could not deny his own connection to the delver, but it was not one which brought him solace. It only reminded him of the energy which was absent from his essence. Neltus believed his only hope for redemption resided not in the points of light but in the waiting void.

Neltus moved to the center of the platform. Moving ahead with his idea, he opened the enchanted book, but read nothing. The writing was irrelevant. It was the magic he needed, and once more, he would have to be quite careful in his casting.

He had seen the shadow portal before, and his previous connection to Ansas gave him greater appreciation for the realm he needed to contact. It was Ansas' thirst for black energy which inspired him to build the spire, and it was the sorcerer's obsession for purity which ultimately created a bridge into a new realm, a region of nonexistence.

That link allowed an exiled ghoul to extend his reach back into the dark lands. Ansas had taken magic from a region of nothingness, mistakenly believing it was pure ebony power. Instead, it was energy which belonged to the slink ghoul Baannat, and it was Baannat whom Neltus would call upon.

## Chapter 4

Neltus kept the enchanted book open as he concentrated on his memories of both Ansas and the slink ghoul Baannat. He also allowed the echoes of past portals to influence his spell. While there was no magic within him, ripples of past deeds trembled against the edges of the plateau. Others had opened gateways into Baannat's realm, and the remnants of old passages hung faintly in the air. Allowing such swells to help shape the energy was the only way he could complete the incantation.

The pages began to turn by themselves, slowly at first, then much faster, as if a heavy wind blew across Neltus' hands. Crimson energy rippled out from the open book like bursts of scorching gas from boiling hot springs. Neltus fought to utilize the magic, and he quickly shaped his spell within the red waves.

Once the spell took firm hold of the energy, the remainder of the crimson magic exploded out of the book in one complete burst. It leapt from Neltus' hands and swirled in the air. Eventually, the red hue began to fade into a gray shadow, and a hollow portal formed over the center of the high plateau. It hung suspended in the air like the empty shadow of a bottomless hole. The inky blackness swirled ever so slightly, but no other movement appeared near the rift.

Neltus held his breath and waited. He began to sweat. He never appreciated confronting beings of great power, even when his core was intact. He preferred facing weaker opponents, foes he knew he could beat. He was opening a gateway into a dimension of emptiness, creating a door for a being of considerable animosity, while he was essentially powerless to defend himself.

To make things much worse for Neltus, he really didn't understand Baannat's abilities. The slink ghoul was once as powerful as Enin. The monster cast white magic marked with the efficiency of two perfect circles. At one time, Baannat had grown even more powerful than Enin and almost defeated the human wizard, but the slink ghoul lost... not only the battle but also his magic.

Many believed Baannat was killed in that clash, but he found a way to return to Uton. He also found a way to reclaim the magic which had been taken from him, and that was the only reason Neltus dared to contact the ghoul.

Neltus peered into the shadow rift. He could see nothing, but that was no surprise. Baannat ruled a realm of nonexistence, and the slink ghoul had become something of an anomaly himself.

Neltus took one deep breath and called into the shadowed hole.

"Baannat?"

He quickly took a step back and waited.

Nothing.

Neltus remained where he stood but called out a little louder.

"Baannat?!"

The shadows within the rift began to swirl more quickly, and the slink ghoul leapt through the rift in one quick bound. Baannat did not land upon the ground. He floated in the air. His shape appeared to glimmer. There was substance to his body, but it also appeared incomplete. The mass at the center of his body swirled with the same

inconsistency as the shadow of the portal. The muzzle of his cat-like face formed a quick sneer as he scanned the grounds all around the edges of the precipice.

Realizing he faced only Neltus, Baannat gazed upon the human with more amusement than curiosity. The thin black irises of the ghoul's eyes twitched with delight. He recognized the human, knew he could torment the trespasser with ease. Thin claws jutted out of his paw-like hands as the slink ghoul swiped at the air in front of Neltus' face. Baannat did not strike the human, but he enjoyed watching him flinch.

"You've been here before," Baannat stated, as the slink ghoul began to circle Neltus.

The ghoul took quick steps with his thick, curved legs, but he remained off the ground, as if he walked on a cushion of air. The beast's entire form continued to shimmer in the dim starlight, making it clear that his body remained incomplete in a physical existence.

Neltus did not turn to match Baannat's movements. He remained almost completely still, allowing the creature to stalk behind him and moving only when he sensed the ghoul's claws come near. He tried not to recoil, but he could not contain the instinctive desire to cringe at an expected assault. Finally, he found the strength to speak.

"Yes, I helped Ansas create this rock edifice," Neltus confessed. "I used the crimson magic to shape the land where it would tower above everything else in the dark realm, reach to the very edge of its existence."

"And form a bridge into my realm of non-existence," Baannat confirmed.

"It was never meant to intrude upon you."

Baannat cackled nearly uncontrollably. When he finally stopped giggling madly, he revealed what he saw as an absolute truth.

"It was Ansas' intention to do just that! His search for pure black magic led him to reach where he should not have placed his hands."

"But it wasn't *my* intention," Neltus noted. He hoped to ensure there was no animosity between them before he made his request. "I didn't steal any of your magic."

"What do I care of your intentions? Are you worried that I view your land sculpture as an invasion?"

"I hope you don't view it that way."

"I never have. It has actually served me. It serves me even now. You have opened a portal and allowed me entrance into this physical realm. I must say, though I have grown very accustomed to my new home, I very much enjoy these excursions, and this spire seems to offer the only bridge which allows me access into this dimension."

"I'm glad I could be of service."

Baannat hissed with anger as he rushed back towards Neltus face. The ghoul glared at the human, appeared ready to strike with absolute malice. He almost tore at Neltus' rather large belly, split it open like an overripe melon, but the creature held his wrath if only to reveal what he saw as an undeniable fact.

"You are not here to serve me! You are here to serve yourself. You are one of the more selfish varieties of your pathetic species. The importance you attach to your own desires pours off of you as obviously as your profuse sweat. You would never have dared face me if you didn't want something for yourself."

Neltus didn't even attempt to lie.

"That's very true. I don't even want to be here now, but I don't have a choice."

Baannat tilted his head slightly as he considered the admission. He looked deeply into the very essence of the human before him, and once more, he started to laugh uncontrollably. He even turned away as he giggled and cackled like some small child in the midst of a fit of laughter.

Neltus wondered if the maniacal glee was a sign of good fortune or a precursor to some diabolical torture that the ghoul might find even more amusing. Rather than question the monster, he remained quiet as he waited uncomfortably for Baannat to supply the answer.

"You've lost your core," the ghoul finally stated as he turned back towards Neltus. "You are much like my old adversary, my brother Enin. The last time I spoke with him, he was empty as well."

"We lost our cores in the same battle," Neltus admitted. He was about to explain how he wished to reverse the situation, but the ghoul had questions of his own.

Baannat cared little for explanations of Neltus' troubles. He became much more interested with certain discrepancies of the current situation. The ghoul began to suspect outside influence, and such suspicions led to mistrust and anger.

"Reaching this platform and creating a portal into my realm are no easy tasks. It might have been difficult for you even if you maintained a healthy magical core. It is doubtful you could have made it here on your own. Who sent you... who is really behind this invasion of my realm?"

"There is no one else. I came here through my own incantations."

"You have no core. How were you able to accomplish this? "

Neltus would have rather dealt with his own needs, but he was in no position to force the issue. He decided to oblige the slink ghoul with the truth.

"I used magic stored in enchanted items."

Baannat sneered, wondered if he had wasted his time bantering with the human. The slink ghoul was no novice in the workings of magical energy, and he voiced unrestrained doubt over Neltus' claim.

"Enchanted items? Do you take me for an imbecile? You want me to believe someone imbedded such intricate spells into an inanimate object? Enchanting an item to create a portal is one thing. Using an enchanted item to create an opening into my realm is something else entirely. And what of reaching this plateau? That was no small matter either. Very few spell casters could have achieved such results."

"The items only held magic," Neltus explained quickly. "There was no spell placed within the enchantment. While I can't absorb or store energy, I've found I can shape it under certain conditions. I formed the spell in my head... from my past connection with Ansas and from the ripples of past portals created here. Once I had the spell in my mind, I powered it with magic encased in this book."

Baannat snatched the book from Neltus hands. He appeared to have difficulty retaining it within his grasp, as if the incompleteness of his body limited his ability to maintain hold over solid objects. Still, he managed to juggle the book long enough to analyze it. He threw it back to Neltus before it fell from his claws.

"The book contained magic without a hint of influence," the slink ghoul acknowledged. "How did you obtain such an item?"

"I forced a young boy with crimson power to enchant three such items; a coin, which I used to reach this place, the book, and the ring on my finger. I will use the magic in the ring to return home."

"Hold up your hand with the ring. Let me see it!"

Neltus did as he was told and allowed the slink ghoul to inspect the enchanted item.

"Interesting," Baannat allowed. "You can still cast spells even though you've been completely separated from the magic? You are more skillful than I imagined."

"I was once able to cast pure crimson magic in a full circle."

The claim sounded more like a boast, and Baannat responded with abject dismissal over Neltus' declaration.

"And I once cast pure white magic in two perfect circles."

Neltus didn't want to sound as if he was challenging the monster, but he saw an opening to reach his own intended goal.

"I know. Do you miss shaping the energy in such a way?"

Baannat found the question insulting.

"Do you think I'm powerless as I stand before you?" the ghoul hissed.

"Not at all, but it's my understanding that you're much different than you once were."

"I am. And to a degree, you're right. The magic contained within physical existence no longer bends to my will as it once did."

Baannat grew quiet. The ghoul turned from Neltus and floated over to the tower ledge. He peered down upon the dark lands, considered the vast number of vicious creatures he once commanded. For a moment, he considered diving toward the gray valley, immersing himself in the angry tides of a cruel existence. He stepped to the very edge of the precipice, but he knew he would go no further. For him, the call of nonexistence had become far stronger than the shriek of brutality.

With another hiss of disgust, the ghoul returned to face the human who appeared to test his tolerance.

"You obviously went through a great deal of trouble to get here. You did not come here simply to stir old memories within me. You have neither the courage nor the audacity for such an endeavor. I can see your fears as plainly as I see your hefty body. I also see the selfishness within you, but your particular desires are lost in the emptiness of your core. That is all I can see, so I cannot determine what you want. Tell me now, and without delay, why have you come to me?"

Finally, Neltus was able to make his desires known.

"Everything you see is what brought me back here. I admit it. My emptiness is the only reason I would risk coming to see you. I want my core back."

Baannat scowled with displeasure.

"I have nothing to do with your missing core."

"I know."

"Then why would you come to me?"

"Because you once lost your magic... but you got it back. I've heard the stories. You fought Enin and Ryson Acumen. During your battle, Enin opened a portal and allowed dark creatures to attack you. They took the magic from you, but you created a new core."

"I didn't simply create a new core. I retrieved what was stolen from me."

The news did not sit well with Neltus, and despite his fear of the slink ghoul, he actually contradicted Baannat's explanation.

"But... after you were defeated by Enin, you created a powerful creature to retrieve what you lost. You combined the skins of other dark beasts into an entity powered by magic. It hunted down dark creatures and pulled their magical essence from them. You mimicked Ingar's Sphere and collected magical energy. You ultimately absorbed that energy... restored what you had lost."

"I created a vessel to hold magic, yes, but that vessel was created by killing many of the creatures that originally stole my own core. I didn't simply capture magic. I could have done that by tapping into any source. I needed to regain a substantial portion of my own magical identity. Collecting magic is one thing, storing it within one's self requires a core which matches your essence."

Neltus' desperation turned to despair as he considered the implications behind Baannat's revelation.

"There's no way to create a new core?"

"With no matching foundation to the spell caster? No. You can add to a core, enhance it, but you can not simply cast out one completely and exchange it for another. Is that what you thought you could do?"

"Yes, but..."

Before Neltus could explain further, Baannat broke into yet another fit of cackling laughter. Neltus tried to ignore the beast but each disgusting snort and twisted giggle tore at his innards and amplified his frustrations.

"Stop laughing at me!"

Surprisingly, Baannat did just that, but he placed a razor sharp claw under Neltus' chin.

"Never attempt to command me again," the ghoul hissed.

Neltus' despair extended beyond his fear. A quick slicing of his throat appeared far better than the future he saw for himself.

"Go ahead, kill me! Do it!"

Baannat almost did just that, but he resisted the urge if only for a moment. He realized Neltus had reached a state of complete surrender. Only the loss of all hope would allow the cowardly human to embrace death. The slink ghoul, however, began to consider the situation in its entirety. A new question formed in Baannat's conniving mind.

"Why did you come here?"

"I told you! I want my core back!"

"No! That is not what I asked. Why would you think I would help you? Even if I could have created a new core, why would I do such a thing? You know of me. I would not simply help you out of some wish to be benevolent. You came here to get something from me. What is it you would have offered in return?"

"Another soul to torment," Neltus revealed without embarrassment. He saw nothing lost in revealing the truth. "You once held Ansas captive, but he escaped you."

"He did not escape," the ghoul hissed. "I released him to fight Reiculf."

"And that's where he is now, cut off from you. Are you saying you don't want him back?"

"You could deliver Ansas?" Baannat questioned harshly. "You? You would enter Reiculf's domain, enter Demonspawn?"

Neltus never intended to retrieve Ansas for the slink ghoul, but he believed he could entrap others who might satisfy the monster's desire to inflict misery.

"No, but there are others I could have delivered to you. The boy, Dimi—the one who enchanted the items that brought me here, the one who's core I tried to take—he would be easy to overcome... once my core was returned."

"So you thought you could throw me scraps? What would I want with a boy?"

Neltus saw no reason to argue.

"What does it matter? You said you can't help me."

"I said I could not create a new core for you. I did not say I couldn't help you."

It sounded as if the slink ghoul was actually offering new hope, and Neltus leapt for it like a kitten jumping for a feather on a string.

"There's another way?"

"I return to my own question, why would I want to offer you any assistance at all? As I said before, I have no need for scraps."

"I'm sure we could work something out. There must be some way I could help you in return."

"That is too vague a bargain for me. What you consider help may mean nothing to me."

"Well, what is it you want?"

Baannat scowled, but he could not dismiss the opportunity before him. The human had managed to reach the top of the precipice and open a portal into the shadowed realm of nonexistence. Such complicated spells cast without a magical core revealed a skill which might prove useful. While the ghoul did not wish to openly admit his desires, he was not above taking advantage of sheer foolishness.

"Before we discuss that, let us determine if it is actually possible to regain what you have lost. If I'm to get what I desire, I will need you to be more than you are in your current state. Your skill with magic may be helpful, but you will need to do more than utilize enchanted items."

The hope of regaining his core seemed to grow brighter, and Neltus was more than willing to bargain with the ghoul.

"What do you need from me?"

Baannat knew much of Neltus' history, had witnessed portions of certain battles. He had seen the wizard's involvement in many important events since the return of magic to Uton, but the ghoul needed details regarding the removal of Neltus' magical essence.

"Place your mind in the past. Think of the moment you lost your core. Consider every detail. Leave nothing out. I will know this story completely."

Neltus did as he was told. He recalled every aspect of the battle which led to the removal of his core.

Baannat used his own twisted magic, energy that fluctuated in and out of existence, to peer into the memories of the human. He spoke in a low growl as he witnessed the events which led to Neltus' loss.

"The demon lord, Reiculf, took control of both your body and your mind. Through you, he brought his great powers into Uton. He planned to take control of the wizard Enin in order to spread his malevolence throughout all of existence. The ghost captain, the protector of Burbon, arrived to save the land, but at a great cost to you. He removed your core and broke the link between you and the demon master."

"Yes," Neltus confirmed.

"You ran off. Without magic, you were nothing. You learned that Enin also lost his core, removed by the same warrior spirit. You began to realize if Enin lost his magic, then there was little hope of you regaining yours. Still, you tried in vain to regain your core, but everything failed. When your last efforts proved fruitless, your desperation led you here."

Baannat grew quiet as he considered all that he had seen in Neltus' past. He saw weaknesses he could exploit. Neltus could become a very useful pawn... if utilized properly.

"The ghost captain is the key to your wishes," Baannat finally offered with a snarl. "He is the one who took your core. He is the one who must retrieve it and return it to your essence."

The proclamation did little to enhance Neltus' optimism. He had hoped Baannat would be able to rebuild his core, not offer useless advice.

"He won't do that! All he cares about is that stupid town of his."

"You will have to convince him otherwise."

"But I can't fight a warrior spirit! I wouldn't be able to defeat him even if I still had my core."

"I might be able to help you in that regard," Baannat replied.

"You can defeat a ghost?"

"What am I? I am both more and less than a physical presence. How does that differ from a ghost? I know more about this spirit than you can imagine. He cannot be defeated as would some spell caster or human warrior, but he has his weaknesses. It is a matter of exploiting those weaknesses."

"What weaknesses? What do we have to do?"

"First, we have to come to an agreement. If I am to assist you, you know I will want something in return."

Neltus would have given almost anything to regain his magic, but he was not so foolish to give an open-ended promise. He needed to understand the full cost before he agreed to any bargain with the slink ghoul.

"What do you want?" Neltus asked, his unease apparent.

"You were right in your previous assumptions. I want souls to torture, souls brought into my domain, but I will not waste my time with some insignificant boy or any other pathetic individual you might find so easy to defeat."

Neltus considered what soul would fulfill the ghoul's desires. The obvious choice was one that he believed remained beyond his reach. Handing over someone else's soul was not beneath him, but he also had to face certain realities.

"Even with my magic, I don't think I could get Ansas. I could try, but I don't think I could make that promise."

"The promise would be an empty one. I doubt you would be able to reach Demonspawn, let alone survive any encounter with Reiculf and seize Ansas. No, it's not Ansas I'm looking for."

"Who then?"

Baannat paused as his own devious plan began to take shape in his mind. There were things he wanted, things he would not profess to the foolish human. In order to fulfill those desires, he would need bargaining chips.

In one quick response, he revealed the names of three individuals Neltus would have to trap.

"Enin and Ryson Acumen... and the delver's wife as well. Yes, Enin, Ryson and Linda Acumen."

The names surprised Neltus. If Enin had retained his magic, the powerful wizard would have been beyond Neltus' reach, but Enin had also lost his core. He was as vulnerable as the boy Dimi, perhaps even more so. Enin was actually the easiest of the intended targets, and Neltus professed why.

"If my core was returned, I could probably get Enin. I might even be able to trap the delver. He takes risks when he explores the land, but Linda Acumen... she lives in Burbon. She's protected by the spirit warrior, the ghost of Sy Fenden, and he's the one who took my core."

"We will have to deal with the ghost captain one way or the other. He is the key to regaining your core. Just as I had to hunt down the creatures who stole my magic, you will have to confront the entity who stole yours."

"But it sounds like you're creating a problem without a solution. I need to get Linda Acumen in order to obtain your help in dealing with Sy Fenden, but Sy Fenden is protecting the delver's wife."

"I don't need one done before the other. Your promise is enough. Swear that you will help me in trapping the three I have named and I will work with you in regaining your core."

Neltus needed to confirm the specifics of the bargain.

"That's all you want from me? My help in trapping the delver, his wife, and Enin? Nothing else?"

"That will suffice," Baannat replied.

"And just how are we going to deal with the ghost captain?"

"We will attack those he cares about. The warrior spirit will also enter into a bargain if the terms are presented properly. Ryson Acumen, Holli Brances, and Enin himself mean a great deal to Sy Fenden. We will place them in danger and then use their lives to bargain with the captain."

"How do we do that?"

"That will be my responsibility."

"And what do I have to do?"

"Bring them to the Lacobian Desert."

"The desert? Why?"

Baannat grew tired of responding to the human and decided it was time to make their positions clear.

"I do not answer your every question!" the ghoul growled. "I've told you what you will be required to do. You will bring the three I mentioned to the desert. I will give you further instructions as necessary!"

Neltus realized it was too late to do anything but agree. More than anything, he wanted to regain control over crimson magic, wanted to reestablish his link to the land. If anything, the price was moderately insignificant. It was not *his soul* the ghoul wanted. The torment would not be his. All he had to do was trap others, individuals he was not all that fond of anyway. To him, it seemed a very small price to pay to get back what he wanted.

"I'll get them to the desert."

"You will not have your magic to assist you," Baannat revealed.

It was true. Neltus would not be able to rely on magic, but the loss of the energy itself might offer an answer. He considered the Lacobian Desert. He had spent considerable time there when his core was intact. He knew the region, as well as its inhabitants. He had once enjoyed a strong connection to the sands of the desert, and his understanding of the area spawned a new idea.

"I don't think I'll need it. I think I have a plan."

"Very well. You will leave now."

Baannat paused and appeared to sniff the wind, but it was not a scent for which he searched. He drank in the echoes of magic rolling over the edges of the precipice, small shreds that pointed back to certain individuals. The emptiness of nonexistence was his domain and he could use it to contrast against the residual auras of those with significant powers. One such stream directed him to the object of his desires.

"Use the magic in your ring as you planned. Head to Connel. You will find those you seek in that human city. Even Ryson Acumen is there, at an ancient structure. Move quickly, but leave the portal to my realm open. In order to follow the events properly, I will require an opening into this existence."

"But I don't have the energy within me to power it endlessly. Once the magic runs out, it'll close on its own."

"I will feed it with sufficient energy. In my current state of existence, I have learned how to merge my power with the spells of others. The magic from my realm will keep the spell from fading. Once I add my own energy to it, it will stay open indefinitely."

Neltus watched carefully as the slink ghouls wove their magic into the portal and placed the energy of nonexistence into the spell which created the rift. The new bond between the original spell and the empty magic cascading out of Baannat's realm was intricate, the connection inspired. Neltus realized learning such a skill would offer him even greater power, if he ever regained his core. To that end, he saw a way to ensure his own survival, at least for a while.

"You realize if something happens to me, the portal will close. I know you can keep me from canceling the portal now that you've transformed it, but only if I'm still alive. If I die, the spell will fragment and the rift will close."

"Do not concern yourself with your own safety. I have other reasons to keep you alive. Do the things I ask of you, and you will have your core returned."

Neltus nodded and prepared to use the magic within his ring to send him to Connel. He knew what he needed to do, and he would use the emptiness within him as a ploy to regain what he had lost.

### **A Final Note from the Author**

**Joint Intentions** 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](http://www.sitelane.com).

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

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