



Delver Magic

Book I

Sanctum's Breach

Jeff Inlo

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For Joan, without you there would be no magic!

I would like to offer my very sincere thanks to Christine Bell for all her diligence in reviewing my work. I would also like to thank J. Armstrong for creating her web site directory of free online novels. A large thank you is due all the fine people at MobileRead for all their support. I also wish to convey my appreciation to all those that have sent me emails. Your encouragement means more to me than I can possibly convey in this short space. Finally, I wish to thank you for taking a look at the Delver Magic series.

Preface

Countless seasons pass.

I... exist.

Time continues.

I... am alone.

The world outside moves on, changes.

The light bends, reflects back to me.

More seasons pass.

No. There is more beyond this. I am trapped.

People are born, they live, they die. The cycle continues on and on.

I have power. I will be free.

A burst of power shreds the silver lined reflective mirrors. It scatters the shadows that surround it just as it shatters through the diamond hard reinforced ceiling. It bends upward through another cavern searching for an outer wall. It tunnels through the rock side of an imposing mountain until it is finally free.

Magic has returned.

Chapter 1

Near the town of Connel, the flatlands in the distance trembled as if a great wave crested just beneath its surface. Like distant thunder, a growing rumble swept forward and broke the peace and serenity of the farmlands. The grinding roar gave only short notice as the wave of convulsion rolled forward with uniform power.

The people of this region were not accustomed to earthquakes, though some had experienced a small vibration perhaps once in their lifetimes. This, however, was no slight tremor, nor was it a massive quake that people of the west have often spoke of... an all encompassing upheaval that spreads like ripples on disturbed water. This was power unleashed yet also confined at the same time. The quake took the pure form of a single rolling tremor, an unbroken line of disturbance stretching north to south, its ends out of sight. The land in front and behind the convulsion remained calm and steady, but the ground at the point of the crest lifted up as if it were being pushed away by a thousand angry souls long-buried in the soil.

The fury of the disturbance lashed out upon all in its path. The few trees which spotted the landscape as markers for farmers resisted the tremor, but as the upheaval rolled past their roots, a few shifted to lean at slight angles from the ground. Fence posts bolted into the air like thrown javelins. Shepherd dogs howled, and the panicked livestock wandering the fields raced in every direction. Fortunately, the ground did not split beneath them. Though the tremor tussled them, threw them to and fro, no true injury befell a single animal.

The distress of the animals caught the attention of the farmers. As they peered out among their vast stretches of land, they witnessed the on-coming tremor. They stared with dumbfounded shock. They had faced storms, draughts and floods. They had endured swarms of crop eating insects and diseases which threatened their livestock. They had suffered through all of this with perseverance, with a belief that these were simply challenges to overcome. Never before had they encountered the land itself rising up against them. They looked to the tremor with abhorrence, as well as panic.

As the quake rumbled onward, its path was unmistakable. It would first surge below their own barns and houses before heading toward the very center of town. The potential jeopardy broke the incapacitating shock, and farmers hastened to action. Neighbors needed to be warned, animals tended.

The alarm spread from the furthest limits inward to the more populated areas of Connel. From the farmlands, calls went out from neighbor to neighbor. A single word of "Quake!" brought disbelief first, frenzy second as the never ending rumble washed away any doubts.

In the town, bells rang to alert the public. Shouts raged from the confusion, and soon, the entire town raised an ear to the commotion. At Connel's heart, merchants and citizens alike stumbled about with a near dazed sense of confusion. As of yet, they could not see the tremor, but the word spread of it like fire on alcohol. When the distant rumble caught their ears, they believed, and they feared what was to come.

The farmhouses to the far west were the first to feel the surging power. Strong men and women raced quickly to their animals, to free them from barns which they feared might collapse. Horses and mules kicked at their stalls as farmers fought against time and panic to open each barn door. They loosed their teams to the open fields, knowing there they would be safe. They did not feel as secure about themselves or their homes.

They braced themselves over open ground as the rumbling bore down upon them. The dirt rose beneath their feet, sending many of them sprawling. The surging disturbance raised the ground above the height of a tall man's knees. Again, the soil did not break. As quickly as it rose, it fell back, leveling out as if nothing had happened.

The tremor rolled apathetically beneath barns and farmhouses alike. The structures quivered with the upheaval. They shook and rattled, they danced and moved. Dilapidated shacks crumbled into muddled piles of wood and debris, but the sturdier buildings withstood the barrage of force, sustaining only minor damage.

Farmers took back to their feet. With a heavy breath of relief for their own safety, they watched with concern as the ripple now raced toward Connel's center.

The next obstacle in the path of the tremor was an ancient stonewall which surrounded most of the town. Built generations ago, it stood as one of the oldest landmarks of Connel. Only the Night Watch Inn, the Church of Godson, and two private homes could boast of a longer existence. Many other older buildings had long since been torn down and replaced with more modern structures.

The wall's age did not bring it any glory or respect. Its purpose or any battles fought at its base had long been forgotten. The townspeople merely ignored it these days, or viewed it as a nuisance when roads needed to be built extending beyond its limits.

The wall was wider than it was tall. Its height barely reached the shoulders of an average man, but its stout thickness made it difficult to remove. Its substance of heavy stone and mortar allowed it to survive these long ages with little wear. Breaking through a section was a mighty task. Even the most skilled engineers marveled at its intrinsic strength. More often than not, the soil was built up around the wall, and any construction went over rather than through it. Fortunately, though the wall encircled the entire town, it enclosed a wide expanse of land. For whatever reason it was built, it far exceeded the original outskirts of Connel's earlier size. Connel expanded many times over the centuries, and only now did it just begin to spill beyond some sections of the wall.

As the tremor rolled in from the farmlands, the alerted townspeople looked toward this barrier to gauge the strength of the rolling upheaval. The wave of energy would strike the foundation of the wall before reaching any significant portion of the town. Fearing more for their homes than for the existence of the ancient barrier, many hoped the stone construction would bear the full brunt of the tremor, thus saving their shops, offices, and homes.

The tremor rolled forward, ready to greet the wall with the full fury of its power. When it struck, the barrier did not give. It did not shake, or for that matter react in anyway whatsoever to the violence underneath it. Dirt and dust flew into the air, a brown haze that followed the tremor like an obedient dog. It obscured the clash only for a moment. As the dust settled, the true victor was obvious. The wall remained in place; firm, strong and silent.

Strangely, after passing beneath the ancient bulwark, the disturbance appeared smaller and weaker. While it jostled the onlookers, it did not throw them with the same force which bore upon the farmers. While large structures shook and trembled, they did not rise from the ground or twist with great disorder. At the two points where the tremor remained in contact with the ancient wall, the disturbance was almost imperceptible. To the relief of the townspeople, the tremor moved through Connel as if in weary retreat.

After passing through the heart of the town and beyond the eastern limits, the rolling quake reared up for one more massive head-on confrontation with the stone barrier. The quake disappeared underneath the barrier which remained silent and unmoving. When the tremor resurfaced, it cleared all contact with the wall. It appeared to return to its original strength, and it rolled through the clearings of the east with renewed power.

As the danger passed, so too did the concern of the townspeople. The frenzy of the event dissipated. The shouts and alarms ceased and the confusion disappeared. Slowly but steadily, the people returned to their homes, thankful for the reprieve and ready to discuss the excitement throughout the day. Inspectors and engineers were dispatched to assess the damage, which was nearly nonexistent. A single work crew set out to

repair a few roads and one bridge.

As the day wore on, most Connel residents quickly returned to their daily activities. Markets opened as usual and people walked the streets with hardly a care. The land remained calm from both the west and the east. With so little damage, the tremor turned to nothing more than an oddity for idle chat.

To some, however, the quake presented opportunity. The town council, consisting of four men and one woman, all with business concerns and political aspirations, met that same day to discuss the tremor.

They gathered in the conference room of the town hall, a building of fairly recent construction. The room was large but uninviting. Portraits of previous council members adorned the walls. The faces in these paintings tried diligently to portray an air of dignified importance. The current members carried themselves with the same ingenuous attitude. They sat around an oblong oak meeting table. Stacks of paper waited patiently for their review. The mayor, Edward Consprite, brought the meeting to order.

"The first thing we should do," he said with a deep voice, "is read the initial damage reports into the record."

He placed a pair of reading glasses upon the bridge of his pudgy nose and picked up the engineer's preliminary report. He spoke clearly and firmly as he read the findings aloud. His voice reaffirmed the overwhelming arrogance which exuded from his person like the smell of day old fish. When finished, he waved the papers pompously in front of him.

"I realize that this report tells us nothing we don't already know," he exclaimed. "I'm sure the rest of you did as I did and took a look around before coming here. I saw nothing which would indicate that anyone received any true damage. I do expect, however, that we will have to look out for those hoping to make false claims. I'm sure there are more than a few undesirables that may see this as a chance to gain access to public funds. You know what I mean, some poor slob thinks his house is starting to wear down and will come to us saying the quake damaged his home. He'll expect we use town funds to repair problems that existed seasons ago. We simply can't allow that."

Consprite paused for a moment and reflected upon his own devious thoughts. He shuffled papers about as if looking for a particular report. "We also, however, should not be so unsympathetic as to refuse funds to those that truly suffered damage. After all, an earthquake is an act of God, so to speak. We have to help the truly deserving members of our community in these trying times. I did notice some small damage to some of the local establishments very near here. They only appeared as small cracks in the foundation, but we can't let these things go without quick repair. Some of these establishments serve every member on this board. In order to show our gratitude, uh excuse me, our understanding to their plight, I suggest we set aside ten percent of the town funds to refurbish these local enterprises. Any objections?"

Samuel Cofort spoke quickly and with an edge to his voice. "I will not object as long as another two percent of the fund is apportioned for repairs to the town hall. I'm sure this very meeting room, as well of some of the offices, might need repairs. For all we know, the very chairs we are sitting on may have received some unseen damage. It would be wise to correct such problems before anyone gets hurt. I think it would also be a good idea to replace the older furniture in our personal offices."

Consprite nodded his head in knowing approval. "I agree, Samuel. Forgive me for being so shortsighted as not to recognize such a splendid idea myself." He turned his head to the others around the table. "Any other suggestions?"

"I have a question," Elizabeth Bent exclaimed with a challenging tone. Her position as the only woman upon the council gave her status in the community, but she thirsted for more. "Who will decide which establishments receive funds and how much?"

Consprite did not hesitate in responding. "We shall form a committee of two. As mayor, I shall take one seat and, since you raised the concern, you will have the other. The committee shall be responsible for distributing funds. Does this meet with your approval?"

"Yes it does," she replied with a guarded smile.

The final two council members were about to object but Consprite, as was his way, spoke quickly to make the situation quite clear. "Fine, with your support as well as Samuel's, we already have the necessary three votes to approve the measure. Although any opposition may be viewed as hostile toward the town in a time of need, I will now ask any council member opposed to speak for the record."

The room remained quiet.

Consprite did not allow the silence to prevail for long. "Now that we have quickly and judiciously met the immediate needs created by this incident, I open the floor to other suggestions on how we may best serve the town."

The councilwoman again seized the opportunity to take the initiative. "I suggest we send out investigators to the east and west. I think it may serve us well if we identify how other areas fared against this small quake. Other towns may not have been as fortunate as our own. There may be a need for labor and materials of which we might be able to supply, for a fee of course."

"I see," Consprite grunted as he placed a hand to his smoothly shaven chin.

The councilwoman proceeded as the mayor continued to solemnly reflect upon the suggestion.

"I know of many shopkeepers with a surplus of certain goods. I'm sure they would be grateful if they found an immediate market for their items. There are also a few artisans available that I'm sure would be willing to extend their talents to out of town opportunities, especially if the price is right. While our town is growing, there are still carpenters and masons eager to find new jobs. This quake may have created such an opportunity."

"An interesting proposal," Consprite hummed with an equally guarded tone. The prospect seemed inviting, but he found it distasteful that the idea was presented by Bent. He knew of her secret desires to unseat him as mayor. It was his gift to see through the charade of others, to understand the motivations, the aspirations, and the desires of both his friends and foes. He would only allow Bent to take his place if he was able to move up the political ladder, not down. Thus, he dealt with most of her proposals with great care. "And how should we proceed with such an initiative?"

"I suggest we send someone who will investigate and send us word of the situation before we get involved. That way, we appear concerned with our neighbors but not foolhardy. I suggest we hire delvers. They will move across the countryside far faster than any of us. They can assess the situation and make first contact with those needing the greatest help."

"Yes, yes," Consprite said quickly. He turned a pen in his fingers. "This is very true. We would not waste time or effort in the less lucrative areas. Any delver worth his salt would surely give us a great advantage." He looked up with a nod of acceptance. "I heartily approve."

"I oppose the measure," Cofort said sullenly. "I do not trust delvers. They always require large payments and no one can ever really tell if they do what they say they do. No one can follow them, no one can check up on them."

"I realize that delvers are expensive," Consprite admitted candidly, "but that's because no one can do the job they can do. I realize that it is difficult to check on them, but just imagine if we sent out regular men. They would need a week's worth of supplies and equipment. Surely, that more than offsets the larger payment for the services of a delver."

"But we don't know that the damage to other towns was any worse than it was here," Cofort insisted. "If so, we will have paid a delver for nothing."

"True, but it's also just as possible that villages east and west of here may require a good deal of our supplies and labor. I'm not willing to miss that opportunity."

Cofort heaved a heavy sigh. He would not, however, give up his complaint so easily. "I still say we can't trust them."

"I don't really trust anyone," Consprite admitted in a cold voice. "And I don't really care for delvers all that much, either. But they are, as I said before, the best suited for this task. We're not asking them to guard our funds, we're asking them to scout out territory, and that is what they do. Now, I don't want to hear anymore about not wanting to hire delvers. We've done it before, and they have come in most useful. I move that we enlist two delvers, one to go due west and another to explore east. Who will second?"

"I second the motion," the councilwoman said brusquely while she glared at Cofort.

"Fine. If there is no other opposition, the measure is passed."

The final two council members remained silent.

Consprite now detected a chance to drop a potentially difficult problem into the councilwoman's lap. Seeking out delvers was not always a favorable activity. Their skills made them great spies and the ignorant often identified them with treachery. It would certainly not do well for any of the council members if they were seen cavorting with delvers and perhaps making secret deals. He clasped his hands together and spoke almost innocently, as if that were possible, about the prospect.

"It seems all we have to do now is find and hire delvers for the job. I think Elizabeth should handle this, seeing it was her idea." He looked to her almost defying her to protest, but she did not. He continued with a calculating tone. "I take it that means you accept. Since this is a delicate matter, I suggest you find two of the better delvers. Send them off immediately. You can pay them up to half of their fee before they leave. I'll leave the negotiations to you. I would suggest you send the more trustworthy you find to explore the west. It is there where the quake originated. I have a feeling that they'll find something important, and I've learned to trust these feelings. They've got me where I am now."

#

The town council was not alone in its interest over the quake. Members of the Church of Godson also could not simply forget the earlier tremor. Their attention, however, seemed edged more out of concern, almost fear. While its attendants were few, confusion and alarm prevailed through their numbers hours after the quake passed. The followers gathered all that day. Many came out at frequent intervals, stood upon the tall stone steps, and looked out to the west with a grim burden. The church's leader, an inconspicuous gentleman, continuously appeared at the door to calm the members and guide them back inside. He himself, however, could not avoid glancing out to the west with an equally pained expression.

This anxiety was noticed by those who passed the church, but it was discounted. Town residents simply shrugged or shook their heads. They considered what they knew of these zealots, and rumor and gossip

constantly questioned the very sanity of the Godson sect.

On the whole, the church and its small group of followers appeared gripped by legends of nonsense, legends which included such bizarre creatures that anyone of rational thought must dismiss as pure fable. If this church spoke of powerful mages and sorcerers, where were such wizards today? And what of these strange races which supposedly coexisted with humans? It was all obvious madness. Yet, rumors raced wildly that this was the embodiment of the church's beliefs.

The distaste for the Church of Godson was almost understandable, for Connel was populated solely by humans. Of all the wild creatures rumored as part of the church's text, only the delver existed within the realm of the humans. Certainly, that was not enough to substantiate the presence of other strange races, and nowhere near sufficient to bring any credence to the followers of Godson. Thus, the attendants were usually ridiculed or ignored, as they were ignored this day.

#

Ryson Acumen, a purebred delver, moved quickly on foot toward the setting sun. The soles of his boots barely grazed the surface of the road, creating just enough impact to propel him forward. The soft step reduced the chance of leaving a trail as well as lessening the amount of friction which might slow him. The striking of foot against ground conceived the lightest of sounds, nearly inaudible until he was upon you. How strange this sight was; pumping legs moving like pistons at break neck speed, yet with near silence and total control. He moved like most delvers moved, as if blessed with the grace of an angel flying among the clouds.

While it appeared this delver was running swiftly, in truth, Ryson was merely setting a comfortable scouting pace. His face revealed his ease with the stride. His mouth shut, breathing through his nose, he showed no signs of physical exertion. He might as well have been resting upon a soft, feather bed. It was the gift of the delver. He could keep this step for many hours without any discomfort.

Ryson's physical presentation included a trim, fit body; from his narrow shoulders down through his long legs. His arms, also long but not to the point of gangly, draped gracefully from his shoulders. His movements were always smooth and precise. His face was only slightly narrower than most, and his features maintained the balance. A crop of short, well-kept hair rode the top of his head. He grew his hair longer once, but the rustling behind his ears interfered with his keen hearing.

Still, with his physical stature as it was, he needed only to act as the common man, and no one would ever identify his delver heritage. But Ryson ran through the town at this particular moment because his delver soul was filled with much too much anticipation. Even as he pressed onward, his mind filled with memories of the quake. The rumble of the tremor echoed as clearly in his mind as if it were still passing under foot. It was not so much the tremor itself which thrilled him, but the results which it may have left behind. It constituted the opportunity for new exploration. It was this, as well as his meeting with Elizabeth Bent, that drove him with eager anticipation.

As he moved toward Connel's town square, he considered his earlier conversation with the councilwoman. While he believed the quake would create an opportunity for his skills, he never believed she would agree to pay so much. He blessed his own luck as he considered his task, a task perfect for a delver. A task he might have set out to complete on his own had he not found a willing employer.

Quakes were rare in this part of the world. In fact, Ryson never experienced one before this morning. He did know that they carried the power to change the land, land which he scouted many times before. After watching the quake roll past Connel, Ryson actually felt something call to him. The very air bristled with subtle changes somewhere beyond the horizon. A deep instinct awakened and the desire to scout the land emerged with great force. It pressed upon his senses to strike out and investigate. Deep within him, he realized

that what he had once examined and had placed into his great memory was no longer the same. Perhaps the entire land of Uton had been altered, and it was his fortune to determine how. So strong was his instincts, he felt the need to leave immediately.

With no family in town, Ryson did not hesitate to begin his scout. As for equipment, a delver needed little. That which was most important, he carried with him always. It included a knife, a short rope, and a spyscope. Everything else, such as food and shelter, could be found along the journey.

Thus, the able-bodied delver departed with no further delay. With half of a sizeable payment already in his pouch, he moved westward to the beckoning lands with euphoria. So great was his anticipation over what he might find, he moved passed Connel's citizens with near disregard until someone called for his attention.

"Delper!" A voice called out. It held a strong tone, yet concern was also evident.

Ryson brought himself to an immediate halt. Amazingly, the delver showed no sign of imbalance at such an instantaneous stop.

He faced the origin of the voice which called to him. He was already well aware of his exact location, for he always kept his bearings when moving. With but a subtle glance of familiar territory, a delver could reveal more about his surroundings than an ordinary man could recite even after taking hours to study. He stood at the steps of the Church of Godson and the leader of the church waited just outside the front door.

The leader, dressed just as any other man of town, took a few steps downward and motioned for Ryson to meet him halfway.

Ryson acknowledged with a nod and slowly proceeded upward, one step at a time. He stopped two steps below the church leader, yet high enough to command a strategic view of the surrounding area.

"Yes sir?" Ryson said reflecting a tone of politeness as well as respect.

"I am Reader Matthew," the middle-aged man said plainly. If he was proud of his position in his small church, it did not show in his tempered speech. He bowed slightly at Ryson.

"I know, sir," Ryson bowed in return.

Matthew showed little emotion other than concern to a distant problem.

"And I am aware that you are Ryson Acumen, full-blood delver."

"I am."

While Ryson continued to feel a great urge to move quickly upon his quest, he curbed his impatience. He waited respectfully for Reader Matthew to continue.

Matthew acknowledged Ryson's honor with a thankful smile before returning a weary gaze to the west.

"You are no doubt setting out on a mission of exploration," the reader stated succinctly. "You are moving west. It pleases me to see this. May I ask you of your objectives?"

"Certainly," Ryson responded without hesitation. Councilwoman Bent said nothing about maintaining secrecy over the matter; otherwise he would have kept a measure of discretion. Instead, she made it plain that the entire town council had asked for the delver's assistance. In fact, she was not at all cautious when making her

request. She had spoken as if she wanted everyone in the tavern to hear, thus he treated the request as if it were public knowledge. "I'm to explore the lands and towns west of Connel. After I've investigated how our neighbors have fared against this morning's quake, I'll send reports back to the town council by courier. I'm to report as to damage and the need for labor and materials."

"How far are you commissioned to travel?"

Ryson considered the question for a moment before replying. "To Burbon and Pinesway. That appeared to be the greatest concern. There's not much beyond that that I think the council might be interested in."

"What are your own personal objectives?" Matthew asked with a delicate tone.

Again Ryson answered without hesitation, but he glanced over his shoulder as he spoke. "I want to know more about this tremor, what it might have done."

Matthew nodded his head. "That is good. I have a charge for you. I hope you will accept it."

Ryson did not speak. He waited for the reader to announce his request.

Matthew exhaled deeply before continuing. "I need to know what has happened. I need to know where this quake came from. And I also need to know how the land has changed. I can offer you no payment. I can only hope that you will include me in your reports. I will also hope that you continue your journey even if it means venturing far beyond the limits of your original employer's wishes. I ask that you continue west until you find the source of this quake, if of course that's possible."

"I doubt finding the source would be difficult," Ryson responded with certainty. It was not with arrogance he spoke, but with calm confidence in understanding the land. "All I have to do is find the area of greatest upheaval. That should indicate where the quake began."

"Then will you do this for me?"

Ryson reflected upon the proposal with obvious hesitation.

His silence brought anxiety to the reader. Not wishing to be turned down, the reader hoped to entice the deliver further. "If it is payment you need, I may be able to scrape something together. We are a poor church, but this is of ..."

Ryson politely interrupted. "It's not that. I've already been hired and I don't see a conflict in sending you reports. I would also be more than happy to inform you of what I find beyond my work for the council."

Hopeful expectation blanketed the face of the reader. "Then you'll do it?"

"I don't know if I can," Ryson responded with all honesty. He did not wish to dampen the spirits of the reader, but he also felt the need not to misguide him. "I'm not just dismissing your request, but I don't know what I'm going to find out there. Right now the source of the quake interests my instincts enough so I want to know more, but that could change quickly depending on what I find. It would be hard to follow a trail of dust if I come across something of greater interest. Do you understand?"

"I do, but I don't think that will be a problem," Matthew reflected. His expression still held hope, yet it also included deep deliberation. He appeared to be placing the limits of logic upon his own dilemma. With a satisfied nod of his head, he continued. "If the quake does hold importance, for me as well as for you, it will continue to pull upon you. If it does not, then my own anxieties over the matter will be eased just as well. You

are a delver with keen insights. I simply have to trust your instincts."

Ryson kept his eyes upon the reader, but he chose his words and tone carefully. He did not wish to insult the reader, but Matthew's request, if not his concern, created questions of his own. "If you don't mind, what is it that's bothering you? I haven't had much contact with people of your faith, but I've never known any of them to show such concern. Your own admission has me thinking about what I might find."

"The truth is, I have no idea what you will find," the reader stated plainly, the gleam in his eyes giving way to the resurgence of that which disturbed him. "That is what truly bothers me. It has been some time since I have had to deal with the unknown. I must admit, I do not like it."

"We all deal with the unknown," Ryson commented with skepticism. "Forgive me for saying so, but I still don't understand why it's upsetting you so much. I have seen the people of your church face much more serious problems without showing the same concern. Truthfully, I have always admired that. Because I want to help you find what it is you're looking for, I have to ask again, what makes this quake so distressing?"

Matthew smiled upon the delver. "You honor your people. If that has not been said to you before, it is long overdue. You show respect with honesty. I shall try to do the same. The truth is that we do not face the unknown as the rest of the town. We are blessed with knowledge of things to come. People of this church follow the Book of Godson. It contains many prophecies, but it describes them in elaborate fashion. An ordinary follower or reader, including myself, has a difficult time understanding the true meaning. Roughly ten cycles ago, however, we were blessed by a visit from a believer with a great power of understanding. I will not reveal his name out of respect for his own wishes. During his stay, he revealed to us the meaning of many of the prophecies. He explained them clearly and in our own language, and he actually told us what to expect over the many cycles to come. Amazingly, each and every one of his interpretations occurred just as he explained. We studied his work and soon we were prepared for every major event which would affect this land before it would even happen. When we heard rumors, we knew which were true and which were not. The interpretations have guided us in that respect and we have relied on them ever since.

"To the people of this church, the interpretations have become a great source of strength and hope. They project great things for those that hold to the works of Godson. The interpreter told us of a time when this land would become a place of peace. While I can not reveal to you his work, I can tell you that many of the prophecies have not occurred and are not scheduled to occur for many cycles."

"I really don't see what the problem is," Ryson admitted.

"The problem is that this quake was not prophesied to us. The translator made no mention of such an event in any of his writings. Yet, we have grown accustomed to knowing such events before they occur. Unfortunately, this morning we faced the quake just as the rest of the town, with no warning and no idea that it was coming. For us, this is most unusual. It is also most discomfoting. Some of our members are wondering if the interpretations are now in danger of failing. This would be a terrible event, for we have grown to base all of our hopes on these same interpretations."

"What has the translator to say of this?"

"We can not ask him. His stay with us was only for a few seasons. Such was his way. He would stay temporarily at each church explaining the meaning of the prophecies before moving on to the next. If he were here, he might be able to explain what is wrong, but he is not."

Ryson considered the tale, scratched the side of his face as he offered his own explanation. "Could he have just missed this one? Or maybe it wasn't even in the prophecies."

The reader shook his head. "Every major event has been prophesied and translated for us. I can't believe he missed it."

"What if it wasn't a major event?" Ryson offered. "Maybe this was just a minor incident?"

"Is that what you really think?" the reader eyed him questioningly.

The delver raised an eyebrow and sniffed the air around him. To his senses, he already noticed subtle alterations. "I'm not sure. I sense changes, something in the air. But how important... I just don't know."

"I'm sure you can sense things which are beyond my reckoning," the reader allowed and once again his focus shifted to the lands to the west, "but what about the tremor itself? Wouldn't you consider experiencing a quake in these parts as out of the ordinary? I'm not even sure of when the last recorded tremor came upon these lands."

"I would have to agree. The actual quake was a unique event. But who knows how important it really was?" Ryson kicked lightly at the stone steps of the ancient church. "From what I've seen so far, the quake has done little to leave its mark. There's hardly a damaged building to be found. Maybe that's why your prophet failed to alert you to its coming."

"I have thought of this myself," the reader allowed. "It is what I'm saying to comfort the others. It is not, however, making any of us rest easier. We have spent much of the day going over the work of the translator in hopes of finding something we might have missed. We have even gone as far as attempting to interpret prophesies in different ways. We have not done this since the translator made his visit. But our attempts have been useless. It's a daunting task and we have not been able to find any reference to this strange tremor. It continues to disturb us all, and as I look upon you, my doubts become even heavier."

Ryson looked thoughtfully at the reader. "Why is that? Have I said anything which bothered you?"

"No, no!" Matthew said apologetically. "It is not in what you have said. Instead, it is in the heightened excitement I sense within you. Your natural instincts are driving you to explore the lands and investigate what has happened. I can see that and that is precisely what worries me. I think your powerful senses might be telling us that there is something important out there."

Ryson shook his head doubtfully. "I wouldn't be so certain. I admit my urge is strong, but I've never been able to rely upon that with any certainty. There may be nothing more to see than a few cracks in the land or a broken road. I simply won't be able to tell what's out there until I make my exploration."

Matthew nodded in agreement. "That is why I have made this request of you. If you report to us that the quake left little mark on our world, than we will all sleep easier."

Ryson held out his hand in friendly reassurance. "Then, I'll ask you to relax, for now. I'll include you in my reports, and I'll let you know if there is anything to worry about only when I find it. Due to the nature of your concerns, I will limit my reports to include only the changes I find and not to those seeking supplies or building materials," Ryson smiled broadly in hopes of breaking the tension which gripped the reader.

The reader chuckled. "Thank you. I doubt we could offer any real help. Leave that to the council."

"I will," Ryson replied with a continued smile, "but I will tell you what I see and what I find. I'll let you interpret this as you see fit. As to finding the source of the quake, I'll make every attempt to find it, but if I do break off my search, I will send you word."

"That is all I can ask, even more." The reader placed his hand upon Ryson's shoulder. "Go now and do not hesitate to report any of your findings. I need to know the bad as well as the good."

Chapter 2

At its infancy, Connel sat nestled on the edge of the largest pine forest in the land of Uton. The trees stretched to the south, west and northwest for untold lengths until giving way to rocky ground or mountains. Hills abounded beyond the reaches of the forest as gateways to other landscapes. A scorching desert waited past rocky ravines to the southwest, and hundreds of snow-capped mountains towered over the horizon in the north. A few scattered peaks stood directly west; forming a jagged boundary between the eastern flatland prairies and the western coastlands.

As Connel became more populated, pioneers moved further beyond its limits. Dark Spruce began to shrink steadily as thousands of trees were cleared to create the outlying farmlands. Two new western outposts were also developed, though in much more recent history. The settling of these towns and the increase in farming eventually removed the forest from Connel's sight. While Dark Spruce remained a large stretch of woodland to the south and southwest, the vein which strove northward was reduced to a narrow band. This thin extension served as a small border between the newly colonized towns and the western mountains.

At the outset of his exploration, Ryson scoured the countryside to the immediate west of Connel. He concentrated first on the pastures and farmlands. Moving on foot at speeds defying human understanding, he covered wide areas while the sun barely moved overhead. His eyes scanned the wide-open lands. He stopped only momentarily to speak with farmers in the field or merchants on the road. To his satisfaction, these outlying lands received little damage.

Finding only traces of the quake's path in the farmlands, he turned his attention to the neighboring outposts, Burbon and Pinesway. Each received more damage than Connel, but nothing which could not be repaired within a season or two. A few buildings had suffered structural impairment and more than one road had crumbled, but the lasting consequences of the tremor were insignificant. Like nothing more than a strong storm passing through the night, the quake had come and gone. The damage was merely temporary as no lives were lost and no permanent alterations in the land could be found.

Ryson's investigations within the towns took greater time than his explorations over the open flatlands. Most of those he met were not accustomed to his pace, and the delver slowed to match their needs. Days passed as he made several contacts with people of both towns. He promised them additional supplies and labor from Connel at prices to be negotiated with a second representative, probably councilwoman Bent.

During this time, he dispatched messages to the council and to Reader Matthew. He detailed his findings, described the degree of all damage. He continued his investigation until he assessed all prospective sites that would be of interest to the council. He sent a final message appraising them of everything he had discovered. He advised one member to make the journey to represent Connel and offered his own estimates of needed supplies. With his duty to the council fulfilled, he turned his attention back to the path of the quake. He sent word to the reader that following the quake's path would lead him into the dense tree-covered regions of Dark Spruce. The lack of any villages within the forest would create a lag before he could send his next communication. He ended his note by promising to forward another message as soon as possible.

Ryson moved westward without further delay. After passing beyond the limits of Pinesway, he soon entered the vast forest. At his point of entry into the woodlands, no road broke through the trees and no footpath existed for travel. A staggered multitude of tree trunks filled the landscape, created a broken labyrinth of infinite paths. While underbrush was light, due to the dense shade of the evergreens, the ground remained uneven and rocky. Large roots jutted up from the soil, creating even more obstacles. Ryson glided over such hindrances as if they did not exist.

He carried nothing which might impede his progress. Even as he advanced into pure wilderness, he ignored thoughts of extra rations of food or water. He brought nothing more than his basic supplies. The forest itself

would provide Ryson with everything he needed. Food and shelter were plentiful. He would eat the seeds, nuts, and succulent fruits of all the indigenous trees. He would drink from streams or dig below the roots for ground water. He would sleep within the pines, using the thick branches for shelter and security.

As for getting lost in such a dense forest, that remained a human calamity. Humans saw the forest as an obstacle between two points. They conceived themselves lost when they could no longer determine the correct path toward their destination or back to their point of departure. A delver, however, was never lost, for a delver did not think in terms of which was the correct path. Even a forest as large as Dark Spruce was viewed in whole. Being lost meant being unable to find a way. For someone with Ryson's skills, there was always a way to travel, a path to cross.

Ryson explored Dark Spruce on previous occasions. The largest and closest forest to his adopted home of Connel often enticed him. Pioneers looking for new lands to conquer would also employ him for such missions. In his first trips to the northern branch, he actually began his investigations with great anticipation. Such an immense area must have held untold secrets. To his disappointment, he never found anything more than the legion of ancient trees. Large sturdy trunks growing boldly to the sky filled the landscape with a universal sameness. The number of branches remained somewhat stunted at ground level, but they increased as one looked skyward. They created a complete blanket of green which could block out the sun with ease. Ryson's eyes faced little difficulty, for they could adjust to even greater darkness, but for his own desires, the forest held little for him to see.

As the delver entered Dark Spruce upon this day, he did so with only slight arousal. The forest held out no special enticement. It only offered the trail of the quake; slightly uprooted trees and shifted broken soil. The traces of the disturbance granted only a slight distraction from the monotony of Dark Spruce, and he walked and climbed for half the morning before he found anything of true interest.

As the sounds of Pinesway faded from his acute hearing, he began to pick up the faint traces of a pungent odor. As he raced onward, he discovered larger pockets of the objectionable scent lingering about. It piqued his curiosity, called for his attention. The smell hung heavy in the air. It smelled of rot. The decay, however, was out of place. It was not the decomposition of the forest which created this odor. It was simply too powerful to be the emanation of rotting leaves or grass.

As the stench became more prevalent, so did the delver's curiosity. Ryson stopped. He paused to take a greater sample of the air through his nose. His nostrils flared. He turned about to sniff the light breeze which filtered through the branches overhead. Part of the rank odor became unmistakable. It held the ghastly smell of rotting flesh. Perhaps an animal, a large animal like a deer, died somewhere nearby. Yet, the smell also contained traces of another scent, an odor which separated itself from the decay. Unique in its properties, Ryson could only liken it to the static smell of a summer lightning storm. Even the very air which contained the stench seemed charged.

Unable to distinguish anything more from the odor, Ryson pushed forward, but he moved with a mind to this new mystery. His concentration shifted away from the quake, and the instincts which are his as a delver began to guide him. The secret behind the stench became his mission.

As he stepped forward, the scent did not always become noticeably stronger. In certain places, it remained constant and Ryson found it difficult to choose a direction. More than once, he circled about his current position before selecting a path. To the delver's satisfaction, the smell did not dissipate. It continued to beckon him and overpowered anything else which might call to his attention.

With thoughts of the quake almost extinct, the delver began to break in a southern direction. With his nose in the air, he paid little attention to the growing thickness of the trees. Greater coverage of branches overhead blocked more and more of the sunlight. The ground stretched out before him, etched with crusty, bark covered

trunks and obscured in shady darkness. He continued to move with the fluid grace befitting a true delver. His stride carried him faster than the running of a frightened rabbit, and his ability to step lightly over uneven ground kept him from stumbling upon the bulging roots.

With Ryson's attention fixed solely upon what his nose revealed to him, he relied little upon his sight. His vision simply aided him in crossing the forest, until it revealed to him the object of his search.

Ryson stopped immediately. His senses erupted as the unimaginable stood before him. The stench leaped in potency, at least tenfold, and there was no doubt that it was indeed the outpouring of rotting flesh. But this, this was no deer. It was a man, or what was left of one.

The degree of decay was staggering. The flesh cracked and shriveled, split and oozed. The stench and the pus attracted insects of all sizes. Flies, big and small, buzzed about like a shifting, black cloud. They landed on loose flesh and scurried about exposed bone. Hundreds of fluttering insect wings created a crescendo of a hissing sizzle.

This lonely traveler, pioneer or scout, must have been dead for weeks, maybe even months, such was the indication of the decay. Yet, it stood. It stood like a frozen ice sculpture or a stone statue. It stood and gazed at Ryson with one lifeless eye. The other had rotted completely away. Ryson could see into the empty socket, and he could look upon the edges of the skull which surrounded it. The left side of the body apparently decomposed faster than the other. Upon the same side as the vacant eye socket, most of the flesh around the arm was missing. Much of the left forearm bone stood revealed. The oozing flesh also hung loosely about the left hand.

In the other hand, which remained more or less intact, the fingers grasped a long thick branch. Its tip had been shaved into a fine point. Though the spear-like weapon remained firmly in the grip of this half-corps, half-skeleton, it hung suspended in the air and offered no explanation as to what allowed the corpse to remain upright. The dead sentinel stood of its own accord, upon its own two decaying feet.

Ryson turned his disbelieving eyes back upon the face. He noticed the lips had rotted clean away, revealing a ghastly grin. The sight was too much, and the delver forced himself to turn away.

As he did, his ears caught the sound of unsteady footsteps. Ryson lifted his head, and noted the flash of movement coming his way. With great speed and balance, he jumped aside before understanding his plight. As the breeze of a slashing stick passed over his shoulder, he refocused his attention, though he could not fathom his dilemma. It was the spear of the corpse which slashed at him, and it remained in the same rotting hand.

"Godson!" The delver exclaimed in shock. He took retreating steps as the corpse turned itself slowly. Ryson watched in horror and disbelief. The decaying body was moving.

The corpse, however, defied logic, defied reality. It redirected itself back at Ryson and again swung its shaft with malice. It voiced no sound. Only the crackling turn of exposed bone echoed from its figure, and that was nearly drowned out by the hum of flies which followed in a dancing swarm.

Ryson's speed again helped him escape the attack, but little helped his mind escape the horror. Even as he stepped out of harm's way, he could not truly comprehend what he was seeing. He moved out of instinct. It saved his life, but it did not restore the hold of his senses.

As this living corpse turned and faced Ryson once more, the delver made every attempt to rationalize his predicament. Perhaps this thing was not yet dead, perhaps by some miracle it held onto the smallest spark of life. How else could it move toward him? How else could it attack, unless it somehow remained alive? But

this was impossible. There was no blood flowing from the open wounds, there was no sign of breathing through those sinister teeth. Nothing like this could live, yet still it moved.

Before the corpse could make another attempt at the delver's life, Ryson finally gained greater control of his own movements. He began to step away and use the surrounding trees as cover. He scurried about like a lost child while he assessed this preposterous situation and questions steamrolled through his mind.

"Who are you?" he demanded with only a hint of panic in his voice.

The creature did not respond. It only circled about the trees hoping to get a clear shot at its prey.

Ryson tried to maintain his composure. He checked his fear as he continued to move, using his speed to his advantage. He kept a safe distance and at least two trees between himself and the corpse as he watched the creature carefully. The more he watched the more confused he became. With muscle and tissue missing from many parts of its body, movement should have been impossible. But apparently, these facts held little meaning. The creature continued its prodding, unyielding attack. It proved its ability to turn, move, and fight even as rotting flesh dropped off its visible bones.

Unable to find any understanding in what he witnessed, Ryson made another attempt to communicate with this atrocity.

"What are you? What are you doing?"

The creature made no sound. No words or even groans escaped its rotted mouth. It offered no explanation for its existence, extended no reason for its attack.

Ryson inhaled deeply, hoping to ease his growing terror. His lungs filled with the stench polluted air, and he coughed it out vigorously. His eyes watered as he fought off the sickness which filled him.

In this moment, the corpse moved with a swiftness it previously hid. It darted from behind one tree and found a position within two body lengths of its target. Nothing but open space stood between it and the delver. It veered back before hurling its pointed shaft with deadly intentions.

Ryson, still choking out the foul air, dropped to the ground instinctively. The spear grazed his hair before gliding well out of reach. His hand flew to the top of his head to check for injury. After brushing his fingers through his hair, he pulled his hand to the front of his face. No blood.

Sprawled over the hard ground and protruding roots, Ryson remained vulnerable. He tried to roll backwards away from the last known position of the corpse. He barely turned at all when his motion was brought to a dead halt. His back hit a solid tree trunk with a resounding thud. He gulped back a sting of pain. His eyes widened in panic as he realized he was prone and backed against a tree, hardly an enviable position to avoid further attack.

With a swirl of his head, he picked up sight of the corpse. It made no attempt to retrieve its spear. Instead, it moved unerringly towards him, apparently ready to block any attempt of escape.

The delver bit back his own terror. Using his great agility, he swung his legs about and came to his knees. He was about to spring to his feet with the intention of climbing the great tree behind him when the corpse unexpectedly leapt forward.

The creature actually flew across the air with a powerful bound. The impact was heavy. It sent the delver back into the trunk. Upon contact, the corpse immediately took hold of its quarry. Even as the two combatants

deflected off the tree and went rolling, the frightful attacker maintained a grip on its intended victim. The cloud of flies now swarmed over both the corpse and the delver as the two became a united mass of flailing limbs.

Ryson used the momentum of impact to continue rolling to an area of open ground. He dug his knees, elbows and feet fiercely into the dirt and propelled himself with all his strength. He pounded a free hand into the midsection of this thing and dropped a heavy shoulder into its chest.

The energized carcass showed no sign of pain. It hung tightly, and it slowly moved its grasp closer and closer to Ryson's throat.

The delver felt the pointed, hard bones of the creature's left hand. They dug first into his side and then into his chest. His mind ached with panic. He whipped his own hand to his belt. His fingers opened his pouch deftly and reached inside. He pulled his dagger free and jabbed it into the center of the corpse. He pushed forward with all his might until every inch of the blade buried itself deep within the rotting skin.

The creature had no reaction. It did not slow its own deliberate assault. Within a heartbeat, it had its putrid hands about the delver's neck. The hard finger bones began to clamp down.

"No!" Ryson screamed before the thing could crush his windpipe. He released his hold on his dagger. With unbridled fury, stoked by the will to live, Ryson threw his arms upward. His forearms crashed into the wrists of the corpse. Such was the force of contact, that the boney left wrist snapped, and the creature's hand went sailing into the brush. The hold was broken, and Ryson scampered off to a safe distance.

The corpse showed no sign of distress over losing its hand. It also showed no sign of tiring. It moved to its feet, brought its focus back upon Ryson, and again, it moved forward.

The delver's shoulders drooped in disbelief. Mental fatigue, more than physical weariness, hung upon him even as he moved carefully away. As he waved the buzzing insects from his face, he considered turning and running for safety. Even as tired as he was, he believed he could quickly outdistance this thing. He condemned the thought, for it offered no answers, but it appeared his only option. With no other weapon, he had no way of stopping it.

Just as he made his decision, a call from the tree above him held him in place.

"Hold your ground!" an order called out.

Unthinkingly, Ryson's gaze flew upward.

The corpse ignored the call and saw yet another opportunity to reach its prey. It again moved with great speed and an extended right arm.

Before the arm could reach its target, another form dropped into the fray. A strange man landed upon the ground directly between Ryson and the attacking creature. He was slightly taller than Ryson, but not by much. He was also thinner, yet his muscles were more defined.

With grace and speed that even a delver might envy, the man drew a gleaming sword. The blade was as long as his arm, but only as wide as two of his fingers pressed together. It gleamed with razor sharpness on both its edges. With one quick stroke, the blade sliced through the air as well as the upper portion of the creature's right arm.

The arm fell to the ground, and for the first time, the corpse paused in its attack. It stood motionless. It stared

at the lifeless arm upon the ground as if contemplating its meaning. The flies also faced indecision. They buzzed back and forth from the amputated arm to the main body of the corpse.

The newly arrived stranger did not show any such hesitation. He leaned to one side, and with a great sweeping motion, sent his blade flashing towards the legs of the cadaver. The stranger stepped into his swing, doubling the force of the blow as it struck at the knees. Both legs snapped in half and the corpse folded to the ground.

Ryson stared at the crumpled figure, his gaze fixed upon the heap of bones and rotting flesh. Just as he exhaled with relief, he thought he noticed a light blue glow fizzle about the remains. No further movement occurred, other than the swarming flies which now appeared content to buzz about the motionless remains. The delver found his voice to mumble a confused question.

"Is it dead?"

"It has been dead for many days," the stranger said sadly, revealing some greater concern.

"What are you talking about?!" The delver's eyes widened as he turned his stare upon the stranger. His outlandish confrontation still fresh in his mind, Ryson failed to question the appearance of the newcomer, and instead, his thoughts remained fixed upon the corpse. Confusion swirled in his brain.

"How can you say that?" Ryson gasped. "If it were dead, how could it move? You must have seen it for yourself. Didn't you see it trying to attack me?"

"That I did." The stranger looked thoughtfully at Ryson. "To perhaps all our dismay, it seems the dead can now be brought back to a sense of life. I despise calling it that, for it is not life at all. Animation. Forced energy. Nothing more."

The delver's bewilderment only increased.

"What?" It was all he could manage to blurt out.

"Magic, I'm afraid," the stranger said distressfully. "It only proves what I already know. The sphere must be free. That is the only answer. It must be. It would explain all that has happened. I could not fathom as to who has gained possession. The thought is too difficult to bear."

The delver found only puzzles in the words of the stranger. He clasped his hands in great torment. His voice held the tone of unreasoning bewilderment. "What... what are you talking about? I don't understand what's going on. None of this makes any sense!"

"It makes all too much sense. Try to calm yourself and I will try to explain. This will not be easy to accept. It's not easy for me, yet it does not surprise me. You were attacked by the undead, sprung from magic long absent from Uton. I would guess that loosened energies are sailing in every direction even as we talk. The remnants of a spell captured long ago, now released, must have found this half-rotten corpse of some wayward traveler. The magic found its home and animated the body. You were simply unfortunate enough to come across its path."

Ryson shook his head vehemently. "That's not possible. What you're saying is simply not possible."

"Isn't it?" the stranger said firmly. "Speak of possibilities and explain to me what you yourself have witnessed. Perhaps many days ago it was not possible, but it appears that this is no longer the case. I tell you the magic is free, and we now face everything that goes with it."

Ryson was aghast. "So you're telling me the dead will start rising all over?"

"No. There will be others, that is for sure, but the magic will take different paths. It depends on many things. Unfortunately, I lack information."

Ryson stared back at the now lifeless heap of rotting flesh. Fatigue, confusion, even despair, crashed upon his every thought. He fought to seize shreds of logic, answers to this unthinkable puzzle. He found nothing but greater turmoil.

"You are human?" the stranger's voice questioned firmly. There was little sign of compassion for the delver's confusion.

Ryson finally forced his gaze completely from the broken mass which previously hoped to kill him. He focused upon the face of the man that came to his aid and now stood before him. The stranger had brown, thin hair that hung straight down and clung to his head and neck. It covered his ears fully before ending at the tops of his shoulders. Over which, he wore a heavy wooden long bow and a quiver of arrows. His face looked as ordinary as anyone's, except for the nose which appeared small and slightly pointed.

"I'm a delver," Ryson finally answered. The question brought some sense of hard reality. Stating a simple fact seemed to reassure his troubled thoughts. Finding momentary sanctuary in such feelings, he focused upon the question. "Why do you ask?"

The stranger revealed a hint of hopefulness at Ryson's response.

"Truly? You are a delver? Full-bred?"

"Yes. Again, why do you ask?"

The stranger ignored the question as he reflected upon his own thoughts. "A delver," he mumbled to himself. "Perhaps a blessing. Difficult to say without more information."

"What are you talking about?" Ryson demanded. His confusion grew into annoyance. "First, you tell me about the undead and strange magic. Then, you say there might be more. You ask if I'm human, but you stand there talking to yourself when you find out I'm a delver. Are we in danger or not?"

"Relax. You are safe for now. Perhaps safer than I. I asked if you were human because I watched you fight. You moved with great speed and agility. I could not believe you were an ordinary human. I thought you might be half-bred. Although they are scarce, they do exist. I myself have never seen one."

"You mean half-delves, half-humans? You haven't seen one before? I've met hundreds."

"No. I mean half-human, half-elf."

"Elf?!"

Again, Ryson's eyes widened in disbelief. He now stared angrily at the brown haired man. The word burned in his mind. This was too much. His despair blossomed into near rage. Was it not enough for him to have dealt with the atrocity of the undead? Would he now have to listen to this stranger cast stories about ancient legends? The explanation of magic animating this pile of rotted flesh and bones was enough to stir his anger, but this, this was too much to handle. Rage took hold of his thoughts, a burning spark ignited into a roaring flame and Ryson snapped with a harangue directed at the stranger's apparent disregard for ancient folklore.

"That's enough! I'm not going to listen to anymore of this. I don't know who you are, but that's enough. You might think I'm fool enough to believe your story about magic, but I won't stand here and listen to anymore! You want to try and make a fool of me by talking about magic, well that's fine, but when you talk about elves you're talking about things you probably don't even understand. You're speaking about legends, myths I may not believe but there are others who do. Who in the name of Godson are you to make light of such things?!"

At first the interloper watched in wide-eyed wonder at the delver's outburst. He was certainly not prepared for such a tongue-lashing and he gaped at Ryson for the first few lines of the angry lecture. Finally, he made an attempt to explain. "Please hold your anger. I assure you I am not making light of the legends. Nothing could be further from my mind."

Ryson's anger barely subsided. "Then, why are you questioning me about elves?" he demanded in a strained tone.

For the first time the stranger showed a gleam of compassion for the delver. He spoke softer and with greater warmth. He sheathed his sword and put his arms behind his back. "First allow me to introduce myself. I am Lief Woodson. I am happy to see you defend what you call myths so vigorously, but I assure you, they are not myths. The teachings to which you refer are based on a reality of long ago. It is a reality, however, which all may have to accept once more."

Ryson finally checked his anger. While the words of the stranger held no more clarity than before, at least his own outburst released the strain of his encounter with the living dead. "I still don't know what you're talking about, but I want to make one thing clear. I know about the legends. I was taught long ago to respect them. That means if you're going to try and make up lies, I won't stand here listening to you. I'll go my own way and find out what I can on my own. I'm not ungrateful to you for saving me, but your words are disrespectful. Not to me, but to others."

Lief Woodson smiled broadly. He even allowed himself to laugh lightly, but only for a scant moment. "You must indeed be a delver, for no human would treat the legends with such respect. Forgive me for laughing, I do not laugh at you. I have witnessed many disconcerting things these past few days. To listen to you sparks a hope deep within me. But let me assure you, I do not abuse those things which you call myths. They are, however, not myths. They were, are, and always shall be reality. I am part of the legends themselves. As you are purebred delver, I am full-bred elf."

Lief pulled his hair back and away from the sides of his head and he exposed his ears for Ryson to witness the pointed tips.

"It is the one true physical characteristic which parts us clearly from the humans," Lief said. "The other differences are not so visible."

"You're an elf!" Ryson exclaimed.

The delver stared at each pointed ear until Lief released his hair and covered them once more. The delver dropped his gaze to the ground and brought his own hand to his forehead.

"What am I saying?" the delver moaned. "How was I to know that elves exist? They're not supposed to exist. And the dead aren't supposed to rise. And magic is something for sideshow illusionists and fairy tales. What's happening here?! What's happening to me?!"

Lief spoke slowly and reassuringly to the delver. "I will tell you all I can. I will tell you of things you may refuse to believe, for I will almost assuredly destroy your previous outlook of this world."

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Ryson groaned with all honesty. His thoughts were a whirlwind. Logic failed to bring light to his scattered mind. He could not erase the image of the walking dead, as he could not avoid casting disbelieving glance after disbelieving glance at his new found companion. The elf's words were no more than a buzzing in his ear which he strained to hear.

"I don't know exactly how much you know of the legends," Lief Woodson continued. "Perhaps what you have heard is only the barest reference to the past."

Ryson kicked at the ground slowly. Seizing upon something he could answer with certainty, he spoke of his own knowledge on the subject. "I've probably heard more than most," he admitted. "My parents wanted me to be acquainted with the legends, not so I would believe them, but so I would be aware of what others thought. I guess it's part of being a delver."

"You may wish to thank your parents for that some day. If it is true, you may well be better prepared for what I see as inevitable."

The delver brought his focus back to the face of the elf. He stared deeply into Lief's eyes. "Tell me the truth, what's happening? What in the name of Godson is going on?"

Lief attempted to show even greater compassion. His own distress, however, became growingly apparent.

"I believe I know," the elf stated, "though others in my camp continue to reject the idea. The existence of the undead, however, confirms my theory. The only question which remains is how it has occurred. The Sphere of Ingar is free from its containment. It is the only answer."

"Ingar's sphere?"

"You know of it?"

"Of course I know of it," Ryson replied. "It's the most important of the legends. It's supposed to explain how the world rid itself of magic and the dark creatures."

Lief nodded to the pile of broken bones and flesh before them. "As you saw for yourself, the dark creatures have returned. Magic is also loose in the land. The blue glow which left the corpse, that was spell remnants. Magic. Perhaps, dark sorcery. Nothing else can explain it."

"But the Sphere of Ingar? Come on! Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"I expect nothing," Lief frowned

"But you're telling me these things. You must be hoping to convince me of them."

"What would you have me do?" the elf questioned with a tone of harshness. "You have asked me what is happening. I am telling you what I believe to be true. Should I tell you that I am not an elf and that this corpse did not come to life? What is it you expect of me?"

Ryson sighed heavily. He did not know what he wanted. If these were the true answers to his questions, they left only more puzzles. "You have to forgive me, but I need a moment to sort this out. What you're saying defies all logic."

"I understand," the elf grumbled grudgingly. "Take a moment to gather yourself, but be warned, I can not totally disregard time. I must return to my camp to warn them of this. The elves are in great peril."

Ryson did not ask for further explanation on that point. Enough confusing, contradictory thoughts bounded through his mind as it was. The last thing he needed was to hear of more outlandish tales. Still, if Lief was right, he had to consider the outlandish; the myths and the legends. His mind rolled back to the tales he learned as a child.

The image of his mother came firmly into mind. He could see her in the kitchen at the holidays. He remembered being young and eager to learn everything. He listened with great intent as she began her teachings of the old stories. He could almost smell the baking of bread and hear her reassuring voice as he reflected upon elf tales and the legend of Ingar.

His mind then shifted to an image of his father who taught him how to use his abilities. In the forests and the mountains, he showed him how to leap and climb. He also told him everything he knew from ancient lore, such as the Book of Godson. He spoke of massive creatures called cliff behemoths that lived solely upon these words.

Cliff behemoths! Could such creatures rally exist?! Yet, here stood an elf before him. If an elf existed, why not a cliff behemoth? Why not an algor for that matter? Tailless lizards could be no more difficult to believe than the dead walking and raising arms against him. What was the explanation that caused this? Magic? Real magic, not fake tricks? The Sphere of Ingar was supposed to contain all the magical energy. But according to the legends, the sphere was entombed long ago. If there is indeed such a talisman, then there must also be sorcerers and wizards.

Such disquieting thoughts continued to cloud his mind. He walked about, circling the pines nearby. He mumbled to himself over and over. This was too much for any one man to accept, even a delver. However, he could not deny the simple facts before him. A corpse attacked him. Something which should have been unable to even move had shown the ability to carry and throw a crude spear, to chase and even choke him. There also stood before him what looked like, for all intents and purposes, an elf. Lief Woodson appeared honest and forthright, and had pointed ears.

Ryson eventually found himself standing once more by the side of the elf. He also found himself retracing the same thoughts over and over again. Finally, he spoke with forced determination.

"I don't know what's going on. That's the unfortunate answer. I have no idea whatsoever. Either I'm mad or you're right. Since I don't want to believe I've lost my mind, I have to hope to find another answer. You may be right, but it's a little much for me to just accept. Maybe it's best for me to be just what I am, a delver, and look for the answers."

Lief nodded in pensive approval. "I hope that also means that you may be willing to assist me. I have said before I lack knowledge. A delver's assistance would help me greatly. It will also serve your own purposes for it will bring you greater information. You will see things you never expected to see in your life."

"That's already happened. I look at you now. I never expected to see an elf, let alone talk to one."

Lief allowed himself to laugh once more. He spoke with a smile through his momentary chuckle. "I suppose that means you really believe I am an elf. I'm glad I will not have to argue that point any further. Actually, I doubt you really know what to make of me at all. You should have seen your face when I showed you my ears."

"It's just that I never expected this," Ryson admitted while revealing a hint of embarrassment.

"It will be new to us all," Lief stated. "The last contact between elf and human occurred so long ago that I can't even remember. It looks as if now we have no choice. Elves will have to come out into the open once

more. But enough of that. Will you assist me?"

Ryson considered the request carefully. "Assist you? How?"

"As I have said, I need information. I need to know what you've seen and heard, and why you are here." The elf stated this pointedly.

"I'll do what I can."

"And I will help you. I will prepare you for what I expect to find. By the way, if we are to assist one another, what shall I call you?"

The delver was taken slightly aback. He never could have expected he would be introducing himself to a being he thought existed only in fantasy. "I'm sorry. I'm Ryson Acumen. I should have told you much sooner."

"It's more than understandable. Think nothing more of it. Now, we have important business to attend to." Lief's congeniality faded into dark seriousness. Bleakness stretched across his face, his words dropped from his mouth like dead anchors. "I must ask you now what you were doing in this part of the forest. It is not a passage and there are no towns about. Are the humans thinking again of expanding their territory? Were you investigating the lands for them?"

"No, not really." Ryson struggled to maintain an even flow of thought. So much had occurred in recent moments; he found it difficult to latch upon those events which brought him to Dark Spruce in the first place. Laboriously, he summed up the reasons for his exploration. "It was the quake, a tremor that rolled through Connel a few days ago." In truth, he wasn't sure how long ago the tremor disturbed the grounds surrounding Connel. He continued as if trying to pull thoughts one by one from his head. "I wanted to see what effect it had on the land. The town council also wanted an exploration. At first, I was sent to inspect damage to some neighboring towns. I've completed that. I left Pinesway this morning to follow the tremor, and that led me into the forest. I'm still trying to see how things have changed. I'm also seeking the origin of the quake."

Lief considered the explanation with apparent confusion. "I do not mean to question you, but when I first spotted you, you were traveling south. You were not following the path of the tremor. That leads to the west"

"Yes. I have to admit I lost my focus," Ryson responded with greater certainty. The reason for his change in direction was the undead attacker, and that memory could not be washed from his mind. "I noticed a smell. It was so strange and new, it pulled at me. Sometimes that's the price of being a delver. We never know how our instincts will guide us. It guided me to this." He nodded to the corpse. The sight now revolted him. "But it is my intention to return to the path of the tremor. By the way, were you aware of the quake?"

The question brought further anguish to Lief's demeanor, graveness painted his face even darker. He looked to the west, as if he could see through the thicket of trees which surrounded them. "I'm all too aware of the disturbance which passed. It is that same tremor which preceded incidents of great magnitude. It is why I have the fears which I do."

"You mean about the Sphere of Ingar?"

"Indeed. While the quake did little damage to our camp, I feel it signified something more. Within hours of the tremor, my people experienced many amazing things. Older elves found themselves rejuvenated with youthful vitality. Younger elves showed an uncanny ability to foretell events and see into the minds of others. As the day passed, it soon became apparent that the members of my camp were becoming filled with a power long since vanished. Many took it as a blessing, a sign that the elves would return to their place in the land's order. I did not look at it in such a favorable light."

"My fears truly became heightened when a very gifted youngster turned invisible at his own will. At that point, I spoke up. I declared that something was very wrong, that the only answer was that the magic long trapped in the sphere was now being released. With no surprise, my announcement created great fear. There were those that refused to believe me. They wished to believe it a blessing and not a curse. Yet, within a day, the more sensitive of my people found themselves feeling ill at ease.

"Again, I spoke up and again I was refuted. This time, however, there were others which spoke with me. Even my harshest critics could not ignore the fact that magic was again free in the air. They persisted, however, that the magic was not from the sphere. They concluded that the magic was freed from the land itself, freed by the quake."

"But you don't think so, do you?" Ryson asked inquisitively. Finally, he found a moment of freedom from the anguish in his mind. The chance to ask questions, to listen and learn of such things as elves and their conversations, to hear of things as foreign as Elf camps; such things invoked his delver instincts.

Lief shook his head sternly. "I did not then, and I certainly do not now. The dead has been raised. That is not a blessing. This is serious magic, magic that could only have been held by the sphere. Magic caught within the land would not hold the ability or the intention to create undead warriors. If it was not from the sphere, it would be pure and hold no such order. No, I'm afraid the magic must have been corrupted by a powerful sorcerer long ago. All of that energy was captured in the sphere."

"It sounds as if you're convinced," Ryson noted. "I don't know enough to argue the point. I know what I've seen and it does defy all sanity. You're obviously out in the forest for a reason, I assume to help support your theory. That being the case, what is it you want to do?"

"We must travel to Sanctum Mountain. We must learn what we can."

Ryson contemplated the proposal. His face revealed slight hesitancy.

"What troubles you, delver?" Lief asked.

Ryson grimaced. "I must admit that I'm not just following the quake for myself. I promised Reader Matthew I would include him on what I found. If I agree to go with you to Sanctum, it means I'm giving up. I'd rather not do that."

"Who is this Reader Matthew?" Lief requested, perturbed by the thought that something might detract from him obtaining the help of the delver.

"I guess you would call him the spiritual leader for the Church of Godson at Connel," Ryson responded simply.

Surprise filled the elf. He reared his head back as he could not refrain from blurting out a hasty question. "A reader of Godson is concerned about the quake? Did he tell you why?"

"He did. He spoke of the prophecies of Godson. Apparently, they were translated with great accuracy for them by some interpreter. But this tremor wasn't mentioned by the translator. Matthew found this difficult to accept. He wants to know more of the quake, where it came from and what it's done to the land."

"So their prophecies include nothing about the quake, either?" The fact appeared to strike Lief more personally than it should have, almost as if the translated prophecies meant as much to him as they did to Matthew and his followers.

The elf's reaction was not lost upon the delver, and Ryson watched with greater interest as he made his simple response. "Apparently not."

Lief shook his head in tired frustration. "Yet, another factor which now weighs upon me. How do I deal with this? Elflore says nothing about this and now I find the Book of Godson is also lacking. Fire upon the prophecies for not warning us of this. Must we face this without the slightest reference of what might be? How are we to act, what should we do?"

Ryson remained quiet for long moments. He longed to ask about elflore and how it impacted Lief's theories. But the elf remained in deep deliberation, and Ryson let his companion weigh this new information without interruption. He would find another time to ask about such things.

The elf grimaced with uncertainty before turning his attention back to the delver. When he spoke, he said nothing of elflore or the Book of Godson.

"So, the reader wishes you to send word as to what you find. I think we can continue to accommodate that. I do not believe it will be a conflict at all. He wishes you to follow the path of the quake. If I am not mistaken, the path will lead us directly to Sanctum Mountain. I would also go as far as to guess that the reader would also be quite interested in the fate of the sphere. I believe the Book of Godson refers to the sphere and its history."

"I'm not sure about that. While I've been told the legends, I've never received teachings direct from the book. I'm not sure which story comes from where. I would have to agree, though, that Matthew would be interested in knowing of the sphere, if indeed such a sphere exists."

"Free yourself from your doubts, delver. I understand them, but they will only make things more difficult for you. There is a sphere and I am now quite sure that it is responsible for the happenings of the past few days. You must expect to see things you would previously never have believed possible. Very simply, the magic is free. How or why it's free is of great concern to me. It is what we must determine. Remember the legends. Keep them in your mind, hold to them, and believe them. They will help you, and perhaps keep you from madness. They may also save your life."

The elf paused and nodded to the decaying remains upon the ground before them. "You've already faced the undead today. There is no telling what else awaits us."

Ryson looked upon the now lifeless corpse for the last time, a stark reminder of the madness he might face. He noticed the handle of his dagger protruding out of its chest. He fought off his own repugnance and bent over to retrieve it. He wiped the blade on the ground several times. He examined it carefully before returning it to his belt, making sure not the slightest stain remained.

"Speaking of such," Ryson spoke with an edge, "what happens if we face another one of these? What do I have to do to stop it?"

"You must remember it is an undead warrior. It is no longer a living thing. It is a lifeless hulk, animated by dark magic. You can't expect to kill it by thrusting a blade into its heart. It won't be effective, for the heart is no longer important. It also won't feel pain. And it won't feel regret or remorse at attacking. There are only two ways to stop such a creature. You must remove the magic which gives it life, or inflict enough damage so that it is no longer a threat. It takes powerful spells to forcibly remove the energy, so unless you are willing to become a sorcerer, that option is not open to you. That leaves the second. That is what I did. The undead are strong, but their bodies are not very resilient. Decay will do that. If you damage the body to a point where it can no longer hurt you, the magic will leave of its own accord. When I struck the legs of the creature, it was no longer capable of movement. The energy could no longer force the corpse to attack, so it left."

"I see. But I'm not equipped for such a battle. This knife is all I carry."

"Then, you might consider altering that decision. Your only other option is to flee. Don't worry about that now. We go to Sanctum Mountain together. If we face the undead, I shall dispatch it, unless they're in great numbers."

"Then I'll rely upon you as well as my own senses," Ryson acknowledged. "Hopefully, I can warn us of another such monster."

"Warnings are always advantageous. Now let us move on. I would, though, make one request. Let us move through the trees. Passing from branch to branch, crossing the forest above the ground, it is how I travel."

"That will slow me down," Ryson admitted.

"I know, but it will allow me to keep pace with you. It is the quickest way for me. It is a fairly short trip to Sanctum. We might reach its base before nightfall, but if you are as gifted as the stories reveal about delvers, there is no way I can match your speed upon the ground. I have seen you move as you battled the undead; of this I'm already sure."

"If you think it's best."

"It is indeed. The forest will take us to the edge of Sanctum. At that point we can examine the area and adjust our travel. For now, simply follow your instincts. Return your attention to the quake and its path. It will lead us westward and that is where I wish to go. Follow it as you see fit. I believe it will lead us to the mountain. If you sense anything else which calls for your attention, please inform me."

"Certainly," Ryson agreed without hesitation. Millions of questions assaulted him, questions without answers. He would not find those answers by remaining here; they waited elsewhere, perhaps within Sanctum Mountain. He could not deny what had happened to him, could not shove it into the recesses of his mind. As a delver, he needed answers, no matter how incredible. He took to the journey with no less hesitation than when he first left Connel. Without further word, the two nimble figures grasped branches overhead and disappeared into the trees.

Chapter 3

The elf and the delver moved westward. They scaled the trees with ease. They leapt from branch to branch, swung from tree to tree, and trotted deep within the pine needles and leaves. Even among the thickest grove of cedars, their pace far exceeded the normal walking speed of a human.

As they carried themselves closer to the sky, their path earned them greater sunlight. The trees themselves were full of life. Early season cherries were already ripening and berries on taller bushes waited within arm's reach. The two travelers paused on several occasions to re-energize with the beckoning gifts.

As they moved about the sturdy branches, small animals appeared to enjoy their company. Birds and squirrels danced along with them. Every now and then, the delver whistled out a bird call or a chirp to a nearby chipmunk. He would smile broadly with every musical response. The sunlight, the animals, the green of Dark Spruce; all served to lift the gloom from the delver. He found the excursion invigorating, and he found his natural abilities more than capable in handling the task. He ducked in and out of the trees with amazing grace and balance. He slipped through dense clusters of branches by navigating through twisting passages. While he could have moved much faster upon the ground, he was satisfied with their pace. He was also pleased to hone his climbing skills. Indeed, he made a mental note to travel this way more often. If nothing else, it kept many of his abilities sharp.

The elf moved with similar ease, but he failed to show the same eager enthusiasm. This was no new or unique experience. Traveling within the trees was as normal to him as breathing. It was how all woodland elves traveled. There was never a need to cut a path through dense underbrush as long as the trees formed a forest. Thick branches cast the framework for both their paths and their bridges. There was not a stream in Dark Spruce that could not be crossed by leaping from one tree to another. As easily as squirrels crossed great distances while never placing a single step upon the ground, the elves moved in similar fashion, and Lief was please with the speed in which they crossed Dark Spruce.

With each step, from one tree to the next, the delver became more engrossed with following the path of the quake. Traveling upon the branches became routine. His attention focused squarely upon the quest, and his instincts took greater control of his movements.

The elf followed behind the delver. He allowed Ryson to choose the direction and path. Only occasionally would he lift his head to get his own bearings. To both his distress and satisfaction, he noted their westward movement, movement that carried them in the general direction of Sanctum.

The delver made his decisions based on the signs of the ground below. Once again, his senses focused upon the trail of the tremor. He peered downward often to assess the mark of the quake. Disheveled ground and uplifted roots gave clear indications of the path. The signs of damage became clearer and more extensive with every step. In places, the soil appeared freshly turned. Actual breaks in the ground, cracks and crevices, appeared more regularly. He also noted greater damage to the trees. He found more than one completely uprooted. Tree branches were covered with dust and debris, fallout from the upheaval of the quake.

As they moved onward, they took fewer and fewer breaks. Ryson rushed forward, the trail beckoning him with greater influence. Even as the path became clearer, something in the distance called out to his instincts, something akin to a faint echo. He could not seize the true fabric of this call, but he was certain something of great importance waited for his discovery. He wondered if it would hold the answer to his questions or only create more mysteries, but whatever the case, he wished to find it. Such was the strength of his pursuit that he nearly forgot about his companion.

The elf kept pace, although it proved to be a struggle. As accustomed as Lief was to this form of travel, he was not prepared for the great speed of a delver. He called upon his own natural skills to keep up. He

considered calling out to Ryson to slow his travel, but changed his mind as he saw the outline of Sanctum Mountain.

It was just as he thought, even as he feared. Following the path of the tremor continued to lead them to his personal objective, the site of entombment for the Sphere of Ingar. Even as he mulled the seriousness of this sign in his mind, he still could not guess what the final outcome might be. Again, he cursed the lore and the prophecies. Not a word about this existed, not a prophecy, not even a warning. Nothing.

The elf gritted his teeth as he smelled the late afternoon air. It was heavy with magic, power that should not exist. Such energy was captured long ago, captured by the sphere, which was in turn buried deep within Sanctum. Yet, the magic was strongly prevalent here. More proof that the sphere's centuries long entombment had ended. Powerful thoughts as well as fears filled the elf with despair and confusion. Lief became so consumed, he almost passed by the delver.

Ryson had come to a complete halt within a broad leafed maple. He stood rigid upon a heavy bough. He looked off to the north. His nose sniffed the air as he remained motionless. Only the elf's continued movement caused him to react. As Lief stepped forward to Ryson's side, the delver put out an arm and grabbed the elf's shoulder. He made it very clear that he wanted silence.

The elf complied completely. He crouched slightly but then remained perfectly still. He peered in the same northern direction. His sharp eyes caught glimpses of movement within a shout's distance away, but branches, leaves and pine needles blocked clear sight of the ground based commotion.

Ryson moved his head near the elf's ear.

"What do you see?" he whispered.

Lief stared for a moment more. He answered in a whispered but sturdy voice. "My vision is blocked, but I make out the movement of at least three. There may be more out of sight. I have caught the glint of steel in the sunlight, normally a sign of weapons or armor, but I can not say what they carry. I also can not determine who they are. It is hard to say for sure, but they appear short in size. They might be nothing more than human children, though I can not explain the existence of steel if they were. Perhaps, they are soldiers that are crouching."

Ryson shook his head. "I don't think so. What do you hear?"

The elf brushed the hair away from the side of his head, again revealing one pointed ear. He listened for a moment and grimaced before explaining. "It is strange, a grumbling of strangely pitched voices. It reverberates with a strange echo, as if they were talking in a cave. I can not make out any words."

Ryson did not respond. He sniffed the air again, and then put a hand to his chin. He crouched deep in thought as he considered their findings.

The elf turned his gaze upon the delver. "You are confused. What's wrong?"

"The smell," Ryson acknowledged. "It's strange to me."

"It was the smell that made you uncover the undead, was it not?"

"Yes, but this is different. This isn't decay. This is something totally new."

The elf took a moment to cast a glance at the outline of Sanctum. "If I am right about the sphere," he

whispered, "and now I believe I am certain, there is magic in the air. That may be what affects your smell."

"The scent is coming from that group," Ryson insisted. "They're the source."

"More evil," Lief mumbled as he turned his attention back to the unidentified strangers. "I see another. I'm sure there are now at least four. They wear thick breast plates. I believe they are warriors of some type."

"Perhaps, but they're not human," Ryson said with great certainty.

"They may be dwarves," Lief interjected. "That would explain their apparent size. It would explain the chest plates, although they only wear armor in times of battle. I wish I could see their faces."

Ryson blinked at the thought. "Dwarves?"

The elf quickly reminded Ryson of the situation he faced. "Remember your legends, delver. You see before you an elf, and you have faced the undead. Take my word for what it is. Dwarves still live in this world."

"I guess it's possible."

"But still confusing," Lief added. "Dwarves do not make a practice of mulling about in the woods, even close to a mountain. They live in the comfort and security of tunnel caves. Daylight is not kind to their eyes. I can not understand why they might be here."

The elf paused a second before offering his own theory. "Perhaps they are also aware of the freed magic. They might be here to inspect the tomb. It would explain much."

Ryson made it clear he wanted more than just a plausible theory before they disregarded this encounter. "How can we be sure?"

Lief responded with quick certainty. "We need to get a better look at them. Dwarves are unmistakable in feature. All are stout and powerful. They are shorter than the average human. Their faces are much like yours or mine except stern, as if chiseled. The men wear long beards, and most let their hair grow full and long. They wield axe, mace, and broadsword."

"Excellent," Ryson exclaimed. "Let me go and have a look at them. I'll come back and tell you if your description fits."

Lief's voice grew stern and demanding. "You do not intend to go alone? I shall accompany you!"

The delver shook his head. "No. I'll move easier if I only have to worry about myself."

"But that is not all you have to worry about," Lief responded adamantly. "You face many things you know little of. I can not let you blunder mindlessly into such a thing."

"I have no intention of blundering into anything. I fully intend on being as careful as possible."

"You will take greater care if I am with you."

"I don't think so," Ryson whispered. "This is what I do. You've seen me move, do you really question my abilities? I can investigate without being seen or heard, but to do it well, I have to move alone."

Lief considered what he had already learned watching the delver upon this day. He could not deny the skills

which were inherently the delver's. He accepted the situation, although reluctantly. "Very well, but take heed. Dwarves are known to be dangerous. They are strong and deadly with their weapons. If you arouse them, they might attack. If you are spotted, I suggest you flee. It is your best chance. I can tell you truly, no dwarf could match you in speed and agility."

"I'll remember that. I'll be back in a moment. This shouldn't take very long."

Ryson looked about quickly before leaping to a higher branch. He continued climbing, barely making a sound or even disturbing a single leaf. As soon he was several lengths above his previous position, he moved toward the unidentified persons. High in the trees, the delver used the cover of the branches and leaves to his every advantage. He became less a shadow and more a part of the trees themselves. He made his way to a better vantage point before dropping down several branches. He quickly obtained a position which allowed a clear view of the group below. He pulled the spyscope from his pouch and gained close view of his quarry. He found the spectacle most surprising. The characteristics he spotted did not come close to matching the description given by the elf. Except for the short stature, these creatures looked nothing like dwarves.

Closer to the group, he counted seven in all. They were odd looking, actually disgusting creatures. They had round, balloon-like heads, with a grayish tint, maybe even a hint of purple. Thick heavy skin, apparently layers and layers, swelled around the cheeks and eyes. It made their faces look puffy and swollen. Thin lips outlined very wide mouths. Within these mouths, Ryson saw long disorganized rows of small, square teeth. Thin wisps of wiry gray and black hair dotted their round heads. Their noses were different and unique from creature to creature. Some had short, round noses. Others had long pointed ones. One had no true nose at all, only two nostril openings at the center of its face.

As for their weapons, they carried small crossbows draped over their backs, and they wore short swords at their sides. They wore thick plates covering their chests. It was their only protection.

Ryson listened as the creatures continued to mull about the ground. They spoke in muffled grumblings. The delver could not decipher a single word.

Before leaving his position, he peered about looking for any stragglers or guards. With careful eyes, the delver quickly spotted a single creature hiding up in the branches over the others. This guard cradled a crossbow in its arms.

Secure that he was aware of all the potential hazards, Ryson silently returned to Lief's side. He whispered his report hoping to gain comprehension from the elf's viewpoint.

"Goblins!" the elf whispered with a heavy sign. "As if I needed another sign to accept the dark truth of what we now face."

"Goblins?" Ryson exclaimed in a weary voice, yet another surprise, another unexpected twist to this mind-boggling experience.

"Yes, goblins. It's further proof that the sphere is free from imprisonment. Goblins can not survive without magic, not in this plane of existence. They are creatures of the dark. Some say they come up from the underground with the help of magic, but the dwarves never agreed with that theory. They contend they fall from trees, like overripe fruit. I don't know where they come from, but I know the last was seen long ago. They did not last long after the war over the sphere. I have never seen one. My father fought one of the last groups in a suicide battle, but that was long, long ago. Apparently, they are back."

"So what do we do?"

The elf quickly considered the available options. "How many did you see?"

"There are seven on the ground. There is one in the tree over their heads. I assume he is there to protect the others. He has his crossbow drawn and loaded."

"Puny numbers," Lief said indignantly. "The true threat of the goblin lies in their numbers. I have heard stories of them attacking in hundreds of thousands. They darken the land and fill the sky with their arrows. I also know that they are not the bravest of creatures. Such a small group, they must be very worried. A single guard in a tree will give them little protection."

Ryson recalled other factors and revealed them to Lief. "They mumbled a lot, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. They seemed to be looking around, almost as if they were waiting for something."

"They are probably waiting for their numbers to swell, hiding in the trees until they feel more comfortable with the size of their group. We won't give them a chance."

Ryson noted the belligerent tone in the elf's voice. "What do you intend to do?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I intend to break up their party before they grow into a threatening herd," Lief answered with a cold chill tainting his words. He could not hide his animosity, and did not wish to. "I seek answers. These cretins may hold such answers. It is a perfect opportunity. Doubtless, they are unaware of our presence. We can take them with little difficulty. I doubt they will do little more than run."

As if there was to be no discussion, Lief gave his orders. "I want you to approach the guard. Knock him to the ground. When you strike, I will move from lower within the trees. I intend to take at least one out with an arrow. Then, I will swoop down upon them. They will flee, but I will capture one."

"You're going to kill one of them?" Great reluctance became very evident in the face of the delver.

"I can't kill anything."

Lief's eyes narrowed, his loathing more apparent. "I will take care of that, not you."

"But I won't be a part of it, either."

The elf bit back a flash of anger. He looked almost scornfully at the delver. His own hate and dispassion for the race of goblins exploded like a flare. "Very well, I will go alone."

"I'll warn them," Ryson stated firmly, revealing he had no intention of backing down.

Lief's anger doubled, tripled. He was about to condemn the delver with every curse known to the elves, but his anger soon gave way to understanding. He saw compassion in the eyes of the delver. It was not fear which spurred Ryson to refuse the plan, it was a respect for life.

"I see," the elf grumbled. "Is there any way to convince you that what you protect is unworthy of such lofty standards?"

"No," Ryson responded simply.

"Very well." Lief gave one final glance at the outline of Sanctum in the distance. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have staunchly argued the lowly worthlessness of the goblin. Their renewed

existence in the land filled him with malevolence and disgust, but it also underscored the nature of his worst fears. Great magic is needed to allow goblins to pass upon the land, this was undeniable, magic which could only be found in the Sphere of Ingar. The thought hammered at him, and the growing importance of the sphere left little time to debate the issue.

"You give me no choice. I will not press you to change your mind at this time. I will only tell you that you may eventually be forced into a position where such high standards become impossible. I do not think you understand the severity of the situation you face. One day a horde of these creatures may attack your home. They will not think twice about killing every inhabitant."

"That may be," Ryson allowed, "but that is not yet the case. I won't be part of unnecessary killing."

"Like I said before, I won't attempt to change your mind at this time. Will you accept my plan if I promise I will not hit any of the loathsome creatures with my arrow? Instead, I will send several that will miss the mark. That will serve to create confusion and force the goblins to flee. I will then capture one."

"I'll take your word for that," Ryson acknowledged. "And I accept it."

"Very good. Let us move now. Each moment we delay, the goblins entertain the chance for increasing their numbers. I will go this way." The elf pointed to a low path within the branches to his left. "I will stop roughly forty paces from their position. When I see the guard tumble from the tree, I will shoot four or five arrows over their heads. After you take out the guard, remain within the branches. If you drop too close to the goblins, they might strike out at you in the confusion. They will not regard your life with the same high standard you afford them."

"I understand."

"Go now!" the elf commanded before moving off in his designated direction.

The delver paused for but a moment, then followed a different path back toward the goblins. He gritted his teeth to fight back his growing anxieties over the danger he now faced. While he remained in control of his movements, his thoughts swelled over the image of facing hundreds of goblins, no less hundreds of thousands.

What was happening to the world he lived upon? He fought the undead, traveled with an elf, and now planned to attack goblins. If not for the seriousness with which his parents told him of the legends, he would have believed himself insane. Yet now, the legends were revealing themselves to him, revealing themselves in a way which he could not simply dismiss as illusion or dream.

In such instances of distraction, Ryson focused upon the task at hand. It was time to force the maddening puzzles from his consciousness and allow the deepest of his instincts to control his movements. He stalked the goblins from above. He glided from branch to branch with such diligence that the guard had no warning of his approach.

The delver gained a position high above the guard, then moved downward. Spiraling around the trunk, Ryson used branches and leaves to cover his advance. He gained a position within arm's reach before the goblin even knew of his existence.

The goblin shifted its head at the sign of a disturbance. It growled in surprise and fear as a shadowy figure moved swiftly toward it.

Before the puffy face turned completely about, the delver pulled the crossbow from out of its hands. He threw it aside. It crashed through the branches and fell harmlessly to the ground. Ryson quickly grabbed the heavy

chest plate of the goblin. He twisted and pulled until the goblin became displaced from the thick bough it clung to.

As Ryson held the goblin aloft in mid-air, the creature looked up and snarled. Foamed spit cascaded from its angry mouth.

The creature weighed barely more than a small child, and Ryson had no difficulty in maintaining his grip. He saw the distance to the ground and decided not to simply drop the goblin. Instead, he hoped to lower it before releasing his hold, thus reducing the risk of injury to the creature.

The goblin, however, did not care about the possibility of falling. It remained far more concerned about being in the grip of a trespasser. It continued to snarl and spit as it waved its hands in the air. Suddenly, it found its balance and quickly brought its right arm to its side. The goblin grasped the hilt of a short sword and pulled the blade from its sheath.

The disturbance in the tree alerted the other goblins below. More snarls and growls erupted. The goblins raced about and around the tree. They pulled their crossbows from their backs and began pulling bolts from pouches attached to their waistbands.

Before any of the ground level goblins could load their crossbows, long powerful arrows sizzled through the air just above their heads. Four shafts whistled by with great force and plunged into the surrounding tree trunks.

The goblins fell into disarray. Their concern over their comrade above vanished instantly. Panic divided them. Without great numbers, they knew of their extreme vulnerability. They scattered without a second thought.

Ryson ignored the commotion below him. He concentrated on keeping his grip on the goblin as he lowered himself down the tree. He shook the goblin with all the force he could muster to keep the creature from striking at him.

The goblin fought against its capture. It made two attempts to strike at Ryson's arm, but each time it failed. Just as it lifted its hand to swing, it was jostled with great force, and the blade struck empty air. It seemed ambivalent to the distance to the ground as it continued to strive for a clean strike. Such a chance opened when the goblin gained hold of another branch with its free hand. Suddenly steadied, the goblin resisted the shaking of the delver. Gleeful fury filled its eyes as it prepared to amputate Ryson's arm.

Only the skill and quickness of being a delver allowed Ryson to avoid the blow. He released hold of the goblin and pulled his arm back. The blade of the short sword passed harmlessly through the air.

The goblin, no longer supported by the delver, found itself unprepared to maintain its grip on the branch. It could not hold its own weight and it plummeted to the ground. It landed with a perplexing bounce, almost as if its body were made of rubber. The creature appeared no worse for wear and scrambled to its feet. In but a mere instant, it was quickly scurrying off into thicker cover.

At that same moment, Lief jumped into the clearing once occupied by the goblins. He swirled his head about. His eyes darted over the different paths of the departing creatures.

With barely a delay, he seized upon one trail. He leapt after the scurrying goblin with stone-like determination. Over rocky and rooted soil, he raced through the forest keeping his eyes locked upon the fleeing creature. He slapped branches away from his path as he continued to pursue.

The goblin made chase difficult. It used its size to its advantage, choosing narrow paths under low lying

branches. It jumped through thick brush whenever possible. It also turned frequently as it used its greater mobility to out distance the elf.

Lief continued to follow relentlessly even as the distance between the two increased. He ignored the stinging pain to his face as pine needles brushed against his cheeks. Eventually, however, he realized the futility of his chase. He pulled to a halt and quickly drew an arrow from his quiver. He placed it upon the string of his bow, but before he could draw, the delver called to him.

"Don't shoot it!" Ryson commanded. The delver darted past the elf almost as a blur. Such was the speed he moved past Lief, the elf felt a small breeze.

Ryson took up the chase where Lief left off, but the delver moved at far greater speed. He cut through each barrier of the forest as if it were nothing more than tissue paper. He turned with pinpoint accuracy and quickly cut the distance between himself and the goblin. In mere moments, he reached out and grabbed the back of the goblin's neck.

This time, the delver would take no chances in losing control of the creature. His hand darted to the goblin's belt and beat the creature to the handle of the short sword. He drew it away from the creature but held it threateningly.

The goblin eyed first the point of its own sword and then the delver. It hissed once, then became still, as if accepting its fate.

Ryson carried the goblin to a clearing in the forest. He dropped it to the ground but made it clear the goblin was not to move. He kept his eyes on the creature as he called for the elf.

Lief arrived quickly. As he stepped nearer to the goblin, he examined it sternly. He folded his arms across his chest and looked down on the goblin with great contempt.

"Why have you returned to these lands?!" The elf spoke with a cold demanding voice.

At first the goblin did not answer.

"Do not try my patience," Lief advised sternly. "You were captured by a delver, a full-bred delver. He can capture another one with the same ease he caught you. If you do not speak, I will dispose of you and we will bring another captive to your lifeless body. I am sure the next will be more willing to talk."

The goblin snarled at the elf before casting a wary eye upon Ryson. The creature looked him over carefully.

"You are delver?" the creature finally spoke. Its lips snarled as the voice carried with a low-toned whisper.

"Yes," Ryson managed. He felt ill at ease actually speaking to such a diminutive monster.

"What is your name?"

Ryson did not answer.

"Your name?!" the creature demanded.

"Tell him," the elf advised while keeping a cold stare upon the goblin.

"My name is Ryson Acumen."

The goblin paused. It stood stoic as if going through long past memories in its head. With a nod of futility, the goblin turned its attention back to the elf.

"If I tell you what you ask, will you release me?"

"I make no promises," Lief responded coldly.

"Then neither do I. I shall tell you nothing unless you give me your word for freedom. Otherwise, threaten me all you wish."

"I will release you only if you speak the truth," the elf conceded. "If I sense a shred of lies in your answers, I will deal with you harshly. Answer me without lies and I will release you to the forest, but I will not return your weapons. That is my word."

"No weapon?! I will be defenseless!" the goblin protested vehemently.

"Find your friends. They shall have to assist you."

"I may not find them in time."

"Enough!" Lief roared. "Your time is up. Take my word now or we shall begin our hunt for another. What is your answer?!"

"I agree to accept your word," the goblin stated. "What are your questions?"

The elf sneered at the goblin. "Why are you here?"

"The magic allows us to be here," the goblin replied shortly.

"The magic of the sphere?"

"If you speak of the orb created by Ingar, I can not say."

The elf's eyes narrowed in anger and distrust. "Do not forget my word. I will only release you if you speak the truth."

"I speak the truth," the creature stated dispassionately. "I know not where the magic comes from. All I know is its presence. It is here and I am here."

"What has happened to the sphere?" the elf demanded.

"I do not know."

"Have your kind seized it?!"

"I do not know."

The elf boiled over with anger. He raised an arm to strike out at the goblin.

The goblin hissed, but veered away. It crouched down spitting and snarling in a defensive position.

Lief moved forward but Ryson cut between him and the goblin.

"That won't help," the delver protested.

"I grow tired of listening to these ridiculous replies!" Lief growled. "It states the magic lets it be here, yet it refuses to tell me where the magic comes from. This creature must be taught that I will not tolerate such things!"

Ryson continued to block the elf's path to the goblin. "But what if it's telling the truth?"

The elf did not respond. He stared angrily at the goblin, but made no further attempt to move forward.

"Maybe it really doesn't know," Ryson suggested. He then turned his attention to the goblin. He spoke softly but sternly.

"Do you know where the magic is coming from?"

The goblin eyed the delver carefully before answering. "No, but I would guess it is from the orb."

"Why?"

"Not since the orb was encased in the mountain have we been able to walk these lands. But now, we can do so again."

"Where do you come from?"

"Another place."

"How does the magic help you here?"

"It opens the door, unlocks the gate and lets us through. For ages we have been unable to break through, but now the door is open once more."

Ryson considered the goblin's answer before continuing. "Do you know what might have happened to allow this?"

"No," the goblin stated flatly.

"Do you know what has happened to the sphere?"

"No."

Ryson turned to his companion with a questioning glance. "Does any of this help answer your questions?"

"Not at all. All I can be sure of is that the sphere is free from containment. This creature might say the goblins have nothing to do with that, but its presence so close to the mountain casts much doubt. I would not be surprised if we have heard nothing but lies."

"I have not lied!" the goblin objected vigorously. "I have not lied in order to hold you to your bargain. You are an elf, you have given your word. I have done everything that will force you to hold to that word. You must release me!"

"I will keep to my word," Lief stated coldly. "You will finish answering my questions first. Why are you here, at Sanctum Mountain?"

"It is where the door leads us," the goblin answered through a sneer.

"How many have entered the land so far?"

"More than I know."

"Where are they now? We only counted seven besides you."

"They are scouting the lands in small parties. We stayed behind to await others that will cross over."

"What are your plans in this land?"

The goblin spoke forcibly and defiantly. "What they have always been. We are here to conquer. We will take our rightful place as leader of this land. Our numbers will swell until we are as the ocean. We will sweep across every territory, we will ..."

"Enough!" Lief ordered. He mulled over the goblin's words for but a moment. He proposed one final question. "Do you know how to close this door which lets the goblins enter this land?"

"If I did, I would not tell you even if it meant my life," the goblin stated scornfully. "Even if it allowed you to back away from your bargain, I would not tell you. The truth remains that I do not know how to open or close the door. It is the magic which does so. Thus, I have answered truthfully. I hold you to your bargain, elf!"

"Very well. Leave my sight! But heed this warning. The elves are now aware of your presence. If the age old war must resume, we shall be ready. Your numbers have never turned a single battle in history. Also be warned, my bargain stands for this moment alone. If we meet again, you will not survive."

The goblin responded with angry spit at the feet of the elf. It turned and raced into the forest.

The delver and elf stood beside each other and watched the creature disappear into the thickening woods. Lief turned his head and motioned to the short sword which remained in the hand of the delver.

"It seems you now have a trophy of your capture."

Ryson held the sword aloft as he inspected it carefully. It was a crude weapon, hardly a fine piece of handcraft. The blade was sharp and sturdy, but it lacked any true dignity or style. It held no proud etchings, nor did it shine with any degree of polish. The handle remained plain and functional. No stones or jewels decorated its base. The sword served its ultimate purpose as a weapon, nothing more.

"Hardly a thing to look at," Ryson admitted.

"True enough," Lief agreed. "A goblin's short sword is practical. It will, however, assist you in battle greater than your own dagger. I suggest you hang on to it for now."

The mention of battle reminded Ryson of the final words of the goblin and the elf. The bitterness between the two and the mention of war weighed heavily upon him. He could not help but pose a question. "How many goblins will end up here?"

"If the magic is truly free, more than we will ever count."

"That's a frightening thought."

"There are more frightening aspects of what we face. The goblins are pawns, pawns to the magic, pawns to other more powerful and more evil creatures. They are probably the least of our worries."

"You're kidding?"

"Unfortunately, no. The Sphere of Ingar is the most powerful and dangerous talisman ever created. Its freedom means the return of more than just goblins. Elflore tells of many monsters which disappeared after the encasing of the sphere. Its freedom may mean the return of all of them. River rogues, vampires, mountain shags, endless undead warriors; all may be walking upon our land as we speak."

Ryson did not respond. He looked vacantly out into the forest and beyond to the shadows of Sanctum Mountain.

"All of these creatures in themselves are dangerous," the elf continued, "but they pale in comparison to the release of the magic. It is the magic that truly threatens the elves. I wonder how many of my camp are already falling ill. No, the goblins are the least of our worries. We must concentrate upon the fate of the sphere."

That was the second time Lief mentioned possible suffering of the elves. Ryson wished for further clarification, but even with the great pull of his curiosity, he knew this was not the time or place for such discussions. He took a chance to survey the area. He looked through the trees in order to gain a perspective of the sun. It was fully behind Sanctum Mountain which was just ahead of them to the west.

"We can probably reach a clearing on the side of the mountain before dark," the delver stated, "but I don't think that's advisable. We should camp here for the night. The trees can offer us greater protection."

"I agree," Lief said with a nod of acceptance. He hated allowing time to pass through his fingers, but he could not deny the circumstances of the moment. If goblin scouting parties moved about, it would not do well to be caught in the open without cover. "Let me suggest, though, that we do not choose a site so close to the spot where the goblins made their own camp. They may return in the dark. We should move south of here and find a secure place high in the trees."

"That sounds good to me."

The two moved off quickly and quietly and found a suitable perch with many paths for escape. They rested comfortably in the trees as the dark of night began to spread.

Chapter 4

In the dark of night, during the peace of rest in high branches of an elderly oak, the delver had much to consider. A full day, a day of revelations was laid to rest before him. Encounters a delver might wish for in a lifetime were his in but one passing of the sun overhead.

Each moment of discovery printed itself indelibly upon his mind. There would be no forgetting. In his last days upon the land, he would recall this chain of events which ushered in a greater knowledge. His world had changed so drastically. Everything he knew, or thought he knew, was challenged. Everything he believed he understood was now confused. The land of Uton was forever changed, and him with it.

With so much passing through his mind, Ryson turned to the elf. He sought insight on what might be the mitigating force behind all that was happening.

"Tell me what you know about the sphere," Ryson asked.

"What is it you wish to know exactly?" Lief replied complacently.

Ryson answered with all honesty. "I want to know everything."

"That would take all the night and most of the next day," Lief countered. "Besides, it seems you know of it already. It is clear to me that you have an understanding of the legends. Is there something in particular that confuses you?"

"Right now everything confuses me. You seem to believe that the sphere is at the heart of whatever is going on. I can't argue that point, and I don't wish to, but if the sphere is the reason behind this, I'd like to know more about it. I'd also like to know why you talk about it with such distress."

"It is very dangerous," the elf stated simply. "That is why it was encased so long ago."

"I realize that, but we've already run into things I have to consider more dangerous than anything else I've ever faced in my life. You keep worrying about the sphere. I've heard the legends, but I've never heard of elflore until you mentioned it. Maybe your story is different than mine."

Lief hesitated before speaking. He folded his hands across his chest, but did not make an immediate reply.

"You don't want to tell me?" Ryson asked curiously but without sounding offended.

"No, that is not what concerns me," Lief replied. "It is just that it is difficult to imagine how fast things have happened. The tremor, the magic. Now I sit in a tree with a delver who wishes to know about elflore and what we might face. I will not deny you that knowledge. Based on what you have already done, it is your right to know. If I'm to ask you to continue our journey, it is my obligation to tell you. It is just that less than a season ago, I would have considered such a thing as impossible."

"You don't have to tell me that," Ryson responded with a knowing glance. "Think how I feel. At least you knew that humans and delvers existed. I couldn't have guessed that any of the legends were actually true."

"Now you know differently," the elf said sternly.

Ryson eyed the elf and spoke with a careful tone. "Can I ask you a question before you tell me about the sphere?"

"You may."

Ryson tried not to hesitate, but he also wished to choose his words carefully. "Are all elves like you? I mean, in the short time I've known you, you've shown an interesting range of emotions. I don't mean any offense by this. Maybe I shouldn't even ask at all, but I've noticed how you react to certain things. I've seen you laugh and smile a few times, but you're a rather grim individual. I don't want to say you're impatient, because that's not true, but you seem to get annoyed easily. You really got angry when we were dealing with the goblins. Even when you and I talk, sometimes you sound as if you're annoyed with me."

"So you think I am perhaps too quick to anger?"

Ryson shook his head. "No, I wouldn't say that. It's just that you seem to have a low tolerance for some things. I don't think that saying you're angry would explain it. It's more like I said before. You get annoyed."

"Don't concern yourself with insulting me," Lief replied simply. "What you tell me now I have heard before."

"Really?"

"Of course. My own kind have pointed it out to me. They say I am quite opinionated and that I become quickly upset. They also say my outlook is much too grim. They say I will always find that which is bleak, even in the best of times. I guess that is why no one wished to believe me when I first spoke of the sphere."

"The other elves say this? Does that mean you're different from the others?"

Lief raised an eyebrow. "Does that surprise you?"

"I don't know," Ryson admitted. "I'm just curious as to what elves are like."

"Let me answer your question by asking you a similar one. What are delvers like? Are they all like you?"

"No, I couldn't say that. We're all different."

"The same applies to the elves. We all have our different personalities. While there are some things you can perceive about elves through contact with just one, it is not correct to make sweeping assumptions. While I might get easily annoyed, there is certainly another elf that would hardly ever show such dissatisfaction. Some elves may believe I am a very poor representative."

Ryson thought quietly before responding. "Poor representative or not, you're my first elven contact. I won't ever forget you."

The elf simply nodded and turned his focus upon the true subject of his own concerns. "Then let us go back to your first question. Let me tell you about what I know of the sphere."

The darkness continued to thicken as Lief began his tale. The air grew cool as the crickets began to chirp from the ground below. Occasionally, the hoot of an owl would cut through the insect's music, carried aloft by the night breeze. The sounds of the darkness seemed to flow with the words of the elf, giving emphasis to the story.

"Since you tell me you know much of the legends, I will not preface the story with any lengthy explanations," the elf noted quickly. "A small introduction, however, is necessary. The Sphere of Ingar was created by the Sorcerer Ingar in a final attempt to win ultimate control of all magic. The sphere was actually constructed from the hides of inhabitants from the land. Ingar sent out minions to capture elves, dwarves, humans, algors,

and delvers. Lore has it that he skinned them alive, and with powerful magic, altered the hides to become portions of the sphere. With the casting of a forceful spell, the sphere became a receptacle for power. Because each race has its own ability to harness, control or resist the magic, the sphere became a magnet, as well as a vessel for containing all magical energy.

"Ingar brought the sphere to all the different corners of Uton. He carried it with him at all times but never revealed its existence or its purpose. Day after day passed and the sphere captured more and more energy. The power became immeasurable. If Ingar had used it at that time, he probably could have conquered the world without challenge. But Ingar became enthralled with the very power of the sphere. He wished to capture all of the energy in the land before he would drink of it himself.

"As the talisman soaked in the energy, the other magic casters began to notice their powers dwindling. Each time they cast a spell, they found they could not replenish their magical energies. Some became completely powerless as they foolishly wasted all the energy stored within their own bodies, and even that stored in their enchanted items.

"With the realization that the magic in the world was fading, the great wizards, both good and evil, conferred together to solve the mystery. Since they all were subject to losing their powers, they agreed to work together. Ingar, however, was noticeably missing from the conference. Becoming suspicious, the wizards and sorcerers believed Ingar might be responsible. Spies were sent which never returned.

"The sorcerers considered casting spells which would reveal Ingar's actions, but most resisted. The casting of any spell meant losing power, power which could not be replaced. The magic casters wished to hold on to their stored energy for as long as possible.

"Finally, Waelin, the oldest of the wizards, confronted Ingar directly. The sphere was finally revealed. Waelin attempted to destroy it with magic, but he failed. The sphere easily absorbed all of Waelin's power. The ancient wizard was never seen again.

"Unfortunately, during the struggle between Waelin and Ingar, a great cataclysm occurred. The power of the sphere was altered slightly. It continued to absorb magical energies, but it also started to discharge tainted magic. Some say it was a reaction to one of Waelin's spell. They believe that the wizard tried to force the magic from the sphere, but the results were disastrous. Others believe the sphere finally reached its limit and had to release power. Whichever the case, the end result led first to the storm of Ingar's stronghold and second to the great war with the magic casters."

"Most of this agrees with the legends I have been told," Ryson interrupted the elf. "except the part of the sphere releasing magic. I've never heard of that before."

"It does not surprise me," Lief stated. "It was the elves which were affected first. The energy which was emitted, although tainted by evil within the sphere, could still be used by sorcerers and wizards. They soon began to re-energize with the magic which now flowed freely from the sphere. The energy, however, was not clean. It was contaminated by the sphere. The elves became keenly aware of this for we were the ones that began to die. The magic contained a poison, and for some reason, the magical emissions targeted the elf race first. That is why it is part of elflore."

In this, Ryson found an answer to a previous musing. "So that's why the elves are in danger now. There's poison in the magic."

Lief nodded. "Just as it was back then.

"So what was it like? How did the elves react?" Ryson asked with greater interest.

"There was little that could be done," Lief replied sadly. "There was no way to hide or to avoid the energy. It sought out every elf in the land. It did not kill immediately. The very old and very young died first. The rest, though, could sense the poison eating at them as well. And it was the sphere. There was no doubt. The energies it released were not pure magic. It was magic with a purpose, magic tainted with harsh direction. Even as magic casters of other races began casting spells anew, elves which grasped the magic faced death. Even elves which tried to reject the magic could not save themselves. The energy embraced them all.

"This is part of elflore because of the actions of a single elf. It is written that the most sensitive magic user of the elf race, a great sorceress named Shayed, probed the emissions. She sensed the plague within the magic. She knew at once that unless these emissions ceased, all the elves would die.

"She also noted that the poison held the power to kill the other races. Its power could easily be shifted to eliminate the algors, the dwarves, the delvers and even the humans. She said this was caused by the hides of each race which formed the shell of the sphere. She believed that the sphere would eventually alter the poison after all the elves were destroyed. Then another race would be eliminated, then another, and another, until all were gone.

"She used this knowledge to convince the leaders of the other races to join her, to storm Ingar's Cove. All races, except for cliff behemoths, aligned together to capture the sphere before it could kill them all."

"I've never heard this before," Ryson admitted. "I knew of the alliance of the races to take the sphere, but I never heard of the poison or that it was a threat to kill everyone."

Lief was not slow in his reply. "Probably because the sphere was captured before the elves were destroyed. Shayed stated the magic would not turn on another race until the elves were completely eliminated. We were the only ones which faced the poison.

"In any event, the storm of Ingar's Cove was successful. Ingar was destroyed and the sphere taken. The only thing left to decide was what to do with the sphere. It continued to absorb pure energy and emit only that which would eventually lead to overall extinction. Shayed claimed the sphere should not be destroyed. She feared the sudden release of the energy would quickly kill all the elves. At her request, the great leaders of Uton decided to encase the sphere in a tomb which would hold it forever and bar the release of any magic. This of course led to the war with the magic casters."

"That I know about," Ryson said eagerly. "How does elflore describe the actual war?"

"The leaders of the races decided the safest place for the sphere would be deep within Hollow Mountain. They since changed the name to Sanctum for its part in holding the sphere. Regardless of its name, all of the magic casters became outraged that the sphere would be encased. It meant the end of their powers. The sphere held all the magic. They wished to destroy the sphere and release the energy within. The dark creatures also demanded the destruction of the sphere. They could not exist without magic. Goblins, river rogues, shags; the lot of them threatened the lives of everyone if the sphere was not turned over to them.

"At these threats, the leaders became even more determined to see the sphere entombed. They realized it would mean the end of all of the dark creatures, a bonus. For this, they would even face the wrath of the magic casters.

"This led to the most bizarre of all alliances in the history of elflore, or in any of the legends for that matter. The magic casters, both good and evil, joined forces with goblins, vampires, mountain shags, and all the undead to take the sphere. Remember, magic casters came from all different races. There were human wizards, elven sorcerers, algorian healers, even dwarf magic casters, though they were few. These were individuals willing to join with dark creatures to fight their own kind. Only Shayed remained on the side of

the allied races. She was the only magic caster not to join in with the dark creatures."

"I didn't know that," the delver confessed. "It was my understanding that no magic was used on our side."

"No magic was," the elf made clear. "Shayed expended all of her power in the fight against Ingar. She had no magic left. Her ability to cast spells was no more. As a magic caster, her craft was gone, but she would still not allow the destruction of the sphere. She would see that it was carried from Ingar's Cove, across the prairies, and to its final resting place. When the leaders reached the town of Connel ..."

"Connel?" Ryson exclaimed to reveal his surprise.

"Yes, Connel," the elf replied with his own note of wonder. "Didn't you know that?"

"I was never given the name of the final battle place. I always thought it was near Sanctum Mountain."

"No, it was Connel. I might say that I find it interesting that you are from Connel. Although I curse the prophesies for not warning us of this, I sense the hands of fate working here."

"I don't know about that," Ryson responded. "but tell me more of what happened at Connel." The delver watched the face of the elf as he eagerly awaited further explanation. He hoped the elf's tale would bring him greater knowledge, more appreciation of his home town.

"Very well. The leaders, knowing they would face a final assault by the magic casters and dark creatures, prepared a defense at Connel. At that time, it was the last village between Ingar's Cove and what is now called Sanctum. Delves, like yourself, scouted the lands to the west and found the dark creatures massing for an all out attack. Magic casters from every race also gathered within their midst. It was their intention to take the sphere by force before Shayed and her followers could bury it deep within Sanctum and prepare defenses which they could not break.

"Reports from the delvers were grave indeed. The force waiting for Shayed was overwhelming. With the magic casters on their sides, the dark creatures were nearly assured of victory. The sorcerers and wizards would cast spells from the backs of the lines as the undead pushed forward. So great was their numbers, that the dark creatures could not even visualize losing.

"The hope of the elves dwindled. Even with the assistance of the other races, they doubted their chances of survival. If they just faced the dark creatures in hand to hand combat, they knew they would prevail, but the existence of the sorcerers and wizards drastically reduced their chances. Shayed envisioned waves of the undead, of river rogues, and mountain shags flowing into Connel under the cover of goblin crossbow fire and powerful magic spells. Some of the leaders hoped the magic casters might hold their power, for each spell cast meant energy lost. Shayed, however, revealed this as a false hope. She knew the wizards and sorcerers would unleash all of their might, for this was their last hope to regain their full power.

"At the suggestion of the dwarf leaders, a plan was developed and quickly enacted. All the races knew that they would never stand a chance against the magic casters in a long distance battle. Their only hope was to force the magic casters to close combat. The dwarves built a powerful wall from stone within their caves. Dwarves are known for their resistance to magic. The stone from their homes is also quite resistant. The wall was built thick and all the races waited behind it as the attackers moved forward. The spells cast from a distance would be reflected by the wall. The loose energy would then be captured by the sphere which remained in the hands of the allied races.

"Building with speed and skill befitting their race, the dwarves constructed the wall within half a day. It was finished just as the sun set. Members of the five races - dwarves, elves, algors, humans and delves - waited

together in fortified positions behind this wall which circled the small village of Connel. It was the last time the races would work together in such a fashion.

"As the final light faded and darkness gripped the land, the assault began. Waves of hideous monsters moved forward as bolts split the night from goblin crossbows. The distant horizon sparked and glistened as wizards unleashed their powers. This, perhaps of all things, signaled the folly of the magic casters.

"So sure of their numbers and their power, the attackers never scouted their foes. They were totally unaware of the wall. They flung spells with mad abandon, never realizing that the races remained protected. This squandering of their power raised the spirit of the five races. When they saw the spells bounce harmlessly off the wall, they knew victory would be theirs."

"I assume this wall you speak of is the ancient wall which still surrounds most of Connel today," Ryson interjected.

"It is. Dwarven construction is boasted to last forever. I believe that is no boast at all."

Ryson rubbed his chin. A crisp image of the barrier crossed his mind. "That's amazing. The people that live in Connel pretty much ignore that wall. No one really knows anything about it."

"Sometimes that is the way of legends," the elf responded dispiritedly. "Over time they are changed or forgotten completely. Those places, people and events that are remembered are often revised to better fit the beliefs of the day."

Ryson shook his head. "But a wall of such significance to just be forgotten? That's not right. I mean it's a wall that was built by dwarves, and people that live there don't even believe dwarves exist."

Lief simply shrugged. "Perhaps that is why the importance of the wall has been forgotten. To carry forward the true importance of the wall would be to admit the existence of all the races. Although I do not have contact with them, I believe humans are more than happy to accept the belief that they are the only inhabitants of this land."

"That's true," Ryson admitted. "They don't even like to admit to the existence of delvers. It is arrogant, but we've learned to live with it."

"Take heart, delver. If I am right about the sphere, the humans will be in for quite a surprise, but that is for later. As for the battle of Connel, the races did indeed win the day. The magic casters squandered their energies and the dark warriors were quickly turned back. The path to what is now called Sanctum was clear. The sphere would be entombed."

Any hint of pride or exuberance which developed during the tale, quickly faded from Lief's voice. His tone turned hollow, almost sour. His expression firmly revealed his emotions as it hardened with the conclusion of the lore.

"Unfortunately, even after this victory by joining together, distrust began to rise. Bickering arose between the different leaders about how to encase the sphere to make sure that none of the races would be tempted to steal it. Trust and partnership dissolved. Even Shayed could not bring them back together. In the end, a solution based on the mistrust was fashioned.

"The sphere would be encased with reflectors all around it. This would ensure that the emissions of the sphere would be turned back upon itself. It would be caught in an endless cycle of emitting and absorbing the same energies. It would also be placed at the very depths of Sanctum, in a cavern where the walls and floor were

reinforced with sheets of diamond constructed by the dwarves. These walls were impenetrable. They would prevent anyone from digging through the base of Sanctum or tunneling underground to reach the sphere from below. No, the only way to the final resting place of the sphere was from the top of Sanctum, through its hollow core.

"Five tiers were constructed as a path from the summit to the final resting place. Each tier was given to a single race. Then, each race would develop barriers or methods of protection which would guard the sphere. Each race kept their defense mechanism a secret from the other. How they guarded that tier remains an eternal secret to this day.

"I know this as fact for only elves of the most high position are allowed to know of our secret. I assume the same holds true for the other races as well."

"I've never heard of this before," Ryson confessed with obvious confusion. "You say each race was given a tier, even the delvers?"

"That is correct."

"But I've never heard of any barriers placed in Sanctum. Even when my parents told me of the legend of the sphere, they never said anything about the races putting in their own secret protections."

"Perhaps they do not know. Perhaps only the elder delvers are aware?"

"I don't know," Ryson shook his head. "To tell you the truth, I really don't think so. Delvers are not a closely knit group. We mix with the humans freely. I don't know of any delvers that hold so closely to their heritage that they might remember such a thing."

"Perhaps, you simply don't know of all the delvers. Perhaps those that may hold the secret of Sanctum keep themselves hidden under veils of secrecy. Remember, before this day you did not know of goblins or elves."

"That's very true," Ryson acknowledged. "And I never heard portions of this story about the sphere until now. So what finally happened?"

Lief's tone grew colder still. "The obvious. The sphere was entombed and each race placed their defenses within Sanctum. The dwarves sealed the entrance to the tiers with observers of every race present. With no further word, each race went its own way. The dwarves returned to their caves, the algors returned to the desert, and we returned to the thick woods. The humans and delvers, for some reason, remained together. As time went on, interaction between the other races dwindled to near nonexistence."

Upon the elf's conclusion, Ryson stood up on the thick branch he rested upon. He walked further out to the edge of the tree and caught a glimpse of Sanctum. Its shadow was present even in the faint starlight. He stood silent for long moments considering that day long ago when the five races separated.

"How long ago was that?" he asked somberly.

"Long before any event you might be able to place in the current of time, that is, other than the legends themselves."

"But you said your father saw goblins."

"And he did, but those were remnants of the final battle. Goblins escaped Connel and held to this land long after that fateful day. Keep in mind my father was not yet born when the sphere was entombed. Elves live a

very long time. He is no longer with me now and he lived for a very long time."

Ryson continued to stare at Sanctum. "So long ago," he whispered. "All this time, all of us living apart. Yet, at one time, they all stood together at the top of that mountain. Standing together and watching the end of life as they knew it. I can't imagine what they must have been feeling."

"Elflore speaks of it as a time of joyful sadness," Lief noted.

"That doesn't make much sense," the delver stated with his thoughts still focused upon the image of the final congregation at the summit.

"It does if you consider everything they faced," Lief responded quickly, as if feeling it necessary to defend elflore. "They just won a major victory based on their cooperation, yet now they mistrusted each other. Magic was removed from the land. It meant no more evil sorcerers and corrupt wizards hoping to seize power, but it also meant the end of healers and benevolent magic casters. The dark creatures would be sealed off from the land, but they all sensed the inevitable separation. The land was changing both for better and worse. It was hard to feel joy without sadness, or sadness without joy."

Ryson remained on his perch within view of the mountain. "Such a moment!" he exclaimed. "I can't imagine what it would have been like." He turned his head back to the elf. "Was anything said? Did Shayed make any final remarks?"

"Shayed was not there," the elf stated sadly. "Remember that the sphere continued to emit energy which was deadly to the elves. During the battle, she remained among the leaders and in close proximity to the sphere. In the end, the energy destroyed her. She did not live to see the dwarves close the entrance."

"I'm sorry."

"Do not be sorry. She died as proud as any elf could hope. She served as the ultimate salvation to the elves. In answer to your question, nothing was said. The collapsing of the rock signaled the end. Before the dust completely settled, the representatives of each race departed."

Ryson turned his attention back to the mountain. "And so there it's stayed all this time. The sphere's been trapped in that mountain containing all this power."

"That is, until now," Lief said firmly. "There can be little doubt now that something is wrong. The energy is again being released. I don't know how or why, but the proof is conclusive. The return of magic, the undead, and now the goblins. We can only hope that the sphere is not in the hands of one of those foul creatures."

"But the goblins said they were not responsible?"

"You can not believe a goblin. They lie with the same ease they breath. Even if it is telling the truth, there are other creatures such as river rogues, mountain shags, and vampires. Any of these creatures may have found a way to break back into the land. Perhaps, one of them has taken the sphere."

"Let's not go making assumptions, especially a bad one," Ryson advised. "What is it that you hoped to do now that we've reached Sanctum?"

"I wish to climb to the summit and examine the opening. I need to see if there are any clues as to what has happened."

"I see," Ryson noted thoughtful. "Do you think it's a good idea that you go?"

The elf raised an eyebrow and frowned.

"Hear me out before you get all annoyed," Ryson responded quickly. "What if the sphere is still around up there. If it is, won't it still be emitting the energy that is poisonous to elves?"

"The sphere has the power to discharge energy which is poisonous to all races. There is nothing to say that the energy is still directed at the elves."

"But there is," Ryson disagreed. "When you told me about how Shayed probed the magic, she believed that the magic would only be altered to focus on another race after all the elves were destroyed. That hasn't happened yet. Also, you said that the more sensitive elves already felt something. I think that means the energy is still focused upon the elves."

"You miss little that I say, don't you?" the elf said.

"I'm a delver. I pay attention and remember."

"So what is it you suggest?"

"Let me go alone. I can climb the mountain faster by myself. I can examine the summit and report back to you. It may be safer if you stay within the trees. Maybe they'll help to shield you."

"I do not know," the elf said reluctantly. "If the sphere has been taken, I need to know who is in possession. There may be trails left by the invader, trails you might not recognize. You have no idea of the markings of a river rogue or mountain shag."

"But I am a scout," Ryson stated firmly. "I may not know exactly how to interpret their trails, but I won't miss them. It's what I do. If there is anything of significance up there, I'll find it, and I'll report back to you."

Lief soured. "I don't like it. I may need to see things for myself in order to understand them."

"We can worry about that after I make my initial scout. There may be no reason for you to go, no reason for you to take the risk. Let me go first, let me find what I can. If there's something you need to look at, we can deal with that when we know for sure."

"It is a delay."

Ryson shook his head. "You have no idea how quickly I can move up that mountain."

Lief remained still upon his branch with his back to the trunk of the tree. His elfish eyes held the delver firmly. "You are sure you would do this?"

"I would do this even if you weren't here," Ryson admitted. "There is something up there I wish to see, something that's calling to me. I also wish to witness the ground where the races stood together for the last time."

"You don't know what you might find up there. You may be putting yourself in great danger."

"Haven't I done that already?" the delver asked.

"You have, but you have yet to see a mountain shag."

"I'm willing to take that risk."

"Are you, delver?" the elf questioned harshly. "Tell me how wise it is to take a risk of which you know nothing about. You have never dealt with a mountain shag. They are large and fierce. They would bite you in half if given a chance. You speak of willingness, yet you understand little."

"Can they hide their scent?" Ryson asked patiently.

"What?"

"I asked if mountain shags can hide their scent."

"Not that I am aware, but what does that ..."

The delver did not let him finish. "I will be careful to note the scent of anything strange. I won't move into an ambush. I'll do this and there's not much you can do to stop me. Even if you attempt to follow me, I will outdistance you in no time. I don't think you can move through the rocks as you move through these trees. I'll leave you behind, and short of placing an arrow in my back, there's nothing you can do about it."

The elf regarded the delver with an even greater frown. "I see. You have then made up your mind?"

"I have."

The elf shook his head. "There will be time for greater discussion in the morning. I suggest you get some rest. Tomorrow will be an interesting day. I will take the first watch."

He said nothing more.

Chapter 5

Morning broke after an uneventful evening. The elf woke with the first glimmer of light passing through the trees. To his immediate left, upon a thinner branch, he spotted a small nest made from twigs and interwoven branches. It was filled with berries.

The delver sat opposite the elf. Straddling a thick bough, his legs swung freely in the air. His right hand was cupped, holding another pile of the wild fruit. He ate some, some he tossed to birds waiting in the higher branches.

"You've been busy," Lief noted. Apparently, it did not take long for the elf to free himself from the bonds of sleep. Immediately, he was wide awake.

"May I?" Lief asked for permission before helping himself to breakfast.

"Those are all for you," the delver replied with a smile. "I've had more than my share."

Lief brushed specs of bark from his hands before indulging in the fruit. While chewing on the first handful, he allowed himself a moment to cast a glance upon the surrounding forest. "Can I assume there has been no sign of the goblins?"

"Not a one," Ryson replied confidently. "I took the opportunity to do some scouting while you were asleep. I checked the perimeter about forty trees out from here. All I saw were a few deer. They didn't seem to be alarmed by anything, either. They pointed out our breakfast."

"Very good," the elf said and hastily finished the last morsel of fruit within the nest. With casual ease, he stood up upon his perch. One hand rested on the trunk of the large old oak, while the other brushed off his clothes. This ritual complete, his hands found his sword, bow and quiver of arrows. He rearmed himself as he prepared for the coming day. His visage turned grim as he swung about to face the outline of Sanctum mountain.

"We should lose no more time," he said bluntly.

Ryson leapt to his feet with even greater ease than the elf had displayed. He jumped upon a rope thin branch which wavered with his weight. He showed not the slightest imbalance, his knees bending in unison with the swaying branch. "You haven't forgotten what I said last night, have you?"

"I haven't forgotten," the elf replied harshly, almost growling. "You intend to climb Sanctum on your own, regardless of my warnings."

"I'm just looking out for your safety," the delver responded firmly.

The elf grunted, but made not further response. He made it clear he wished to renew their travel as quickly as possible. Without waiting for Ryson's acknowledgment, he began passing across the branches which stretched to the west.

Ryson joined him with a shrug. He also said nothing further, keeping his silence as he hoped not to stir the volatile emotions of his companion.

They moved together, nearly side by side. Ryson no longer led, and Lief no longer followed. The beckoning slopes of Sanctum Mountain became their sole objective, and it called to both of them. They looked to no trail, and followed no path. They simply let the trees and the ever closing outline of Sanctum dictate their

steps.

It took little time to complete this last leg of their journey. Even as the sun hung low in the eastern sky, the delver and elf broke through the edges of Dark Spruce Forest. They leapt to the ground and stood upon a rocky clearing of the mountain side.

The days were growing longer now, and the air warmed quickly. The fallen dew of the previous evening dried hastily in the bright sunlight, especially in this clearing. The rocks and boulders before them were covered more with dust than any remnants of moisture.

After Ryson moved further away from the trees, he paused to check his surroundings. First he looked to the skies. Clear blue greeted him happily. He looked to the tops of the trees to gauge any wind. They rustled with only a small breeze. He then looked to the sparse white clouds which floated lazily through the sky. He judged the higher altitude winds to be no greater than the light breezes which passed through the forest. The delver then knelt and felt the ground. While still somewhat cool from the dew, it was already dry.

"We won't have to worry about any storms, at least for the early part of the day," he stated more to himself than to his companion. "I think it may be warmer than normal for this time of the season, though. The ground holds more and more heat now. And the sun will be bright. I'll have to keep it to my back as I climb in order to maintain a clear view."

The delver then turned his attention to the mountain. He paced about a few steps to his left, then back to his right. He arched his neck to gain different perspectives.

"It won't be a difficult climb at all. It's a steep slope, but it's straight and clean. I can already pick out two or three paths which even a novice climber could handle."

"It was not chosen for its difficult exterior terrain," the elf stated, almost as if responding to an insult. "Shayed and the leaders did not care how difficult it was to climb. It was chosen due to its structure. Sanctum is a mountain with a thick and deep base. Its sides are filled with rock and granite, yet its core is hollow. At the time of the sphere's encasing, the dwarves explained it was an extinct volcano where the opening at the top had collapsed on itself. It would prove the safest place to construct the tiers. The hollow core curbed the amount of digging necessary. The ..."

Ryson interrupted the elf before he could continue. "Will you look at that!"

Lief was taken aback as he tried to follow the delver's gaze, but could see nothing aside from the rocky side of the mountain. "What is it?"

"The path of the quake," Ryson responded hurriedly. His head darted back and forth and all around. He looked back to the trees and then back up the side of the mountain. He turned and paced in circles, always examining the landscape. He shook his head in displeasure with his own carelessness. "I can't believe it took me so long to see that."

"See what?!" Lief asked desperately. The elf stood in place but looked about with great alarm. He crouched ever so slightly and put a hand upon the bow which remained over his shoulder. As his eyes darted back and forth across the surrounding grounds, he could not find the origin of Ryson's dismay. "What are you looking at?!" he demanded again, hoping to uncover the source of any threat.

Ryson, for the most part, disregarded the elf's agitation. Instead, he concentrated upon the source of his misgivings. He spoke to himself, bitterly and scornfully, trying to place the past events in orderly form. "I was on the trail of the tremor. When I saw the goblins and then heard your story, I was more interested in other

things. I forgot what brought me here. That's really no excuse. I can't believe it. It's been right in front of me all this time!"

"What has been in front of you?" the elf nearly shouted, but still uncertain as to any imminent danger, he kept his voice as guarded as his emotions would allow.

The delver turned a near disbelieving gaze upon the elf. "Can't you see it? It's what brought us here. The quake! It started from here! Look at the mountain. Look at the unsettled ground going up the slope. Look at those cracks. That's the greatest disturbance we've seen yet. Follow it down to the forest. Look at some of the trees! That one's fallen over. Look at that one, it's almost completely uprooted. Look at the leaves and branches on the ground. That damage is fresh."

Lief took his hand from his bow, now certain that the delver's dismay came not from a pack of goblins, but from the signs in the land. He looked to everything Ryson pointed out. The signs were not as clear to an elf, but he could not deny them.

"Yes, I see," Lief responded with renewed alarm. "The very ground here has been shaken badly. But are you sure this is where the quake began? Could you be mistaken?"

"I doubt it. I'm almost positive." The delver's neck arched back toward the mountain as he pointed to signs so obvious to him. "Look at how the disturbance runs down the mountain. Look there, a large deposit of small rocks and stones caught by that boulder. That's a fresh avalanche. There's another one over there."

Ryson pointed to several different locations as Lief followed the directions with growing confusion. He could not interpret these findings with the same degree of certainty. Certain aspects appeared like nothing more than piles of sparse rocks.

The delver, however, showed not the slightest hint of doubt. He spoke with the continued shrill of excitement hinging upon his voice. He had indeed found what he had been searching for, found that which the Reader Matthew asked him to search out; discovered it almost by accident, but he found it none the less.

"The rocks and stones are scattered in different directions. By the looks of the trees, the tremor was much more powerful here. Certainly stronger than when it hit Connel. This has to be the origin. I wonder how Matthew would react to this news."

Acknowledging the delver's expertise, Lief accepted Ryson's claim. He could not know how such news would affect a human follower of the Book of Godson, but he knew his own reflections. It brought little solace, and left him with greater concern. If a tremor rose from this place, a place of great significance to all in the land of Uton, it was important to know how and why. Lief's voice turned cold and even more demanding. "Can you tell what might have caused it?"

Ryson shook his head. "It looks pretty natural to me. I'm not sure I can even pinpoint... Wait a minute. There it is!"

Lief tried once more to follow Ryson's eyes to the source of attention. He was unsuccessful and frustration poured from him.

"There's what?" the elf charged bitterly.

The excitement of discovery filled the delver. He spoke with a quick tongue. "Roughly thirty degrees down from the summit on the southern slope. Do you see the indentation?"

Lief brought his hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from any glare bouncing off the mountainside. "No, I don't see anything." His reply was sour and filled with growing impatience. Finally, thankfully, his eyes penetrated the same area revealed to the delver. "Ah, yes. Yes I do."

"That's a definite break," the delver exclaimed. "Look at the shadows. Look at how the sunlight fails to reflect at certain points. That's because there's nothing there. It may be nothing more than a deep crater, but it may also be a complete split into the core."

In search of more information and now dismayed over the visible break in Sanctum's side, Lief remained eager for answers. "Can you tell anything else from here?"

For the first time, Ryson turned his attention completely upon the elf. As a scout, it was his job... his duty, to provide the most needed information to those that asked for his assistance. "What do you want me to look for?"

Relieved that the delver finally gave him true attention, Lief spoke with a more controlled tone. "I want to know why the breach is there. I want to know what caused it."

Ryson nodded his head in acceptance of the task. Before he answered, however, he posed a question to the elf. He did so for reasons not quite clear.

"What do you think might have caused this?"

"I do not know," Lief responded sternly. "That is why we are here."

"But you're afraid of something, aren't you?"

"Of course I am!" the elf stormed. "We have found a breach in the mountain! It reaffirms why the magic is free, but it does not explain why. What if it is the work of a mountain shag? What if the sphere is now in its hands?! That is what I am afraid of! Do you see any signs up there which can tell you what caused the breach or don't you?"

"Not from here," the delver replied. "But I intend to take a closer look. I want to ask you one more question before I go. Where did the dwarves seal the original entrance? Was it near the same spot?"

"No," the elf answered stoically. "According to elflore, the entrance was at the peak. It opened directly into the center of the mountain and down to the upper most tier. That breach is too low in the mountain."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Agony dripped from the elf's very words. "Why do you persist on asking me?"

"Because something's calling me from up there, something at the top. I felt it ever since you told me that story, but I don't think it's the quake anymore. It's something else. I think it has to do with when they sealed the cave. I need to see it."

For Lief, impatience transformed into concern, as if the finding of the breach was not enough. The elf looked to the delver guardedly. "I do not like to hear that. In truth, I don't know what it means, but I saw what happened the last time you felt such an urging and went off your original track. You walked into the undead, do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. I smelled the decay of the flesh. I think I also sensed the magic which revived that

thing. That's what I followed. But this is different. It's not something I can smell, see or hear. It's something else. Something inside of me is telling me to get to the top of that mountain."

"You put me in a very difficult position," Lief stated anxiously. "I need you to explore the breach. Unfortunately, I also know how keen your senses are. Whatever is calling you may be just as important. It may hold the answers to my questions. Time, however, is becoming an issue. My people need to be told of what I have found. Should you forget, goblins are appearing in this land. An unwarranted delay may prove deadly."

"I don't know what to say to you," Ryson replied honestly. "I know I have to check out that crater up there. I even want to explore it. I can't imagine what I might find if it leads to within the hollow of the mountain. Still, I know there's something else I must see, something at the peak."

"Then, I will offer but one plausible solution to both our problems. You go on ahead up the mountain, and I will follow."

"Wait a minute, I don't ..."

The elf erupted. His anger boiled over. "No! I will not wait! Last night you made it very clear to me you would do as you please and there was nothing I could do about it. Now, I am telling you the same thing! You can not prevent me from following you. I will not stay here just because you say so! I will make my own decisions just as you have. Now, if you let me finish my proposal, you will understand what I offer."

Ryson did not argue. He bit back any anger of his own.

"Go ahead," he said simply.

The elf continued through heavy breaths. "You wish to explore a part of this mountain which may or may not hold importance to us. I wish to find out what has caused the breach and if there is any indication of the sphere's presence. I will follow you up the mountain, but I will not hold you up. You will go forth at your best speed and reach the breach first. Examine what you will, but be careful. We must both remember that there are secrets hidden in this mountain that neither of us may understand. If you complete your investigation before I have reached the rupture and you feel there is nothing which alarms you, continue on your quest up the mountain. Find whatever it is you seek, but do not delay. While you are exploring the top of this mountain, I will examine the break for myself. I will make my own judgments. If I find something which raises my concern, I may not wait for you. I may leave to warn the other elves."

The delver considered the proposal for but a heartbeat. He could not argue its logic or its merit. "I understand, and I guess I can't really argue with any of that."

"No, you can not. Now, let us go. We've wasted enough time as it is."

With nothing further to say, both elf and delver began moving up the mountain. The climb was fairly easy with few obstacles, but within an instant the delver quickly pulled away from his slower companion. Even as the grade of the slope increased, Ryson bounded forward as if he were moving over flat, smooth ground.

For Lief's part, the elf moved gracefully at times, but it was apparent that rocky slopes were not the trees of Dark Spruce. He stepped with more conviction and with less ease. He labored at times with the steep grade. It was also difficult for him to keep his attention purely on the climb. The smooth movements of the delver were certainly a spectacle to see. Lief took his focus away from his own footing more than once to marvel at Ryson's speed and agility.

Ryson stopped every now and then to check his surroundings. He took heed of the elf's warnings and made sure he would not stumble upon anything blindly. He checked for loose dust in the air which might signal movement ahead of him, and he listened intently for sliding rocks. He sensed nothing. He peered down to the forest and watched carefully for any signs of goblins. He smelled the clean warm air, and in everything, he sensed no sign of danger.

He took time to check the ground and saw the great disturbance in the soil. He was now certain that the quake which rolled through Connel must have originated from this mountain. Still, everything he examined appeared natural. He saw no signs of man-made tunneling, no sign of digging or of excavating. The fallen rocks, the loose soil, the raised ground; all appeared the natural result of a powerful tremor.

As Ryson moved to within range of the crater, he took a position behind a large boulder. He pulled his spyscope from his belt and made his first examination from a safe distance.

The hole in the side of the mountain was as tall as two men and almost as wide. The sunlight cascaded in at an angle and lit up the western edge of the break. From where he stood, he could not see a bottom to this crater. Instead, it formed more of a cave entrance. He knew it was very deep, he just did not know how far it traveled.

He circled about the opening before approaching. Remaining ever careful of ambush, he continued to sense not a shred of danger. He stopped at several points to take a look into the opening, but still he could not see the bottom of this crevice.

Finally, secure that no danger of ambush existed; he stepped up directly to the breach. He stopped right at the foot of the opening and peered deep into its center. The break formed a tunnel which apparently bore clean through. It dove through the rock at a forty-five degree angle and continued far beyond the delver's vision. Nothing but darkness welcomed his sight.

Ryson knelt and checked the rim of the opening. The soil was still loose, but the surrounding rock felt sturdy, and there was no threat of collapse. He stood and felt the top as well as the sides, still checking the integrity and soundness of the rock.

Secure that the tunnel would not collapse around him, the delver began to step down into the crevice. He took several steps forward into the shadows. He bent his knees slightly to compensate for the downward pitch of the floor.

Out of the sunlight, he let his keen vision adjust to the dark. He soon could see further into this newly created passage. It formed a long cavern which continued far and deep down through the mountain. It curved ahead of him, thus he could not see its ultimate destination.

He paused briefly for a quick examination of the interior walls. He examined the sides of the cavern and noted their texture. They showed no sign of being disturbed by tools or explosion. Shovels and picks always made definite breaks, but the surrounding walls were almost smooth, as if one solid cylinder broke through the wall in one mighty burst. Explosions leave smoke residue and burn marks, but he found neither.

Ryson took a few more cautious steps forward. Unknowingly, he slammed into an unseen barrier. The unexpected impact dropped him to the seat of his pants. He slid slightly down the slope of the cavern floor until again he hit the same unseen barrier with his feet.

Surprised, the delver swung his head back and forth trying to find an answer. He saw nothing behind him. Ahead was nothing more than the continued path of the tunnel. He was alone in the cavern, yet something had dropped him to the ground. That something remained directly in front of him.

From a sitting position, he reached out his arms and his palms pushed flat against an invisible wall. He pushed at the barrier, gently at first, then with greater force. The unseen wall would not give. He lifted a leg and placed his foot against it. He used all the leverage he could muster, but still the barrier held him back.

"What in the name of Godson in this?" he muttered to himself as he struggled against the slope to return to a standing position.

Again, he reached out and found the barrier with his hands. He followed it from left to right and found that it extended from wall to wall. He continued moving his hands about, trying to find a hole or a break. None existed. It appeared to cover the entire width of the passage.

Ryson stepped back and glanced around his feet. He spied a small stone and picked it up. With a slight flick of his wrist, he gently cast the stone at the barrier. It was an amazing sight. The stone floated through the air until it hit the barrier. It jolted to a stop in midair and dropped straight to the ground. It barely made a sound upon impact with the invisible wall, but its thud upon reaching the ground echoed through the crevice. Shaking his head with puzzlement, he turned and climbed back out into the open air. He stood outside the crevice considering what he had found. He could not, however, divine a reasonable explanation.

Of course, the unreasonable reared up with disturbing possibilities. Magic. Was this yet one more case of something he could not fathom? He was growing weary of such explanations. Just once, he would have hoped to venture upon something of a more conventional nature, something which might not seem so implausible.

Ryson wondered if Lief might explain this phenomenon. He checked the elf's progress. The elf was closing on his position, yet he was still several paces away.

Ryson sighed. He looked further up the mountain. He continued to sense a strong attraction from a point near the top. He felt no danger, only a summoning. The pull was strong, and he greatly desired to move further up the mountain. The existence of the barrier, however, created an anchor which kept him in place. He waited at the mouth of the crevice until the elf reached him.

Lief did not appear winded by the climb. He stepped up to Ryson with diligence, and he immediately noted the concern on the delver's face.

"What have you found?" the elf demanded.

"I'm really not sure," the delver responded without shame in admitting his confusion. "I started checking out the hole and I couldn't see the bottom. I wanted to see if it led all the way into the mountain, so I started walking into it."

Lief listened carefully as he stepped up to the break in the mountain wall. He peered into the shadows as Ryson continued.

"I got a few steps inside," the delver explained, "then I hit something. It was like a wall, but it's invisible."

If the presence of the invisible barrier alarmed the elf, he did not show it. It was the breach which held his concentration, a break in a mountain which was supposed to be indestructible. "Did you see anything or anyone? Did you hear anything?"

"Didn't see or hear anything," Ryson responded simply.

Lief would wait not a second more before further examination of the tunnel.

"Let's take a look," he stated bluntly.

The elf stepped slowly forward. Ryson followed behind.

Ryson pointed to an area a few paces forward. "The barrier's just ahead."

Lief stopped before he took more than three steps into the crevice.

"What's wrong?" the delver asked pensively.

"Don't you feel it?" the elf's agitation was clearly apparent on his face. His hands shook slightly and he wrung them together as if hoping to remove an unwanted film.

"Feel what?" Ryson questioned as he watched the elf with growing concern.

The elf's voice remained firm, but within his tone of both strength and impatience, a hint of fear became noticeable for the first time. "The magic. It is pouring out of this hole."

"You can feel it?"

"Yes. Yes, I can. This does not bode well. I should not stay here for long. Quickly, show me this barrier."

The two continued forward. Ryson walked with outstretched arms until he found the invisible wall.

Lief walked up to it and examined it quickly.

"It is a force field," he stated. "It will block our path. We don't have the power to break it. Long ago, magic casters surrounded themselves with these invisible fields of energy to protect themselves from arrows and stones. They could concentrate upon their spells and release them through the force field. It will keep us out, but it won't prevent the energy from flowing to the outside. That's why the magic is able to escape. Follow me now. We need to get back to the free air."

Lief stepped quickly upward. As he broke out into daylight, he stepped to a safe distance away from the breach.

"Are you alright?" Ryson asked with obvious concern as he followed.

"Yes, the magic is more dispersed out here, but none of this bodes well. The power of the sphere is being funneled out of the mountain through that crevice. It is just as I feared. Unfortunately, I still don't know why. I can only imagine that some horrid creature has found the power to dig through the mountain and break through the diamond walls. It must be down there now directing the power through the tunnel it made."

"I don't think so," Ryson responded. "I checked the walls of the tunnel. It didn't look like a dig. Also, the force which made it pushed out from within the mountain, not from here inward."

The elf's frown grew just as his eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I saw the way the rock was broken. All the angles indicate the force came from the inside and pushed out."

"But that doesn't make any sense. I know the sphere is still inside there. I can feel the magic pouring out. Why would this cavern exist if that is so? If it was used as an escape route to take the sphere to a safe place, I would

understand. But the sphere is still there!"

"I can't explain it. I just know what I saw."

"Fire upon all of this!" the elf said in frustration. "This has become too much for me. I need counsel. I must return to my camp and explain what we have seen. Although I am already in debt to your service, I ask that you accompany me. You will help me in forcing the truth upon them."

"I'll go," Ryson said quickly, "but I want you to come with me up the mountain first. There's something up there I need to see. I think you might need to see it as well."

Lief actually groaned. The weight of his problems became more visible with each second. He shook his hands out in front of him as he animated his consternation.

"We do not have time to go on a delver hunt! Don't you understand what we've found?! Sanctum has been breached! We do not yet know why or by whom."

"The answer may lie up there," the delver replied, taking no offense at the elf's outburst. While he had only known Lief for little more than a day, Ryson already accepted the fiery spirit of the elf's personality.

Lief eyed the delver harshly. "Fire upon you! Now you leave me no choice. I could not leave now if I wanted to! I'm aware of your powers and your great senses. By telling me an answer is so close, I could not do anything but follow you to whatever you seek! I only hope what you say is true. To waste time now may be more than foolish, it may be fatal." The elf paused. He sighed and groaned simultaneously. He brought one hand to his forehead as if trying to wipe away his problems. When he spoke again, his tone was forceful, yet sincere. "I will not hang that upon you, though. I will only ask you to probe deeply that which you feel. Is it merely curiosity to a story I spoke of which attracts you, or is it something more? Examine closely! Do you truly believe it is something related to what we now face or is it simply the hold of a legend?"

Ryson took the request with great seriousness. He shut his eyes and stood perfectly still. He cleared his mind of all other thoughts. He focused upon the far off sensation which beckoned him to climb further up the mountain. He seized it with every fiber of his being. This was something his father taught him long ago. It was the only way for a delver of his powers to choose a single path when many called to him. This deep and pure moment of pointed concentration allowed Ryson to truly judge that which held the greatest importance. He had done it before, but he had never experienced what happened at that moment.

A voice spoke out in his mind. It was not his. It spoke softly, yet with authority. It was most definitely the voice of a woman, but it was a voice he had never heard before.

"You must come now," the voice said simply. Nothing further.

The delver's eyes shot open. He swerved around and looked up to the peak of Sanctum.

"We have to get up there now," he said with a great sense of urgency.

Lief showed no sign of disappointment at the decision. He noted the look of astonishment on the delver's face, but did not ask for further explanation. He accepted the delver's decision without hesitancy.

"Then let us go now," the elf said simply.

Lief and Ryson scampered further up the mountain without another word. Ryson slowed his pace, refrained from breaking into a full gallop which would have surely left the elf behind. He wished the elf to accompany

him, to remain at his shoulder. He did not know why, but he knew that they should reach the top together.

As they rounded a corner ledge and stepped up to a level platform at the top of the mountain, an answer presented itself. It offered explanation for the voice in Ryson's mind just as it muddled his perception of reality to an even greater extent.

Standing upon the open ground, or perhaps floating would better describe it, the ghostly form of a woman greeted the two with silent appreciation. The spiritual outline was undeniable, as was the joyful rapture which accented her dream-like countenance. She cast no shadow even as she stood in direct sunlight. Her form was ethereal, intangible. The outline of rocks behind her was visible through every span of her silhouetted figure.

Not a shred of her person carried any hint of color. Whiteness of different shades cast the different parts of her body, gave her form greater identity. Her facial features were distinguishable, but they remained softened, almost blurred by the lack of any true substance. Her flowing gown simply glittered and shimmered in the sunlight. Not even her long hair displayed a trace of anything besides white; not brown, nor blonde. If Ryson held any images of a ghostly spirit, this would certainly fit.

Lief traveled only slightly behind Ryson. When he came into sight of the apparition, he froze. He could not find his voice to speak. His feet anchored him in place.

Ryson, while also jolted with overwhelming awe, was not quite as affected. He moved a careful step closer, for the figure appeared to welcome them. He was unaware of Lief's frozen state. His attention, his every sensation, focused on the incomprehensible figure before him. It was a magnet for all his curiosities.

It was at that moment that the delver noticed the pointed tips of the spirit's ears. Even with the ill-defined edges of the apparition's silhouette, this trait was undeniable. If this truly was a ghost, it was the spirit of an elf.

Unsure of exactly what to say, Ryson's first words rambled out somewhat randomly.

"I felt something calling me. Actually I heard a voice call me up here. I believe it was your voice. I hope it was your voice." An honest statement, for somehow the delver knew it was an honor to be acknowledged by this benevolent apparition.

"Indeed, it was," the spirit said with a continued beaming smile. "I am Shayed."

Chapter 6

"You're Shayed of the elflore legend?" the delver finally spoke up. Facing the spirit, Ryson had completely forgotten that Lief was just behind him. The unmoving elf could not make a sound and became a forgotten statue. Ryson's attention thus remained unbroken and focused upon the form of Shayed.

"I am." The apparition's mouth moved as she spoke, but her voice resounded from her core, as if it were the center of her soul which generated the sound for her words.

Even as untold questions haunted the delver, one could not be ignored. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"My body died long ago, if that's what you ask."

"So you're a ghost?"

"I am Shayed," the spirit replied as if it were a simple explanation.

Ryson rubbed his forehead in exasperation. He had hoped for affirmation of her status, but she seemed to decline. If she had simply admitted to being a ghost, his confusion might have ebbed. As it remained with him, he fought valiantly for at least partial comprehension. "You were dead, but now you're back. If I hadn't been through so much in the last day, I would have never believed this. But you are here and you are speaking to me. I can't help but accept that much." He took his hand from his head and glanced back at Shayed. "Now, just because I say I accept it doesn't mean that I understand it. If you're dead, you shouldn't be here. I mean, I've never heard of anyone talking to ghosts before, if you even are a ghost. Sure, I've heard ghost stories, but this isn't right."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Shayed asked with a genuine desire to help him through his confusion.

At that moment, it was difficult, if not impossible, for the delver to explain what he believed.

"I don't know," he stammered. He made every attempt to answer the question, as if he knew it might hold the key to final understanding. "I believe in souls, but I don't know if I believed something like this was possible."

"It was not before now."

Ryson shook his head. "I don't understand." He sighed as if giving up.

"The sphere is again radiating its captured energies into the world," the elf sorceress said with a smile, reassuring the delver. "That is why your beliefs are no longer as you would have them. Even in its corrupted form, the return of magic means the return of many things. The ghosts in the stories you spoke of might have indeed been souls trying to return to this land, yet without magic they could not make the transition complete. That is no longer a problem."

"So what's that mean? Now, along with everything else, ghosts are going to start roaming around just like everybody else! You know, this is really getting ridiculous. Did you know that yesterday I was attacked by a corpse?" His words emphasized his growing strain. Ryson's entire life became unraveled before him. He faced a delver's nightmare. Nothing was certain; nothing held absolute answers, whether simple or complex. Facts were no longer facts as this cursed magic changed the rules he spent his life learning.

Shayed took compassion upon the delver. Her hazy eyes warmed with a loving glow. "An unfortunate result of the corruption caused by the sphere. I sense the confusion within you. I can give no remedy for that. The strain bears upon you because of what you are. You are delver, that I am sure."

"Yes, I'm a delver. I'm Ryson Acumen. But right now that's about all I know. I wonder now if even that's true."

The spirit laughed lightly, an open-hearted laugh. "That will always remain true. You will always seek answers, even if they might change. View this as an opportunity, Ryson Acumen. See this as a chance to relearn all that you believed you knew. Could a true delver ask for more?"

"I guess not," Ryson admitted. His tensions eased, but only slightly. He still faced the seemingly impossible. He attempted to face it with the delver spirit she strove to bring out of him. "Does your appearance mean that other ghosts, or spirits, or whatever, will start appearing all over the place?"

"Spirits will not simply return to this land at will. They are either summoned and controlled by dark magic, or they must have some higher purpose."

Ryson quickly caught the underlying possibilities of such a reply. "Since I assume you are not controlled by dark magic, I guess you have some higher purpose?"

"I do. It is a purpose of the highest order. Do not, however, misinterpret me. I am not a savior, not a heroine who comes with the power to end the threat which exists. I play the mere role of messenger. My ability to alter the current course may only be negligible, but it is a purpose which allows for my presence here. It is your presence upon Sanctum which is of greater importance. I am limited to this spot. I would not be able to travel to find you. Your presence here signifies greater powers at work."

Ryson cast a doubtful look upon the sorceress apparition. "That's the second time I've heard that, and I'm not sure I accept it. You talk as if some force is guiding me along. I don't think so. I was just doing a job and things just happened. It's hard to imagine that something else might be responsible for me being here."

Shayed cast aside his doubts. She turned the attention to Ryson's motionless associate. "I assume it was your speechless companion that spoke of it first."

Ryson suddenly remembered that Lief was at his side. He turned to see the flustered elf still and quiet. The delver placed a hand on the elf's shoulder as Lief's eyes stared unblinkingly at Shayed.

"Hey, Lief." Ryson shook him lightly. "Are you alright?"

Lief regained his voice, but his skin remained gray. "It is Shayed!"

"I know." Ryson could not help but chuckle at Lief's disposition. The stunned expression and the gray pallor of his companion lightened the delver's mood considerably. For the first time since they met, it was Lief who showed greater surprise at the stirring events which had passed over them.

"Do not make light of this," the elf clamored. His rising emotions finally chased away the gray pallor and restored a flush red to his cheeks.

"I'm not making light of this," Ryson said trying to bite back his smile. "But you should see your face. It's getting red now, but before it was almost as white as hers."

Lief clenched his teeth but said nothing further.

Shayed beckoned for their attention once more.

"Both of your reactions are quite understandable," she said calmly. "I assure you, I am glad to see both a

representative of the delvers and the elves." She looked squarely at Lief as if trying to recall his face. "What is your name?"

"I am Lief Woodson." The elf bowed slightly.

"I am pleased to meet you." Her voice lost some of its inherent warmth as she pressed the elf for his knowledge. "Do you know what is happening here?"

"I know much less than I would like. We have found a breach in the wall of Sanctum. It must break to the hollow for I can feel the magic flowing through the rift. That also tells me that the sphere remains in Sanctum. As for why the breach exists or as to who might have caused it, I can not say."

"No one is responsible for the breach," Shayed stated firmly. "The sphere itself has broken through."

"That can not be!" the elf blurted out, but he caught his tongue quickly. "Forgive me, I meant no disrespect. I just could not believe that that was possible. But if you say so, then so it must be."

"You need not apologize, Lief Woodson. I understand your surprise, but rest assured it is true. The sphere has used the power within it to break from its prison. It created the quake to shift the mountain. At the same time, it discharged a powerful blast of energy which created the opening in Sanctum."

"That would explain what I saw in the crevice," Ryson acknowledged. He placed a hand to his chin as he recalled the sight of the cavern. As delver's are capable of doing, a clear image came into his mind and he could see the inside of the tunnel with great detail. "It wasn't man-made and the force came from within."

"Your senses are keen, delver," the apparition said with an even warmer expression. "They will be needed, that is why I believe there are greater powers at work here."

"You talked about a higher purpose before," Ryson responded. His voice revealed his skepticism about these greater powers, but for the moment, he turned upon his curiosities of Shayed's appearance. "Before you start talking about how I'm needed, can you tell me why you're here?"

Shayed answered without hesitancy. Her words held the conviction that made it clear to Ryson of how she was able to lead the alliance of different races long ago. She spoke with neither pride nor arrogance over her own importance. "I was responsible for encasing the sphere within this mountain. I have come to understand that my decision was neither right nor wrong. It simply delayed the inevitable. Perhaps, it allowed for a time where the participants were better prepared for what they must face. Only time can judge that matter.

"Regardless, the time has come. The sphere can no longer be entombed. There is nothing which might hold it. With each day it becomes more aware of its surroundings. It is slow to think, slower to react. That is why it took so many cycles of the seasons to break free. It will not take as long if the same approach is taken. There is but one thing that must be done. The sphere must be destroyed."

The mere mention of the destruction of the sphere extracted an animated response from Lief. His own mind raced over the legends of elflore and how Shayed herself gave her very life to prevent the wizards from doing what she now suggested. "Are you sure?" Lief questioned with eyes nearly bulging. "I mean not to question you, but the Wizard War? Was it not fought to prevent that very thing? What of the elves? Will they be safe if the tainted magic is freed?"

"They are not safe now," Shayed replied with the first hint of sadness. The mention of the war brought a flood of memories, of decisions long ago, actions when she was of mortal body. She continued. "Nor is anyone safe. If it reassures you, it is my belief, no, my acceptance that the destruction of the sphere will not mean the end

of the elves. It is the sphere which corrupts the magic, the sphere which creates the poison. If the sphere is destroyed, so will be the poison."

"Your word is more than enough for me," Lief stated firmly. Any shred of doubt evaporated with the conviction of Shayed's words. Lief now stood boldly willing to take up the weight of any endeavor at the simple command of the spirit sorceress. "If you command the sphere to be destroyed, then so it will."

"Now, wait a minute!" Ryson passed a glance at Lief. The issue of the sphere, the momentary debate, and the final decision all seemed to pass him by. It was his own question of Shayed's higher purpose that led to each, yet he remained as ill-informed as a newborn. Sentence was past, and he remained uncertain of the very issue at hand. He became almost as demanding in tone as Lief had displayed during their journey to Sanctum. "Maybe all you need is the word of a spirit and you're off, but I still need to know more about what in the name of Godson is going on here."

Shayed spoke patiently to the delver. "Your service is needed delver. The services of all races, in fact. The sphere can no longer be held within this mountain or any other mountain. It has gained enough awareness to realize it wishes to break free. There is danger for everyone and everything. The sphere holds the power to destroy all life, to decimate all races and end the eternal conflict."

"What conflict?" The delver grew frustrated. With every explanation, Shayed created only more questions.

"The conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, happiness and sorrow; that is the conflict I speak of. You must understand that the sphere works for neither side. In effect, it has chosen the only other alternative between these struggles; oblivion. It works for but one purpose, annihilation of everything."

"The sphere? In this mountain, the sphere wants to destroy everything?" Ryson's disbelief was obvious.

"I understand your doubt." Her words rang with sincerity for such a thing seemed almost unthinkable. "What is happening was never foreseen or foretold. Even more disheartening, its final outcome remains unknown. Being of spirit form, I have had the privilege to speak with powers that in different means have passed the prophecies to earth. They all agree upon one thing, the sphere resists the influences of both sides. In truth, there is nothing which will indicate how any of this may turn out. This one event may yet be that which decides whether the struggle between good and evil continues or if oblivion will take both sides."

"You aren't making this any clearer to me."

Shayed spread her transparent arms to her sides. "Think of this land as the great playing field where good and evil compete. It is an ongoing struggle. The prophecies talk of these struggles and their ultimate outcome. Now, however, this land faces something which might intervene, something which might end the struggle in the worst way. Oblivion threatens to run over this land. It threatens to end the struggle with neither side winning. It would mean the end of good, the end of evil, the end of everything. An endless void, no life, no struggle. An option that is unacceptable."

"Can this be possible?" the delver questioned.

"Unfortunately, yes," Shayed emphasized. "It has been made possible by the awareness which was created within the sphere. It is something I overlooked when I first probed the energies. The sphere is neither the pawn of evil nor of good. It serves its own purposes, and that is of oblivion. For some unknown reason, it wishes to end the struggle."

"Let's say I understand everything you're saying. What are we supposed to do? I know you said we had to destroy the sphere, but do you have any idea of just how we might do that? I just got through inspecting the

tunnel. It's blocked. There's a barrier that's protecting the opening to the inside of this mountain. I don't think we're going to be able to break through it."

"You could not break through it," Shayed acknowledged. "The sphere absorbed powerful energies during the battle between the races and the magic casters. The force field would be impenetrable."

"Well, that doesn't leave us many options. According to my friend here, this mountain was designed so digging is out of the question. He said that even the dwarves couldn't reach it through tunneling."

"That is also true."

Ryson continued to press the spirit for answers. "You aren't leaving us with any choices here. And you still haven't answered my question. I'm not even sure how to destroy this sphere, but even getting to it is going to be a problem. It might be impossible."

"It is not impossible." Shayed spoke with certainty as she revealed the only true option available. "You must reach the sphere by using the path which was originally created to entomb it. You must travel down the five tiers. This is a path that the sphere will not be able to block."

"It's already blocked," Ryson exclaimed. "According to elflore, the people that buried this thing put in their own measures to prevent anyone from doing exactly what you want us to do. I don't even know what's down there."

"That is why you must prepare for this quest. You must gather representatives from the five races responsible for entombing the sphere." She took a moment to turn her spiritual presence toward the inspiring view of the land. Her words became musical in their conviction. "What has been broken must be mended. What has been forgotten must be remembered. What you need to know and what you must have, all awaits you. It is a time unequaled in history, a time when all powers can unite for a common goal. There is much at stake, for both sides."

Her form circled back to the on looking elf and delver. "If this task frightens you, and well it should, there are other aspects which must bring you strength. You are not alone. Not you, Ryson Acumen as a delver, and not you, Lief Woodson, as an elf. Do not speak of the barriers in this mountain as unbreakable. What barrier is stronger than the line between life and death? I have crossed that barrier to seek you out, to alert you to what you face. If I can do that, can you not cross the barriers placed within this mountain? And what of your appearance here? You wish to overlook the guiding forces which have certainly had a hand in this, but these forces still exist. If it is their will that you succeed, then all of the magic in the sphere doubled, even tripled, could not stop you."

Ryson exhaled deeply. It did not sit well with him, this concept of divine selection. It made him feel more like a pawn. He wished to believe he was here of his own choosing or of mere coincidence. He attempted to clear his mind. He looked around and again his senses seized that which was around him. He felt the warm sunshine on his face. He smelled the clean air. As he inhaled, he noted a slight charge, the presence of magic, and he realized the air was not as pure as he thought. Finally, he turned to his companion.

"It sounds as if we have no choice."

Lief looked deeply into the face of the delver. "Do you truly believe her words? Will you accept this task?"

Ryson spoke as if condemned. "I know she's not lying. I don't know why. But yes, I believe her and yes I'll accept this task, even though it seems impossible."

"That is good because I know she is Shayed. I knew it when I saw her. We must do as she asks."

"I'm not arguing." Ryson forced a smile, hoping to reassure the elf before turning back to the ghostly apparition. "I'll do whatever I can. It might help, though, if you give us an idea of what to do first."

"It gives me strength to hear that," she answered with a great smile. "You must leave me for now, you must realign the five races that once fought together to defeat Ingar and the magic casters. An alliance is needed once more, and that is where you must begin. You must seek the dwarves, the algors, and the humans. Once you have gathered what is necessary to begin the quest, return to this spot. I will be waiting for you. Go now, you have much to do."

"We shall go," Lief spoke with authority. He even bowed deeply. He spoke as if chosen for hero's quest. "And we shall return."

Fool's quest was perhaps how the delver saw it, but Ryson kept his thoughts to himself as Lief uttered a determined vow before they both descended Sanctum.

"We shall go first to my camp and I promise their assistance as well as all the elves. We shall destroy the sphere."

Chapter 7

Lief and Ryson descended Sanctum and made a hasty return to Dark Spruce Forest. Again, at Lief's request, they traversed the forest by climbing through the branches. This time Lief took the lead, and he sped through the trees without hesitation. His back to the delver, the elf set a boisterous, ambitious pace. Taking longer leaps, avoiding thick pines which might slow their path, and moving with fierce determination, Lief blazed a southerly trail through the thick umbrage.

Ryson did not have to strain his abilities to maintain stride, but he noted the unyielding desires of the elf. He wondered what Lief might do if he was unable to keep up. He sincerely doubted that the elf would wait or even look back, so resolute were his movements.

They did not converse as they had done on the previous trip through the forest, though there was much Ryson wished to know. The delver caught glimpses of Lief's expression and decided not to start a debate over the soundness of Shayed's request, or to question the validity of ghosts in their world. Only the sounds of their travel broke the silence. For now, even the squirrels and birds seemed to avoid them, as if the elf's fiery determination was a danger to be avoided. The silence, the unanswered questions, the resulting loneliness; all served only to lengthen the trip.

They traveled on for the rest of that day. Ryson's only diversion was to map their movements in his mind, taking stock of small landmarks that scouts without his powerful senses would surely miss. He calculated their length of travel, but while they crossed a great portion of the forest, it remained evident that their journey was far from its final destination. Ryson was aware of the breadth of this forest and his calculations placed them a good distance from its heart.

They did not break at night, but continued through the dark. When the first light glowed in the east, this section of the forest resisted the sun. The woods became thicker as branches from neighboring trees intertwined to make continuous bridges. Leaping from one tree to the next became unnecessary. Lief continued to lead and he stepped with a quick pace over the sturdy branches. Their journey continued throughout that morning, and the elf moved as if the long travel meant nothing to him. It became apparent that he wished to reach his camp as soon as possible. He would accept no delay.

As any good delver would, Ryson made mental notations of their direction, the grade of the ground below, and of different passages within the trees. Remembering the threat of the undead and of the goblins, such a practice became more than scout related. If retreat became necessary, he would be more than able to choose a path within the forest which would yield the greatest safety. He took notice of all that surrounded him. He sniffed the air, he put an ear to the wind, and he constantly watched for even the slightest shadow of movement. Late in the morning, he noticed such signs and he whispered an urgent warning to his companion.

"Lief! Get back here. Something's ahead of us. Five trees up and over to the right. Ambush." The volume of his words was soft to conceal their meaning to the intruders, but his tone was harsh, filled with alarm.

Lief did not stop nor did he whisper his response. He turned his head and replied openly without fear of being overheard. "Do not fear. It is the guards of my own camp."

Before Lief could continue, several elves jumped upon him. They quickly disarmed him and took hold of his arms and legs. Such was his surprise; he lacked the ability to escape before they had firm hold. As his eyes widened with fiery emotion, he roared with anger.

"What are you doing?! It's me!" Outraged, he spoke as if the action defied explanation. "Free me at once! Have you lost your minds?!"

The other elves kept their grip firm. They would not release him even at his roaring insistence.

Ryson quickly ascertained the situation. His head bobbed to the left and right, then above. He saw movement circling about. They were trying to outflank him. Without hesitation, he scampered further up the tree.

As he bolted, two elves from opposite sides leapt for his position. They did not expect the speed of the delver and were left to grip only open air. Undaunted and believing their own skills more than a match for their quarry, they recovered and followed.

Ryson paid little mind to those climbing after him. He continuously peered to neighboring trees. He quickly spotted another guard standing in wait off to his right. He leapt to his left to a clear tree. He climbed even higher and soon outdistanced the two following him. With a higher perspective, he paused for but a moment as he scanned everything below him. He pinpointed the locations of several more guards, and in an instant, he chose a path which would lead him to the ground.

Six or seven elves closed upon the delver with overconfidence. Secure in their abilities to scale the trees, they believed the chase over. In all of their past encounters, a treed opponent was a captured opponent. They could not expect what would happen next, and they gasped at the blur in which the delver moved.

Ryson shattered the elves' confidence as he dove downward with matchless speed. He leapt quickly from branch to branch, descending the trees as if they were nothing more than a staircase or a smooth and even ramp. Within two blinks of an eye, he was upon the ground, a position where no elf could catch him.

If his speed confused the elves when he moved through the trees, it blinded them now. He danced around the forest floor, making quick turns and using the cover of thick trunks. Dashing in zigzagging fashion, he would not reveal his true direction. The tree-born elves had no chance of following.

Lief continued to struggle against those that held him, yet even he was silenced by the maneuvering of the delver. After his companion appeared to retreat, he found his voice and yelled out in anger.

"You fools! He was here to help!"

One of the elves which held him snarled with his own anger. "How can he help? You brought a human to our camp."

"He's not human, he's a delver," Lief insisted. His own determination boiled over, and with a mighty twist, he broke free. He faced the leader of the guards with obvious malice. "Fire upon you! Do you know what you've done? Do you have any idea what's going on? If he is gone, it may mean the end of us all."

Lief was about to strike out at the elf captain when Ryson's call from far below checked his anger.

"I haven't left," the delver called out.

An elf low in the bough of a nearby tree caught a glimpse of the delver. Instinctively, he pulled an arrow from his quiver, strung it, and sent it hurling toward the assumed invader.

Ryson heard the arrow cut through the air. Reflexively, he ducked behind a thick tree trunk and watched with disbelieving eyes as the arrow whisked by. It would have hit him in the heart.

"One more like that and I will leave!" he yelled angrily.

"Hold, do not go!" Lief yelled before calling out an order to the other elves. "The rest of you, cease your

attack. Let the delver be."

"Why?!" the captain demanded. "He is an intruder. He is a threat. With all that is going on we can not afford to take a chance!"

"What chance?" Lief replied heatedly. "The delver is with me. That should be more than enough to allow him to pass."

"Is it?" the captain replied scornfully. "When has a human, or delver for that matter, been allowed entry into our camp? Why should we allow it now?"

"Because I am telling you!"

"That means nothing! You have been gone. I am responsible for the protection of this camp. You did not see what I had to witness. The slaughter of two young elves by river rogues."

The response caught Lief off guard. He blurted out a questioning response. "River rogues? Attacked the camp?"

"Yesterday!"

"That is unfortunate, but it is even more reason why we must not be detained. You will let me pass, the delver as well."

The captain's face grew red. He was not accustomed to taking orders, but giving them. "You will be detained as long as I wish!"

It was the delver that ended the battle of wills. He spoke with authority from his position on the ground. He stepped out into the open with his own look of defiance, daring the elves to give chase, or perhaps even fire another arrow. "Detaining us won't help your cause. We know why the river rogues have returned. I'm not sure what they are, but I can tell you they're not alone. I've faced the undead as well as goblins. We have been to Sanctum. The mountain has been breached."

Momentary silence before a harsh reply.

"You may well lie!" the captain shot out a yell.

"Why should I?" Ryson demanded angrily. "I'd prefer to just take off now and forget any of this ever happened. You couldn't stop me."

"Very well, then leave!"

"I can't do that. I spoke to Shayed."

Again, a hush fell over the guards. Indecision mounted.

"That's impossible," the captain finally replied.

"Is it? I bet you thought river rogues were impossible before yesterday, but they seem to be back."

Lief spoke up again. His anger was now replaced with stony resolution. "This will end now. The delver and I must speak with Mappel."

Lief said nothing more. He stepped by the guard captain. His movement made it clear he would not accept being stopped again. He climbed down the tree and walked directly to Ryson. He paid no attention to the other elves still in the trees.

"Fire upon the sphere," he said more to himself as he reached the delver. "So much is happening; so many things changing. River rogues attacking elves again. Goblins in the woods. I doubt there is any turning back now. I think our life in seclusion has ended."

"I can't say I completely understand what you're feeling, but I have some idea," Ryson said and sadness tinged his voice. "It seems reality is now upside down for all of us."

"That much is true."

Suddenly, strangely, a look of pride warmed Lief's face. Such dramatic swings in emotion were becoming even more common for the fiery elf. When he spoke, his words reflected that same pride. "But keep in mind what we have seen this day. We have spoken to Shayed! A privilege no one else can boast of. That in itself fills me with hope."

Ryson smiled at the elf's optimism. "I guess then we should get on with her wishes."

"Indeed. We will speak to Mappel. He is the eldest of the camp. He holds the elflore and will instruct us."

Lief turned back to where the Elf guards had stopped him. He remained on the ground and showed no sign of climbing a tree. He motioned for Ryson to follow.

Chapter 8

Lief and Ryson walked deliberately across the forest floor. Lief led, keeping his eyes forward. Back straight, shoulders squared, his gait revealed his defiance to any elf that might consider stopping them. He stepped methodically over downtrodden paths where underbrush had been beaten and crushed away by constant elfin travelers.

Ryson noted the paths with curiosity. He wondered why the elves would take to the ground at this portion of the forest where the trees were yet numerous and intertwining branches made continuous bridges from one to another. While there remained many elves in the trees overhead, others watched below the branches, behind heavy trunks or bushes.

Ryson watched them all with a wary eye. He made particular note of those that carried bows. For now, they made no threatening moves, but they remained as cautious as the delver, and their numbers increased.

Ryson could only assume they were closing upon Lief's camp, but as of yet, he spotted no cluster of huts. While he saw stocks of food at the bases of trees, and small burning fires in deep holes, he saw no signs of a permanent camp. He wondered what an elfin home might look like, whether it would be a sturdy shack constructed from boards of wood, a hut of tangled branches and a thatched roof, or a tent spun of vines and leaves. There appeared nothing to answer this question for he saw no signs of any large shelters.

He could not imagine how far they would have to walk to finally reach this camp, for he saw nothing in the distance with his sharp eyes. Yet, he knew that the elfin guards staked positions in this area and more and more elves moved about, both on the ground and in the trees. In the end, he could not help but posing the question to Lief.

"Where is this camp of yours?"

"You are in it," Lief responded with casualness.

"This is your camp?" Ryson exclaimed with obvious surprise.

Lief laughed lightly as he continued walking. "What did you expect? A sprawling town like those of the humans. We do not live like that. We have little need for gaudy buildings. The forest provides us with everything we need. In return, we leave it as undisturbed as possible."

"So you basically live out in the open?" Ryson questioned.

Lief showed no sign of insult. He spoke with continued good will, almost as if he found the delver's reaction somewhat amusing. "Is that so surprising? Do the deer construct their own houses, or the wolf, or the bird?"

"The wolves and birds do," Ryson replied. "The wolf digs a den and the bird makes a nest."

"That is for the benefit of the young," the elf insisted. "We do the same. We build shelters out of branches. We place them in the trees and upon the ground. We use them to protect our children and to store our more delicate items. But they are only temporary. They can be dismantled and moved in a moment's notice. Like that one there."

The elf pointed to an orderly arrangement of thick branches which formed a small tent-like structure upon the ground. Its top barely reached Ryson's waist. It stood against a large cherry tree which assisted in support and added an umbrella of leaves overhead.

"That particular shelter holds the wild cherries harvested from that tree. We have found that keeping them under cover preserves them and protects them from birds."

"What about the dormant season?" Ryson wondered aloud. "Don't you get cold?"

"After the last harvests, we become more like the bear and the squirrel. We build more shelters but we also become less active. There is no sense wasting energy when food is scarce. We will build small fires at night and feed upon stored nuts. We simply wait for the growing season to begin the cycle anew."

"That's a tough life," the delver remarked. He considered those without a warm fireplace and a thick roof over their heads as less fortunate.

"Is it? Or is that just your point of view? A point of view which does not sound that of a purebred delver. You might have been living with the humans for too long, Ryson Acumen. Perhaps we live as we were all supposed to live. It may very well be that the lives of humans, and the delvers that choose to follow, are the truly tough lives, as you put it. I would think it may be more difficult to try and ignore the seasons, to continue as if nothing changed from the growing season to the dormant season. Yet, isn't that what humans attempt to do? They build towns and roads so that their lives remain uninterrupted. They work the same amount throughout the cycles of the season. There is no period of hibernation, no time to rejuvenate. Perhaps, this is the difficult life."

Lief paused as he focused upon the figure of an elf leaning upon a long, thick branch. Lief's face became etched with shadows as he considered the point of their return. "Enough of that for now. It is time to concentrate on the struggle at hand. Come with me."

He motioned for Ryson to follow as he approached the other elf.

Ryson stepped cautiously and remained slightly behind his companion. The elf holding the branch appeared much older than Lief. Remembering how long elves lived, Ryson could not imagine how many cycles this one had seen. He concluded that this must be the elf elder, Mappel, which Lief spoke of.

Mappel stared out into the trees even as Lief moved near. He made no sign of acknowledging either of the two. He even showed no stir of agitation at the approach of a delver, an obvious stranger to this camp. His stare was neither vacant nor cold. His eyes held a twinkle of life, even if they seemed ignorant to the advance of a stranger.

Mappel stood erect. While the hands of time etched their work as lines in the elf's face, it could not yet bend Mappel's bones. A long flowing forester's cloak covered Mappel's figure. His hair, a mixture of charcoal, gray and silver, hung limply from his head. The thin wisps had lost their texture over time and could not hide his pointed ears.

The long branch, straight as a hand-drawn line, served as a staff for the elder elf, and he leaned upon it with great reliance. Ryson judged the branch to be slightly taller than Mappel and of stout thickness. Each end was flat and most of the bark had been smoothed away, either by time or by the caresses of Mappel's hands. The elf held to the branch with comfortable ease as if the staff was now simply an extension of his arm.

Lief reached out and grasped the branch several lengths below where Mappel's hand gripped it.

Upon Lief's touch of the staff, the elder was almost startled into awareness of the two before him. He blinked once, then twice. He looked over the delver with great curiosity. His own expression quickly became shadowed. He offered no greeting. Instead, he spoke as if continuing a previous conversation.

"It was not enough for you to reject the magic as a blessing of the land," the elder elf rattled. "You insisted with your doubts. Now the land is heavy with danger. What have you brought upon us, Lief Woodson?"

"It is not I that has brought anything upon us," Lief replied. At first his voice betrayed his annoyance with the elder, but he quickly gritted his teeth and toned down his emotions. "It is impossible to say what is responsible for the fate we now face, but I bring you news of both darkness and light. As I warned the camp previously, the sphere is again radiating its tainted magic upon the land. It is not, however, in the hands of an enemy. It is the sphere itself that has broken from its own entombment. It remains in Sanctum, yet it has managed to create a break through the very side of the mountain. Through some dark power unexplained to me, the sphere has gained an awareness of its captivity and refuses to be encased any longer. It will bring oblivion to the land."

Mappel rotated his hands about the long branch in his grasp. His words expressed his doubt over the younger elf's story. "You have gathered much information in a short time, information which seems beyond your abilities. How is this possible?"

"There are two major factors." Lief's voice quickly brimmed with pride as he revealed the encounter with the elfin sorceress. "The most important being that I have spoken with the spirit of Shayed. She has explained the awareness of the sphere and its refusal to be encased within the mountain. That is how I can be sure of the fate we face."

The elder elf appeared greatly mystified by this explanation. He leaned upon his branch with greater reliance as if the weight of this revelation staggered his balance. His eyes narrowed and his head tilted as his expression communicated his expectation of further explanation.

Lief gladly continued. "Shayed has told us that the sphere remains out of the hands of any enemy. Its effect upon our land is based solely upon its own will. It is the land's misfortune that the sphere has gained its awareness. It works for neither good nor evil. It simply wishes the total extinction of all life. As to why, I can not explain."

Mappel took no time to mull over the possibilities. Instead, he questioned Lief further. "You said there were two factors which aided in your retrieval of this information," he noted almost harshly. "What is the other?"

Lief presented Ryson with a wave of his hand. "He stands beside me now. I came across a delver as I traveled toward Sanctum. His name is Ryson Acumen. I found him locked in a struggle with one of the undead. When I learned he was full-bred delver, I sensed the hands of fate bringing us together."

"Do not be quick to judge what might be fate," Mappel interrupted. "These are uncertain times. We have no idea what forces may or may not be at work. But continue with your explanation."

"Fate or not," Lief conceded, "that I can not say, but I can say that Ryson Acumen was indeed a boon to my travel. We agreed to follow the path of the quake which initiated these troubled times. It led us, as I suspected, to Sanctum. His powerful senses detected a group of goblins. With his help, we captured one and found that the goblins were not responsible for the freeing of the sphere."

Ryson suddenly felt the urge to help with the explanation. In listening to the story, he himself found it unbelievable even though he experienced everything described. Knowing the severity of what they faced, Ryson felt it essential to convince the elder elf.

"What he says is true," the delver exclaimed. "I did fight what he calls one of the undead. I couldn't believe it myself at the time, but it tried to kill me. We also fell upon goblins and captured one. I have one of their swords. You see." Ryson held up the crude short sword for the elder elf.

Mappel showed no interest in the weapon. His eyes fell upon the delver and spoke with a voice so crisp, it defied his age.

"Do not feel as if you must prove something to me. I still have eyes and ears. I see, hear and feel what is happening. I might not have accepted the truth at first. I hoped that the magic might have returned naturally, but now I am sure that it is the work of the sphere. That means the return of goblins, among other things."

"You believe now?" Lief asked with his hope rising.

"Much has happened during your absence, Lief Woodson. The magic has grown within us. Though it may be difficult to accept, I know you, and I know you have no reason to lie. Your story corresponds with much of what has already happened here. Those gifted have even been able to cast minor spells. The magic, unfortunately, is not pure. I am not so old that I can't sense the poison within it. It will undo us all. If the magic has returned, then why not Shayed? There is also the matter of the river rogue and the fate of the two unfortunate elves. Now, you return to me with continued proof. As much as I would like, I can not deny the tragedy which faces us."

"It may not have to be a tragedy. Remember, we have spoken with Shayed," Lief reminded him with words trimmed in pride and optimism. "It is her counsel that we might yet defeat this thing which now haunts us."

Mappel found only small reassurance. He spoke more of his growing confusion. "The return of Shayed, even in spirit form, fills me with hope. It appears as if this is indeed a momentous time, a time which may decide the fates of many. Yet, this all remains so distressing. It distresses me that elflore gave no foreshadowing of this event. The return of Shayed signifies a time which must be of great importance. Why must we face this without a shred of help from the lore?"

Lief hesitated for a moment, but finally forced himself to speak.

"There is more which you might find troubling, Mappel. We will not be able to simply bury the sphere. It is the word of Shayed that this will no longer be allowed. She makes other requirements of us. In truth, she commands that we destroy the sphere."

The words lingered in a moment of silence, stabbed at the elder and drew his ire.

"Were those her words or yours?!" Mappel questioned sternly, hissing like a startled rattler.

Lief stood his ground. His eyes remained upon the elder, but his voice dropped in tone. "They were hers." It was apologetic in its offering.

Mappel remained unsatisfied and eyed Lief questioningly. "You know the story of Shayed. During the Wizard War she defied the magic users because she would not destroy the sphere. Now, you tell me differently. This does not follow with elflore. Does Shayed truly advise the destruction of the sphere?"

Lief could answer no differently. "Yes, she does."

The elder elf, filled with disbelief, turned to Ryson. "What do you say to this, delver?" Mappel demanded. "Were you present? Did Shayed truly order the destruction of the sphere?"

Although he found Mappel's outburst most disquieting, Ryson answered with the simple truth. "Yes, she did."

The elder gripped his branch slightly tighter and grumbled something unknown to Ryson. He ripped his sight from the two that stood before him and his eyes bore into the trees. He thumped his staff twice against the

ground in revolt against what had been told to him.

Ryson and Lief waited quietly before him. The delver remained uncertain of what to do or say. He looked to Lief who stood, more or less, patiently waiting for Mappel.

After his momentary display of resistance, Mappel fell completely into acceptance of what he viewed as nothing less than a tragedy.

"Then so it must be done," he sighed, his shoulders sagged with the weight of the revelation.

Mappel turned the prospect over in his mind. As if condemned to a sentence of hard labor, he faced it with a will to begin as soon as possible in order to end it as soon as possible. "To destroy the sphere we must reach it first. You say it is still within Sanctum. What of this breach? Can we use it to reach the sphere?"

"No," Lief replied flatly. "The sphere protects the opening with a force barrier. The magic may exit, but we may not enter."

The elder dropped his head in frustration.

Lief continued. "Shayed advises us to use the tiers as a path to the sphere. It can not be blocked by any power the sphere might induce."

"The tiers are protected in other ways," Mappel shook his head.

"I know, but we have no other choice."

"You realize what this means?"

"We must enlist the help of the other races," Lief began, again sounding apologetic, but when he recalled his own encounter with the spirit of Shayed, unyielding determination filled his voice. "I realize the weight of this matter, but it is also what Shayed commands."

"Shayed may command, but it may not be all within our power," Mappel spoke with sadness. "We must depend on the assistance of others for this request. The tiers have proven to be the divisive matter surrounding all the races. To break the secrets of the tiers is to break centuries of an accepted settlement that led to the new order. This can not be done easily."

"It will have to be done," Lief insisted.

"You speak as if we can snap our fingers and it will be so," Mappel lectured. "You have no idea of what we face. Not only must we convince others to join our cause, we must defeat the barriers themselves. Although I know only of what the elves placed within Sanctum, I know that passing this will not be easy. I can only imagine what other horrors might await. The tiers were constructed so that no one might reach the power of the sphere."

"Do we have another choice?" Lief questioned. "Forgive me, if I appear impudent, but I see little value in debating the issue. We must do what we must do."

"It is not only up to us," Mappel countered. "The barriers of Sanctum are beyond the unity of elves. They represent the separation of the five races, and thus, they include the five races. Just because you and I might say Sanctum must be entered does not mean others will agree."

"It is not just you or I," Lief reminded, "it is Shayed as well."

"So it is," Mappel allowed, "and perhaps it is time to break the symbol of the pact which separates the races. I don't know how we might accomplish such a thing, but if it is the command of Shayed, it must be attempted."

"Excuse me, sir," Ryson finally spoke. He found the exchange between the two elves interesting and enlightening, but the near defeatist attitude of Mappel puzzled him. As he questioned Mappel, his voice carried in low tones, hoping to remain as inoffensive to the elder as possible. "I can't claim to know much of what you're talking about, but it sounds as if you're dooming this before we even get started. Will it be so difficult?"

Mappel turned his disheartened glance upon the delver. He answered with grace. Though his response was lacking in detail, he made a genuine attempt to answer the delver with all honesty. "If you must ask, I must reply that it will be far more difficult than you can comprehend. It is not simply the barriers we must overcome, but the ages of mistrust and separation."

"Well, that may be," Ryson countered. "I really don't understand any of this fully, but I've continued along with what I've seen and heard so far. That may not be much, but consider what I have seen. I didn't know of elves or goblins before. Today, I saw a ghost for Godson's sake. I haven't walked away yet."

"You are a delver," Mappel reminded. "It is your natural instinct to follow anything which is new and unknown to you. Take my word; it will not be as easy to convince others to assist in this task. The stakes are very high, as is the mistrust."

"So high that others won't realize we all have to work together?"

"That is the point. The races no longer work together. That has been the way. Even the threat of total extinction may not allow for a change."

Ryson remained unconvinced that their plight deserved such skepticism as to ring a death bell before they even began. He simply would not accept such a pessimistic outlook. If he had, he would have given up on his own sanity at the first encounter with the walking dead.

"How can you sound so sure?" he questioned.

Mappel answered as if reading from history. He spoke with a gaze that spread across the forest. "I can be sure for I have seen the changes over time. I have seen the new order evolve and I have seen the races move further apart. To change this would be more difficult than reversing the flow of tens of rivers. It is the reversal of a path which occurred long ago. In a time you might not be able to imagine, this land held magic. The magic was the common denominator for the different races. They lived in the land aware of each other's presence. They worked together, traded and respected each other's existence. They held a common enemy in the dark creatures.

"All this ended, however, when the sphere was buried in Sanctum Mountain. The things which kept the races together were gone. There remained nothing which they might hold as common. There was no longer a common foe and there was no longer the link of magic. Distrust appeared almost immediately. The very creation of the sphere was such a consequential event; it changed the very fiber of our existence. It led to the new order of things, an order which has been in place for a very long time. It will not be so easy to undo."

Ryson appeared undeterred by Mappel's words. "If the creation of the sphere could create such a situation, then maybe it is exactly the destruction of the sphere which is needed to change it."

"But in order to destroy the sphere we must end the separation. Do you not see the paradox?" Mappel questioned.

"I see it. We need to destroy the sphere to bring back common ties among the races, but we need for the races to come together to destroy the sphere. It's a circle. I'm aware of that, but we have to enter the circle at some point."

"That is where the very problem lies."

"It's only a problem if we make it one," Ryson insisted. "You seem to be willing to accept what we have to do. How can you be so sure others will not?"

"Because elves have remained in contact with the dwarves. I know of their stubbornness. I also know of the humans. They wish to ignore the history of the legends. They live without knowledge of the other races."

"Very few are stubborn when their lives are at stake," Ryson countered. "I've noticed that before. I suggest we get them to realize what's going on. You spoke of changing the course of a river. Maybe you should compare it to changing the tide of the ocean. The tide has been going out, but now it's time for it to come back in. It's just like everything else. It takes time, but it does happen."

Mappel raised an eyebrow. His face softened, lines of age seemed to disappear miraculously. He even allowed a smile to cross his thin lips. "This is the second time I have been comforted this day. First, I hear of Shayed's return. Now, I hear a delver advising me of what I should already know. Thank you.

"Lief has done well to find you. You instill within me a faith that we might complete the impossible." The transformation of the elder elf continued, now both in his tone and in his expression. The self-doubt vanished, replaced with confidence and a willingness to grasp hold upon the hope held out by the delver. His eyes and his voice now held a fire which was known to Lief but not yet seen by Ryson.

As Mappel spoke, his words now echoed across the forest. Other elves looked to them with growing curiosity. "We must now feed a fire which must burn to save ourselves as well as the land, but there is much more we all must do. Our path is now chosen. We must send forth representatives to speak with the dwarves. They will be the easiest to gain an audience. The humans will be the most difficult. They might not even accept our very existence."

"Won't they have to if you come out of hiding?" Ryson questioned. The thought of elves walking down the streets of Burbon or Pinesway was all too vivid in his imagination. Such a sight would certainly cause a stir and raise the curiosity of all.

"Hmmp," Mappel exhaled almost indignantly. "You may live with the humans, but I see I understand them better. They have grown arrogant in an age where they assume they are the superior race. It will not do them well to find otherwise. They will resist such knowledge. I don't know if they even carried the ancient knowledge with them. We may never find a single human with the knowledge of their own part in the Wizard War."

"Let's not get too pessimistic about that, either," Ryson advised. "I know of people that keep close ties with what we call the legends. In fact, I was sent out by Reader Matthew to investigate the origins of the quake. He is the leader of the Church of Godson at Connel."

"Connel? Does that mean you also come from Connel?" Mappel asked.

"Yes, it does. Lief already told me of how Connel was the place of the final battle in the fight for the sphere.

He thought it might mean something that I come from there. Respectfully, I think it's just coincidence."

Mappel's expression revealed his interest at the delver's remark. "Who is to say whether it means anything or not? It may be as you say or it may be more. Indeed, we have nothing to guide us. Thus, it is not wrong to grasp at even the slightest hope that other powers are at work. Whatever the case, I believe Connel to be significant in this matter. Connel is where the five races made their stand together, and it will be the place where we shall rejoin."

Ryson's eyebrows flipped upwards. "Are you sure about that?! Connel is a place where the people don't exactly warm to strangers, let alone strange things. They're going to have a hard time accepting elves just walking into town."

"They will have to accept more than that," Lief stated fervently. "Wait until they see the dwarves, or the algors for that matter."

"That's just what I mean," Ryson explained. "Don't you think a less conspicuous place would be better for such a meeting?"

"No. It must be Connel," Mappel spoke with a newfound determination. He accepted the cause with all his heart and soul. He would move forward now with all the intensity he could muster. "Its potential importance is too critical to overlook. The other races may even be more willing to help fight a common foe when faced with reminders of our last joint battle. We shall bring all the races back together within the confines of the ancient wall which saved us so long ago. As for the humans, they will simply have to accept what they see. The world as they know it is finished no matter what happens. Either the sphere will destroy all life or we shall destroy the sphere. In that case, the magic will return and the land will revert to how it was during the time of elflore."

"I guess so," Ryson said reluctantly. His image of elves walking through a human town re-entered his mind, but now he saw them in the familiar streets of Connel. He wondered how those he had come to know would react to such a sight.

"It is how it must be," Mappel stated firmly. "Now, about this Reader Matthew. He is versed in the book of Godson?"

The question brought Ryson's attention away from his personal thoughts. "I would have to say so. My guess is he is the best hope at finding someone who might know what the humans placed in Sanctum as protection. If he doesn't, I don't know who will."

"I shall see him myself. Lief shall accompany me."

Both Ryson and Lief displayed great surprise and concern.

"You're going to go to Connel?" Ryson questioned.

"Do not be alarmed. I may be old, but I still can travel. This is an important time for us. It is my responsibility. If it calms you, we shall remain inconspicuous. We can appear to be just as humans. No one will know of us until we locate the reader. We will disclose ourselves only to him."

"Are you sure of this?" Lief asked.

"I have no choice. It is my place. It is also your place. You have spoken to Shayed. Without aid of elflore, we must choose the obvious. It may have only been chance that it was your lot to come across the delver in the

woods, but it might just as easily have been the guiding hand of fate. In some unknown manner, you have been selected to play a role in this event."

"What about me?" Ryson wondered aloud. "Does my part end here? Do I go with you to Connel? I promised to send word to Reader Matthew. If I accompany you, I can report to him directly. I might also help explain what's going on."

Mappel shook his head, but eyed the delver with veiled expectations. "If Matthew is indeed a follower of Godson, we will not need you to explain. As for your part, I don't believe it is over. That, however, is up to you. I would have a task for you that is both important and dangerous. Whether you feel it to be your role, that is up to you."

The weight of Mappel's gaze fell heavily upon the delver, and Ryson almost hesitated in asking the obvious question. His delver instincts, however, would not allow him to remain quiet.

"What is it you want me to do?"

"As I have said before, I will send word to the dwarves about this matter. That will need no special messenger. They will hear my word and I am sure they will understand. They will send representatives to Connel. The algors are another matter. They are a strange group. They live by their own accord. I never claimed an understanding of them. In truth, I wouldn't know how to find them. I know they live in the desert south by southwest of our camp. That, unfortunately, is the extent of my knowledge. But here I find myself graced with a delver, a purebred delver, and by elflore I know it is within you to find anything that might be hidden. I can advise you on what to look for, what to sense. With your abilities, you have the greatest chance of locating them."

Ryson's eyes widened at the suggestion. A loose description from the legends of an algor filled his mind. It left much to his imagination, and even more to disbelieve. "I've never even seen an algor before. Even if you tell me what to look for, it's not going to be easy. The desert is a tricky place. The wind and the sand can play tricks. Even if I do find them, what then? I don't even know what language they speak."

"They speak the same as ours," Mappel answered simply.

"But what will I say to them?"

"What you must, what you have already said. You have convinced me that the time of change is at hand. Use the same emotion. Tell them all you have seen and heard, and I mean everything. Do not leave out a single item because you might fear it is too outlandish. The truth is that the algors may agree to meet us if your story is curious enough. Do not ask me to explain it. As I said before, they are a strange group. The more eccentric the story, the more inclined they are to look into it. It is how elflore describes them."

"You also said this might be dangerous. Are you talking about the algors?"

"No, the algors will not harm you. They will either hide from you or simply ignore you. That is not where the danger lies. In reaching the desert, you must cross territory which is now certainly inhabited by mountain shags and river rogues. That is the danger you face."

"I see." Ryson rubbed his chin as he considered the proposal.

"Do not feel forced into this matter, Ryson Acumen," Mappel counseled. "Look deeply into yourself. Let your own feelings dictate your answer."

And he did address his feelings. This day he walked within the camp of elves, spoke with an elfin leader. Now, the exquisite opportunity of chasing another legend opened before him, something previously beyond his imagination. As a delver, he simply could not turn away.

"My own feelings tell me to go," Ryson admitted, answering not only Mappel's request, but the doubts in his own mind. "Not because I don't fear the danger, because I do. It's because as a delver I wish to find an algor. If I reject this, I would regret it. That much I'm sure of. Maybe this is my chance to finally prove that I'm not really mad, that this really is happening."

"He should not face it alone," Lief insisted. "He will not know how to deal with what he might encounter. Let me go with him. You do not need me in your travel. A guard will suffice."

Mappel shook his head sternly. "Your lot is cast, Lief Woodson. But I agree he should not face the dangers alone. I will send a guard with him. I will send Holli Brances." The elder elf paused. He considered a gnawing thought echoing through his own mind. He spoke of it almost as if the thought defied logic. "I also realize that a short sword taken from a goblin will not help him. He shall take the Sword of Decree. It will be needed in times yet to come, and perhaps it is foolish of me to give it to him. Risking its loss when it is truly needed seems more than foolish. For some reason, though, I sense it is necessary."

"The Sword of Decree?" Ryson looked confused.

"A powerful weapon," Mappel responded. "A weapon that's purpose was forged at the time of Sanctum. A weapon which will be needed again if we are to succeed. However, I sense an intertwining of events, and I believe it must go with you now."

"It is a great honor he bestows upon you," Lief added. "The sword has not been carried in battle or in defense as long as I have lived."

"The truth is that it was created just after the Wizard War," Mappel emphasized. "The sword is enchanted. It has been held in reserve for an occasion of dire need. Its time of service has come, and it will be needed for us to reach our objective."

"I thought the sphere held all the magic?" Ryson remained confused. "How can the sword still be enchanted?"

Mappel offered a simple explanation. "The sphere took that energy which was free. It could not pull the power from items which held it inertly. That is why the sword remained unused for so long. It can hold its power for an eternity. As it is used, however, the power will dwindle. The enchantment can not be recharged as long as the magic in the air remains tainted. Each time the sword is used it will lose a portion of its enchantment."

Another hundred questions erupted in the delver's mind. He blurted out the first, his curiosity apparent. "How do you use this sword?"

"Like any other sword, but with greater energy. When it touches your foe, it will do far more than cut or stab. It will unleash power that will burn the very soul."

Here, Ryson's curiosity faded into aversion.

"I don't know if I want such a sword," Ryson stated seriously.

It was Mappel's turn to reveal confusion. To bestow the sword was to bestow honor. He could not imagine why someone would refuse. "I do not understand."

"I don't want to use anything that's going to burn someone's soul," Ryson admitted without shame. He did not wish to insult the elder or the honor, but the sword was simply beyond his desires. "I wasn't happy with carrying the short sword."

Lief spoke up, now with greater authority. "Your mind might change when you face a river rogue. It would not show you the same kind of mercy. There are simply times when you must act with force."

Ryson stood firm to his principles. The thought of holding such a sword left him ill at ease. As a delver, it was always easy to identify danger before stumbling upon it, or to dodge threats as he dodged the arrow of the elf guard earlier that day. He understood defensive procedures, but shied away from any offensive undertaking.

"I can understand people protecting themselves," he explained, "but I don't agree with going out with the intention of killing. I can't believe you would want me to go out with that attitude."

Lief spoke coldly. "I realize that you may not understand this, but yes we would. Right now, you are still looking at things as if the world you knew was still intact. It is not."

"If you're talking about indiscriminate killing," Ryson responded quickly, "I doubt my feelings on that will ever change. I was taught to respect life, all life. Even if I have to accept the existence of goblins, river rogues and even elves, you can't expect me to give up my values."

"Your values are based on a reality which will soon change greatly."

Mappel waved his hand making it clear he wanted the debate to end.

"I understand your values are important," the elder allowed. "They make you what you are. I doubt anyone will expect you to change them, but your perspective must change. You must accept what is about to happen."

Ryson spoke undeterred of his position. "There is still right and wrong, good and evil."

"Yes there is. Even more so now. The evil which lurks in the wilderness may strike at you horribly. I do not ask you to hunt this evil down. I ask you to carry the sword and use it to protect yourself. Use it to make sure your task succeeds. It might mean the end of everything if you fail."

"What about this Holli person. Can't you give her the sword?"

Mappel reflected upon the suggestion for long moments. "I can, if you insist, but then I will have to make a request of my own. I offer the sword for your protection not hers. If you wish her to carry it, you must always remain at her side. Do you agree to this?"

Ryson found the option acceptable. "Sure."

Mappel did not allow this reply to end the discussion until he made one more request. "You must also vow to protect the sword, as it will protect you. Use it when necessary, but not with disregard. If something should happen to Holli, you must take up the sword. It must then never leave your side. I can not speak further of this. You simply must accept that if the sword is lost, so are we all."

"If it's that important maybe you should hold onto it." Ryson offered.

"I believe it must go with you. Do you accept this responsibility?"

Ryson nodded.

"Very well," Mappel spoke as if the matter was concluded. "Lief, summon Holli Brances. She will receive the sword and guide our new friend toward the desert. It will be a difficult path through the forest. It remains thick in that direction."

"Do not fear for him on that," Lief stated as he turned to fulfill Mappel's request. "He climbs as well, perhaps even better than I."

"That is high praise indeed. Come now, delver, it is time for me to tell you all I know of the algors."

"Before you do, I have one more question for you. It seems to me we're forgetting one piece of the puzzle."

"Which might that be?"

"The delvers," Ryson admitted. "Even if Reader Matthew can help us with the humans, and I can convince the algors, we still have no idea what my people put in Sanctum. I can't even tell you who to ask."

"I see." Mappel paused as he closed his eyes to think for long moments before continuing. "Let us not fret upon that now. I will see what the reader can tell me and we shall see how you fare with the algors. As for the delvers, you are here with us at this moment. That is enough for now. We will deal with the puzzles of Sanctum when we bring others together. Perhaps, Matthew will help us with this problem."

Ryson only shrugged.

Chapter 9

Holli Brances moved alongside Ryson as they headed toward the Lacobian desert. She obviously took Mappel's request seriously for she remained ever within arm's reach. The Sword of Decree remained sheathed at her side, but Ryson knew it would take her less than a second to wield it against any potential foe.

Ryson made a point of watching Holli closely when she was first introduced to him. If Ryson's life would be dependant upon this elf, he wished to know as much about her as possible. As only a delver would, he examined her movements, expressions and replies. He realized immediately that her personality was as diametrically opposed to Lief Woodson's as possible. Where Lief's emotions would burst forth, Holli remained stable and controlled. Lief had previously showed signs of humor, but Holli remained stoic and reserved. Ryson would never forget the look in Holli's face when Mappel presented her with the sword. She barely breathed as she took possession, and a smile dared not crack her lips. She held it with the care a mother holds a newborn, but not with the same emotion. She said not a word. She only nodded her head as if willingly accepting some Herculean task.

Holli Brances looked very much like an average human female, except of course for her pointed ears. She stood tall and slender, but no more than some of the appearance conscious girls from Connel. In truth, her most distinguishable characteristic was her darting eyes. Even when resting, her eyes flashed about constantly, drinking in every surrounding image. She took nothing for granted. She looked about, scanned the horizon, and watched for the slightest movement in all directions. One pass was evidently insufficient, for this surveillance continued unendingly.

Unable to ignore this trait, Ryson found the habit catchy. After but a few moments with the elf guard, he too, began to constantly scan his surroundings. Such diligence became strenuous as the two ventured further southward.

The forest increased in its density. Thick branches overwhelmed the travelers, limiting their movements and choice of paths. It also restricted their visibility which obviously discomforted the elf. She twisted and turned her neck with greater speed, hoping to offset the limited sight distance with a quicker review of everything around her.

Ryson considered making conversation to ease her discomfort, but he quickly realized such an action would only compound her difficulties. He knew that his questions or comments would be viewed as a distraction. He remained quiet, concentrated on finding the quickest and easiest path through the trees.

Holli did eventually speak, but only to request a slower pace. She could not keep up with him if he concentrated solely upon movement. That would mean she could not fulfill her obligation of protecting him. Every time he began to pull away, she rebuked him, almost ordering him to remain within her grasp.

The remainder of this long day ended as the final light of dusk disappeared. Holli requested they remain in the trees for the night and Ryson did not object.

They barely spoke. She told the delver to sleep the entire night. She would take the whole watch. She made some reference about being trained to rest while remaining awake. Indeed, a highly trained elf guard could go unencumbered for several days without actual sleep. They only needed breaks from strenuous activity. Holli found such a break as she perched herself between two thick boughs of a large oak tree.

Ryson bent back the branches of a soft blue spruce, tying them together to create a make-shift hammock. He sprawled out without fear of falling and drifted into a deep sleep. When he woke, he could not recall a single dream.

Holli woke the delver at the first light of day. They both used the new light to inspect the surrounding area. Ryson even dropped to the ground to check for signs of intruders. Holli followed him unhappily. She did not wish to leave the trees, but she could not forget her duty to remain at his side. Nothing was found, and they decided to move forward. They were traveling again before the sun rose above the tree line.

Ryson kept them moving at the quickest pace Holli could follow. To his pleasure and surprise, she showed no signs of fatigue from the lack of sleep. They moved southwest and she made no complaints over his speed. If anything, she seemed more apt to follow the delver as if she spent the night preparing for the task, both mentally and physically.

Their diligence paid off as the trees became more diluted. The dire heaviness of the forest began to lift. Pines and deciduous trees spread themselves further apart. Their travel quickened, unencumbered by the stifling forest. Before them, thick branches formed long bridges in nearly every direction. As the number of trees dwindled, the space around them opened. Holli found it easier to survey the encompassing grounds, her eyes swept across the landscape with broad scans.

The heightened senses of the delver grasped the forest's weakening hold in the direction they set. The soil content below them was becoming rocky and dry. Moisture in both the air and the ground was fading. The trees showed signs of a greater struggle to reach the sky. Browning leaves and withering branches were a testament to the harsher environment of the desert that waited well ahead of them.

The Lacobian desert remained far off, they would still have to travel the sparsely vegetated and rocky hill regions which separated the forest from the desert, but by all accounts, they should reach the outskirts before late afternoon.

Before the sun was overhead, they were forced from the trees. To Holli's dismay, this form of travel was no longer possible. The trees grew too far apart for them to leap from branch to branch. They tried for a while and each showed the leaping ability of the nimblest of squirrels. The soil, however, became dryer with each passing step. The forest thinned to a cluster of trees and then a smattering. Soon, the landscape was nothing more than rocky terrain spotted with more sagebrush than healthy trees.

Holli reluctantly accepted the inevitable and they trotted upon open ground. Only the increased range of her vision gave her any solace. Without the thick forest to block her view, she could see far off to the horizon in each direction. She remained cautious and at her urging they shied away from the steeper of the hills or any large boulders. She directed them in a path that would keep them in areas of little cover.

Ryson questioned that tactic as he recalled the weapons of the goblins. Walking through the open ground left them vulnerable to crossbow fire. He asked if they might be safer keeping close to the hillsides. She disagreed flatly.

Holli knew the path she chose left them without protection, but it also reduced the chance of ambush. This was her greatest fear. She knew enough of elflore and listened well to Mappel's advice. The goblins did not pose a true threat in this area. They hated the dryness of the desert, perhaps almost as much as the elves. Thus, she did not fear an attack from crossbows. If they were to be assaulted now, it would be by creatures that cared little for using arrows.

She explained no further and they continued forward. They made excellent time and the scent of the dry desert air soon became clear even to Holli.

Upon a high clearing, Ryson squinted his eyes and peered across the horizon. In the far distance, the sparsely vegetated hills and rocky terrain were replaced by sandy dunes. Tall cacti reached toward the sky. They numbered more in the distance, but a few jutted up from the land they now traversed. Ryson examined the

ground and saw more signs of sand accumulating among the rocks and gravel.

"The hard ground is starting to give way to the desert," he exclaimed. "Pretty soon we'll be walking on pure sand. Can you see it in the distance?"

"Yes," Holli stated simply. "It will not take us long." She said nothing further.

Ryson, however, felt the need to talk. He saw the vast emptiness of the desert before them, and its far reaching desolation brought loneliness to his spirit.

"You know, when we get there, I'm not really going to know where to go." He offered this as much as a warning as an attempt to open a conversation. "So far, I've been traveling with a known objective. I mean, I knew how to get to the desert, but when I reach it, I won't know much after that. I don't know how to find algors. I might be leading us into nothing more than empty sand. Don't misunderstand, I'm not worrying about us getting in any trouble out there. We can get food and water if we need it. It's just that we may end up wandering around for weeks and I still might not find what we're looking for."

Holli's eyes remained focused on unseen threats. Her reply was short and to the point. "Trust your senses, delver. Mappel does and so do the forces that sent you to us."

Ryson grunted. It seemed every elf he met couldn't resist tying his meeting with Lief to some act of fate. Couldn't they understand the curiosity of a delver and how it led to his current predicament? It was the tremor which initiated his desire to renew explorations. It was his brush with the walking dead which commenced his meeting with Lief Woodson. Yet, every elf, from the spirit of Shayed to this elf guard, wished to act as if Godson himself placed him within their midst. Could they not understand coincidence?

The delver could not refrain from discharging his annoyance with the suggestion. "Here we go with that again. I keep trying to tell you all that I'm not here by any special providence. I think you're all putting too much faith in something that may not even be a factor."

"I only know what I am told and what I see," Holli replied simply.

"I just see a coincidence," Ryson insisted. "But no one else seems to agree." With a shrug, he turned his attempt at conversation back to the subject of the Lacobian desert. "Anyway, I'm just warning you that I really have no idea where to go when we reach the sand. I remember everything that Mappel told me, but I don't think it will help me choose one direction over another. I just want you to understand that."

"I understand that we are both on a mission. You will do what you must, and I will guard you."

Holli did not let the conversation deter her from scanning the rocky terrain. Small rock formations filled the area amid a barren landscape. Brown hills, basically appearing like large, rounded boulders buried half underground, broke the level plane of the horizon to the north and west. Any signs of Dark Spruce were far behind them. Cactus and sagebrush presented the only break from the hard surroundings, and their own brown, dry, harsh appearance accomplished little in offering any cheer.

Again, Ryson could not help but notice the ever watchfulness of the elf guard. "Did you know that watching you do that can be very unnerving?" he asked. "You've been looking around in every direction since we started. I have to admit you have me more nervous than I think I've ever been. I keep thinking that something's going to jump out at us. It was hard to deal with in the forest because we couldn't see very far. Now, that we're out in the open, I've been able to deal with it a little better, but it still gets me uneasy when you look behind us. What is it that you keep looking for?"

Holli spoke as if the answer should be obvious. "I watch for things which may or may not be there. If I do not search, I will not be prepared."

"But shouldn't one look around here tell you that we're not being followed or that nothing waits ahead of us in ambush."

Holli simply could not agree. "Things change from moment to moment. What I see now may change within an instant. I will not know unless I check."

"So you never rest at this?"

"Not while on duty."

The delver considered the proposal. He understood the initial inspection, which fit with his own delver instincts, but to keep examining the same thing, that sounded more like tedium. It was a delver's desire to find something new, not to inspect for consistency. He knew he would find it irksome to reexamine the same rock formations over and over again just to remain alert. For him, for all delvers, there were other ways to sense change or even danger. The sounds of loose rocks being disturbed ever so slightly, tracks off in the distance, or the scent of an intruder; these warnings would gain a delver's attention, but constant visual inspection seemed arduous at best.

"I imagine it would get pretty boring just looking around at the same stuff all the time," he remarked. "There hasn't been much going on since we got out of the trees. I don't know what you could be looking at, but we can see for a pretty good distance out here. Not much is happening."

"That is exactly what a guard wants to see," Holli acknowledged.

Ryson raised an eyebrow as he considered the short statement. "I guess that's true. I suppose if things kept changing you'd be pretty nervous. Let me ask you this, have you ever been ambushed by anything?"

Holli answered without hesitation, though a note of displeasure drifted among her words. "Not while at a post, and not on escort, but once on patrol."

"What does that mean exactly?" Ryson seized upon the response, hoping to coax something new from the tight-lipped elf guard.

"A post is a fixed position. It is the easiest duty. A guard will take a position and remain there for extended periods of time. Since we do not move, it is much easier for us to spot an intruder. On patrol, we must move about a designated area. Since we are moving, it makes it easier for an intruder to spot us first. That would give the intruder an advantage. An escort is by far the most difficult. It covers a wide scope of the land. There is usually no designated area, and there is little time for the guard to become acquainted with the territory. It is what I do now."

"That's the most difficult?" Ryson wondered aloud, trying to compare the differences in his mind.

"Absolutely. Consider what we now face. We travel in an ever-expanding path, we have no idea what lies ahead. It is next to impossible to maintain continuous points of reference. Our surroundings change with every step."

"I see. And you've never been ambushed while escorting?"

"No, it is what I excel at." Holli showed no sign of pride. She stated it as a simple fact.

Ryson hungered for more information about this elf. He wished to know what might propel someone to remain ever so vigilant. "Can you tell me what happened when you were ambushed on patrol?"

Holli frowned. It was obviously a topic she did not like to remember, but again, she did not hesitate in replying.

"It was early after my final training. I was patrolling the eastern edge of our camp. I chose a path too high in the trees. I mistakenly believed it would give me the best vantage point. It did not provide sufficient cover. I was spotted by a raiding party as I made my rounds."

"What kind of raiding party?" Ryson asked with obvious curiosity.

"A group of elves from another camp."

"Really, other elves? You'll attack each other."

"Just a humans and delvers will," Holli responded, this time with a tone of indignation. "Elves compete much the same way as other races. In harsh winters, there is always a struggle for food."

"So that explains why you need guards. I was wondering about that. From what Lief said, I gathered that the threats to the elves disappeared when the goblins and the other dark creatures disappeared. I couldn't understand why the camp needed guards."

For the first time, Holli spoke with a passion as she quickly came to defense of her accepted role. "There are many reasons for guards. We can warn of wild animals, secretly turn away curious humans and delvers without them knowing we are even there, and also fight off an angry tribe of dwarves out looking for trouble."

"You can turn away a delver?" Ryson responded with disbelief.

Holli answered as if reading from an elf guard's manual. "A delver will often follow that which most calls to his curiosity. If a delver is moving toward an elfin camp, the delver can be led away by creating diversions, or offering a mysterious sound or smell in an opposite direction."

Ryson nodded. He could not argue the point but he did make a mental note. "I'll have to remember that. Anyway, what happened with the raid?"

Holli's voice repossessed its heaviness. "Two of an opposing camp's party came from below me using the thick branches as cover. I was lucky to escape their capture. I fled back to the inner camp and warned of the raiders. It was my greatest failure."

"If you weren't captured, and you warned your camp, how can you consider that a failure?"

"A guard's responsibility is to find the raiders before they find you. I was located and ambushed. I was forced from my position without discovering the party's size. It was not what I was trained for."

"I see." Ryson saw the signs of discouragement on Holli's face. He felt the need to console her. "But that sounds like a long time ago. You must have done much to make up for that mistake."

"Perhaps."

Ryson did not allow the near defeated response to stand. "No, not perhaps. You must have. I consider that a fact and let me tell you why. This is no small affair we're on now. Mappel must trust you greatly. He knows

what this is all about. Ever since I met you elves, all I've heard is how things will never be the same and how crucial this whole affair is. Do you think he would send just anybody in the desert with me? Besides that, he's letting you carry that sword. You must know what kind of honor that is."

"It is indeed an honor, but also a great responsibility."

"Oh, I'm sure it is."

Ryson smiled as he noted the disappointment fading from his companion's expression. He let silence overcome them, hoping the encouragement would drive any further misgivings away from his escort. As they moved, now in quiet, he took an opportunity to check things out for himself. Not only did he look off into the distance, he sniffed the air and listened to the wind. He considered those things Mappel told him of the algors and what he might sense in order to find them. Unfortunately, at this moment, he remained unsure of where to travel when they reached the sand.

Thinking of the sand, it was at that moment that Ryson closely examined the ground. Something troubled him. He watched as he stepped down into the mix of sand and rock. He could not pinpoint his alarm, but he did not like how the ground reacted to his step. He was about to say something to Holli, but suddenly, she dropped nearly out of sight.

The elf guard made no sound as her step took her through a camouflaged hole in the ground. When her foot penetrated the veil of sand and rock, her momentum carried her downward through a sizeable gap which measured two arm-lengths across. She showed no sign of panic. She remained in control and used her forward momentum to propel herself to the far side of the opening. Her right hand found solid ground, and she managed to stop her fall. By that time, her entire body, up to her neck, remained submerged under the surface of the ground. Only her head and her right arm remained within the delver's sight.

Ryson leapt over the circular opening. He knelt in front of the elf and took hold of her hand. He also reached into the opening and grabbed the back of her shoulder.

"Hold on, I'll pull you out."

As he began to lift her up, he heard a distinct clicking noise echo up through the hole. The sound grew louder and quicker. The delver could not identify the noise, but he knew whatever was causing it was moving towards them. He continued to pull Holli free, but he leaned forward to look over her shoulder and into the hole. His eyes quickly penetrated the darkness. He made out the trace outlines of a far reaching tunnel. It was tubular in design, fairly tall and very wide.

His attention seized upon the source of the noise within this underground cavern. It moved towards them through the shadows. It skittered through the tunnel in awkward sideways movements, its many legs tapping over the sides and bottom of the tunnel. It crawled vigorously, its intent clear.

As the creature closed upon Holli's vulnerable body, it bounded into the light that cascaded through the opening. Ryson felt nothing but pure aversion to this thing. A grotesque mix of spider and crab, grown to enormous proportions, it veered up with open claws. Bone-hard pinchers the size of tree limbs and two eyes extending out of its face brought similarities to the crab. The rest appeared like a giant spider with most of its round body covered in thick black hair. Its six legs were jointed high in the middle, and they propelled the creature directly towards Holli.

Ryson pulled with all his might. He tried to free Holli from the hole before the creature could get any closer. She was halfway into the open air when the first claw reached up and took her by the waist.

Again Holli made no sound. She attempted to twist free but could not break the grip. She turned her head to look down at whatever held her. If it brought fear to her, she made no sign of it. She quickly took her free left hand and brought it to her side. The other claw grasped it just as quickly. She hovered halfway out of the hole but fully in the grip of this monster.

Ryson continued to pull at her but the claws fought back. The delver held on with all his strength even as Holli sunk further out of his sight. His grip around her right arm tightened, and he dug his knees into the soft sand. He braced himself against the ground swearing not to give up.

"Let go of my arm!" Holli commanded.

"What?!" Ryson exclaimed with ever-widening eyes.

"Let go of my arm!" she shouted forcefully.

The strength of her voice was so resolute, he almost obeyed without thinking. He did not, however, release his hold.

"If I let go, it'll take you in!" he managed to blurt out as he continued to struggle against the force which opposed him.

"Do it!" Her eyes blazed with such fury, her mouth formed a grimace out of pain and anger. "Do it now!"

Ryson let go. He watched in absolute shock as Holli was completely sucked into the hole. She was gone.

He knelt stunned for but a second. He darted his head back to the hole. They were not directly below him as he hoped. The creature had backed away from the opening. It would not allow its prey any chance of escape.

Ryson watched in horror as the two claws remained firmly attached to Holli's waist and her left arm. It pulled her closer to its open mouth which included two large, white fangs. Ryson was about to leap into the hole in hopes of saving the elf when Holli's quick movements held him in place.

The elf, even while in the clutches of such a fiendish creature, found the strength to use her right arm. Her hand flew to her waist in a blur. Her fingers gripped the hilt of the powerful and magical sword which remained at her side. As the blade flashed out of its sheath, it caught the drifting sunlight. The blade glowed like fire and it lit up the entire tunnel for as far as Ryson could see.

The creature reacted violently to the blast of light, seemingly more out of fear than pain. It did not drop Holli from its claws, but it pushed her further away from its face. The two eyes of the monster recoiled. As they did, Holli brought the sword crashing down between them. The light from the sword flashed with even greater brilliance. The blade burned as if immersed in flames, and it split the creature nearly in two. The monster collapsed to the ground with a crunch as dark liquid spilled from the huge gash.

Holli leapt clear and back towards the hole. She watched the dead creature for long moments before checking her own wounds. Her waist and arms were cut, but all wounds appeared merely superficial.

Ryson gracefully lowered himself into the tunnel beside the elf. He spoke with obvious concern.

"Are you alright?"

"I'll live," the elf responded with obvious disgust.

"How's your waist?"

"Abrasions. Slightly bruised. They should be cleaned, but perhaps we should not waste the water."

"Don't worry about the water. I can always get us more, even in the desert. Just take care of yourself."

"I should be dead for such carelessness." Her voice was hollow, made even colder by the echoes of the long reaching tunnel.

Ryson was taken aback by Holli's abruptness. Her response was more confusing than the appearance of this mutated creature.

"What are you talking about?" he questioned.

"I'm talking about what happened here. I stepped right into a trap. You talk of how Mappel trusts me. Now you see how I repay that trust."

"Hey, ease up. I barely noticed the hole and I'm a delver. I should have seen it long before you fell in."

"I am an elf guard. I can not afford to make such mistakes." Her voice was cold and bitter.

Ryson shook his head vehemently. "That's ridiculous."

"It is not ridiculous. What if you had fallen? If I had lost you to this thing, how could I have explained it to my captain, to Mappel?"

Ryson could not accept the harsh self judgment. He pointed to the remains of the creature with near ferocity. "Do you even know what that thing is?" he demanded. "I've never seen anything like it. I doubt you have either."

"I do not know what it is," Holli answered with a near lifeless tone.

His pressing eyes bore down upon her. "Then how could you have been prepared for it?"

"I must be prepared for everything," Holli responded quickly. "I was warned to watch for the unknown, the unexpected. I did not fulfill my duty."

Ryson heaved a heavy breath. He was determined not to allow the elf to hold on to such a perception. "What is your duty?"

Holli answered swiftly, and with more than a hint of self-disdain. "To protect you, to see to the safe conclusion of your mission."

"Was I hurt?" The delver's simple question echoed through the tunnel.

Holli remained silent.

"Was I hurt?" he asked again. His expression demanded she speak the obvious answer.

"No," she allowed.

"Then you have not failed in your duty. You were told to watch for the unexpected. That's a very vague

instruction. You dealt with this monster better than I could have. And neither of us got hurt. I can't ask for more than that."

For a moment, Holli appeared slightly relieved. Her sternness, however, returned quickly. "Be that as it may, I can not allow such a thing to happen again. As you have said before, yours is a mission of great importance. If we must face such unexpected obstacles, then I must heighten my awareness."

She checked her ire long enough to apologize for what she felt was previously inappropriate behavior. It was the duty of an elf guard to remain watchful over those they escorted. They would give orders when safety was at risk, take command when danger presented itself, but they were to always remain in control. They were also to give continuous respect.

"By the way, forgive me for shouting orders at you, but I needed my right hand. I could not free my left. I believed that the sword was my only hope."

Ryson waved aside the apology. He took no offense at the time, and none now. "I would have yelled, too. As for the sword, it looks like you thought right." Ryson's gaze locked upon the shimmering blade of the sword. Strangely, it did not hurt his eyes to stare directly into the glowing metal that brought near daylight to this dark tunnel.

"That sword seems pretty special," he remarked with obvious interest. "It even gives off its own light."

"It is not a source of light," Holli confessed, "it simply magnifies the light around it. That is part of its enchantment. Do not underestimate that power. It can catch the faintest gleam and offer enough light for travel into the darkest of caves. For example, it can catch the light which flows through the hole in this tunnel from a great distance. We could walk far and deep. We could turn corners and descend steep banks. We could reach a length where our own eyes would sense no light at all. The sword, however, would still capture the light which flows from that opening. It is only in an enclosed place where light is completely blocked will the sword fail to offer illumination."

"I see." Ryson took a moment to glance down the long tunnel. The light from the sword lit the passage way with greater depth than the brightest of lanterns. It allowed Ryson to inspect the walls and to follow the path. The tunnel twisted and turned for a great distance before the path curved out of sight. "I wonder how far this thing goes."

Holli showed no interest in the tunnel. "It is of no concern to us."

She stepped back to the opening and passed an expectant glance at the delver. She obviously wished to exit the tunnel and continue with their original quest.

Ryson's curiosity would not be so easily contained. He meandered within the walls of the tunnel, taking deep longing stares down the enclosed corridor. He offered his own opinion. "I don't know about that. We don't know what that creature was. You said so yourself. Maybe this tunnel holds the answer."

Holli's response was coldly logical. "The creature must be a result of the tainted magic which now swells over the land. The sphere emits energies which can alter creatures in unthinkable ways. It might have been nothing more than the egg of an ordinary spider that somehow became mutated. It's a surprise we haven't come across something like this sooner."

Ryson's growing desire to explore the tunnel exuded from him like smoke from a fire. "But look at how long this tunnel goes. Who knows what we might find."

"And you wish to explore it?" Holli's expression was harsh.

"Of course. If the magic created this creature, it might have created something else."

She frowned dubiously. "Yes, something more terrible and more deadly. I do not see the point in taking such a risk."

"We shouldn't just leave without inspecting at least a little further," Ryson requested. "We may never have an opportunity like this again."

Holli stared sternly at the delver. "How will this help us in our quest to find the algors?"

"I don't know. I don't know what may be down there. That's why I think it wouldn't hurt to check it out."

"This will not help our cause," Holli spoke angrily.

Her tone finally caught Ryson's attention. He stood confused over her adamant stance.

"What's wrong?"

"You have been given a task," she replied forcefully. "That task was to find the algors, or have you forgotten? We must find them and explain to them of what is happening. According to Mappel, even according to you, there are important decisions to be made involving the sphere. We have not the time to explore this irrelevant tunnel dug by some monster. We must return to this objective."

"It won't take long just to have a look around," Ryson persisted.

"It will not help us." Her hardened stare did not ease. "I know what is causing this. It is your natural instincts as a delver to explore that which is new to you. I must ask you to contain these feelings until we have accomplished what we have set out to do. Now, I can not find the algors on my own. That is your responsibility. But I also know that I can't force you to do anything. I know enough about you that if you wanted to leave me behind you could do so in an instant. I can't capture you or even keep up with you. I can only ask you to remember your pledge to Mappel, and to Shayed. Remember your responsibilities as I remember mine. We need to find the algors."

Ryson grimaced at acknowledging the truth. He knew his desire to explore the tunnel failed to hold any true rewards other than satisfying his own curiosity. He cursed lightly under his breath before accepting the only true course of action. He looked to Holli requesting forgiveness with his eyes.

"Of course you're right. This kind of thing just happens to me sometimes. It's hard for me keep my attention focused with so much going on. I hope you can understand."

"You do not have to explain further. Let us forget this matter and exit this tunnel. I will need a moment to clean my wounds. Then, we will return to what we must do."

Chapter 10

Ryson and Holli trekked without hesitation through the Lacobian desert. Holli, accustomed to the thick brush of Dark Spruce Forest, cared little for the sand or the heat. She would have welcomed the shady refuge of tall leafy trees, but only thin cacti appeared along their travels. She longed for flowing streams or small quiet ponds, but the desert offered only an empty ocean of sand. The sun poured down upon her and the hot dry wind from the south bit at her skin. Her arms and legs were accustomed to climbing and leaping, not struggling through these Lacobian dunes.

Holli ignored these pains. She concentrated upon the delver's back and upon the surrounding land. As the sun and sand burned her eyes, she continued to scan the horizon as well as the very ground they tread upon. As she watched the delver move so effortlessly across this barren terrain, she remained always within arm's reach, always ready to defend him. She bit back any stray thought which begged her to give in to the desert or to even request a moment's rest.

She called upon her training to keep her from tiring and to keep her moving forward in these conditions so hostile to her race. Whenever she felt her strength diminish, she placed her hand upon the hilt of the Sword of Decree. Its presence at her side reminded her of the faith Mappel had placed in her. She affirmed to herself that she would not delay the search for the algors. She would not slow the delver or force him to rest when he did not need it. She would continue far after all her strength evaporated into the dry desert heat if need be. Her own will and determination would carry her to the end of this quest.

So true was Holli's spirit, that Ryson did not even recognize her struggle. He stopped only when absolutely necessary. When he did, their pauses were brief. He also began to use the desert more and more to his advantage. He declared they would save all of their supplies and use only that which he could take from the land. He used his knife to coax liquids from hidden roots and from the innards of the surrounding cacti. After short breaks to complete such tasks, they were again on their way.

As Ryson moved through the desert, he opened his senses. He fought from focusing upon one item. Instead, he exposed his senses to everything around him. His mind turned back to the advice of Mappel.

Mappel had tried to explain how the algors lived based on his knowledge of elflore. They did not live in small camps like the elves, in towns like the humans, or in underground cities like the dwarves. They lived together, yet apart. Thousands upon thousands lived within the desert and considered themselves part of the greater community, but that community spread itself thinly over the vast desert. They dug dens in high sand dunes, they made homes in hollow cacti, they even found shelter in caves among the desert cliffs. They preferred a life equally split between solitude and group activity. As quickly as they would wander off into desolation, they would return to find kinship with other members of their community.

While each held a sense of strong loyalty to another, they fashioned their lifestyles upon individualism. It was a difficult prospect for outsiders to accept, for the algors appeared born with a natural sense of conformity; their desire to shed this inherent attribute led them to near split personalities.

As for their other habits, Mappel had described the algors as using every element of the desert to their advantage. They would feed from a cactus at the top of the stalk so as not to harm the roots or trunk. They would mold the very sand around them to construct dunes that would protect them from the sun and the hot dry winds. It was these things which Ryson focused upon as he traveled through the desert.

The delver constantly surveyed the land looking for such signs. He examined every cactus hoping to find claw marks indicating a recent climb to the top. He watched the breeze break across the desert trying to see signs of an unnatural barrier. He also lifted his nose to the air hoping to catch a unique scent which might indicate the presence of a creature he had never before met. He listened to the wind. Perhaps he would hear the slight

vibration of a distant call. He held himself out for anything, anything at all. He would grasp upon the slightest clue to lead them.

For the moment, he found nothing. He followed only his instincts. He trotted forward making turns based on nothing more than a whim. His direction held no true logic; he simply plodded forward like a hungry beggar looking for a morsel of bread in a land devoid of food. Yet, he held to the belief that at any minute he would hone in upon the smell, the sound, or the sight of something that would lead him to his ultimate destination.

The day trudged on. The wind quickened and the sun baked the sand as it began to sink from its position directly overhead. If night would bring them cooler times, they would pay for it first with the billowing heat of the latter half of day.

Still, they moved forward blindly, aimlessly across the wasteland. Even the scorpions and desert birds took refuge from the baking sun. The two appeared alone, searching for something they could not identify. Only their footsteps in the sand and on rock accompanied them now, and these trailed off behind them far out of sight, like a long wandering tail. It reminded Holli of the loneliness of their journey each time she turned to check their flanks.

When the elf did turn, she could not avoid the scope of their travel. Nothing in the distance behind them offered any sense of security. Any trace of the forest had long since vanished. The desolation of what surrounded them was overpowering. Hopelessness, loneliness, desperation; these were the emotions which attacked her mind. She spit these crushing thoughts from her like a bad aftertaste. There were more important things for her to focus on now.

As the sun lowered, the heat became thicker, stronger. It pressed upon her like some unseen hand trying to force her to her knees. Maintaining the pace the delver set became more and more difficult. Purely and simply, the elf was asking her body to maintain a cross country run through the desert. While her physical condition allowed for great stress, there remained limits. She was now exceeding those limits, and she faced yet one more battle to fight, the struggle of mind over body. She would have to convince her own tiring, aching muscles that they could indeed continue.

It became a personal war with the desert itself. She turned the wasteland into a powerful foe that mocked her. As she continued to scan the horizon, she looked over the dunes with growing animosity. The sand, the sun, and the wind were now all enemies that wished to stop her. It was up to her own perseverance to win this battle, and she remained determined against any failing. She began to care almost singularly about this one point. The desert would not defeat her.

Ryson did not face the same difficulties. His body apparently adapted to all environments. Like the chameleon, his very body chemistry altered to match his surroundings. The heat barely affected him. Running across this empty land offered no true challenge to his skills. The true challenge rested in the search itself, in finding the algors, a search he continued without frustration. Even as he moved without true direction, he maintained a vigorously determined outlook upon his intentions. The day was passing without a single hint of the mythical algors, yet he remained open-minded to their existence. More, he now accepted their existence as fact. The question to him was no longer if they were actually in the desert. It was more if he could find them. With such a challenge, his delver blood flowed true, and he began to move with methodical precision.

More and more, he pulled the spyscope from the pouch at his belt. He scanned far across the desert, inspecting the terrain with more and more concentration. Perhaps, it was the purifying power of the desert which began to clear his mind of his own unconscious barriers, the long travel over rock and sand with a dry wind cleansing him of self-doubts. It brought an edge to his senses and brought out the most receptive instincts inherent to a purebred delver. He began to sense things about the desert that he did not even notice when their journey began. Each time he brought the scope to an eye, he nodded in approval. He even began to smile with

great satisfaction.

As this behavior increased, Holli wondered if the desert was taking the mind of the delver. She knew of how such conditions could drive anyone to madness. She worried if the madness now controlled her companion. She finally decided to break her silence even if it meant momentarily delaying their search.

"Delves," she called to him over his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Ryson twirled about with great energy. He smiled happily. "I'm fine, Holli." He said nothing more. He watched her expectantly, obviously hoping she would continue to question him.

"What is it?" Her tone indicated she was tired and expected an immediate explanation.

"They are here," he said plainly, but with an even bigger smile.

"You are sure?" The elf took her attention from the delver. Her body became tense and ready. Her hand fell to the hilt of the sword as she scanned all directions. The wear of the desert upon her body almost completely disappeared as she considered facing possible danger.

"You can't see them," Ryson offered. "I haven't seen them yet, but they have been here. I'm on to them now. Actually, it's not so much as following a single algor. It's more of finding signs of many of them. They do congregate, but they spread themselves thin just the same. There are so many different and opposing signs to look for. It's possible we've passed right by many of them for a long time. I didn't know what to look for when we started, but I do now. I see how they've forced changes on the desert that the wind couldn't have made. I see how they've made markings which appear totally natural, but offer landmarks for their own kind. Even now we're closing in upon an area which is well traveled by many of them. There's no question about it. They exist, and they're here."

Holli spoke with relief, as if believing the long journey was finally coming to an end, her own personal victory over the desert assured. "I take your word for it. What do we do now?"

"We find them." His smile did not vanish. It remained on his face as he pointed to a ridge of a sandstone mountain off to the west. "That is where we have to go."

Chapter 11

It was with great hope that Mappel and Lief had undertaken their journey to Connel. After Ryson Acumen and his escort departed for the Lacobian desert, Mappel had advised the rest of his camp of the situation they all faced. The discussion lasted much of that night. The following morning, he sent messengers to the dwarf city of Dunop with strict instructions. With all preparations complete, the elder elf and Lief had set out for Connel.

Even at his age, Mappel navigated the Dark Spruce Forest with casual ease. In but half a day they drew near the limits of Pinesway. Upon entering the town, they covered their ears with forester's caps. Their clothes were not that much different from their human counterparts. Only the hats and cloaks worn on such a beautiful day might have raised an eyebrow, but their arrival within the town's center caused not the slightest stir.

They themselves felt more uncomfortable than the humans that passed them in the streets. Walking among the townspeople, across paved roads, and past tall buildings; this was both a new and unnerving experience. Their ears were concealed, but their self-consciousness could not be as easily tamed. More than once, they gaped at the crowds gathered at a street market or at the lavish decorations of the surrounding architecture. Viewing the humans from a distance could simply not prepare them for the experience of walking among them. The two elves felt as if they had slipped through space and time and into a new dimension.

Both Mappel and Lief forced this unease away as they realized that interaction with the humans was now inevitable. Without wasting much time, they secured faster transportation to Connel. Upon rented horses, paid for with gold dust obtained through trade from the dwarves, they reached their destination easily within the same day.

It pained Mappel to pass beyond the lands which led to Connel. Farmland had replaced wide areas where Dark Spruce was once in full command with its many trees. He wondered how many of them fell to the woodsman's axe to clear such long stretches of land. A few trees remained as markers for farmers and travelers; lonely sentinels; reminders of what once was.

Lief pointed out the outline of buildings in the distance as they approached Connel, which in truth was now more of a city. Activity bustled as they closed upon the growing collection of structures on the horizon. It re-energized Mappel to see the stone wall still intact, but the sprawling size of Connel, which now actually spilled over sections of the wall, did little to ease his anxieties.

Much had changed since the time of legends, since Shayed stood with the humans, algors, dwarves and elves. This human town was filled with dwellings, shops, and inns; few of which honored the past, thus it was easy to spot their ultimate destination, Matthew's Church of Godson.

Upon entering the church, they had announced themselves as messengers of Ryson Acumen with important news. They were apparently not the first for other members of the church paid little attention to their arrival. They were quickly escorted to Reader Matthew's quarters in the back of the church.

Matthew met with the two alone. It was clear he awaited news from the delver eagerly.

Mappel spoke calmly and succinctly as Lief remained silent but vigilant at his elder's side. The elder elf did not at the outset reveal his identity or his true purpose. He recited the findings of Ryson Acumen as if giving a report. He waited to judge the reader's reaction to the emergence of the sphere before announcing the true purpose of his visit.

Reader Matthew took the report with obvious agitation, but he showed no sign of true disbelief. He made no scoffing remarks, nor did he fail to accept the enormity of such news. He only demonstrated great concern. He

was troubled and worried and the report left him weary.

It was then that both Mappel and Lief removed their hats and truly detailed the happenings that caused their very arrival upon his doorstep. Their pointed ears became unmistakable exclamations to a tale which was even now unfolding, a tale which was not foretold and where the conclusion was far from certain.

Lief remained watchful and alert, but obviously uneasy at being confined within the stone walls of the church as well as the bricked walls of this smaller room. He moved about at small intervals to check each corner as if concerned with every shadow. After each pass, he returned to Mappel's side, and stood quietly.

The elder elf rested his weight against his long wooden staff. The long travel tired him only slightly. He showed less signs of agitation with being confined within the small room than his counterpart. Other than taking a moment to feel the heavy bricks of the wall and the oak panels which formed the door frame upon entering, Mappel stood with his attention focused squarely upon the reader.

As he continued to speak, he coughed momentarily, an expulsion of road dust. He accepted a cup of wine produced from a cabinet behind the reader's desk. He sipped it gently and allowed the weight of the goblet to rest against the side of his staff.

With their identities revealed, Mappel included every detail from Lief's early warning to his return with the delver. In his explanations, Mappel spoke of Ryson Acumen with high regard. He reported the appearance of the spirit of Shayed and of her message to Lief and Ryson. He told the reader of Ryson's wishes to explain all the events which had unfolded.

It was thus that the reader now faced the unveiled truth behind the earthquake which unsettled him so many days ago.

"I do not doubt your word, Mappel; it is just that you must understand none of us were prepared for this." Reader Matthew tried to explain his position as his own thoughts lay scrambled. "Please do not mistake my words. It is not that I don't believe in what you say, or even in your very existence. It's part of my faith to believe in what many call the legends, which includes elves. I've believed all along that elves exist. I know that the sphere was buried long ago, and the captured magic with it. That is all part of the Book of Godson. That is the foundation of my religion. I accept it. But your presence here, at this time, does come as yet another surprise, and surprises are something I am not used to."

The reader paused to regroup his thoughts. It was his great desire to make his position very clear to the elder elf. "It's not that I thought the separation of elves and humans would continue forever. That's not true at all. I believe it's inevitable that the land will someday revert back to the time of legends, when humans would again have to accept the existence of the other races. In truth, that has been prophesied for us, and until now I have learned to trust, even depend, on these prophesies. It is part of our faith, but the return of the magic was not foretold. Nothing of our prophesies spoke of the sphere returning as a threat. To be sure, there is always the shadow of great powers and forces beyond our recognition, playing a role in our future. I always assumed, however, that those forces would be beyond our reach. Never have I read or heard of the sphere freeing itself from Sanctum. It is this lone fact that causes me great concern and, yes, even great doubts."

"Do not apologize for such concerns," Mappel replied, showing a deep understanding and appreciation for the reader's plight. "I find no insult in your words or your actions. In fact, I share them. Our own elflore also leaves us without guidance during this trying time. It seems the prophets have left us to our own designs in this matter."

"Your people were also not prepared for this event?" The reader did not know whether to feel relief or greater despair at this possibility. It was a comfort to see he was not alone, but he wondered if this revelation truly

held anything to be thankful for.

"No," Mappel replied firmly, yet sadly. "The elves have had their share of prophets. Elflore is as much a guide for the future as it is a map of the past, but we enter this day without the grace of their foresight."

Reader Matthew bent his head with a grunt of frustration. He eyed the aged, cloth-bound cover of the Book of Godson which always remained upon his simple desk. His hand brushed over the top of the worn cover, seemingly reaching for comfort and wisdom. He found little. "I wish I could be of more help to you. Less than a season ago, I would have believed this church and its followers were prepared for everything, that we were blessed with knowledge of all things to come. How naive. To think, we were so full of pride, even scorn for nonbelievers. We secretly laughed at their ignorance. Now, I find we face true danger without any such blessing. I wonder who is laughing now."

Matthew chuckled sarcastically at himself. His eyes revealed the pain he felt in his soul. He looked to the two elves that watched him with obvious interest. He felt no embarrassment at his own remarks. He repeated his heartfelt apology. "I am sorry I could not have been more help to you."

Mappel smiled and exuded a warmth which indicated a personal understanding to Matthew's plight. "Again, I will tell you not to apologize. I comprehend your dissatisfaction, greater than you might realize. You and I are looked upon as spiritual leaders. There are great expectations of us, yet we are not prophets and we are not gods. We are both limited by the failings which are inherent of all our people. We must, however, look beyond that now. From what I have learned, we face a great struggle. We must set aside our shortcomings, rise above them. The truth be told, I am very grateful to have found you. You have been more open-minded to our cause than I might have hoped. Certainly, you are more willing to listen to us than any other member of this town, and we do need the help of the humans. We need the help of all the races. The fact that I was directed to you, the reader in this church, I take that as a sign of hope. I also find strength in the fact that Connel finds itself at the center of our struggle. The simple arrival of a purebred delver in our forest has brought us back to the ancient wall that allowed the races to survive so long ago. It is this hope I now carry."

"Speaking of Ryson, where is the good delver now?" Matthew asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Ryson Acumen walks the Lacobian desert in search of the algors. As I have said, we need the help of all the races."

Upon what the reader had already seen and heard, the prospect of dealing with algors seemed as ordinary as dealing with the merchant across the street. He thought more of the sphere, the return of the magic, and the danger they all faced.

"Will the algors assist in this matter?" the reader wondered aloud.

"I can only hope they will," Mappel responded with simple confidence. "I believe in such. According to elflore, I imagine they would find such a cause most interesting. They might remain skeptical of our reasons, but certainly no more dubious than the dwarves."

"The true problem will be finding them," Lief noted.

"I would not be too concerned of that," the reader came quickly to the defense of the delver. "Ryson Acumen is full-bred delver. I don't know how long it will take, but I know the power of these people. If it is there to be found, Ryson will find it."

Lief cleared his throat. "I meant no disrespect to Ryson Acumen. His assistance has already proven to be priceless. It is just that the algor has not been seen by elf nor dwarf since the entombing of the sphere. I can't

help but wonder if they even still exist. The desert, after all is a harsh place."

"Harsh to an elf, but not to an algor," Mappel reminded his escort. "The algors still exist. The reunion of all the races is spoken of in elflore. There is no mention of the loss of a single race."

Matthew took a moment to reflect upon Mappel's reasoning. Something within those words sparked an idea, a hope of his own. He leapt upon it, grasped it with obvious enthusiasm. "Is it possible ..., I can't believe I haven't thought of that. If it's true, it could mean that it was foretold. A connection, but maybe out of place. Sequences are important, but not always. It's possible."

Mappel watched the reader carefully. He wished for an explanation. "You feel you have discovered something?"

The elf's voice startled Matthew, brought a realization he was jabbering as he attempted to organize his thoughts. He brought his hand away from his face to turn a questioning glance to Mappel. "I don't know. Let me ask you this first. Your elflore, does it explain the reunion of the races? I mean, you just said that elflore refers to a reunion. Does it explain how that is to be accomplished?"

"No, it does not. It simply states that the age of separation shall end. It does not explain how."

"That's what brings a question to my mind," Matthew presented. "I've spent all this time going over the prophecies to find something to connect to this event and I've missed the most obvious. You state that elflore speaks of a reunion. I have already indicated that the prophecies within the Book of Godson refer to a time when the other races would return to make their presence known. Don't you think that the return of the sphere may be the very cause of this prophesy? We have been worried because this most significant event has not been forecasted by our prophets. Maybe it has, just not as clearly as we would have liked." The statement faded off as more of a question of hope held out to the elder elf, and Matthew waited for a response.

Mappel glided his hand along his staff. This skin on his forehead crinkled into long deep lines as he considered the thought. "Interesting. Foretold, but not foretold. It is strange that neither prophecies mention how the separation is to end."

Matthew's eyes lit up with a spark of increasing hope. "But it was specified in both that the races would be united. From what you have told me so far, such a reunion is now necessary. In a way, this event has been foretold to us."

Mappel's assurance came more grudgingly. He could not simply accept such a loose connection. "Who is to say? That interpretation may very well be correct. The re-emergence of the sphere does indeed force us into such a situation. But can we infer so much? While I do not wish to dampen your hopes, I must point out other significant factors. It does not explain as to why we were not warned of the sphere. It is clear to me that such an event is of major importance. I merely need to point to the reappearance of Shayed. We now face a battle where all life hangs in the balance. We must enter Sanctum. Such an undertaking is without question the most significant action that any people might employ during this time. There is more here than the simple re-unification of the races. In its own way, Sanctum has been a landmark to the era created when the magic was removed from the land. Destroying the sphere will mean more than the re-unification of the races. It signifies the very end of an accepted way of life. I can not believe that such an event could have been overlooked by our prophets, or yours."

At first the reader appeared to wish to debate the matter. He shook his head ever so slightly as Mappel spoke. He did not, however, blurt out a response upon Mappel's conclusion. He rose from his chair behind his desk and began to pace the room with his hands behind his back. The heels of his shoes clicked hollowly against the stone floor until they hit the mat which covered the center. The soft woolen floor covering silenced his

steps until he reached the far end of the room. Crossing beyond the border of the mat and on to the stone, again his shoes snapped out a light crack.

"I must agree," Matthew finally answered with a defeated groan. "The return of the magic is mind boggling in its scope. Much smaller events have been prophesied and interpreted for us. It is mystifying as to why this event was not foretold." He turned and faced the elder elf. "Forgive me if I appeared reluctant to accept your words at first. It's just that I had hoped for a moment that I might still rely upon the prophecies in this matter. I do so want to believe that the plan of Godson as told to us will unfold without intervention. I wish to remain as faithful to this as possible, but I cannot overlook the obvious. The sphere appears beyond that plan."

"Your reactions are not foreign to me. I expect I am doing much of the same," Mappel admitted. "I keep reaffirming that there are other powers at work here, coming to our aid. I have made such a claim when Lief came upon Ryson Acumen and again when I found you here in Connel. It lessens my own concerns to hope that we are not left alone to face such a dreadful task, but I must face the cold facts. Elflore is lacking in guidance. We face this matter with but our own wisdom. Perhaps it is but a test to prove whether we are worthy for what might come in the future. Perhaps the same is true for your people as well. If you are to see the plan of Godson unfold, then you must deal with this particular danger with your own spirit and power."

Lief Woodson began to speak, but his voice cracked. He cleared his throat quickly. His expression made it clear he felt uncomfortable speaking of such weighty matters. It was not his place. Yet, he could not resist speaking of his moment in the presence of Shayed. "I claim no vast knowledge of elflore or of Godson. I know only of what I have seen these past days. As I have told Mappel, the great Shayed spoke of the threat we face. She also spoke of the prophets. The power of the sphere seems beyond them. I don't believe you will find the matter addressed in either the book of Godson or elflore. According to her, what we face now, we face on our own. If any of us wish to save the land, we must destroy the sphere by our own doing."

Mappel placed a hand on Lief's shoulder. "My good elf. You speak with passion, but we must always hope that we are not alone. I agree that we will do what we must do, but we must never forget our beliefs, our hopes, our faith. I will not dispute what Shayed has spoken to you, but what of the powers that sent her back to us? Yes, she said the sphere resists the foreshadowing of the prophets, but it has not resisted the greater powers which I believe exist in this land. Say what you will, but I believe we will not be alone when we enter Sanctum."

Silence filled the chamber. Lief shifted his gaze uncomfortably to the floor. He stood motionless.

The reader felt reassured by Mappel's words. He might not have found the script in the book of Godson to ease his insecurities, but the presence and the words of the elder elf brought his own faith welling up within him. He honestly believed that with such faith, even conquering Sanctum was not beyond his reach.

"Speaking of entering Sanctum," the reader questioned with renewed vigor, "have you any plan for this undertaking? Obviously it must be done, that is why you are here. You have made it clear that the spirit of Shayed requests that the sphere be destroyed. You yourself say that the magic still contains the taint of poison for the elves and that it will soon affect us all. If you plan to destroy the sphere, which seems apparent, you will face many obstacles. First, you must enter Sanctum. Our own book of Godson speaks of Sanctum and the five tiers. The tiers were constructed to prevent exactly what you hope to accomplish."

Mappel returned his empty wine goblet to the desk of the reader. He grasped his staff with greater resilience as he professed his intentions. "At the moment, I have no intricate plan, no detailed design for what we face. I simply look to the ultimate objective. The first order of business is to realign the races, make everyone understand what we face. It is thus I have sent messengers to the dwarves and algors. With my apologies, I admit that I have requested that the representatives meet here, in this very church. I know I should have consulted you, but time has become a factor. From Ryson Acumen's testimony, I believed you would be the

most helpful to our cause. With members of each race in attendance, I will explain everything I know. I will hope that each race will understand the dire consequences. I will pray that the secrets of Sanctum are revealed so that together we can devise a scheme to overcome these obstacles.

"However, I am not so blind that I don't foresee great difficulties. The mistrust between all the races has had centuries to grow and fester. The dwarves themselves will be reserved against revealing their own secrets of Sanctum. It may well be that each race will refuse to unlock the secret of their tier. In such a case, I will be faced with dark prospects, but they will not stop me. I have no choice. The sphere must be destroyed. All elves will eventually see that one pure fact. Every camp, even enemies, will join to fulfill the request of Shayed. I will send an army of elves to their deaths if need be and send another army after that. Our people will die anyway, an attack on Sanctum will at least give us a chance.

"I will make demands of all the races, as well. I will request that the dwarves push themselves beyond the point of exhaustion to tear Sanctum apart stone by stone if that is the only way to get to its heart. I will demand the industry and the great multitudes of the humans be used to accomplish our task. I will send delver after delver into Sanctum to scout the dangers until I can find no more. Whether any race agrees to help is beyond my power, but it will not stop me from making each demand.

"I realize that many lives will be lost if this is how we must enter the mountain and this will be my plan of last resort. First, I will attempt to break the mistrust between the races. I hope that I will convince each to reveal the secrets of the tiers before any die needlessly within Sanctum. If we all reveal our secrets, we may yet determine a way to move unimpeded to the sphere."

Matthew's hope faded ever so slightly. He sat back down in his wooden chair behind his desk. He considered Mappel's words and again his hand found the cover of the book before him. He peered down upon the collection of words which represented his faith. A sorrowful expression shadowed his face. "That is a mighty request. I will be honest with you. Even if I knew the secrets of Sanctum, I don't know if I would simply give them to you now."

The reader reflected upon his own answer before continuing. "Call it a lack of trust if you will, and in all honesty it does shame me, but I just don't know if I could reveal such a secret. Oh, I understand the need for trust at this time. I clearly see that if we must destroy the sphere, such information is vital. But would I have the right to simply divulge such information on such short notice, with such little information? Here in the face of all of this, I don't know if I could simply reveal a secret of such magnitude without greater assurances. I imagine having knowledge of Sanctum carries with it great responsibility. Were it my responsibility, I might remain honor bound to maintain secrecy until I was absolutely certain there was no other choice."

Mappel shifted his weight as he changed the angle in which he held his staff. "I understand all too well what you speak of, for I have that responsibility. I can only tell you that I would be willing to reveal what I know to increase our chances of success."

"But will others be so willing?" Matthew persisted voicing his doubts. "The five tiers were constructed so that no one might enter to regain the power of the sphere. What you will ask of all the races is in direct opposition of this." Matthew looked up at the elder elf and began to speak quickly. "Please understand, although I know I'm not explaining myself well. It's just that you present more than a request. The tiers represent a sense of safety for all the races that understand the legends. It is so that no power might use the sphere. I realize the sphere now becomes a danger and the tiers are now an obstacle in ending that danger. It is difficult, though, to simply free myself of the covenant of the tiers. If such skepticism rests within me, how will you convince all the races?"

Mappel addressed the question with understanding, but with no less resolve. "I am already aware of such difficulties, but there is no other way. It will be my task to make all understand that there is no other choice."

Matthew exhaled deeply. He crossed his hands atop his desk over his book. "I am glad I won't have to make that decision. In all honesty, I do not know what the humans placed in their tier, but I know who might."

At this, Mappel's eyes widened with interest as well as hope. "There is a human in your church that might have this information."

"He's not a simple member of just this church. He is a blessing to all of those that follow the word of Godson. I will do my best to get word to him. Until then, I can only suggest we focus upon other problems."

Lief found it refreshing to face something other than the sphere, elflore and the book of Godson. He gladly seized upon the opportunity to deal with other matters. "What problems may that be?"

Matthew spoke with a heaviness that revealed a deeper shame, a shame of how his own kind might react to the sudden presence of such beings as elves, dwarves, and algors. "If you plan to bring representatives of other races to Connel, you will have to give previous warning to the residents of this town. We may be able to hide their presence for a while, but as more come, it will be difficult to keep such a thing a secret. Such a thing might cause a panic. If we do not address this now, we might face a greater problem when we need it least."

"What is it you recommend?" Mappel questioned, regarding such matters with serious conviction.

"I am not good at this, dealing with such problems." Matthew conceded. "The followers of this church are viewed as outsiders. I doubt our warnings would be taken with any regard. I would suggest we meet with the town council. But it is late and the sun is almost down. It's going to be hard enough to see the council as it is. It would be near impossible to see them this very evening. It would be better for us to make the attempt tomorrow morning. I suggest we break for a meal. Then, perhaps we can talk further. I know I have a lot of questions for you. I suppose you have the same for me. I would hope that you would stay here tonight and we can discuss all of these things, then we can see the council at daybreak."

Mappel nodded in agreement. "We are honored to stay within a Church of Godson. I must admit it will be strange for us to sleep within the confines of any building, but I would also admit that if I had to choose such a place, it would be here. There is much to discuss, and even more to plan. As events unfold, it becomes more and more evident to me that the barriers between humans and elves must fade. We have a long road to travel. It is best we travel it together."

Chapter 12

The fog drew close upon Matthew as he guided the two elves through the streets of Connel. The previous evening was a cool one, allowing for warm fires within hearths as well as vast quantities of dew, even in the dusty streets. As the sun broke the eastern horizon, the warm rays excited the layers of moisture into a jubilant mist.

Such was not uncommon for the growing season. It would take the passing of many more days before the ground absorbed enough heat to refuse the wetness of night, before the onset of the dry season when long hot days began at first light.

Matthew silently thanked Godson for the fog, a blanket of security and secrecy from prying eyes. If he had to walk the streets with strangers, far stranger than any might believe if they could see the ears which were hidden behind the forester caps, it was best to do it behind a veil of mist. It would not take long for the rising sun to burn off the last remnants of the fog, but it lasted long enough to see the two cloaked figures follow Matthew through the doors of the town hall.

Surprisingly, they were guided directly into the mayor's office within moments of their arrival. Matthew did little more than announce their presence and an urgency to speak with the town council. The receptionist greeted the request with unfettered nervousness, rather than the cold dismissal Matthew expected. As the two elves and the reader were left with the mayor, the door thumped shut with the heaviness of a vault.

Matthew, Mappel, and Lief found themselves in a dimly lit office with the blinds shut. The cobblestone fireplace remained cold and dark. The growing warmth of this morning required no fire, but the sterile cold and dimness of this office begged for the bright flames.

Mappel pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders to shield him from the strange chill. He allowed himself a moment to inspect his surroundings. The room was much bigger than Matthew's chamber at the church and included many more lavish decorations, but Mappel found this room uninviting. As he turned his head about, he noted the dark paneled walls that appeared newly cleaned. The thick rug also appeared fresh, and clear of dirt. The air smelled of disinfectant, and the windows remained closed. The office was almost completely devoid of life and nature. It certainly held no inviting hand to an elf, and for perhaps the first time in his life, Mappel felt his age.

Lief also found no comfort within these walls. The large volumes of books upon the shelves did not impress him. Neither did the paintings hanging upon the walls. Again, he felt trapped and contained, but even more so with so many distractions placed around the room. He longed for the green of the forest which was notably absent in this seemingly lifeless environment.

Matthew stepped forward ahead of the elves. He faced the large mahogany desk which stood majestically in front of them. The desk top, outlined with gold edging, contained piles of miscellaneous papers. It also contained the name plate of the current mayor, Edward Consprite.

Consprite sat in a full thick leather chair, behind his desk. The chair was turned to face the back wall and the three guests could only see the top of his balding head barely peeking over the hilt of the chair.

Matthew went to clear his throat to gain the mayor's attention.

Before he could make a sound, Consprite swerved his chair about and faced his visitors for the first time. His expression revealed his total lack of joy for their presence. His eyebrows raged downward in the middle, creating a crease just above the bridge of his nose which rose upward to his forehead. His jaw remained tight as he placed his hands down flat upon the desk top. He examined his visitors with notable disdain.

After his eyes whisked quickly over the two cloaked companions, Consprite's stare fixed coldly upon Reader Matthew. He frowned, almost angrily. His teeth barely broke their clench when he finally spoke.

"Why are you here?" he asked bluntly and coldly.

Matthew was taken aback by the surly approach. Members of his church were used to poor attitudes of other townspeople, but never such outward hostility. They were normally laughed or scoffed at, usually ignored, but hardly ever challenged with great antagonism.

The reader gathered himself and tried to ease into a conversation. "Thank you for seeing us. I have to admit I was surprised you would see us so quickly. Usually the council is rather reluctant to meet with members of my church."

The mayor would not let him continue. He spoke with demanding impatience as well as anger. "What do you want?" It was much more of an order than a politely, or even tactfully placed question.

Consprite's anger again caught Matthew off guard. He stood silenced for long moments. Lief and Mappel remained behind him, their gazes shifting back and forth from the mayor to the reader.

Matthew finally contained his surprise and stiffened himself with new resolve. His thoughts garnered an image of Godson. With a new focus, he met the mayor's angry glare with simple inner strength.

"I wish to speak to the council on matters of great importance." His voice reflected little defiance and no arrogance. "Do not misjudge my intentions. I am not here simply on behalf of my church. I am not going to make any demands of funds. I am here to inform you. What I will tell you, you will need to know. If you do not hear me out you will not be happy with what you might face in the future."

The mayor's eyes remained fixed upon the reader. His expression changed ever so slightly. It continued to contain outward hostility, but even Matthew sensed a note of concern behind Consprite's flashing eyes.

"What is it you have to say?"

"I would rather speak to the entire council. This is a matter which will affect everyone in this town, everyone in the land."

Consprite appeared quite unfazed by this remark. He made no scoffing gesture and spoke not a single word of rebuttal. If anything, the hint of concern grew ever so slightly.

This reaction wasn't lost upon the reader. He expected to face more than doubt from the council; he expected to face downright disbelief and ridicule. After all, he was merely the reader for the Church of Godson, an unenviable position in a place filled with nonbelievers. Surely, he would have great difficulty in convincing the council of any of his story. This was why he brought the elves with him. Without them, he honestly believed his tale would not gain a single shred of respect from the council, especially from the mayor. He could only hope that the presence of the elves might sway them into accepting at least a portion of his story.

Now, however, he looked into a face that showed a great sign of concern; not at all what he had expected. The mayor was absorbed with some great anxiety, and Matthew's appearance in his office did little to ease his tensions.

"The council can not convene today," Consprite again spoke bluntly. "You will have to speak to me and me alone."

Matthew did not let a second wave of surprise break him from his intentions. He wavered only for a moment, searching for the right words to convey the true importance of what he had to say, and then offered his own response. "I do not think that is a wise idea. I can only say that my message is of great importance. It would be better if the council heard it together."

The mayor slapped his hands angrily against the top of the desk. His palms hit with such force that papers lifted up in the air before wafting back down slowly to their previous, albeit more confused, positions. All three visitors jumped slightly at the violent sound which cracked through the room. Consprite gave them little regard as he clenched his open hands into fists. He then brought them to his sides as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Look reader," Consprite spoke with a low snarl, a growl like a trapped, frustrated badger. "I don't think you understand! I said the council can not convene today. Now you will give me your message now or I will have you locked up for creating a public disturbance."

"I have created no disturbance!" Matthew blurted out with astonishment. He never anticipated such a response from anyone on the council, and he had not even revealed the outlandish tale he was now forced to tell.

Consprite leaned ever so slightly forward in his chair, as if to emphasize his conviction. "You just spoke of a message which will affect everyone in this town as well as everyone in the land. Those were your words. Do you deny them?"

"No, but ..."

"But nothing. Those are the words of a rabble-rouser. They create panic and mob rule. Now you will get on with what you have to say or I will have you locked up, and you will never see the light of day again."

Matthew felt his knees grow weak. "You can't do that, you have no right."

"I have every right! I'm about to issue an order imposing martial law! That gives me the right!"

Consprite caught himself before continuing. He cursed under his breath. His face was now crimson and his anxiety was as obvious as ever. He uncrossed his arms and rubbed his temples with his fingers.

Matthew stared disbelievingly at the mayor. "Martial law?"

The mayor did not respond other than cursing under his breath once more.

"You can't do that," the reader repeated himself.

The mayor stood up angrily, grabbed a paper from his desk and shook it at the reader. "Yes, I can. And here's the order that proves it. If this doesn't convince you of how serious I am, I don't know what will."

Before Matthew could say another word, Mappel stepped forward to the edge of the mayor's desk.

"This has gone on long enough," the elf spoke with conviction before pulling the hood of his cloak away from his head and removing the forester's cap. His pointed ears stood revealed for all to see. "I am an elf, and as I believe every one in this room already knows, the end of an age is here."

"Mother of bastards!" Consprite exclaimed, yet he revealed more despair than disbelief. He did not question what he saw; he did not stare with gaping silence. Instead, he dropped himself back into his chair as if capitulating. His large bottom hit the seat with a resounding thump. He placed his left hand over his eyes as if

trying to block out a nightmare.

Matthew looked back and forth from the elder elf to the mayor. He could not fathom Consprite's reaction. "You're not shocked?"

"Nothing can shock me anymore," Consprite moaned.

"What are you talking about?" Matthew beseeched. Nothing had gone even close to his expectations. The reader imagined difficulty in gaining an audience with any of the council, he anticipated outright dismissal of his story, and he expected downright astonishment at the revelation of elves in their midst. The actual turn of events was beyond his imagination. He stared dumbly at the mayor, waiting and hoping for a shred of reason.

Consprite offered nothing. He grunted, he cursed, but he remained in his chair with his hand over his face.

Mappel stepped forward ahead of the reader. He raised a hand from his staff requesting Matthew refrain from further questions. He spoke with an explanation he garnered from his own observations of the mayor. "It is the inevitable I fear. I expect this man has already seen and heard of things far more surprising than the presence of elves. He is the leader of this camp of humans as I am the leader of my camp of elves. Just as I received reports as to the occurrences after the quake, I expect he has received the same. The magic has returned, and no camp or town is safe from the effects. It is not so surprising that this man already knows of the changes taking place."

"At first I didn't believe what I was hearing," Consprite mumbled. He dropped his hand to his lap, stared at it rather than return Mappel's knowing gaze. "I thought the reports were made by crackpots out in the wilderness too long. That's where they came from at first. Stories from strangers coming in from the hills and the mountains up north. Then more stories came in from the outlying farms. I had to send people out to investigate. I lost two men to some kind of monster they couldn't even describe. It surprised them at the river and ripped them apart with claws and teeth."

"It was a river rogue," Lief spoke for the first time since entering the office. "They move as quickly on land as in the water. They have attacked my people as well."

Consprite glanced up with a look of desperation. "River rogue, huh? It's good to know the names of creatures which shouldn't exist." He placed an inquisitive eye upon Lief. "I guess you're an elf, too?"

Lief pulled off his cap in acknowledgment.

"That's just great." Consprite shook his head. "River rogues, elves. What do you call the short, swollen-headed things that walk around the forests with crossbows?"

"They are goblins," Mappel answered softly.

"Well, I haven't seen one of those yet but the mayor from Burbon sent me a message this morning. They've attacked Burbon twice in as many days." He shook his head as if to expel the images of things he could not comprehend. Upon recalling a sight he could bring to mind, his voice rattled with anguish. "I'll tell you what I did see with my own eyes, a corpse, a moving corpse. It killed a farmer and two of his boys before my men trapped it in a barn. I tell you that thing should not have been walking around. It was half rotted. I could see bone, yet it kept banging at the doors to get out."

"Another of the undead," Lief muttered as he shook his head sadly.

Consprite boiled over with anger and frustration. He shot a wild stare at Lief. His eyes remained wide and

bloodshot. "What do you mean another? I had the one in the barn destroyed! It took five men with axes to do it. They chopped it to pieces before it finally stopped moving! We burned what was left. Then burned everything that touched it. Blazes, I had my own clothes burned. Now you tell me there are more of these things. How many more?"

"No one can tell," Lief answered simply.

"But you're sure there's more, aren't you?!" The mayor's nostrils flared as his eyes made wild accusations toward the elf.

"No one can be sure of anything during these times," Mappel counseled coolly. "Our own people are at a loss to understand everything which has happened or might happen."

"Loss? Loss?!" a crazed expression rippled across the cheeks of the mayor. He glowered at the three men that stood before him. "Everything is out of control here and you stand there telling me you're at a loss to understand what's happening? There's no way to understand it! The dead are walking around killing people! There are monsters doing the same near the rivers! And that's only the half of it. All these reports on my desk ... unheard of things. I thought the town was going nuts. Maybe it is. Maybe we all are. One woman said her son was able to levitate. I laughed until I went over to see her. The kid was floating around in the air! She thinks her son is possessed by demons. I didn't want to believe any of this, but I can't shut my eyes to it!"

Mappel stood firm with his weight pressed against his staff. He listened carefully to the words and the tone of the mayor. He watched even closer. Even as he stood within a whirlwind of an emotional tirade, he found it near impossible to develop a true assessment of this man.

The elder elf could read nothing beyond the mayor's immediate concerns. His worthiness as a person, his tendencies toward righteousness or malevolence, remained well disguised by a veneer of self-importance. The arrogance of the man drew clear by the objects in which he surrounded himself. The desire for control became evident by his outbursts. Unfortunately, neither characteristic assisted Mappel in making a moral judgment. Such characteristics are present in almost every leader of every race.

"What you face, we all now face," Mappel spoke in earnest. "The humans are not alone in this plight. Every creature that lives in the land faces the same danger. It is not madness that overtakes you or your people. It is a challenge to all, to human, to elf, to dwarf, to alger, to even the great cliff behemoth."

The mayor nearly laughed with exhaustion. "Is that supposed to make me feel better? That's just great. I can go out and tell my people that everything is fine because we're not alone. The elves and dwarves are facing the same problems."

"I don't think that is what he meant," Matthew offered.

"I know what he meant!" Consprite shouted. His expression turned cold as the crimson hue ran from his face like water from a tap. His fists tightened to stop their trembling and he took hold of the situation with all the resolve left within him. He would no longer allow anyone but himself to dictate the subject of this meeting. He narrowed upon their presence in his office and his focus turned upon their reasons. "Now listen to what I have to say and know that I mean it. I want to know why you're here. As far as I'm concerned you may be responsible for all that's going on. You came here with something to say, and you'll say it to me now. If you don't, I'll lock you up and you'll never see the light of day again. I don't know your two friends here, but I know you and your place in this community. No one, other than your own followers, is going to even notice if you drop off the face of the land. As for these two elves," he said the word with near disdain, as if it were a foreign virus that had no business in the land of Uton. "I doubt if anyone around here will miss them if they disappeared. People around here don't believe in elves and dwarves."

At that threat, Lief moved forward with an agile step. His hand disappeared beneath his cloak where it found the hilt of his two edged sword. He side stepped Mappel with casual grace, the folds of his cloak barely rustling. He bore down upon the mayor with a fiery anger of his own.

The elf's intentions were not lost upon the mayor, and Consprite's cold calculating confidence took flight as his pallor turned gray. He sank back deep in his chair, searching for protection and a retreat. His feet dug into the floor as he propelled the chair back away from the oncoming elf. Beads of sweat rolled down his temples. The only noise which erupted from his mouth was a low groan.

Matthew called out for Lief to contain his actions, but it was Mappel who stopped him. He merely lifted an arm from his staff and swung it out like a gate which crossed Lief's path. By itself, the thin aged arm could not have held back the younger, more powerful elf. Lief would have plowed through that arm as if it were a thin rotted pine branch, if it belonged to anyone else.

It belonged to Mappel, however, and Lief submitted to its authority. The angered elf left his sword sheathed under his cloak. He even stepped back away from the mayor in acceptance of Mappel's silent request.

The mayor coughed in uneasy relief, but maintained a watchful eye on the younger elf. He pulled his chair back to his desk before wiping his head with a clammy hand. The room now felt much too small for Consprite. He now felt trapped, the only exit blocked. He rubbed his hands together, hoping to warm them and dry the perspiration he had wiped from his temples. He gathered himself, drawing upon all his experience. In his best fashion, he flushed signs of weakness from his expression. He continued to remain watchful of Lief, but he finally set his attention back on Matthew.

"Now you look here," he mumbled, somewhat unsteady but not lacking in bitterness, "I have had enough of this. You will speak now."

Matthew shook his head almost apologetically. He remained firm upon his earlier stance. "I would rather speak to the whole council."

"Are you deaf man?" Consprite bellowed. "The council can not convene today. I've already said that."

"Why not?"

"Because there is no council anymore." The mayor dropped his forehead into his left hand. "Elizabeth Bent was killed by that thing in the barn. I had to inform the entire council of what was going on, didn't want to face it by myself. She wouldn't believe me. I took her out to see it for herself to convince her. Samuel Cofort went with us. Pig headed woman, she wouldn't listen. She just about laughed at me when she threw open the barn door, told me it was a spooked horse. It ripped her throat open. That's when I ordered the men to destroy it. I had Bent's body burned. I didn't want to see her rise up like that other thing. Cofort didn't stick around. He got sick right there and took off. I've sent people to get him back here, but they can't find him. He's left town for sure. When I finally told the other two council members of what happened they walked out. Last I heard, they locked themselves in their houses. So there is no council. I'm in charge here. Me, alone! Got it?"

Matthew stared at the mayor vacantly before finding his voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Well, now you do. So whatever you have to say, say it to me."

Matthew faced this prospect with confusion, uncertainty. He tried to form his own alternatives as he mumbled a response. "I don't know. It still affects the whole town. Perhaps a new council should be put together, an emergency council."

Conspriate nearly fell out of his chair. "Are you out of your mind?! To do that I would have to tell people what's going on. Do you have any idea what that will cause? Panic! Riot! We'll lose control of everything. I've had enough trouble keeping a lid on this as it is. I only use people I can trust. Everyone here has sworn their secrecy to me. I intend to keep this a secret until I can figure out what to do. Now you want me to just announce a need for a new emergency council?! Forget it! The rest of this town knows nothing so far and that's the way I intend to keep it."

"You will not be able to keep this a secret for long," Mappel said stoically. "I understand your desire to maintain calm among your people, but there is no way it can be accomplished. Very soon, they will all see things with their own eyes that you will not be able to explain away. They will realize that the land is changing. I would suggest you inform them as soon as possible."

"Just like that, huh?" Conspriate laughed sarcastically. "Maybe I should just go out in the street with a bell and tell them that the dead are rising, there are monsters in the rivers, and elves in my office. What kind of response do you think I'll get?"

The humorous image was lost upon the elder elf. "I can not say. I have little experience with your people."

Conspriate laughed again, as if he finally found an escape from his inner turmoil. "Well, I have a lot of experience. First they'll have me locked up; they won't believe any of it until some of these things come marching up our main street. Then, they'll all panic. They'll run in every direction at once, not caring who or what they run over. They'll take what they can from wherever they can. They'll fight over horses and food before they leave this town a burning cinder."

"That may happen regardless," Mappel proposed. "Who can say when a goblin raiding party might target your town, or when a mountain shag wanders forward in search of food. The changes around you are vast. The people of this town will see them. You may temper the panic if you warn them."

Conspriate bit down slightly on his lip. He exhaled heavily before casting a determined stare at Matthew. "I will not talk in circles any more. You came here to tell me something. I want to know what it is. What do you know about this?"

"I know what these elves have told me," Matthew said honestly.

"And what is that?"

"I would rather they tell you."

Conspriate grimaced before turning his head to the elder elf.

"Well?" he said with an expectant tone.

Mappel did not hesitate in responding. "Whether you or your people wish to accept it, the land is changing. The time you have known is over. If you doubt my word, simply consider what you yourself have already seen. These things will not go away. They will, in fact, get worse. You will not be able to hide the truth from the humans within the structures of this camp, or in any other. You, however, will have to face these changes more quickly than others. Connel has been selected as a meeting place for representatives of other races. It is very possible that even this day living creatures strange to you will indeed be walking down your main street. We have come to warn you now so that you may take any necessary precautions to avoid the panic you speak of. As to whether you accept this or not, that is beyond my control. It is not beyond my control, however, to reveal myself to your people right at this moment. My very existence will create a stir you will not be able to silence."

"I see." The mayor paused to consider thoughts of his own before proceeding. Quite distinctly, the elf just posed a challenge of authority, a challenge this mayor was accustomed to meeting. Consprite finally took hold of something of comfort. He now viewed Mappel as a political adversary, and he attempted to create an atmosphere of conflict. First, he decided to gain more information before deciding a course of action. "You still haven't told me what's going on. You say the land has changed, but not why. And why is Connel being used as this meeting place?"

"Connel was selected for its history. It was the battle ground of the Wizard War, the last place all the races worked together."

"Sounds like a fairy tale to me," Consprite added, hoping to goad the elf into revealing something he might have wished to keep hidden.

"Then I would also be a character in one of these tales. Yet, I stand before you now, do I not?"

Matthew decided to add a fact which might add at least a shred of substance to the story. "It also has a lot to do with Ryson Acumen," the reader revealed.

The mayor did not move his head. He only shifted his eyes toward Matthew. "That's the delver we sent out to check the damages by the earthquake. What's he got to do with this?"

"When I saw he was about to explore the lands after the quake, I asked him to send reports back to me as well. I wished to know what caused the quake. As it happens, Ryson was the first to come across these elves. Apparently he has assisted them. He also spoke of me and thought I might help them."

"Why?"

"Because I am a follower of the Church of Godson. I would be most willing to accept them for what they are."

"No, that's not what I asked. Why do they need help? No one has told me what's causing all of this. All you've said is why they came to Connel. That doesn't explain ... Wait a minute!" He made a sideways glance at Matthew. He sized him up and read the meaning within the unspoken words. "The quake. You sent Ryson to check out the quake and that's when he came across these elves. It was after the quake when things went haywire around here. That's the link, isn't it? This has all got something to do with that quake, if it was a quake."

"What else could it have been?" Matthew posed with a nervous tone.

"Something that might explain what's going on here," the mayor said flatly. He noted the reader's nervousness and grasped it. "I think you know, and I want you to tell me."

"The forces at work here are beyond one man's understanding," Mappel interceded, hoping to quell the mayor's interest with the tremor. The elder elf was not sure of this man's character, but he was sure he did not want to reveal the source of the quake, or the fact that the sphere existed within the walls of Sanctum.

Consprite, however, honed in upon Mappel's words. Forces. The word blinked in his mind. It meant power, and power of this magnitude interested him. He considered his options, weighed them carefully, and finally spoke with cold calculation.

"It may be beyond my understanding, but I wish to know more of what caused this quake. I have a feeling it may shed some light on what I've been facing and even why you're here."

"We are here as the first representatives from other races to come to Connel." Mappel spoke with careful conviction. He hoped to make it clear his intentions should not be questioned. "It is here we will decide how to deal with the changes we all face."

The mayor failed to accept the elder elf's authority. In Consprite's world, power created authority, and as of yet, the struggle between them had not yet been decided.

"That doesn't tell me what caused this change," Consprite persisted. He decided to play an ace. "Now, I want to go back to this quake. It seems you're rather uncomfortable talking about it. I can't make you tell me what it is you know, but I can do this. There are other delvers here in Connel. There are also human trackers which I trust very much. I might simply send one or more of them out just as Acumen went out. I can get the answers myself."

Mappel stood silent. He turned to Matthew, then to Lief. Dealing with humans was foreign to him. Dealing with humans that made a career out of reading, understanding, and even redirecting the wants and desires of others, posed a challenge for which he was not prepared. The elves of his camp accepted his word and authority without challenge. This human would not.

Consprite noted the uncomfortable gaze of the elder elf. He sensed the confusion and concern like a shark senses the distress of another fish. He wanted to smile but he kept his emotions hidden. This was a battle he was determined to win.

He did not allow the elf time to regroup his thoughts, he pressed the elder. "Now that I think about it, it's very clear that the quake which rolled past this town must be directly related to the events of the past few days. But I don't think it's the quake itself that disturbs you. It's the secret behind the quake. It's big enough to cause you elves to come out of hiding. It apparently is important to others as well. Something about dwarves, and algors. You said yourself that there are other representatives coming to Connel. I'm beginning to think that you're trying to keep something from me which I should know about."

Consprite watched the elf carefully. The pained reaction he witnessed informed him his calculated assumption was correct. He now stared expectantly at Mappel.

Mappel moved his hands slightly about his staff and repositioned his feet as he weighed his response. He now believed that meeting with this man was a mistake. He considered simply turning and leaving.

Maybe Connel was not the place for this. Perhaps they would have been better off in a town closer to the wilderness, closer to the forest. Pinesway. Or Burbon, where the goblins already attacked twice. Maybe if the elves had been there to fight them off they would have gained the trust and acceptance of the humans. At least the humans of Burbon would already have witnessed the existence of creatures far stranger to them than dwarves or elves. Yes, Burbon now seemed a welcome retreat, an escape from this walled chamber where he now stood, an escape from this man that now asked the wrong questions.

Only one thing held Mappel in his place, the hope that he was directed to Connel for a reason. Ryson Acumen, the Reader Matthew; these men were assets to his cause. He realized this. And Connel; Connel was a place of legend with its ancient wall still mostly intact. To give up on Connel meant giving up on a larger hope. Leaving meant accepting their fate was in their own hands, with no outside force guiding their actions.

"No," Mappel said to himself.

It was barely above a whisper but all heads turned toward him.

"Does that mean you're not hiding something from me or that you wish not to tell me what is truly going on?"

the mayor questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"It means simply that I can not base my decisions on the accepted ways of the past," Mappel said with renewed strength in his voice. "The age of separation is over. The elves can not hide from the humans any longer. Neither can the dwarves, nor the algors, nor any other race. We must learn to deal with humans and humans must accept us and the new way of life we all face."

Mappel's fateful decision was made. To leave for Burbon or the wilderness meant accepting that Ryson's appearance in the forest was nothing more than coincidence. It meant that Connel held no significance. Mappel could not accept that.

The mayor, however, maintained a challenging tone. "Does that mean you're going to explain to me what this new way of life is and what's causing it?"

Mappel went forward with his decision. He remained, however, cautious in his response.

"You are correct in your assumption Mayor Consprite. The earthquake you felt signified something much more important than a simple shift in the land itself. You may not yet understand the scope of my explanation, but if you consider your own experience I expect you will. Magic is again free in the land."

The mayor scoffed but kept his attention locked upon the elder elf.

Mappel continued unfailingly. "I do not know your concepts of magic. It must be foreign to you for it has been absent for many of your generations. Your own history, as you understand it, is probably devoid of the true nature of what existed before the humans took command of the land. From what Matthew tells me, only a mere handful even respect the Book of Godson. That in itself tells me that the main body of your race will most likely doubt the truth. They will resist what they will see, but they will not help seeing it.

"And they will see this new age. Whether it is an age of destruction or an age of rebirth is yet to be seen. But none of your people will be able to hide from the truth. The magic is returning. It is the source of all these reports." Mappel waved his hand over the mayor's desk.

"Your stories of the undead and of levitation are but the beginning. If you wish to deny the existence of magic, how will you deny the consequences? Spell energy spills over the land. In ways, it can be used, as seen by the boy that discovered the spell of levitation. It has also brought back the creatures of dark wishes, such as the river rogue and the goblins.

"These are but some of the consequences, but know this, the magic returns with the taint of destruction." The elf's tone grew with authority as he issued this warning. "It is beyond good, it is beyond evil. It returns with a purpose of obliteration, a purpose it can fulfill. It moves of its own desire. Uncontrolled and mutated energy alters the very fabric of the land. That can be already seen in the appearance of the undead. No current wizard cast a spell to raise the corpse which attacked your people. That is partially the taint of this uncontrolled power. The magic is not pure. Some of the very energies still maintain the direction of spells cast hundreds and hundreds of cycles ago. If allowed unfettered, it will wipe the land free of life, all life. Thus, we return to Connel, return to make yet another stand together to fight the magic just as we did long ago."

The mayor allowed Mappel's pause to fill the room with silence for long moments. Finally, he pressed with what he believed to be a major point of interest. "This magic you speak of, it seems you're saying that this is what's causing all of the strange occurrences. That may or may not be true. I personally can't offer any other explanation, but I still have more questions that I would like answered. What has caused the magic to return, where does it come from?"

The mayor thought the elf might hesitate, show weakness, but he did not.

Mappel addressed the mayor with nobility as well as authority. "It comes from the land. It was buried long ago, but it has gained the awareness to free itself." Mappel saw no advantage to revealing all to the mayor. He was truthful in his response, though not complete. He judged it unwise to reveal the existence of such a powerful talisman as the sphere. "Humans played their part in the Wizard War, and even though most chose to forget this history, it is part of the legends of the land. The alliance of races defeated the magic casters, and the magic was buried in the land to prevent future misuse. The tremor which passed through your town was a signal the magic had been released. That is what is happening to your town. That is what is happening to the entire land. Now, elves, dwarves, algors, delvers and even humans must put aside their mistrust and again work together to end this threat. That is why I am here and why others will soon come."

At first the mayor said nothing. He unfolded his hands and began lightly tapping his fingers upon his desk. He cast a glance over the papers strewn before him; he then looked up at the pointed ears of the two elves which stood in front of him. He noted the expectant look from the reader, then turned his chair slightly to his left. His gaze was upon a portrait of his grandfather that hung proudly upon the wall. The face in the painting stared back blankly.

"Hmmpf," the mayor muttered and shook his head. He paused again, trying to tie the loose ends together. If the story was true, it meant he could do little to return the town back to its previous state of normalcy. No matter what he attempted, panic would most certainly reign. If it were not true, he would be left with no reasonable explanation for the wild events or even the pointed eared people that stood before him.

Only one element offered him any sense of enthusiasm, and that was the existence of such powerful energy. If the bizarre story was true, then this magic was the basis for extraordinary power. That thought enticed him. He almost began salivating. This thought led him to speak.

"I will accept your story, and I will do what I can to help you. I will, however, request that when it comes to dealing with the people of this town, you follow my advice. If you are hesitant about this, I will tell you this as a fact. If we go out and simply announce your story and what is happening, I can guarantee two things. There will be mass panic and they'll either throw us out of town as a bunch of loons or hang us for being responsible."

Mappel immediately turned to Matthew for council on this point.

"He's probably right," the reader conceded. "People will not simply accept what is happening. They will look right in the face of a monster and still refuse the truth. Very few will take this without causing a riot."

"Mob rule is an ugly thing," the mayor added with dramatic accents. "Confused angry citizens can react in ways totally opposite their normal law abiding nature. We ourselves may get ripped apart, torn to pieces by crazed men unwilling to accept what you say."

"That may be," Mappel noted, "but the truth can not be hidden from them forever."

"No it can't, but we can ease them into it. I ask that you allow me to maintain a low profile on this. Let's keep things as quiet as possible and avoid raising any immediate hysteria."

Mappel, while not sensing the true desire of the mayor, still foresaw difficulties. "How can we avoid that? Hopefully, representatives of the algors and the dwarves will be here within a day or two. The humans in your town can not simply ignore their arrival."

"They don't have to see their arrival," Consprite pressed. "You came into town without raising a stir."

"But we hid our arrival. And our appearance is more or less quite like your own. We simply place a hood upon our head, and any visual difference remains unseen. It is not the case for the others."

"We can keep them from being seen at all," Consprite insisted. "I have men working for me that I trust; men that, to a degree, already know of what is happening. I can send them out to meet these guests. They can bring them into town quietly and unobserved."

"I don't know."

Consprite decided to throw one last ace. He played upon the fears he stirred earlier, and again mentioned the high likelihood of outward hostility. "Think of this alternative. One of these strangers walks into town unescorted in plain sight of everyone. Word starts getting out of monsters. What do you think will happen? I'll tell you. The people will grab clubs and spears and swords and attack the stranger with such viciousness that you will not believe what you see. That is what fear and confusion will do. Will it help your cause if the people you wish to speak to are killed upon entering the streets? Take my word for it; it is the safest way for all involved."

Again Mappel looked towards Matthew, unable to discern how much truth existed in the words of the mayor. The reader could only whisper that such was possible.

Mappel grudgingly accepted. "There is truth in what you say. It will not help to renew an alliance if any representative is attacked, but I remain wary of leaving the members of your town in the dark about the changes they must all someday face."

"Let them face it gradually," Consprite said firmly. "Otherwise they will react violently. That's what people do when faced with sudden change. Let me deal with it. In the end, it is my responsibility. Would you have someone tell you how to handle the elves? I doubt it. You must allow me the same."

"Very well," Mappel said with a heavy sigh. "I will accept you know how to deal with your people as I would expect you to accept my authority regarding the elves."

"Very good. I will give the order to have guards posted at the outskirts of the towns and on watch for arriving strangers. I will issue them the fastest horses and they will scour the outer farms with diligence. Where should I have your guests brought?"

"To my church," Matthew replied quickly.

Lief stirred. He had moved away from the mayor, but he had remained observant of all that was said. "How will the elf guards or Ryson Acumen know what the human escorts have in mind? If an elf guard is approached by a human on horseback, it is likely the exchange will not begin pleasantly."

Mappel took one hand from his staff and placed it upon his chin. "We will have to alert our camp of this," he said stoically. "Though I am adverse to such, you will have to leave my side to send word to our camp."

Consprite seized an opportunity to offer a favor to the elves, a favor he hoped to collect upon in the immediate future. "I can have fresh horses prepared for him. If the trip is not far, and goes through nearby towns, I can see to it he's back quickly."

Lief refused vehemently. "I will not need a horse when I reach the trees."

"But you will not have to go far into the trees to do what must be done," Mappel interrupted. "You need only reach the outskirts of Dark Spruce and call to a perimeter sentry. The elf guard can relay the message back to

our camp. You can ride from here to Pinesway and then back. A horse will return you to my side quicker and so it should be done."

The mayor smiled. "Fine. That makes things easy. I can have a fresh horse sent to the church right now, and have another waiting for you at Pinesway for your return trip." The mayor then spoke with a guarded yet questioning tone. "I have one more question for you. You spoke of representatives of other races. Who will be representing my people?"

Uneasiness filled the room. Matthew looked about absently. He wished to make no comment.

Mappel shifted the grip on his staff. He looked back and forth from the mayor to the reader. "That has not really been decided as of yet. For the moment, the reader Matthew is acting as an intermediary. His knowledge of the legends has allowed for an easier communication of the problems we face."

"That's fine, but don't you think you should be consulting someone that understands all of the people? Reader Matthew represents the followers of the Church of Godson. I would think you should include me in any of your decisions which might affect this town. After all, I am the duly elected official of Connel, and it is Connel which has much at stake." The sentence was punctuated by Consprite's almost harsh, questioning stare.

"I can not say whether that is wise or not," Mappel offered, hoping for an escape from this new dilemma. He fished for a quick response which might rationalize keeping the mayor at bay. "We need those that will understand the legends, those that will offer knowledge of the past beyond your recorded history."

"Yet you also need someone who will assist you in how things are run in the present," the mayor nudged the elder elf. "If you expect assistance or even acceptance from the people of this town, you simply must gain the backing of someone in authority. At the present, I am that someone."

Mappel grunted with dissatisfaction. "I do not know. There are other concerns. You must realize that this is not simply between the elves and the humans. Representatives of other races will also be involved. Others may question your presence. It is not only my decision. I would not want to insult the other leaders by simply accepting you. I would be stepping beyond my experience and knowledge."

The mayor was not put off, not for a moment. "But it sounds as if it was your decision to meet at Connel. And it was your decision to speak with the reader. You seem to have more power over this than you're willing to admit. Now, I can't claim complete understanding, but I already know of what has been happening around this town. Even the reader can't say that. I also offered you assistance with the gathering of the strangers you wish to bring here. I expect that entitles me to be informed of what's going on, what other decisions you might make, and how Connel will be affected. For the last, I will demand that, no matter what your wishes are. I am still the mayor here."

Mappel wished to speak of this no further. He might have found it difficult to read the intentions of Consprite, but he knew he did not like the mayor's insistence at being included within all their decisions. Uneasily, he made one more attempt to sway Consprite toward a lesser role.

"You will be alerted to all things which might directly affect your people and this town. That seems to be more than a reasonable request. We will also defer to you as the authority in how to deal with all matters involving the general population of Connel. If any services are needed, such as horses, blacksmiths, forgers or craftsman, we will of course come to you. We will also alert you to any of our activities which might, even in the slightest way, gain the attention of any of the townspeople. As to your request for being a representative for our discussions, I must defer on that decision. You will simply have to accept that of all the races, the humans have gained the most distrust of the others. The dwarves, the algors, even the elves have lived to

remain hidden from your people. The humans themselves have shown a desire to forsake the past and to ignore the legends. Indeed, for the past hundreds of seasons, the humans even refuse to accept the existence of other races. Even you can not deny that."

Mappel paused to let the mayor speak. He looked at Consprite, expecting him to reply.

"I won't deny that your presence is new to me, but ..."

Mappel spoke quickly to cut off further remarks. "But that is what I must focus upon. Can you even tell me of the legends which are now central to what we face?"

"I do not know of ..."

Again Mappel seized the opportunity to direct the conversation. "And you should not be blamed for not knowing. It was not your way, but it is of great importance at this moment. The trial we face is based upon legends contained in elflore, dwarf tales, and even the Book of Godson. You pointed out that I decided to meet with the Reader Matthew. That is because he is familiar with the legends I speak of."

The mayor glared in frustration at being interrupted in both cases.

Mappel continued with reverence. "Since humans have forgotten the past, it is not unreasonable for us to first meet with those that will have a better understanding of what we face."

Consprite frowned sourly. He knew Mappel had seized a small victory in temporarily sealing him from the intended meetings. He was about to make one final attempt to reassert himself when the door to his office flung open.

A woman not known to Consprite pushed forward and out of the reach of the mayor's assistant, Kendal, who followed behind her with outstretched hands. The woman revealed an immediate sense of relief at finding the reader. She also maintained a look of bewildered excitement.

"Thank Godson I found you," she spoke with heavy breaths.

"Rachael?" Matthew turned to her and caught her arm.

Kendal tried to move further into the room, but Lief stepped in front of him with a menacing scowl. His agility surprised the assistant, who almost turned and ran back out of the office. He gathered himself quickly as he caught the familiar and questioning face of the mayor. At first the assistant wished to question the presence of such strange men with pointed ears, but Kendal had already witnessed far stranger things these past few days. As the mayor's chief aide, he was privy to the reports of nearly every occurrence. He wrote most of them out himself.

"I'm sorry, sir," Kendal said with a heavy breath, as he stepped slightly back and away from Lief. He tilted the upper half of his body to the left to gain a clear view of the mayor. "I tried to stop her, but she ran past me."

Matthew ignored the assistant. "What is it, Rachael?"

"He's back!" she blurted out.

Matthew was about to ask who she was referring to, but the excitement on her face made the answer clear. He held his tongue and spoke reassuringly to the wide-eyed woman. "It's alright, Rachael. We expected him."

The reader then turned to the mayor. "You'll have to excuse her. Like you, I have also kept things from my people. Little surprises like this are bound to occur."

The mayor said nothing. He sized up the words of the reader along with the continued excitement of the woman.

Interesting, he thought to himself.

Matthew wished to waste no further time with the mayor. He had questions himself. Although he could guess as whose arrival excited Rachael so, he could not fathom how he returned so quickly. He had sent word out only this morning. In truth, he had no idea where to send his messengers. He only pinpointed the closest churches of their faith hoping they might have an idea. He believed the hardest part would be trying to find him. It was unthinkable that any messenger could have located him so quickly. Perhaps, even the will of Godson was aiding them now.

"Mayor," Matthew announced, "you must forgive us, but I must leave. I will keep you informed as to those things that will affect Connel. If you have your guards bring our newly arriving guests to our church, I will appreciate it. I'm sure we will meet with you again to discuss any questions that arise between now and then."

He said nothing more as he turned his back on Consprite. He led Rachael and the two elves quickly out of the mayor's office.

The mayor bit back an order for them to stay. He watched dubiously as all but his assistant walked from his office.

When they had left, he motioned for Kendal close the door.

"I want someone placed on watch outside that church of theirs," Consprite growled. "I want it watched night and day without their knowledge, and I want someone we can trust. I also want you to get me a tracker, a human tracker. Get word to Evan Chase. I have a job for him. There's a delver I want tracked."

The assistant nodded, he considered asking about the men with the pointed ears, but decided against it. He recognized the tone of the mayor. Silently, he went to open the door. As his hand hit the knob, Consprite gave one more order, a strange order to his ears at least.

"And get me a copy of the Book of Godson."

Chapter 13

Reader Matthew walked briskly, nearly trotting, as Mappel, Lief and Rachael followed his direct and unerring path back to the church. He did not glimpse over his shoulder even once to check on them. He simply expected them all to follow. He ignored, as well, the growing number of eyes which fell upon them.

The morning's mist had given way to a clear, bright day, and the number of town residents on the streets swelled with the growing warmth. The two elves had returned the caps to their heads to avoid attracting attention, but the reader and his faith were known to most. As he passed, flanked by strangers, his robust pace fanned more than one passer-by's curiosity.

With the hoods of their cloaks pulled up over their hats, the elves appeared as nothing more than foresters wearing too much clothing for a gorgeous, clear day. They matched step with the reader, as only Rachael seemed to have difficulty in keeping stride, and neither elf questioned the reader, even when they exited Consprite's office with great haste. They followed obediently, especially as it pleased them both to again be outdoors and away from the sterile smell of the mayor's office.

Lief particularly welcomed the warm sun on his face. The open air brought a renewed sense of freedom. The blue sky overhead reminded him that no ceiling confined him. He drank in the sweet air. For a moment, he allowed himself a quick glance westward. He could not see the tree tops of his home, but he knew they were there. It was all he could do to keep from tearing off his outer cloak and race away from this town.

Mappel, although grateful to break free from the mayor's probing questions, became more attentive of Matthew's excitement. Before this moment, before Rachael abruptly announced the appearance of some unknown visitor, the reader walked with a slow sure step, avoiding attention, carefully navigating the most unobtrusive path. At this moment, that was no longer the case. He now stepped fervently, caring little for crowds or gawking onlookers. Mappel could only surmise that the reader held great expectations for the new arrival announced by the woman follower of Godson.

"Is he inside?" the reader asked Rachael with near booming exuberance as the group reached the steps of the church.

"Yes, he's in your chambers."

Matthew turned and ran up the stone stairs, his feet passing beyond every other step. He grabbed the door and yanked it open. It swung to its full length before it thudded against the stone door stop. It vibrated for but a moment, until its own great weight brought it to a motionless halt. Matthew was through the door in but a heartbeat. Before another such beat, he had already vanished beyond the line of sight of those that followed.

Rachael also moved quickly up the stairs. She grabbed the door handle, but waited patiently for the two strangers to follow her inside before she swung it closed. Once all were inside, she set off down a small corridor and disappeared through a door in a far back corner of the church.

Mappel and Lief looked about curiously. The main room of worship now contained several more anxious people. They totaled barely more than a dozen, but their whispers buzzed with excitement and sent an echoing hum through the rafters. In comparison to the space available to them within this building which was more like a fortress than a church, their number appeared meager at best. They could no more fill the many benches which lined the open space than Mappel's camp of elves could fill the branches of all the trees in Dark Spruce Forest. Yet, from what the elder elf remembered of Matthew's words, this must represent a great majority of the church's followers.

Those within barely heeded the arrival of the elves. In fact if either Lief or Mappel had removed their caps, it was doubtful that any would have noticed. Instead, they chattered nervously, excitedly among themselves. They looked pensively toward the hallway which led to Matthew's personal chamber.

"What should we do?" Lief asked softly while keeping a watchful eye on the people that continued to ignore them.

"Let us move to a seat in the back where we will remain inconspicuous to these people. I assume the reader will summon us when the time is proper."

The church members paid them no mind. Their attention remained centered upon the passage to Matthew's chamber.

Both elves took satisfaction in the small respite, and neither felt at all uneasy with the present number of humans, a humble and unassuming lot.

Lief took the opportunity to look about the large open space which represented the heart of the church. For the most part, it remained simple. It was void of any relics or symbols which might connect it to the faith of Godson. The walls made of powerful stone, rose up to the thick wooden rafters of the roof. The benches stood aligned with a walkway down the center, leading away from the front door. At the path's end, a simple platform stood innocuously and just high enough to allow a clear view of a speaker.

Lief's further inspection was cut short by the sudden appearance of the reader. He broke from the passageway into the vast open space alone. He took but a few steps toward the center before stopping to address the other followers who immediately ceased their chatter.

"Friends, it is not my intention to keep things from you. I would have you all involved with what must be considered, if I could. Unfortunately, I am not even sure if it is my place to be included in what must be discussed here today. Please bear with me for but a few moments."

The reader turned, but not back to his chamber. After scanning the room, his eyes fell upon the two seated in the back. He moved to them almost as quickly as he raced up the steps of the church. He leaned over Mappel and whispered so as no one else could hear.

As the other church members watched silently, Mappel nodded and made but a passing remark to his companion.

Lief rose and headed to a side door which Rachael had previously used. In but a moment, he was behind a closed door. It was time for him to send word to the elf sentries of Dark Spruce.

Upon Lief's exit, Mappel turned his head back to the reader. They exchanged messages inaudible to the others. He then stood and followed Matthew to the center of the room, to within the very midst of the other followers. They gathered around the elf and the reader curiously, expectantly.

It was Mappel who spoke. He stood still, his hands gently clasping his staff. Only his head turned about to meet the questioning gazes of those that now surrounded him.

"Do not blame the reader for keeping you in the dark over what has been happening here. It was never his intention to hide anything from you. If you must blame someone of that, blame me. I will tell you now, what only a select others might know. You will understand, for your following allows you an appreciation for the land as it was." He tried not to pause, but he could not help stopping to inhale deeply before speaking his next sentence. "The Sphere of Ingar has broken free from its entombment, and the magic has returned to the land."

Mumblings erupted, but soon all quieted to hear further explanation.

Mappel held them calm with his reassuring voice and patient eyes. "I know you will find this difficult to accept. I have been told such a thing has not been prophesied for you. I can only say that such an event was also not included in elflore. I know such a thing, for I am an elf."

With these words, he removed his cap and cloak and tossed them upon a nearby bench. He did so with a confident assurance, as if he knew exactly how those that surrounded him would react. He remained still for long seconds to allow the others a moment to vent their surprise. Indeed, the room was filled with gasps of shock and mumbles of disbelief. As the room finally quieted once more, Mappel concluded his address.

"The events which are now unfolding are difficult for us all. Yet face them we must. And we must face them together. I ask that all of you keep this to yourselves. The reader has assured me you are capable of such and I have no cause to doubt that. The interpreter has returned to you. He has returned to discuss the sphere. As your reader has said, he does not wish to keep secrets from you, but I will ask your indulgence. I must speak to the interpreter. There are things we both must know. I would ask that I may do this in private with only the Reader Matthew present. For now, this is how it must be done."

Mappel turned and walked from the small crowd and toward Matthew's chamber.

The reader lingered but for a moment to allow himself one last reassurance to the other followers. He then followed quickly after Mappel.

Matthew took the lead after turning a small corner and guided the elf back to his chamber. The door remained open as Matthew stepped inside. With great respect, he presented the elder elf to the interpreter.

Mappel walked purposefully into the chamber with dignified grace, almost as if he expected to meet royalty. He came to an abrupt halt upon witnessing the appropriately named interpreter. While Mappel knew little of the current customs and culture of the humans, he was well aware of their short life span, especially as compared to the longevity of the elf. He knew they grew old quickly. In but the turn of a handful of seasons, their lives past and age made its mark upon their faces. He thus expected a wizened old man. At the very least, a senior to the reader. That is not what he found.

The youthful interpreter leapt from his chair with a broad smile and the energy of a young deer at play. He could not keep his eyes from the tips of Mappel's ears even as he held out a sturdy hand to grip Mappel's. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, rather than surprise.

"An elf," he said almost joyously. "By the wisdom of Godson, an elf!" He laughed a gleeful laugh. "You don't know how happy it makes me to see you."

Matthew moved past, but as he did, he noted the bewildered expression pulling upon Mappel's cheeks. He cleared his throat lightly before speaking to make introductions.

"Mappel, this is Stephen Clarin. We also refer to him as the interpreter. Stephen, this is Mappel. He is an elder and leader from an elfin camp in Dark Spruce Forest."

Before the interpreter could utter another word in greeting, Mappel turned upon the reader. He had pulled his hand away from Stephen's grip as if it were nothing more than an illusion.

"This young man is your interpreter?" Mappel could not withhold his question nor mask his disbelief.

Stephen took no insult at the inquiry as he responded for the reader.

"I am that," he spoke cheerily while continuing to steal yet another glance at the unique ears. "Not what you expected am I?"

"No you are not," Mappel replied as he allowed himself to glance over Stephen's entire young body. "I do not wish to offend you, but I must admit I do not understand this. It does not fit with the rest of the story I have been told."

"What story is that?" Stephen asked. His eyes twinkled even brighter, as if he was privy to some joke no one else in the room was aware of.

Mappel's grip tightened about his staff. His voice rang with confusion. "That you came to this church ten complete cycles of the land ago, yet you appear less than thirty cycles now."

"I am twenty-six," the interpreter said with no shame.

"That would have made you sixteen upon your previous arrival to this church."

"Yes, it would."

"A boy of sixteen interpreting the prophecies of Godson to elders of the church?" The thought seemed so preposterous, so out of place for the elf. For but a moment, he pictured himself taking council from an elf of sixteen. Outlandish! Where was the wisdom of anything to be gained in but sixteen precious cycles of the land, let alone the ability to interpret such things as the prophecies of Godson?

Stephen could not withhold a chuckle. "Yes, I'm afraid that's true. And I can't tell you how difficult that made things. Luckily, the followers of Godson are more willing to overlook such things; more likely than the town regulars."

"Please explain to me how this can be." Mappel swam in a sea of apprehension as he made his plea. More than just disbelief now threatened to take hold of him. He had placed great hope upon this interpreter, hope that secrets of Sanctum might unravel within the combined understandings of elflore and the Book of Godson. Such expectations grew out of the high regard that the reader had placed in the interpreter, but the presence of this young man now nearly dashed such hopes. How could any one so young be knowledgeable to any great extent over such ancient and intricate composition?

Stephen retook his chair as Mappel deferred an equal invitation and placed his staff upon the floor for support. The interpreter sunk happily into a relaxed state. Unlike the mayor, he took a non-challenging position in his tone and his expression. When he spoke, his words carried a simple ease and a self assurance. Apparently, he found no offense in being questioned over his age and revealed no hesitation in making an explanation.

"People have said I was born with a gift. I do not wish to make any such judgments. I will simply say that Godson wishes to reveal the secrets of his prophecies, the secrets of the future, to the followers of his word. I have been chosen for that task. When I was very young, perhaps nothing more than an infant in your eyes, I sensed things before they happened. Everyone around me wanted to take advantage of what I could do. I was pushed and prodded. I faced constant demands. I began to hate what I was and what I could do. But that's a boring story, filled with self pity. Luckily, I realized I was allowed my ability for a greater purpose than to make others wealthy and famous. Now, I accept my fate, though I would appreciate it if you do not throw my name about with casual ease. You never know who might remember me. As for now, I simply move with the path that Godson makes for me.

"That's a rather simple summary of my life, but its enough to get my point across. You wonder how someone so young could be able to provide the insight necessary to understand the prophecies. I tell you it has nothing

to do with what I have learned or what I have done. It is the will of Godson and He doesn't seem to care how old I am. I was led to this task and the Church of Godson just as I was led to you now."

Mappel raised an eyebrow. "Why would you say that? It was the messenger sent by Matthew that called your attention here. What makes you think it is the will of Godson?"

"I never spoke to any messenger," Stephen responded flatly.

Mappel turned a questioning glance towards the reader. His expression made it very clear he expected confirmation of such a statement.

Matthew answered the unspoken question. "It's true. None of my messengers returned with him. In fact, I wondered how he could have gotten here so soon. We only sent word out this morning. I thought it might have just been pure luck that one of them came across him in a nearby town, but that's not the case. He began his trip several days ago."

Mappel turned his attention back to the interpreter.

"Why?" It was spoken cold and hard.

The bubbling happiness in the interpreter dimmed ever so slightly. "I know what's happening. In my mind, I can see the sphere. Even now, it is still in the midst of Sanctum. It has broken the reflectors which cast the energies back into its center. It's sending out magic at will through a long break in the wall of the mountain. It will continue to do so until it is stopped. I can see this as I saw other things just as significant. I sensed your meeting with the delver. The reader tells me his name is Ryson Acumen. I can tell you this, that delver's importance to us all has not ended. Keep him with you in whatever you do."

Mappel suddenly released a surprising burst of anger and impatience. He had given no warning to such an eruption, but he boiled over with demands. "Do not dare talk in riddles to me! Tell me what you know of my meeting and Ryson Acumen. Tell me the importance of the delver. If you truly understand what we face, then you know the danger as well. I will not stand here and play games with you. If you are blessed by Godson then you will happily reveal to me what to do and how this tragedy will unravel. If you wish to test me with riddles, I will mark you as a messenger of dark creatures, of those that wish to bring turmoil to the land rather than save it, or perhaps even of the sphere itself!"

Mappel stared holes through the young man. He could not say if it was his tense dealing with the mayor or his growing anxiety over the poison magic which filled the air, but he knew his patience had worn thin. He would not stand there with this boy and play a guessing game over what was important and what was not. If the boy could see the outcome of this trial, he would know of it now.

Any last trace of a smile left the interpreter's face. Sadness and guilt replaced the sparkle in his previously bright eyes. He exhaled once heavily. He spoke with his own frustration and sadness. "I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to leave you with riddles. I'm not doing it on purpose anyway. I know it sounded like that, but sometimes I just don't know how to put things. The truth is that I don't know the exact importance of Ryson Acumen, not yet anyway. And I don't know what you should do, or what anyone of us should do, or how this will end up. My ability to understand what will happen or what can happen is limited. I'm allowed to see what I'm allowed to see. I only know that this delver remains important to us all."

The elder elf looked deeply into the interpreter. With a grunt, he accepted Stephen's explanation. His tone, however, remained as dubious as ever. "So because of this insight of yours, you knew I was coming to Connel in hopes of finding a way to enter Sanctum safely and destroy the sphere?"

"That's right."

"Do you see anything else?" It was spoken more of a command than a request.

The interpreter spoke openly of what he knew. "I see that you will bring all the races together here. Each race knows that something is terribly wrong. They will all meet with you."

Mappel found hope in those words and chose to seize upon it. "Will they assist; will they reveal the secrets of Sanctum?"

"I don't know, but I know only a small party will enter the mountain. I can't tell you what that means."

Mappel brought a hand to his chin and stroked it as he considered the thought. He brought his stare back to the interpreter. "How sure of this are you?"

"It will happen."

"I see. You seem to be very sure of this, which brings me to another question. In my talks with Matthew, he had revealed that you predicted every important event which would affect the people of this church. Why did you miss this most important occurrence?"

"I don't know, but I have a theory."

"I would like to know it." Again, it was spoken as a command.

Stephen hesitated for the first time. He repositioned himself in his chair as if something was poking him in the back. His discomfort seemed to grow as he spoke. "I don't believe this was supposed to happen. For some reason, I think it might actually be defying even the will of Godson. Understand; it is very hard for me to say that. I have gone through life believing that nothing could defy that will, that the prophecies would be ours without doubt. Now, I'm not so sure, and that scares me."

Mappel pressed beyond Stephen's hesitations. "As well it should, but what makes you believe this? Even Matthew admits that he can not find the prophecies which point to this moment, but he himself stated the races would reunite. This is causing that re-unification."

"No, it isn't," Stephen said resolutely.

Mappel was taken aback by this determined response. "What makes you say that? You yourself said that the races will all unite here at Connel. Are you now saying that prediction may not unfold?"

"No, they will all be here, but this will not cause a re-unification. It's only temporary. It will not end the true separation. It will only serve as a reminder for the humans that other races exist. However this turns out, the races will again go their separate ways." Stephen noted the probing eyes of the elder elf. He continued with his explanation as clearly as possible. "I know what you're thinking. You're wondering if I know this, then why can't I see the conclusion of your plans. I told you before I don't know how this will end, and that's true. It's because for the first time in my life I see two possible outcomes. That has never happened before. Either the sphere will be destroyed or it shall remain intact to destroy everything in the land. But whichever happens, I know the races will again divide. They will either separate in fear of the sphere, or they will return to their previous lives."

"You see two possible outcomes?" Matthew asked with an expression close to agony.

"Yes, I do."

The reader dropped his forehead into his hand. His anxious fingers caressed his own temples as if attempting to press the disconcerting thoughts from his mind. "Then there is no set destiny here for us."

"It seems so."

Mappel began to uncharacteristically pace the room. Instead of standing still with his palms wrapped about his staff, he traversed the floor, poking the end of the staff against the wool rug as if to punctuate each silent thought. He grunted twice and mumbled something barely audible to the other two that watched him intently. With one last great thud of his staff upon the floor, he again stood still. He leaned upon his staff and addressed both men.

"There is no sense in us grieving over the interpreter's visions. We must take assurance in the fact that the possibility of destroying the sphere still exists. How this situation came about and what powers it might defy are no longer important to us. If our destinies are in our own hands, then so be it. I will remain hopeful that the forces which protect and enlighten us are still guiding our decisions. With that in mind I will turn to the most important question which must be posed to the interpreter. Do you know the secrets of Sanctum?"

Stephen spoke clearly and resolutely. "I know what the humans placed within their tier. I don't know of what the other races placed."

Mappel's eyes lit up like a bonfire. His voice actually cracked with expectancy "That is not important. The other races will be responsible for that. It is enough that you know the secret of the tier which belonged to the humans. That is what I hoped for."

"Well, then your hope has been answered."

Matthew spoke with a more guarded tone, but his excitement and interest were equally evident. "How did you come of this knowledge? I have never found anything in the book of Godson. Was it hidden behind the words?"

Stephen shook his head resolutely. "No, the secret was never placed in the book. It was too well guarded for that. The human followers of Godson wanted to spread the word, but they didn't want to spread the secret. When copies of the book were made, the secret of the tier was purposely left out. It was kept separate. It was kept on two pieces of parchment and held by only two. When one of the holders passes on, the other goes out to find another holder so there will always be two living humans with the secret. The two holders must remain separate but they must always be aware of the other's health and whereabouts. That's how the parchment continued to pass on through so many generations. That's also how its existence faded from the memory of the humans."

"You are a holder," Mappel stated as more of a fact than a question.

"Yes, I am."

Mappel tapped his finger gently against his staff. He stood silent for but a moment, both weighing his thoughts and the context of Stephen's words. When he spoke, his eyes locked upon the face of the interpreter.

"Will you reveal to me the secret of the human tier?"

Stephen answered the elder elf's gaze with an icy determined stare of his own. His position became as rigid and as solid as granite. His words were laced with strength. "I can not do that, at least not now."

Mappel showed no sign of distress or disappointment. He continued to bear down upon the interpreter, trying to press his own will upon him. "It is now that I need it. You know what we all face. Hiding this secret will not help any of us. It could lead to our death. It could doom the land itself."

"It could also doom the land if I reveal the secret at the wrong time. This is the wrong time," Stephen answered back, giving no quarter.

"And what will be the right time? When it is too late?"

Stephen again shook his head deliberately. "I have no intention of holding to this secret to such an extent."

The interpreter inspected the palms of his hands as he tried to further explain his position. "You may think I am stubbornly holding to information without any true cause, but that's not the case. I'll ask you to remember that what is written on the parchment is only one piece of the puzzle. Sanctum is comprised of five tiers and five secrets. What I know represents the secret of only one of those tiers." The interpreter looked towards Mappel. "I assume you have the secret kept by the elves. That is another piece of the puzzle. I'm not asking you to reveal that to me now. We have to wait, wait until the others are here. We have to agree how to handle this together and how to reveal the secret so that each race feels it has been dealt with fairly. Don't you think it might disturb the dwarves if they find out that we have shared information about Sanctum before they have arrived?"

Mappel nodded his head. "I doubt they would be happy, but there may be no need to tell them of what was discussed in this chamber. It may ..."

Stephen did not let him finish. "No need to tell them the truth? That's not a good way to start this thing out. It's better we tell everyone everything we know, and everything we intend to do. We need everyone's cooperation. I will hold to what I know, and you will hold to your secret. Otherwise we invite trouble before we even begin this thing."

It was Matthew who spoke up in as much defense of himself as for the interpreter. "It is as I feared, the one with the responsibility of the secret has much to consider. Perhaps, it will be a relief to us all when all the secrets of Sanctum are finally free."

"But they must be freed at the proper time," Stephen insisted. "I have seen, thus I know, that at least one representative of each race will convene in this church. Would that not be a better time to discuss what we all must face?"

"There is wisdom in what you say," Mappel conceded. "That, I can not deny, but I do not like waiting, and there is little else for us to do."

"Not necessarily," Stephen said with a renewed twinkle in his eyes. The relaxed and comforting smile returned to his lips as he again settled back into his chair. "I can explain the revelations in detail as I have seen them regarding what we must do, what I have seen happening and what I know is to come. With your knowledge of elflore we might put together a plan before we know all the secrets."

"More wisdom," Mappel nodded appreciatively.

"Thank you," Stephen responded graciously. "I also have a question for you, which I already believe I know the answer. You haven't found anyone from the delver race who might know their secret, have you?"

Mappel spoke with a grunt of dissatisfaction. Of all the tiers, he believed the human tier would be the most difficult to disclose. It was beyond him to believe that the human secret would be so close at hand, while

another would remain more elusive. "No, I haven't. I sent word to the dwarves to send one with the knowledge of Sanctum. I gave Ryson Acumen the same message to bring to the algors. But Ryson himself could give me no insight as to who to inquire about the secret of the delver's tier."

"Then we have a problem to deal with as well. I don't know where to find that answer, either. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the secret was lost. I hate to say things like that, but we have to face the possibility. Where the humans had the church of Godson to maintain the legends, the delvers had no church. In my dealings with them, I know they are aware of the legends but they don't have any structured following that I know of. Their race became splintered and eventually absorbed by the humans. It is difficult enough these days to find a pure bred delver. This may mean their piece of the puzzle is lost."

"If that is true, we may face a losing battle," Mappel said. "I had not truly thought of the delver's tier until now. I had spoken briefly to Ryson of it. He had hoped that Matthew might know of where to look."

Both Stephen and Mappel turned a hopeful gaze toward the reader, but Matthew's expression curtailed any further enthusiasm.

"I didn't even know the human's secret of the tiers," he admitted with a sour grimace. "How should I be expected to know of what the delvers put in Sanctum?"

"Maybe Ryson thought you would know of someone in Connel who might know?" Stephen posed.

"He would know better than I. All I can suggest is asking other delvers. They mostly spend time at the Night Watch Inn. But what am I supposed to do? Just go up to total strangers, ask them if they are delvers and then ask them if they know of the secrets in Sanctum Mountain? I don't think that would be wise."

"No, it would not," Mappel allowed. "But it is also unwise to ignore the issue. As Stephen has stated, Sanctum is a puzzle of five pieces. We gain little if we obtain only four."

"I wouldn't go that far," Stephen said optimistically. "If we manage to agree on a way to reveal four of the secrets, that in itself is an accomplishment."

"Small accomplishments will mean little if they do not lead to ultimate victory," Mappel reminded the youthful interpreter as if to warn him of the price of failure. "This is not something in which we can accept limited success. We succeed fully, or we perish."

"Maybe the best thing to do is wait until Ryson returns," Matthew advised. "He would know the other delvers here in Connel. He would be the best to approach them."

"That's as good a plan as any," Stephen chimed.

"It delays things," Mappel replied sternly, "But I realize we have little other choice. For now I would like to hear the details of your visions. I want to know what you see in both of the alternative outcomes. There might indeed be something I might sense which will lead us in the right direction."

Stephen crossed his hands in his lap and looked to Mappel with a true willingness to express his revelations. His voice, however, turned somber and near hollow despair rung from his words.

"I will tell you everything my mind has seen of both. I hope you can determine what to do because I can tell you the scene I see if we fail is a terrible and frightening thing to witness. We will all die slowly, withering away as the sphere turns our land into a sea of dust."

Chapter 14

Evan Chase, seasoned tracker, walked abruptly into Mayor Consprite's office. He did not knock and no aide announced his arrival. The door swung open in total silence, without a click of the latch, without a squeal of the knob, and without a creak of the hinge. He stepped in like a hunting cat, and closed the door as quietly as it opened.

His eyes darted around the room but for a moment. In those passing seconds, he analyzed, interpreted, and judged every item within the confines of those walls. Nothing within his sight escaped his attention. He was aware of potential hazards as well as all sharp edged or heavy items which were in reach of the mayor. He also made spatial observations. He knew how far it was from the front of Consprite's desk to the door, he noted the paths around furniture, and he observed that the window was locked.

He moved up to the mayor's desk, stepping so lightly he barely disturbed the dust which came beneath the soles of his moccasins. His clothes moved with him as he stepped. He wore no coat or cloak. Animal hides formed his shirt and pants. They did not rustle or creak, but instead remained as silent as his own steps.

The mayor was aware of Chase's presence, only because he was waiting impatiently for him, waiting and watching his door. If his attention had been upon papers on his desk, Chase could have poked him on the forehead before he even knew the tracker was in the room.

Chase acknowledged the mayor's gaze, but his eyes would not lock upon Consprite's stare. The tracker shifted his eyes about warily. He seemed more concerned with the movement and placement of the mayor's hands than his expression.

The tracker's own countenance was uncaring and shadowed by his own indifference toward appearances. His face was shaven roughly. Spots of stubble remained upon his chin and scattered about his throat - shaving with a hunting knife no matter how sharp and without a mirror is bound to lead to a less than perfect job. The shaggy mop of black hair on his head curled about in an unruly, unkempt mess. It covered both of his ears, including the one which was missing a huge chunk from a fight with a wolf.

The wolf won that battle, forced Evan to run up a tree. His thigh still ached when it rained from a savage bite received during that same encounter. He stayed away from wolves and dogs ever since.

Chase minced no words as he stopped in front of the mayor's desk. "What do ya want?"

The mayor scratched the tip of his nose before addressing the tracker. He also decided to be blunt and to the point. "I need someone tracked and followed. I want to know where he's been over the past two days and I want to know everything he does after you locate him."

"Who?" The word came quick from the tracker's mouth as if he spit out the question. It was quite evident that Evan Chase wasted little time, and knew too few words to waste any of those.

Consprite grimaced. He did not like being questioned with such bluntness, but he was well aware of his situation. As mayor, he had little that Chase wanted, and nothing he needed. He could not threaten the tracker with ordinances, or the restriction of permits and licenses. Chase probably used such papers to wipe his nose or light his smokes. The mayor was not dealing with a merchant, or a homeowner, he was dealing with an uncivilized barbarian that cared not at all for politics and power. Only gold enticed trackers, and thus the mayor replied sourly to the blunt question. "Ryson Acumen, he's a delver."

"I know who he is," Chase spoke as if insulted.

The mayor continued, undaunted by the tracker's lack of grace and tact. "Good, then you'll know him when you find him. He left here several days ago to check out the damage to other towns from the quake."

"An old trail," Evan stated quickly, making it clear he considered such a thing more difficult and expected to be compensated for such.

Such a response was not lost on the mayor. It indicated the tracker was willing. If not, he would have simply turned and walked out the door, perhaps spitting on the floor, or on the mayor himself before leaving.

"I can help you with that to a degree," the mayor responded in fashion realizing the negotiations for the fee had commenced. "I have reports from him as to where he went and who he spoke to for the first part of his trip. I don't need you to look into that. He was in Pinesway less than four days ago. It's where he went after that I want you to look into. I can also give you leads into that. He was following the trail of the tremor. He also spent some time in the Dark Spruce Forest."

Chase grimaced at the thought. Dark Spruce had little of anything that interested him and a lot of what didn't, especially wolves. The job was becoming less enticing by the moment. Again, he responded shortly.

"Dark Spruce is tough terrain. Nothing but trees clumped together."

"Very few trails as well," the mayor countered. "It's a good bet if you find any markings, it will be our delver. Not many people have a desire to go through there. You won't have to sort through multiple trails."

"Don't tell me how to do my job." The tracker sneered and for the first time his expression revealed a hint of true inner feelings. He had an obvious dislike for delvers, and had no mind to hide it. "I know about forests and I know about delvers, which brings me to another point. Ryson Acumen is full bred. If he wants to, he can lose me at any time. I can't explain it; it's just something about those full breeds. When they have a mind for it, they don't leave a trace."

"He won't know you're tracking him. That is, if you're careful."

"I'll ignore that," Chase responded. "The fact of the matter is he's still a delver, and that makes things harder."

The mayor waved his hand indifferently. "Fine, it makes it harder, but it's what you do. Now do you want the job?"

If the tracker took time to consider the proposal, it was surely not long. Within mere moments, he responded firmly, a tone that made it clear he had no intention of haggling. "I'll take the job, but I want forty pieces of gold right now. Another ten when I get back, thirty if I come across somethin' I don't like."

The demand caught the mayor off guard. He expected the tracker to begin bargaining at half that amount. "That's absurd! He's only a delver. I've told you where he's headed and where he's been!"

Evan Chase stood firm. He did, however, understand his price was exorbitant. He made a simple explanation as to the height of his fee. "It's not what I'm tracking that's botherin' me, it's the other things that might be out there."

"What are you talking about?" the mayor eyed him suspiciously. He wondered if the tracker might know of the elves that accompanied Reader Matthew into his office that morning. If he did, he would have Kendal's throat slit. The assistant was the only other person that knew of the meeting.

Evan, however, made no reference to the elves, but he made it clear he knew something was very different

about Connel.

"I'm talking about what's been going on around here for the past few days," the tracker said with a knowing expression. "And don't make it seem like ya don't know what I'm talking about. I've seen ya traipsing out to places ya don't normally go. You've been out to farms, and to the river. Ya normally don't do that, which means ya know something. I don't know exactly what it is, but something ain't right. Which reminds me of another part of my fee, I want to look over the reports on your desk right now."

"You can't see those!" Consprite objected strenuously. "That's official business. It has nothing to do with you."

"Maybe it doesn't and maybe it does. I still want to see 'em." He could have snatched them up without Consprite's permission, but he wanted the mayor to hand them over.

The mayor fought desperately to find a way to deny the request. Thoughts of these reports spreading across Connel corrupted his thinking. He could only imagine the public outcry for his head if the town found out what he had been hiding. He fished for a way out. "Do you think you'll find out why I want the delver followed by reading these? I can tell you that you won't. If you want to know that ..."

Chase interrupted the mayor's declarations forcibly. "I don't care about your reasons for having this delver followed, but I do care about the things I might run into out there. I know something's goin' on around here. I've seen tracks I can't identify. I've heard things in the night that don't belong to any animal in these parts. Ya can keep your reasons to yourself, but I want to know what's happening around here. It's a safe bet that if it's happening here, it's happening out there in them woods."

The mayor grunted. He sat silent, contemplating other options, but Chase quickly took them away.

"If you're thinking about finding another tracker, ya might as well forget it right now. Any tracker worth his salt is going to want the same thing I want. I've been talking to some of the others already. We know ya have an idea of what's out there. You can tell me or you can tell someone else. The only tracker that'll go out there without reading your blamed reports isn't gonna to come back. He'll take his up front money and leave."

Consprite snarled. "Fine." He picked up a clump of papers and held them out to Chase. He had no alternative. He figured the tracker would probably find out for himself sooner or later. His only hope was to bind the tracker to secrecy. "Here, read all you like, but keep this to yourself. That's also part of the agreement."

Chase concentrated upon the papers in his hand. His lips moved sporadically as he read. Reading words never helped him as much as reading the ground, so he never gave it much practice. He knew barely enough to understand the new reality of things, and now that he did, he cast a sideways glance at the mayor.

"This stuff for real?"

"Of course it's for real. I saw most of it myself."

Chase grimaced. "I don't like it. Corpses walking around and monsters comin' out of the water. I don't like it at all."

The mayor held his hands up in exasperation. "Do you think I do?"

"No, I suppose you don't," Chase grunted. "What about the money?"

The mayor had already conceded to showing the tracker the reports, he would not concede entirely as to the

rest of the fee. "I'll pay you thirty now and fifteen when you get back, whether you like what you find or not. That's more than this job is worth and you know it."

Again, the tracker showed little sign of truly considering the agreement, and his acceptance came nearly instantly. "It ain't worth my own skin, but I'll take it. It'll give me a chance to find out what's really goin' on."

"Good." The mayor's voice turned cold as he gave his final instructions. "Now I don't want you sending any reports to me. I want you to keep everything to yourself. You come back when you know what the delver is up to and when you're sure you know where he's been. Don't take too long either. If you think the delver is just surveying the land, then forget him and come back here. You're also to report only to me. Is that clear?"

"Uh huh," Evan muttered as he gave one last glance to the papers before throwing them back down on the mayor's desk.

Chapter 15

"What do you think it is?" Holli asked as her head swerved about on her arched neck. She did not like standing at the foot of this desert canyon wall. There was too much to focus on at once, too many places where attackers could hide. Small openings in the sandstone dotted the high rising edifice. A well placed archer could easily pick them both off without either of them knowing from where the fatal arrows had been launched. Thick ledges blocked her vision. Even now, warriors might be squatting low behind boulders, using small cracks and crevices to keep a watchful eye for an opportunity to ambush.

The threat of danger washed her fatigue away with the strength of a waterfall. The ache in her legs vanished, and she forgot her dry, sore throat which had become parched from breathing the dry desert air. Her vision became sharp as she surveyed all that stood before her.

Holli made no secret of her discomfort over approaching the sandstone mountain, but the delver had persisted and brought them to within arm's reach of its very base. Her hand gripped the hilt of the Sword of Decree. A glistening light appeared just above the sheath for she had pulled the sword slightly from its cover, revealing a sliver of the blade.

Ryson, at first, paid her no mind. His body remained still. His head bent backward to allow him an upward glance at the face of the canyon wall. Rather than turning his head, he simply moved his eyes, from one small opening to another. He pulled his spyscope one last time from his pouch. He scanned several different openings and grunted in satisfaction. After pocketing the scope, he finally answered the elf's question.

"I believe it's a meeting place for them of some sort. It may also be a type of village for them to live, but I doubt any of them live here for long periods of time. From what I've seen and what Mappel told me, they spend almost the same amount of time alone as they do together."

"Are they in there now?" Holli demanded with a tone which made it clear she wished to know exactly what dangers they faced.

Ryson turned to her for the first time since they arrived at the foot of the wall, and he saw her hand upon the hilt of the sword. Her threatening stance alarmed him nearly to the point of anger. "Yes, they're there and don't even think about pulling that thing out. In fact, I want you to take your hand away from it right now."

Holli scowled at the delver. "It's my job to protect you." She spoke as if it were a rule never meant to be broken.

"It's also your job to see that my mission succeeds," Ryson shot back. "That means I have to meet with these algors. You're going to make that impossible if you continue to maintain that threatening position."

Holli's glare darted from the sandstone mountain to the face of the delver. "It is not a threatening position. It's a position of defense."

Ryson shook his head. "I don't care what it is. I want you to stop."

"You would have me leave us vulnerable?" Holli posed the question with as much disbelief as annoyance.

"I will have you let me complete what we were set out to do," Ryson stated abruptly. He bit his lip before continuing. With a heavy breath, he cleared his growing irritation. He renewed his request with a note of greater understanding, but with no less conviction. "Look, I know you're only doing this to keep me safe, but we can't have that right now. The algors are here, and they know we're here. They're not going to see us if they think you're going to lop their heads off."

Holli did not argue further. She removed her gaze from the delver and again returned to surveying the many openings in the cliffs. Her hand moved slowly away from the sword handle. It became a taut fist as it dropped to her side.

Ryson began pacing about the desert floor as he inspected the lower level of the sandstone wall. He knelt down at a few places and rubbed his hand against the rough, porous rock.

Holli virtually ignored him, and for the first time since their trip began, she allowed him to move about without following close behind. She kept a steady breath and a watchful eye, but she knew in her current position she was defenseless, an easy target for a myriad of attacks. She accepted the role with the same stubborn determination which moved her full speed through the desert. If she was to be sacrificed for the success of her mission, that was merely the distinction of her duty.

Ryson continued examining the rock wall. He would stand and brush the sand from his knees, only to take a few steps and kneel again. "I don't think they built this thing themselves," he muttered. "I think the wind and perhaps a long extinct river shaped it originally, but they sure made enough adaptations. I wouldn't be surprised if those openings led to a completely intertwined tunnel system, except for maybe a few of the lower ones. They're decoys. I doubt they go anywhere except to dead ends. But they're definitely traps for possible invaders." He pointed to three openings which were closest to the ground, only three or four body lengths above the desert floor. "You see those three? If we went into any of those we wouldn't come out. They're all set to collapse. I guess the algors figured if invaders tried to climb up, they would investigate the first openings they came across. If they did, they'd never get a chance to climb any higher. Not that climbing it would be easy, not without the right tools anyway. Although, it looks like they've made some false facings that seem sturdy, but probably wouldn't hold any weight."

Ryson again stood erect and brushed his knees, then his hands. Loose grains of sand showered back to the ground before he walked placidly back to Holli's side.

"I don't think climbing is an option," Ryson said as he shook his head. "No, it's a safer bet if we stay here and wait for them to come out. That'll probably also let them feel better about us. We won't be forcing ourselves on them. I suggest we simply make camp here and hope they come out to see us."

Holli scanned the area. Overall, the plan held merit. The towering sandstone wall provided shade from the afternoon sun. It appeared the desert vegetation also approved of the cooler, albeit shadier ground. Groups of cacti and brush arose from the sand with greater numbers along this section of desert. Ryson had previously proven his skill in finding pockets of underground water, and she believed he would have no difficulty here. The canyon side also would prove to grant protection from hot southwesterly winds. In the refuge of the sandstone, the sand was not as dry and loose as in the open desert. It did not burn to the touch or grate with the same abrasiveness as the sand they just recently walked across. Indeed, this area held many advantages for a camp site, yet she looked to the openings far overhead with a weary eye.

"I do not like making a camp so close to this wall," she said firmly. "We are almost inviting an ambush. They could attack us at anytime from anywhere."

Ryson arched his neck as he directed his gaze across the face of the rock canyon. "That's very true, and I'm sure that bothers you. I just don't think we have any choice."

"There are always choices."

"That's also true, but none of the other choices will give us as much of a chance to convince the algors that we're here to see them and that we're not just a couple of lunatics out for a stroll in the desert."

"They may think that no matter what we do. And if that is the case, it may be more reason for us to consider our security."

"Let me ask you this, have you heard of the algors attacking any one of your people?" He paused to allow her to answer, but she remained silent. He continued, explaining his own difficulties of what they faced. "You see, I really don't know what to expect. I have no experience with algors. I'm basing all of my decisions on what Mappel has told me and from what I see in the desert."

"I have no experience with the algors, either," Holli admitted frankly. "The race avoids all contact with others. The elves have no cause to venture into the desert and the algors apparently care little for the forests. I can't say that I have ever heard of the algors attacking an elf, but I have also never heard of an elf seeking them out in their desert home."

"So you think it's wiser to keep a safe distance from them?"

Holli simply nodded.

Ryson crossed his hands in front of him. He tapped his thumbs together methodically, in rhythm with his thoughts. Algors; a race akin to the lizards, forming communities, yet living solitary lifestyles in the vast reaches of the desert. He knew so little about them. Mappel said they spoke in the same language. That in itself was difficult to imagine, large upright lizards holding a conversation. The image was laughable.

Yet, was that not the point of his mission? As absurd as it seemed, his main goal was to meet and talk with the algors, to convince them of the danger to the land and all of its inhabitants. Here he was, already in the desert, already following the thin veneer of signs that led him to this canyon.

In the end, he returned to the very things which brought him to this place. He turned to his inner most feelings. He hoped his own deepest instincts would guide him to a decision, just as they guided him through the desert. If he expected to meet with the algors to explain the breach in Sanctum and the threat of the sphere, he would have to gain their trust. With that thought, he gained the answer to his question. They would wait here in the open, wait for the algors to acknowledge them. How could he expect them to trust him, if he did not trust them first?

He made his decision known to Holli by yelling out to the canyon wall and the many openings within it.

"Algors! My name is Ryson Acumen. I'm a delver. I am with Holli Brances, an elf. We are here to speak with you."

His words echoed only slightly overhead against the cliff face. After that, the hot desert air swept them away. No other sound graced the area until Ryson continued.

"All the races must speak together! The Sphere of Ingar is free from Sanctum! We can tell you what we know, but we must meet with you."

He lowered his head, and his voice, as he turned his attention to Holli. "Let's make camp here. We have to show them that we trust them. I really don't think they'll attack us anyway. They'll either come down, or they'll ignore us. We'll just have to wait and see."

"We will not have to wait at all," Holli stated abruptly. Her face was expressionless, the demeanor of an elf guard facing the unknown. Her eyes narrowed as they scanned the entirety of the canyon wall. While she fought off her own instincts to pull her sword, she nodded to Ryson to look back.

Ryson caught his breath as he turned. In all of his experiences over the past few days, nothing could prepare him for this bizarre spectacle. Meeting an elf was one thing, this sight yanked at his grip on sanity. Even seeing the ghost of Shayed could not compare to what he now witnessed.

Like a legion of ants flowing from their anthill, countless algors erupted from the openings which abounded across the sandstone. Within mere moments, nearly every cave entrance spat out algors. An endless flow of yellowish green flowed down the canyon wall toward them. They climbed downward with casual ease, each algor moving in concert with the next, so as every apparent space of the cliff face was covered.

At first it was difficult for the delver to center his attention upon a single algor. Their coordinated movements kept Ryson scanning the growing flock as a single entity. Like a shifting, diving, turning school of fish, the moving multitude attracted attention from every angle and direction. Not one algor moved in opposition, not one algor stalled or paused. Step by step, foothold by foothold, lines of algors moved as if directed by a single consciousness. It was like watching a parade of well trained soldiers, soldiers that spent years together so that every movement was in precise order.

The delver and the elf marveled at the whole spectacle. Never had either witnessed such a display. Even the elf guard could not boast of such precise coordination of movement. It seemed impossible, as if the desert had finally taken control of their minds. It was not until the algors began their final approach towards them, that they were able to break free from the hold of the group movement.

As the first wave of algors reached the desert floor and stepped toward him, Ryson gasped out the breath he had held. He inspected their physical characteristics with as much wonder as he watched their movements. An upright toad, as tall as he was, was the only way he could describe them. Large black eyes bulged near the top of every head. Two holes formed nostrils at the end of the rounded snouts that jutted forward. The mouth opening crested wide, far back to the round greenish brown cheeks. Not much of a forehead existed, merely a space above and between the two eyes. The top of their heads curved slightly before dropping down to a wide neck. Small purple bumps took the place of hair.

As for their bodies, the algors wore no cloak to hide their scaly chest which was more yellow than green. Long thin arms hung nimbly from somewhat droopy shoulders. Long narrow legs, which appeared quite flexible, held the light weight of the algor easily. Claws tipped the thin fingers and toes and webbing filled the spaces between each. Just as the legends described, there was no sign of a tail.

More and more of the algors filed down the sandstone mountain and encircled the two messengers. They left a small space around Ryson and Holli as they formed an unbroken circle all the way around, but they left little room for themselves. They clumped themselves together in a growing, continuous ring, hardly leaving enough room to breathe. Arms appeared interlocked as they stood hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder. The chests of those that stood behind the inner ring pressed flat against the backs of those in front of them, and so it was for each ring which spread back from the inner point of Ryson and Holli.

It was all the elf could do to remain calm, to stand as if oblivious to the swarming presence. She bit back urge after urge to draw her sword and maintain a defensive position. It was not so much the sight of the algors which disturbed her, it was the simple fact that they were now completely surrounded. Not a single path existed for their escape. She tried to steady herself, and maintain a casual appearance as if the circling horde did not incite her. She hoped to maintain a single perspective as if to declare that she cared little for what was happening around her. All such attempts, however, were futile. Her head continued to shift from side to side as she kept a constant gauge on the space between them and each and every algor. She could not break from her training any more than she could stop breathing.

Ryson dealt with the circling mass with even less success. Such proximity to such foreign creatures stirred strange feelings. In his lifetime, he spent many a day seeking new and exotic places. It was part of his nature,

part of his calling. He found nothing more exciting than coming across an unknown valley in the mountains or a secret cove on a deserted shore line. He thrilled at the first sight of large and small animals, anything that was new to him and the more foreign, the more bizarre, and the greater the thrill.

At this moment, however, he did not feel such unbounded excitement. Certainly, nothing could be more exotic than what stood before him now, yet, he actually recoiled from the sight of such unfamiliar creatures. It was one thing to be a delver on exploration; it was something else all together to break the very bonds of reality. Such was the case with a toad-faced creature that took the posture of an ordinary man.

The astonishing demeanor of the algors was not all that unnerved him. Their cresting numbers, which threatened to swallow every inch of space around him, left the delver searching in vain for open spaces. Just like his elf companion, he tossed his head from side to side with anxious rigor. He searched in vain for open spaces within the cascade of algors, searched for an open path, or even jagged breaks in their ranks, but none existed. He felt as if the rings of algors would suffocate him.

Again, his anxiety was unfamiliar. He spent many a day exploring tight caves and narrow caverns, spaces with barely enough room to move, and he never flinched. On countless occasions, he walked through forests so tightly bound with trees and underbrush that nearly all light vanished, even during the summit of the sun. Such excursions gave him no more apprehension then walking into the Night Watch Inn. Yet, this throng of algors left him more than uneasy. Claustrophobia chewed at his nerve endings and left him fighting for air.

Ryson could not speak. He stood helpless as a seemingly infinite number of bulging black eyes probed him. Suddenly, his claustrophobia, his aversion toward their strangeness, as well as the desert silence were all broken by a chorus which erupted from every angle of the ring of algors.

"What do you know of the orb?"

The request came from several dozen mouths at once, but they were in such unison that the words were clear.

Ryson flinched in surprise but said nothing. He understood the question, for the algors spoke as plainly as any human. He might have expected a slithering accent or croaking, throaty tone, but neither manifested itself.

The algors stood waiting for a reply, motionless for but a moment. Their own response to the delver's silence crackled and rippled throughout their own circles, a cacophony of questions and exclamations. Gone was the unity of their voice. The harmony of the first question which rang with such clarity was now replaced by a confused, muddled barrage. Each algor spoke a different message and each called out to be heard. Neither Ryson nor Holli could discern a single question or statement from the confused mass of voices.

The ruckus stopped as suddenly as it began just as a hundred or more algors spoke out again in unison. "Why don't you answer?"

The sudden shift from the undecipherable, disjointed outburst to this harmonic question left a strange echo in the air. Like a voice of reason breaking from the bounds of confusion, it prodded the delver into a reply.

"I didn't expect to see so many of you," he explained in a raspy, uncertain voice.

A checked gurgle of laughter broke from the mass, but was quickly stifled.

Ryson felt an immediate urge to explain further. "I mean, I knew there were a lot of you up there, I just didn't expect you all to come down at once."

Several questions broke from the crowd. Not all the algors spoke, so it was not like the first unintelligible

outburst, but no question was the same. Ryson struggled to hear as many as possible.

"How did you find us?"

"What of the orb?"

"Who is responsible?"

These were the only questions he could make out. The others broke off into a cluttered echo of shouts.

Ryson took a deep breath. He took a quick glimpse at the ground to organize his thoughts. When he lifted his head and spoke, he tried to look at as many of them as possible at once, hoping they would understand he was addressing them all. He raised his voice to be heard, but kept it under a shout.

"The sphere is no longer contained in Sanctum," he started with emphasis, hoping they would not interrupt with another outburst. "It is still within the mountain, but it has used its power to create a breach in the wall. The magic which was buried with it is now being discharged throughout the land. Unfortunately, the magic still contains the poison which forced its burial in the first place. I have met with elves to discuss this. I am here as a messenger to ask you to come to Connel."

More questions erupted from the crowd. Again, Ryson strained to hear them all.

"How do we know it's true?"

"What of the foul creatures?"

"How did the breach occur?"

Ryson held up his hand as the questions mounted. He could no longer decipher the words from even the closest algors. Their voices melded together into a rumbling chant of nonsensical syllables.

Slowly, reluctantly, the algors quieted.

Ryson spoke with as much patient composure as possible. "The sphere has gained an awareness of its own burial and has broken free with its own power. The return of the magic has brought with it the return of dark creatures. Goblins have returned to Uton. As for knowing it's true, our very presence here should indicate there is something of great importance happening throughout the land."

Several algors in the rear shouted out together. "Do not believe him."

Ryson responded quickly. "Whether you believe me or not should not matter. The simple fact is that the magic is again free in the land. If you haven't noticed it yet, just wait. You will. There are signs of it occurring all around this desert of yours. I have already encountered the walking dead and a group of goblins. But like I said, you don't have to believe me. You'll see sooner or later. The point is that the sphere is free from Sanctum and it threatens us all."

"How does it threaten us?" A question broke clear from the crowd. It was again spoken by several algors, and again in unison.

"It contains a poison which will kill all of the races, kill every living thing in the land."

"The poison is directed at the elves," the chorus of voices replied.

Ryson shot a questioning glance at the mob. "Then you admit that you know the magic has returned?"

"We have known that for some time," spoke one voice from the back of the crowd.

"We have been able to return to the ancient art of healing," another single algor spoke from Ryson's right.

The algors continued to make statements, but they called them out one by one rather than all at once. Each algor was allowed to speak, if it so wanted, and now the others allowed each statement to be called out without interruption.

"The magic may not be pure, but we can still use it."

"It contains nothing which can hurt us."

"None of this concerns us."

It was this last statement that raised the ire of the delver. For the first time he raised his voice with more than a hint of anger. "So that's it? It doesn't concern you so you'll just hide out here in the desert? What are you going to do when the sphere finally turns toward you? What will you say when the poison starts affecting the algors? Will it concern you then? And what about the goblins, the undead and other creatures mutated by the tainted magic? When they start attacking you, will you simply tell them that none of this concerns you? Do you think they'll listen? I could have said the same thing when all of this happened. I'm not an elf. I'm a delver. But I realize we all have a stake in this."

Ryson's harangue was suddenly stopped in surprise as he felt a hand upon his shoulder. His head swung with deliberation. It was Holli's hand that held him, and it was Holli that spoke with gentle wisdom. "This will not help. Convincing them of the need for assistance is not the same as scolding them. We need their help."

Ryson bit his lip. He unclenched his tightly held fists and folded his hands together in front of him. Turning his attention back to the algors, he spoke with greater control. He did not, however, apologize for his outburst.

"If you know that the sphere is no longer contained, then you must accept that there is danger to the land. It is your own responsibility to determine what that danger is. You owe it to every one of your kind. I'm not asking you to do anything more than send representatives with me to meet at the town of Connel. Other races will be there. As you can see now, a delver is walking with an elf. I have been told the dwarves will also be present. Will it really help you if you miss this meeting? Or is it better that you understand what is happening? There you can discuss the merits of your own opinions and determine for yourselves if you are really threatened."

Before continuing further, Ryson recalled Mappel's insight about the algors. Algors were attracted to the unusual. The stranger the story the more likely the algor will embrace it. Ryson brought the most curious of the events back into his memory. It was not a difficult task. He spouted them off to the crowd with a dramatic flare.

"Maybe you are willing to wait this out in the desert, but are you truly aware of all that's happening around you? I have spoken to the ghost of Shayed. That's right, the elf sorceress that brought the races together in the Wizard War. She has returned and now waits for us at the summit of Sanctum. She waits for all the races. If you doubt any of this, remember that the magic has returned to the land. It allows the spirits to return just as it allows the goblins, just as it allows you to work with powers of healing. The land is changing. That much you can't deny. I suggest you find out just how much things have changed. Otherwise, the algors will be ignored in the meeting of the races, just as you will have decided to ignore my request."

Barely a moment of silence existed in the small gap between the end of Ryson's speech and the eruption of the

algors. Voices rang out from the crowd. Some spoke in unison, others broke from the tide.

"It would not hurt to find out what is really happening."

"If Shayed has returned, we must be included."

"What if the sphere falls in the wrong hands?"

"Send out scouts."

"If there is a danger we should be prepared."

"We should not be left out of something so important."

Ryson seized the trend of agreement towards his purpose. "Then you must send some of your own with me now. Holli and I will guide you to Connel. We will see that you are told of everything we know. You will have your say in this matter. If you don't, decisions will be made without your consent. Can you afford such a thing when dealing with the Sphere of Ingar?"

A throng of fifty or more voices spoke in somber unison. While the chorus rang with clarity, its tone of anguish could not be denied. "No, we can not."

A single voice spoke out immediately after to throw one last dilemma at the delver.

"Connel is a human town. We can not go there."

Holli took the reins of the discussion for the first time and settled the matter quickly.

"We will bring you to my camp first. My people will see that you are brought into Connel unnoticed and protected. We will see that the humans do not harm you."

"Then it's settled," Ryson accented the point. "All you have to do is decide which of you will accompany us."

For the first time since crowding around Ryson and Holli, the algors turned their attention towards themselves. Heads bobbed about. Calls were shouted to and fro. The rumble of disconcerted voices turned into a roar. Every algor spoke at once, every algor shouted something different. None listened to what the next said.

The mass began to move again, but not in unison, not like the tightly defined group that brought them down from the canyon wall. Instead, algors moved independently and in every direction. They pressed passed the right and left of one another. They circled clockwise and counter clockwise. Some pushed to the forefront of the circle. Others left completely, returning to the holes high in the sandstone cliff face.

Ryson could not imagine a more confused sight. Like dry leaves scattered by the four winds, the algors mulled about without purpose or direction. If the delver hoped to gain any group consensus, such hope faded in this churning mass.

He rubbed his forehead with his hand, unsure of what to say or do next. At this point, he doubted he would have been heard even if he shouted. Algor after algor continued to step past, each mumbling or shouting something to a crowd that could not hear and did not wish to listen.

"This is ridiculous," Ryson mumbled to Holli. "I don't think we have time for this. Do you have any

suggestions?"

Holli simply shook her head.

Ryson heaved a heavy, exasperated breath. He watched another group of algors vanish into the sandstone. He wondered if they would return, he wondered if it mattered. They were still encircled by hundreds of algors.

As he turned about to gauge the actual numbers that remained, he noticed many walking off into the desert by themselves. They walked without care, off into the barren desert as if it were nothing more than a casual walk in a small park. Those that left in this manner, left alone. They drifted off in separate directions, in every direction; north, south, east and west. Some rounded the wall of the sandstone canyon, others walked off toward the high dunes of the southeast. One after another they disappeared into the bright sand which continued to reflect the late afternoon sun.

As algors continued to leave into the sandstone caves or out into the vastness of the open desert, the numbers of algors which remained about Ryson and Holli dwindled. Soon, there was but fifty. They continued to speak out their minds as they moved about without form or pattern. The roar had also diminished. Now, their calls mounted to nothing more than a rumble. Still, Ryson could not make out any of what they said.

Suddenly, they stopped. They stopped talking. They reformed a tight circle about Ryson and Holli and stopped moving. Roughly twenty of the fifty voices called out to together.

"It is decided, we will accompany you."

Ryson could not mask his surprise. "All of you? There's about fifty."

"We are the most interested," the voices again rang out in unison. "The others have left it to us."

Joy over having the algors accept his plea mixed with apprehension over leading fifty back through the desert, to Holli's camp, and ultimately into Connel. "I don't know if it's a good idea to bring so many," Ryson stammered.

"Why?" the chorus questioned.

"It will attract too much attention," Ryson responded. "And it will be dangerous. How am I going to keep you together when we get to Dark Spruce Forest? What if we're attacked by goblins? For that matter, how am I going to conceal a group of fifty algors walking into Connel?"

The unity of the algors again disintegrated. One by one shouts disseminated from the smaller circle.

"If one goes, we all go."

"It will be more dangerous."

"A smaller group can travel faster."

"Who is to choose who goes?"

"Let the delver choose."

Ryson responded quickly to the last remark.

"You can't leave that to me," he insisted. "I'm not the one that should make that decision. We need algors that can speak for all of you. How do I know that? We also need algors that know the legend and the secrets of Sanctum."

"Any algor which stands before you can fulfill that task," the group again spoke in unity. "What one knows, we all know. We keep no secrets from each other."

"Then it doesn't matter which of you go. I shouldn't have to choose at all. You can decide," Ryson offered hopefully.

"How many do you suggest accompany you?"

"How about four?" Ryson speculated.

"No less than ten," the group responded. "But you must choose."

Ryson again looked to Holli for assistance, but got nothing more than a shrug.

Again he addressed the fifty. "Are you sure about this?"

"You must choose."

Ryson accepted the responsibility with great reluctance, but accept it he did. Randomly, he began tapping the shoulders of algors around him. He counted out numbers as he moved about the circle. When he reached ten, he returned to the center.

"If I touched your shoulder, you will come with us."

Without any dissent and without making a sound, the forty not chosen removed themselves from the circle. Some went off into the desert, some returned to the sandstone wall.

The ten moved in closer to the delver and elf. All ten spoke together. "You will lead us now to the elf camp."

Ryson held up his hand. "I don't want to head off just like that. We've had a long journey to get here and it's going to be a long walk back. It's late and the sun will set soon. For now, I would hope you would offer us a place to camp. The time of rest will be well spent."

Holli said nothing, but her expression revealed her relief.

"We can stay the night within the canyon," the algors replied. "But we will leave before dawn."

"Agreed," Ryson stated. "Keep in mind, this is going to be a long and potentially dangerous journey. Do you have any weapons to bring with you?"

"We will bring our slings." It was all they said before they turned and stepped up to the wall of the canyon.

Ryson and Holli looked at each other before following the small group up a short climb and into a hole in the sandstone mountain.

Chapter 16

Ryson glanced over his shoulder for the third time in a span of but twenty paces. He said nothing to the others, but he noticed Holli making similar checks. They had left the loose sand and the dry wind behind them, but he doubted it was the fading sight of the desert which called to her.

He knew she was happy to be upon solid footing, away from the shifting sands and the bone scorching heat. A few stubborn trees sprung up from the rock hard ground. He knew that sight brought her solace. Even now, larger clusters of trees poked above the horizon in the direction they traveled. Before the sun dropped from its peak in the sky, they would be within sight of Dark Spruce Forest.

He knew she was well aware of this, yet her attention clearly focused on their flanks and not upon the path ahead. Her weary glances to their rear far surpassed her normal cautiousness. Her darting eyes continued to scan the land in every direction, but he could not deny that her sweeping glances to the southwest were more deliberate. He could also not deny that her apparent concern simply matched his own.

Perhaps she spotted something, or heard something; Ryson could not tell. He had not seen or heard anything as of yet, but he, too, was well aware of something which followed them. He believed it picked up their trail just as the sandy terrain gave way to the rocks of these canyons and hills which separated the forest from the desert. Whatever it was, it was keeping out of sight and paying careful attention to the wind. Only during sudden shifts, caused by breaks in the rocky hills, did Ryson pick up an unfamiliar scent. It disappeared quickly, as if that which pursued them noticed the change and adjusted its position to compensate.

He did not recognize the scent, for it was totally unfamiliar. Frustration loomed as his ever observant senses failed to identify the threat. He knew it had little to do with the algors that accompanied him. He had spent many hours resting and traveling with the ten that now walked at his side. In that time, he grew accustomed to them, etched an understanding of their appearance, their sounds, and their scents into his mind. Whatever followed was surely far removed from the race of algors.

But there was also something else which nagged at the delver - a second threat; something that moved behind the first pursuer. He could almost sense a third party; someone or something which remained far in the distance. He was not totally sure, no true signs he could point to, only a penetrating sensation that a second pair of eyes followed them as well.

He wondered if it was nothing more than nerves, overcompensation for dealing with the magic. Or it might have been the magic itself; some strange spell that drifted in the air and confused his senses.

Even as he considered this explanation, he could not accept it. The feeling of being watched, of being followed; this was a sensation he experienced before, before the magic tumbled back into the land. It was a feeling his mother and father told him to trust, a feeling which was part of being a delver.

He would not doubt his instincts. Such an act would be more than foolish. He now accepted the fact that they were being followed not by just one, but by two separate individuals or groups.

With acceptance came the need for a solution. If they were being followed, it represented a threat and endangered his mission. If he was to succeed, he must identify these threats, and ultimately remove them.

He considered the facts. The closest pursuer was acting more like a hunter; moving with stealth, but taking risks to close the gap. Its intentions were obviously far more ruthless than that of the second entity. Ryson wondered if even Holli was aware of the second follower. He doubted it, for it was only a deep sensation within himself which alerted him to that presence. Thus, his mind set upon the nearest hazard.

Ryson turned his attention to their own trail and looked upon the ground they passed over. He, himself, left no mark upon the ground. The elf guard also left no sign, but the clawed toes of the algors made unmistakable scratches in the rocks, scratches which indicated their movements as clearly as if they tied balloons to their path.

Ryson faced the simple truth that anyone, even the most novice tracker, could follow them while staying out of sight. If he hoped to force the pursuer out into the open, he would have to put an end to such markings.

Hiding such a trail would not be impossible, but he would have to have the assistance of the algors. They would have to walk carefully, upon the heels of their feet with their toes upward. He wondered if they would acquiesce to such a request, and if so, how much it would slow their progress. As he contemplated their willingness to agree to such a demand, he considered if they even cared about what dangers they faced.

The algors, with their small cactus skin sacks draped over their shoulders, paid little mind to the backward glances of both the delver and the elf. They walked onward at the direction of both Ryson and Holli with their faces and eyes forward, oblivious to everything behind them.

Unable to make a firm decision and desiring greater information, the delver solicited advice. Ryson caught Holli's attention as she made yet another backwards glance over her shoulder. He pointed with his thumb off into the distance behind them and nodded his head.

Holli returned the nod.

"I want to talk with you," Ryson whispered. He then heaved a heavy breath and called for the attention of the algors.

The algors stopped and turned about. They tilted their heads as the delver walked within whispering distance.

"Keep your attention on me," the delver said softly but with a hard edge. "And don't show any concern." Actually, he didn't know if the algors could reveal anything other than confusion. Their expressions always seemed the same, but he remembered how they walked about in a jumbled mass when they debated some question. For now, he wanted them to stay put. "I want you to act as if I've asked you to take a short break for rest and food. I want you to take a seat over there, on that small group of rocks. Take some food from your bags. Keep your slings handy, but out of sight. Something is following us. I don't know what it is ..."

Before he could continue, the algors shuffled off casually to the rocks as Ryson directed. They gathered about as if nothing at all was wrong and appeared to aimlessly remove food from their bags. Roughly half of them, however, draped their slings over the sides of their pouches. Those that did not pull out their slings discreetly kicked and nudged fist-sized rocks within reach.

Ryson marveled at the algors actions. They did not require long explanations. They followed his instructions implicitly, and they showed not the slightest sign of panic. If the delver himself was watching from a distance, he would never have believed the algors were informed of any danger.

More than satisfied with these results, he motioned for Holli to follow him over to a small tree. He picked a small nut from a lower branch and broke it open. He offered it to the elf as he picked another. He spoke with his attention on the tree.

"I guess we both know we're being followed. Have you seen anything?"

Holli spoke coolly, as if a well trained subordinate making a report to an officer.

"Yes, it fell into sight only once. It was crouched down and appeared like only another boulder, but I make mental notes of the positions of all large rocks to gauge the distance we travel. We passed no such boulder. I turned my head and allowed sufficient time for it to move. When I checked again, the boulder was gone. I have not seen it since. I can not tell you with any great accuracy where it is right now or if it continues to follow us."

"It's still following us," Ryson assured. "What do you think it is?"

"I can only believe it is a mountain shag. It was too far away for me to see any detail, but based on its crouch and the space it filled, its overall height would exceed two average elves."

"That big? Could it be anything else?"

"It could be anything. With the magic as it is, it could be another mutation. But I sincerely believe that it is a mountain shag."

"Well, I put great trust in your assumptions." The mention of a mountain shag brought little solace to the delver. While it revealed what followed them, it did little to tell him more. He dug into his own memory of the legends, but found little to draw upon. He needed to know more about what true hazards the shag presented, and he pressed the elf for more information. "Besides being tall what else can you tell me about it?"

"It is strong, but only marginally quick. While it has speed, I doubt it could match yours or mine. We can outrun it if necessary."

"Even with the algors?"

Holli shook her head. "Doubtful."

"Then, that's not an option. What else?"

"It is heavy. It can climb rocks like a mountain goat, but it needs solid ground to support its weight. If we make it to the forest, even with the algors, we can escape. It would not be able to climb or move through the trees as we would. It would eventually lose our trail as it blunders through the forest, forced to break the branches which block its path. Shags are, however, somewhat intelligent. I am sure it knows the forest looms ahead of us. If it wishes to attack, it will do so before it loses the advantage of the terrain. It will probably wait until we reach the taller hills and attack from above. It will then use its weight and strength to drop down on us and take out as many as possible. If we try and beat it to the higher ground, it will trap us by circling the foot of any hill we choose to climb. It will then simply outwait us."

Realizing that outrunning the shag would be futile, Ryson turned over the option of a forward attack. "The algors have their slings ready, and you have your bow. If I lure it into the open, you can send a barrage upon it. Maybe it will be enough to scare it away. Do you think we can overpower it with our weapons?"

While Holli's face remained expressionless, her tone revealed her skepticism. "The slings will do little. Blunt weapons, even when projected with a sling will do little to hurt a mountain shag. The matted hair and thick skin give it protection. The best weapon against it is the bow with long tipped arrows. We have but one bow and the shag has a high tolerance to pain. I can aim for the eyes, but I don't know if that will stop it. The first may only anger it, and that is as risky as trying to outrun it."

"What about your sword?"

"A sword can be effective, but it's a dangerous ploy. If you're close enough to use the blade of a sword, you're

within the grasp of its long arms."

Ryson turned his head and scanned the entire horizon. He also took in a quick glimpse of the sky. It remained clear with no signs of storms. The temperature was still very warm, attributable to the southerly winds which blew off of the desert.

Ryson eyed the algors. "I didn't tell them what was following us. Do you think they know?"

"They have showed no sign of alarm."

"Do algors even know what a mountain shag is?" Ryson wondered openly.

"Who is to say for sure, but I would guess so. They have already said that they share no secrets from one another, that what one knows they all know. I don't know how much knowledge they retain of the legends, but they knew of Sanctum and the sphere."

"I agree," Ryson affirmed as he removed his gaze from the algors. He hoped not to alarm them further, though they sat and ate as if it were an ordinary meal, as if they were still within the reaches of their desert home.

Ryson began picking once more at the branches for scattered nuts. He offered a handful to the elf. "What about the algors in a hand to hand fight against a shag? They seem to have sharp claws. And there are ten of them. If they group together, they could be a dangerous weapon themselves."

"I have heard ancient stories of mountain shags," Holli began with a distressing tone. "Powered in some way by the magic which filled the air, a single shag attacked entire elf camps, dodging arrows and carrying away as many as a half dozen at a time. These tales make me believe that the shag is not concerned with our numbers. As for the algors combat abilities, I can not say. They carry a sling. That makes me believe they prefer fighting at a distance. I'm sure they would use their claws if that were their last option, but I wouldn't count on their effectiveness."

Ryson put a hand to his chin as he considered their predicament with growing dismay. "Then, we're really not facing a very positive situation here. If this thing wants us, it's going to take us in the hills ahead, and unless we get lucky, we don't have much else to do about it. We have to proceed, but we'd simply be walking right where it wants us. And I don't want to hang around here for night to fall."

"No, that would be disastrous," Holli emphasized.

"What are our true options?"

Holli did not hesitate in replying. She had obviously given the matter much thought as they traveled and was prepared with an answer.

"We have three. If it is still behind us as you say, we can try to outrun it to the forest. With a quick pace, there is a chance we might keep ahead of it and avoid an ambush in the taller hills."

"How fast do you think the algors can move over this type of ground?" Ryson questioned with more than a hint of doubt in his lowered voice.

"Not fast, but if we catch the shag off guard, it might be fast enough."

Ryson pictured the group charging off in hopes of making a mad dash to the trees. He could imagine the shag would respond to such a tactic by increasing its own pace. The shag would have to realize that they were

aware of its presence. Such a revelation would perhaps only lead to an immediate engagement. The group would probably be caught in a state of confusion and unprepared to handle the attack. "That's too big a chance. What's option number two?"

"Change our direction to the north and avoid the tall hills all together. Stay on the flat level rock as we are on now and head for the Fuge River. Shags don't like the water.

"Why not?" Ryson asked quickly.

"They are natural enemies of the river rogues."

The mention of yet another mythical monster offered little if any consolation. "Won't that mean we might be trading in one attacker for another?! I've heard about these river rogues. I don't want to run into one of those, either. We might also not reach the river by night fall. Do you really want to be caught out here not knowing if we're going to be trapped between our friend back there and a river rogue ahead of us?"

"No," Holli replied simply. "But it is a better alternative then simply continuing forward. I believe the shag will eventually attack once we reach the tall hills. At least if we head to the river, there is a chance we might get away without running into a rogue."

"What about our third option?"

Holli looked directly into the eyes of the delver. She spoke with blunt determination. "I can stay behind and cut off the shag while you lead the algors to safety. I have the Sword of Decree. If I but touch the shag with the blade, it will flee. They are no fonder of the burning touch of fire than they are of water."

"Out of the question," Ryson said flatly.

Holli did not retreat from her determined stance. "Do not be so hasty. It is the best of the options. I will accept my chances of success. No matter what happens, it will guarantee the safety of the algors and yourself."

Ryson shook his head. "You seem to forget one thing. You're now more important than I am. I found the algors and have delivered my message. They have agreed to follow us, but you have to bring them to your camp first. It is what you have promised them. If we lose you, we can't fulfill that promise. You know the way back to your camp, I don't"

It was an undeniable lie. With his skills as a delver and his diligence toward recalling trails, Ryson could have easily led them all back to the center of the elf camp. He did not, however, wish to see Holli take such a risk as facing the shag alone. He also began to develop an option of his own.

"There's a better way," Ryson stated firmly. "A safer way where no one will have to actually face the shag. You will lead the algors back to your camp, and I'll stay behind and keep the shag from following."

Holli immediately began to protest, but she held her tongue as Ryson spoke forcibly, making it clear he wished to finish.

"Don't misunderstand me, I'm not trying to be a hero here, and I'm not talking about facing it in some kind of fight. I don't want to get near it and I have no intention of doing so. I'm talking about doing what I do best. I'll cover your trail and make a false one. I'll lead it off away from you. I'll let it close enough to know that I'm still around, but no where near where it can do any harm. I'll only have to do it for a little while, just long enough to make sure you have time to get to the trees. It's the safest and smartest thing to do."

"It is not smart to have you risk yourself for my well being," Holli finally interrupted. "I'm an elf guard. What shall I say when I return to my camp without you? Shall I tell them the truth, that you did my job for me?"

"Your job now is to protect the algors, not me. And to see to it that they reach your camp. Which of your options allows that?"

"We can head for the river," Holli replied stubbornly.

"Is it your training which tells you we should increase the risk in our mission, or is it your own pride?"

Holli did not answer; she stared callously at the delver.

"Get mad at me all you want," Ryson answered with feigned disgust. He did not wish to anger or insult Holli. He admired her too much for that. Her presence was a true asset, that could not be denied, but she now opposed what he believed was the most sensible solution to their problem. "I'm asking you to look at this from a cold and logical perspective. Forget it's me and you out here in the desert. Pretend it's only a hypothetical problem, a problem that your superiors might pose. You have a delver with you that is no longer critical to the mission. You must lead a party back to the camp in which only you know the way. What should you do?"

"I can not answer that."

"Why not? Because you know I'm right."

Holli turned away for the first time. She threw both the empty shells and nuts to the ground in frustration.

Ryson spoke calmly. "I trusted your abilities to protect me in the desert, now you have to trust in mine. I can lead the shag away, I can move faster and quicker than it can. You've seen what I can do. If you don't believe that, tell me now."

"I believe you can outmaneuver the shag," Holli replied grudgingly. She quickly, however, added another fact she thought was also most relevant. "You have also never faced a mountain shag. It is not wise for me to leave you in such a situation."

"I really don't think we have another choice. You're just going to have to trust me to be careful. I will do everything ..."

"Very well," she cut him off. She continued to stare off into the distance, looking anywhere but at the delver. Her response was as cold as the deepest sea. The proposal annoyed her, perhaps even hurt or insulted her, but she could not win this argument. The delver accurately placed the importance of the mission squarely in front of her. The algors had to be led to Connel. If she left them, she would be failing in her duty. Her desire to be the one to face the shag was based more on her own pride than pure logic and duty. The delver had pointed that out clearly enough. Still, she could not easily forget her past duties to the delver or her training to be the one that faced danger before those she escorted. Mappel had entrusted her to protect him, but also to see the mission to its fruition. She faced no easy choice. In the end, she accepted duty over pride. "Explain your plan to the algors."

The delver nearly questioned her if she was sure, disbelieving she would agree without more of a fight. He did not, however, say another word or press his luck. He moved to the algors with an explanation as quickly as possible and without giving Holli a chance to change her mind.

The algors listened intently with tilted heads, but made no comments. As he finished his short instructions, they displayed total, as well as casual acceptance of the plan. They simply gathered their bags and waited for

Holli to guide them.

Before taking the lead, Holli moved to the delver. She removed the belt which held the Sword of Decree and held the sheathed weapon out to Ryson. "Take good care of this, bring it back with you to Connel and return it to Mappel."

"I won't need that," Ryson protested.

"I will not argue this," Holli stated bluntly. Her steely eyes accented her position. "This sword was entrusted to me so I might use it to protect you. That was made clear enough. You made a promise to Mappel, a vow that you would not part from the sword. You promised you would stay by my side so that the sword would be near you. You also vowed to remain watchful over the sword itself. If you wish me to leave you here, you must take the sword."

Ryson saw in the elf's eyes that she would take no argument. If he did not take the sword, she would not leave his side.

"Alright," he said reluctantly. "But I have no intention of using it."

"I honestly hope you have no need to. I urge restraint and caution against this shag. I will be unable to assist in any fashion, for as you have clearly pointed out, it is now my duty to bring these algors to Connel. I will tell Mappel of what happened and explain that you have accepted the charge of carrying the sword."

"If I'm going to take your sword, you should at least take the one I was carrying." He removed the belt which held the short sword he obtained from the captured goblin and handed it to her. "I'll try to reach Connel before you or at least not too long after," he said with a forced grin.

"I shall hope for that as well. Good luck, Ryson Acumen."

Chapter 17

As soon as Holli lead the group of algors around the corner of a large boulder, she bid them halt.

Ryson brought up the rear. He made a quick check behind him. Satisfied that the boulder now blocked the view of anyone, or anything that trailed, he moved with uncanny swiftness and precision. He immediately gathered up two dozen stones of varying sizes. He had each algor rub each rock. He placed his dagger in his mouth, blade outward, and his spyscope in his back pocket. He opened his pouch for the quick return of the stones as well as the cores of the cactus fruit the algors ate during their previous rest.

Ryson quietly pointed to a path close to a narrow cliff ledge. He made a swooping motion with his hand to Holli, making it clear she was to circle to the northeast, using the ledge and the rocks to hide their movements.

He then quickly motioned for the algors attention. He touched his head and bent it down. He pointed to his feet and lifted his toes from the ground so his weight rested on his heels. He looked back at the algors with an expression of expectancy.

The algors acknowledged the request without reluctance or hesitation. They duplicated his actions, bowing their heads and lifting the claws on their toes from the ground. As Holli waved a final good-bye, the algors followed with their heads low, crouched over. They walked on the heels of their feet, keeping their claws clear from any surface. They took their own leave of the delver with placid acceptance.

Ryson did not find the detached response even slightly surprising. He could not find it within himself to blame the algors for their apparent lack of concern. Ryson simply assumed that his departure from the group was nothing more than accepted activity for the algors. He was being considered just another algor that decided it was time to break from the pack. In that, Ryson found a slice of cheer. If these algors could accept him as just another part of their community, perhaps all of the inhabitants of the land could accept the inevitable changes they all faced.

He shrugged off his inner contemplations as he returned his concentration to the task at hand. As the algors followed Holli toward a ravine, Ryson inspected the path they walked. He moved quickly but softly over the ground the algors passed. Not a single scratch mark. He nodded his head with satisfaction, but he took the precaution to wave his hand just above the ground. A thin layer of rock dust swirled about, then settled quickly. Any marks in the dirt were thus covered.

Certain the actual path was now well hidden, the delver set about marking a false trail. He pulled the core of a cactus fruit and two of the stones from his pouch. He stepped off in a direction opposite from the path taken by Holli. He dropped the first stone as he bent low to the ground, and he tossed the second further off into the distance. He lightly pulled the dagger from his teeth, and with dagger in one hand and the soft remains of the fruit in the other, he began marking a trail.

Shuffling along, hunched over, Ryson moved with unbelievable speed. His hands worked miracles in the fine arts known only to delvers. The dagger moved as if it knew by itself what it must do. The crisp sharp tip created short shallow scrapes in the rocky ground. Each scratch finished with a light curve as if made by an algor claw.

With his other hand, Ryson rolled, dotted, pressed, and nudged the fruit core against the ground. He followed this trail with his nose as well as his eyes. He sniffed the air to ensure sufficient amounts of juice spilled out of the core to leave a scent trail. As the core disintegrated, he dropped it to the ground and smashed the remains under his boot. He quickly outlined the shattered core with scratch marks. The results looked nothing more than unwanted remains cast out and trodden underfoot.

Further and further he moved, staying as low to the ground as possible. He continued laying the trail, digging into his pouch over and over until all the stones were cast upon the ground and all the fruit cores were left behind. With his pouch empty, he surveyed the long winding trail he had forged with satisfaction. He knew the markings were sufficient to lead even the best tracker away from the actual path of the algors.

His only fear was that he might have been spotted while laying the trail. Try as he might, he could not locate the actual position of the mountain shag, thus he could never be sure if it still followed. If the shag saw only him, it might have seen through the deception and returned to the last known position of the algors.

Ryson inspected the Sword of Decree which was sheathed and belted about his waist. His hand slid over the jeweled handle. With the sword in his possession, Holli and the algors were truly defenseless. He could picture the elf guard attempting to defeat the shag with the goblin short sword. Holli had stated that facing the shag with the Sword of Decree was risky. How much more dangerous was it to face the monster with a blade that was only slightly longer than his own dagger?

He exhaled deeply as he looked back upon the trail. He had to make certain the shag remained after him and had not doubled back.

He surveyed the land all about him. The steeper hills were closer now, within but a few moments of a brisk delver run. The summit of a nearby hill would provide an excellent view of the land stretching back toward the Lacobian desert. Two small trees stood lazily off to the side, their growth stunted by the rocky terrain and paltry amounts of water. The first tree grew but four paces from the end of the false trail.

Ryson stepped to its base and then gazed back to the first tall hill ahead. Gauging the distance, he took his spyscope and inspected the sides up to the ridge. It met his needs. With a snap of his wrist, his retracted the spyscope, and with the stones now gone, placed it back in his pouch.

With his knife, he cut a small piece of cloth from the sleeve of his shirt. One quick leap and he was already two branches up the tree and within reach of the highest branch. He pulled the branch down toward him and tied the cloth to the very tip. As he released it, he saw it bounce upward, bringing the cloth into clear sight. In but another moment, he was out of the tree.

Once back to the end of the trail, he took one long look over his shoulder. He saw nothing. With that, he took off towards the ridge.

The delver moved in a blur. As fast as he cut across the land, this also was not his top speed. Slowing his pace, he scraped the heels of his feet along the ground rather than bounce off the soles. Every now and again, he slowed to shuffle his feet wildly in all directions. He glanced down to make sure his movements left the desired effect. Anything with eyes could surely follow this trail.

Upon reaching the base of the hill, he chose a path which would lead him to the previously selected ridge. He now cared little about leaving a trail or not. Step by step, he scampered up the incline, his movements flowing with casual ease. Like a sudden warm breeze rising up to the sky, he reached the summit without breaking stride.

At the hill's peak, he brought himself to an immediate halt and dropped to a squat. He had not yet turned to regain sight of the false trail, but instead, he faced the horizon of the northeast. Even as he crouched low, seeking obscurity among the abounding rocks, he could not restrain from lifting his head to peer into the distance. The view was stunning.

Ahead of him, taller and wider hills lined the country side. Unlike mountains with their steep slopes and jagged peaks each fighting for attention, the hills rested lazily, comfortably out into the horizon. They blended

together as much as they stood apart. He could not help but think of the algors. If anything exemplified their willingness to come together yet seek separation, it was this setting of dignified, uncomplicated scenic beauty.

The hillsides grew greener as Ryson looked farther to the north and east. While countless rocks and boulders remained abundant, tall grass, small brush, even wild flowers adorned the gradual slopes. While a greater variety and a greater number of trees appeared along the landscape, they remained scattered in clumps. Their presence magnified the rolling beauty of the landscape.

At the base of each hill, the grass and wild plants grew with much more vigor. The green was thick and dark, forming passages of meadow which curved and branched off in endless directions, a testament to the rains which could not break into the Lacobian desert but could bring life to these hills. He could almost hear the welcome drops and the gushing streams which would run down the slopes and collect at each base.

With a delver's eye, he examined some of the closer hills and noted the light crevices running down the hillsides, a sure sign that the hilltops held snow in the winter. During the thaw of planting season, the melting ice and snow would create temporary streams, bringing even more water to the thick growth at the bottom.

Hills such as these always drew Ryson's interest. Some delvers lived to explore rivers, or the shore lines of the sea. Still others sought out thick forests at the bases of tall mountains, but nothing appealed to Ryson more than a natural setting of peaceful hills.

Other delvers might scoff at the idea, but Ryson marveled at the subtleties involved. Each hill looked so much like another, each rested complacently within its boundaries. They appeared as nothing more than a collection of sloped dirt and grass, even sometimes to a delver's eye, but not to Ryson's eyes. Each hill in itself was a mystery to unravel. Some would indeed turn out to be nothing more than solid empty mounds, while others held secrets of long ravines, secret meadows, or even unexplored caves.

The sight of the hills pulled upon Ryson. It called to him, almost forcing him to forget his true purpose for climbing to this ridge in the first place. This seemingly endless line of hills could occupy his curiosity for months, and part of his soul yearned to explore the flowing countryside with all due haste.

The attraction, however, was not strong enough to force the image of Holli and the algors from his mind. Their plight reminded him of the shag. The hills would wait; in fact they may even prove useful. For now, the matter of the shag remained of the utmost importance.

Still squatting, Ryson shuffled completely about. He removed his spyscope from his pouch. He moved only his arm, the rest of his body remained completely still. He brought the scope to his eye, slowly, purposefully. Then, no motion at all escaped his body. If he could be seen, he would have appeared lifeless, for even his chest remained unmoving, as if he was no longer breathing. With one eye closed, he peered back towards the direction in which he had come.

He immediately locked sight on the small scrap of sleeve he had knotted to the tree branch. With his marker located, he angled the scope slightly back to the ground where he pinpointed the false trail. Ryson followed the path as far back as possible. His elevated position allowed him a greater perspective than at ground level, but the rocky landscape prevented a clear view for any real distance.

The numerous boulders and ravines allowed for hundreds of hiding places, and the shag could have been in or behind any of them. However, at the point where the trail changed from the forged claw marks to Ryson's shuffling boots, the path would certainly create confusion. If the shag in fact followed the false trail, it would be forced into the open to inspect the markings. Ryson waited patiently for this revelation.

As moments passed, as the sun moved slowly overhead, a shifting breeze brought a familiar scent to his nose.

Ryson's nostrils flared to catch as much of the scent as possible. He gauged the speed and direction of the breeze by noting the wave of crab grass at his feet. The scent disappeared as the breeze died away, and Ryson's concern died with it.

Without moving his head, the delver adjusted his view to the far left. Only the spyscope and his eye shifted. His sight locked upon a cluster of rocks. There Ryson stared, stared and waited for the inevitable.

Long moments passed. The scope remained on its target and Ryson's eye did not blink. Through the lens of the scope, it bore down upon the rocks incessantly. It would not stray for even the slightest moment.

As if rewarded for its persistence, Ryson's sight was granted its wish. The mountain shag staggered reluctantly out from behind the cluster of rocks. As it paused, apparently to sniff the air, Ryson commanded a clear view of a creature which he would have considered part of a nightmare, another unthinkable monster like the crab-spider that attacked Holli.

No doubt, it was tall. How tall, however, was difficult to gauge. Thick and long matted fur, encrusted with dust and dirt, covered the creature from head to toe. It made it impossible to distinguish where certain parts began and where others ended. Unable to isolate the knees or the waist, Ryson could not determine whether the legs were bent or if the creature was hunched over. And he certainly could not judge the actual length of the arms for both remained close to its body, and they blended in with the brown fur of its chest and its shoulders. Only the hands and face broke free from the thick hair.

Its hands were thick, meaty and wide. The fingers long but round with the total absence of claws or even fingernails. Its face, encircled by the same filthy hair, held no beauty or charm. A short muzzle hooked downward, tipped with a gray nose and whiskers similar to a cat. Its mouth was uneven and never closed completely. It revealed several slanting, uneven rows of jagged teeth. Gaps in the first row were filled with rough fangs behind. Its eyes were set close together directly over the sloped muzzle. They appeared to glisten with a yellow tinge whenever the sun rays hit them just right.

"It can probably see in the dark," Ryson spoke just above a whisper to himself but watched the creature closely after he spoke.

The shag made no reaction. Instead, it lumbered hesitantly toward the trail marked by the delver.

Ryson had tested the shag with his spoken words and he spoke again to himself of the results. "And it's either a good actor or it doesn't have extremely sensitive hearing. Let's see how it reacts to the end of the trail."

The shag slunk towards the open ground. Its head turned left and right as it approached. It stopped only once, for but no more than an instant. It picked up a stone, held it up to its nose, and tossed it away indifferently. Finally, it placed its hand upon the last markings of Ryson's knife. It looked back down the trail where similar markings abounded. When it turned its head forward to the high hills and to where Ryson remained perched, it only tilted its head.

Apparent indecision and confusion hindered the shag as it considered the change in the trail. It could easily see the scuff marks of Ryson's shuffling boots, but it could not find any scratches which it first identified and followed when it spotted the group of travelers crossing its territory.

"A little slow witted," Ryson murmured. A smile crossed the delver's lips. His enthusiastic enjoyment grew with every new shred of knowledge he procured from watching and analyzing the movements and reactions of the monster. A delver's blessing was before him; an entirely new species to examine.

The shag continued to move about with indecision, its nose and eyes passing across the broken path.

Eventually, it spotted the lighter trail to the small tree where Ryson used the sleeve cloth as a marker.

"Very impressive," Ryson conceded. "I wonder if it found it with its eyes or its nose." He spoke a little louder each time, testing the range of the shag's hearing.

Still, the shag showed no sign of picking up the sound. Instead, it followed the nearly invisible trail which led to the tree with the marker.

"I'm not sure, though, if I want it to find that. It may figure out what I'm doing. Maybe I can confuse it a bit more."

With steady, deliberate motion, Ryson moved his arm to the ground and felt for a stone which fit the palm of his hand. His movement was so controlled, so steady, it would have barely attracted the attention of someone standing right next to him. With rock in hand, he cocked his arm back with the same preciseness. With one quick fluid movement, the stone sailed across the sky. It split the air, a screaming missile, as it soared away from the hill top. Its direction would lead it to the ground a good fifty paces away from the shag, but in the opposite direction of the tree.

Before the stone hit the ground, the shag spun and fixed its glance directly upon Ryson's position. It stood taller than it had before, its shoulders pulled back. The thick hands opened wide, the fingers trembled with apparent anger.

Through his spyscope, Ryson watched the shag's indecisive expression roar into an angry sneer. Its yellow eyes never left the ridge where Ryson crouched motionless, even when the stone finally hit its mark.

"So it can spot movement pretty quickly," Ryson whispered, his lips did not move. He watched the monster with a growing understanding of the developing situation. "It knows something is here, but it's not sure what. That means it can see fairly well, but it's better at spotting motion than at focusing over great distances. It's going to wait for me to move first so it can figure out what it's up against. Let's see if I can't use that to make sure Holli gets to the trees with no trouble."

Ryson remained absolutely still, as did the shag. The furry monster could sense Ryson's presence, but it waited for the delver to move before it would make an advance. For now, it had the location of its quarry. It was apparently willing to let the prey make the first move, hoping and expecting it to be a critical mistake.

The delver waited with monumental patience. He felt no urge to run, no anxiety over being watched so intently by the shag. He was accomplishing his mission, for if the shag remained in his sights it could not be chasing Holli or the algors. He allowed the day to pass with the two of them locked in this battle of inactivity. He judged the elapsing time by watching the shadows extend. When the sun reached a point halfway between noon day high and sunset, he decided it was time to end the stalemate.

Certainly by now, Holli and the others were safely within the trees and heading toward the heart of Dark Spruce Forest. All that was left was to secure his own safety and all would be well.

The obvious option was to escape toward freedom as quickly as possible. He could leave the shag behind by running off at top speed. Considering his own abilities, he believed he would be halfway to the forest before the shag could make a decision. Being a delver, however, Ryson considered other alternatives, options he chose to pursue.

There was so much to left to learn of this creature, so many questions left unanswered. Ryson had only observed a fraction of the shag's tracking and hunting abilities. If he would face this new world with shags and goblins, if this was what the re-emergence of the magic dictated, he would need greater knowledge of each

new dark creature in order to survive as a delver. With a shag in sight and upon his preferred terrain, he could not let the opportunity pass by.

With his own decision cast, Ryson leapt upward and darted over the hilltop behind him and out of sight of the shag. He did not continue down the slope. Instead, he dropped to the ground upon his chest. He kept his spyscope in his hand. He waited. One breath. Two breaths. Stomach to the ground, he slithered back over the peak and brought himself into view of the shag's position.

Nothing. The shag had moved, and moved quickly.

"So it can make a snap decision when it has to," Ryson noted.

Turning his head slowly, Ryson scanned the ground closer to the base of the hill. The shag moved furiously at full speed. It covered ground in amazing time. Two thick, hairy legs pummeled the ground ferociously as they propelled the shag forward.

"I can outrun it, but I can't fool with it," Ryson gave the creature its due. "If I get cute, it might actually catch me." The delver watched for but a split second more as it assessed the shag's direction. "It's circling the hill and expects me down there. I shouldn't disappoint it."

Again, Ryson leapt over the hilltop but this time with the intention of running all the way down. With fluid yet powerful strides of his own, the delver plowed downward. Ryson forced his eyes open as wide as possible and increased his peripheral vision to a greater range. He reached the hill's base, crossed a small gorge which rested in front of a second and taller hill, and started up that slope just as the shag rounded the first hillside and came into his view.

The delver allowed for one quick glance up the hillside he ascended. In that moment, he noted all potential hazards and the quickest path to the top. With that image painted crisply in his mind, he slowed his speed and turned his head over his shoulder to watch the pursuit of the shag.

Ryson watched with interest to see its next decision. Would it follow him up this hill or try yet again to intercept by cutting around the base?

The shag showed no reluctance this time at following the delver's path directly. It must have believed its speed superior and it bounded upward directly behind the delver.

The creature has confidence in its speed, Ryson thought. If it didn't think it would catch me, it wouldn't follow and waste so much energy.

The shag handled the incline of the hill without the slightest difficulty. If anything, moving on a slope, even an ascending slope, added to the creature's speed and dexterity. The uneven ground aided the shag's movements, movements which were designed for even the taller slopes of mountains. A tractable joint at the creature's hip actually allowed the shag to proportion the extension of each leg to adjust for the slope of any hill or mountain, an attribute duly noted by the delver. Level ground rendered this sliding joint rather useless, but slopes in any direction allowed for full utilization and an advantage over those with fixed hip joints.

Ryson, however, ran at a pace which matched the shag's exactly. Their current pace was perhaps slightly more than half Ryson's top speed. It was a pace Ryson could maintain for long periods without any true stress, and the creature could not gain even a step as they rose to the top of this second hill.

Ryson charged over this hilltop. His head swirled to allow for another quick scan of the back slope. The descent offered a few obstacles, a patch of loose rocks, a few areas of tall weeds, but nothing to be overly

concerned about.

A wide-mouthed grin enveloped his face - a delver's true dream; pure exhilaration. Not only was he defining and categorizing the abilities of a mountain shag, he was now locked in a thrilling competition. This was as much a test for his own abilities as it was a learning experience. He would not be content in simply outdistancing the shag. There was more to be gained here, a greater opportunity at stake. The charging shag afforded him the chance to pit his greatest skills and cunning against a mysterious monster with unique abilities of its own.

For safety sake, however, Ryson would influence the decisions of the shag; he would impose his own restrictions on the options afforded to the monster. The shag might believe that it determined the pace and direction of the chase, indeed Ryson hoped it would, but it was the delver who would decide where they would go and how they would proceed.

The shag fell mindlessly into the delver's will. It moved as much on anger as it did on instinct. It growled and roared as it raced behind the quick moving delver. It showed only minor ability for tactics and strategy as Ryson dictated more and more of the struggle.

If the delver felt the shag slowing, Ryson reduced his own pace. The gap between them closed and the shag would experience renewed energy at the prospect of ending the chase. With but a snap of his boots, Ryson would extend the gap once more. Thus, the chase continued over several hills. Influenced highly by Ryson's maneuvers, the shag at times followed directly behind, otherwise it circled around the base of a hill trying to cut off its intended victim. On such occasions, Ryson answered with different tactics. Stopping at the top to challenge the shag to ascend or changing directions and descending over the same path he used to climb, he would then wait to see how the shag would react. Ryson monitored the shag's apparent willingness to follow over certain obstacles as well as its tolerance for frustration. The shag showed mostly perseverance, almost stubbornness, even as the chase lingered.

Ryson marveled at the shag's endurance. No signs of heavy breath, no signs of muscle fatigue. Except for a few fleeting moments of indecision as to how to follow, the shag maintained its pounding stride.

The delver forced the chase northward, towards higher elevations. All the while he kept his own strength and ability in check. Hiding the full extent of his own endowments, disguising what he could truly do, he forced the shag to reveal every secret of its own.

By the time they were charging across long valleys thick with vegetation, Ryson acquired a wealth of information. He understood that a shag's abilities would vary in degree from individual to individual, but there were certain attributes he now understood with great consciousness.

As the pursuit continued, Ryson noted they were closing upon the Fuge River. The benefits of the chase dwindled as the delver found little else in the way of useful information. The thought of river rogues made the delver realize that the risks were now growing. In gleaning all that there was to know from this particular shag, it was time to end the contest.

At first he maintained his present speed. He chose a tall hill to his right and ascended with his eyes forward. He no longer bothered to watch his pursuer. Upon crossing over the summit and out of sight of the shag, he propelled himself at top speed. A blur of motion cut down the green hillside. At the base of the hill, he made a half turn, again to his right. He was now heading southeast and back in the general direction of Dark Spruce. He rounded the base of yet another hill as he gave one last backwards glance at the shag. It was just now reaching the summit of the last hill. Its head was turned in the opposite direction. If it caught Ryson's final burst of speed, it could do nothing about it. The delver was finished with this chase and beyond the shag's grasp.

Chapter 18

The roaring fire snapped and crackled, brittle dry twigs and branches bursting non-rhythmically. Waist-high flames speared out and up in broken, jagged lines. They reached upward, higher and higher, beating back the darkness of the overhead sky. Ryson was careful to set the blaze in a clearing with no branches overhead, thus the glow simply extended upwards, gently erasing the darkness above with nothing to reflect it back to the waiting ground.

Ryson located this particular clearing beneath the slope of a hill which extended to the edge of Dark Spruce Forest. The hills died off to the east as heavy, thick pines graced the lower flatlands with abundance. This was one of the last hills in the area and the surrounding smattering of large pines and deciduous trees basked in the pounding radiance of the tall flames.

Flickering, dazzling firelight illuminated everything within a radius of twenty maybe thirty paces. The blaze blocked out the light from shimmering stars and cast a brightness around the camp which nearly matched the light of dawn. Such a fire could be seen for miles, and such was the delver's intent.

Ryson huddled but a few steps from the base of the flames. He rested prone on the ground with his head on a soft piece of sod and without a blanket. The nights remained cool, even during the advent of the growing season. The fire, however, provided more than sufficient heat. It was fed with large amounts of quick-burning, dry wood. Another pile of long dead logs stood off to the side, far enough from the blaze to ensure safety from sailing red-hot embers, large enough to feed the blaze for the entire night.

Ryson only stirred from his spot when the fire threatened to lose its brilliance. If the flames dwindled, even slightly, he rose from his makeshift bed and carried himself begrudgingly to the stack of wood. He cradled a stack of timber in his arms, far more than sufficient to keep the flames alive, and carried them to the blaze. He dumped them unceremoniously into the fire and returned to the ground and his pillow of grass.

He showed no signs of outward agitation, did not peer into the darkness in any direction. He simply moved about his camp as if he was alone, even though he knew he was not.

It was not the shag returning to his trail. He had left it a great distance back in the hills to the north. Certainly by now, that particular monster was either on the trail of some new prey or seeking shelter from the night. No, this was not a shag, not the one he had escaped and not a second one seeking a claim to this territory. It was something that followed with different techniques, different intentions, something that knew more about the delver's abilities and took the precaution to cloak itself in the distance.

It was the same presence which he sensed before he parted with Holli and the algors, the presence that only the delver's keen senses could distinguish. This set of eyes was still upon him. It remained with him even as he and the mountain shag began their chase through the hills. It lagged behind as the encounter progressed, but Ryson always felt the nagging existence of the watchful eyes. It was when Ryson turned away from the shag and sped to freedom, ending that particular chase once and for all that the delver truly honed in on the second follower. Ryson's sudden moves and speed must have surprised the distant pursuer, caught it out of position and unprepared. Ryson extracted a full taste of the scent from the air. It was a scent he knew, the scent of a human.

He could have vanished from these eyes as easily as he broke free from the pursuit of the shag. His rising and undying questions over the matter, however, kept him from making any such move. The shag apparently followed because it felt its territory was being invaded or it was interested in obtaining a meal. As for this new twist, there was no easy explanation for a human on his trail. The revelation added to the curious nature of the situation.

As he had allowed the shag to remain within reach in order to learn the secrets of the monster, he considered doing more of the same. He had debated the issue as he made his path more east than south. He would not head into the heart of Dark Spruce, for it was not necessary for him to return to the elf camp. His destination now was back to Connel. He intended to travel through the thinner northern branch of the forest, cutting due east and making a trail directly to Bourbon. There he could obtain an ale, listen for news, perhaps even enjoy a meal of fresh bread and warm stew before speeding on to Connel.

Through the end of the day as the sun waned in the western sky, he had maintained a pace which would allow the human to continue his or her pursuit. He did nothing to draw the human in closer and made no attempt to become the pursuer. While he could have caught any human so close to him, he doubted he would have any questions answered if he made such a move. Normally, humans became belligerent to the point of hostile when chased and caught.

As the first true signs of the thickening forest came within his sight, he could not restrain his growing curiosity. Not only was he being followed, he was being tracked by an expert. With his curiosity rising, he developed his own plan to force the mysterious tracker out of position.

At the setting of the sun, Ryson had chosen his campsite. It was not out of fear of losing his way, or losing the human which brought his travel to a halt. And it was not fatigue. But Ryson was tired, tired of feeling the shadow behind him, tired of moving on without learning anything more. It was time to tempt the human, time to force a mistake. He would reel the follower in by using his own apparent carelessness as bait.

The brightness of the fire illuminated a large patch of land, but it added to the darkness of the forest and the hills which lay beyond its own range. Fire, large flames especially nearby, hampered a delver's night vision as easily as if he looked directly into the sun. Thus, the border between light and dark was as distinct as a line in the sand, and anyone or anything could be hiding behind that curtain of darkness.

As obscurity crept deeper in with the night, Ryson relied more and more upon his ears and his nose. His eyes were shut anyway as he feigned sleep. He only stirred when his body felt the warmth of the fire weaken ever so slightly. It was then he would make his routine amble to the makeshift wood pile. As he walked, he grunted and rubbed his back, gave signs of weariness and muscle fatigue. He would take this innocent opportunity, however, to smell the air, gain a new fix on the human, who was indeed drawing closer, moving in to take advantage of the delver's apparent recklessness.

With his last trip to feed the blaze, Ryson could not keep the hair on his neck from rising. The human was at the edge of the darkness, behind the trunk of a fairly large oak, waiting and watching as quiet and as motionless as the dust on the rocks. Ryson knew as well as the follower that there was no turning back now. The human was in a position to advance not to retreat. Any such change would give away the edge of surprise, and the human had been too careful for Ryson to consider that a possible alternative.

If this human was half as good as Ryson believed, he would wait for Ryson to return to the ground into a defenseless position, perhaps wait a few more moments, and then make his move. As Ryson dropped log after log into the consuming fire, he fought back the urge to look directly toward the spot where the human waited. He paused but a moment to rub his hands in front of the flames, a move he had made several times before, a move that would not alarm the human. With a casual turn, he stepped back to the sod pillow, dropped to the ground and spread out facing the fire. He closed his eyes and waited like a coiled spring.

The twang of a bow string pierced the night sounds of the crackling fire and the musical crickets. Before Ryson heard the cutting swish of the arrow through the air, he had tumbled to his left and rolled to his feet. The arrow plunged into the ground where his right leg had been stretched. His hand automatically encircled the handle of the Sword of Decree, but he left it sheathed. He did not know how the glowing blade would react to the firelight but he wished to keep its powers a secret until absolutely necessary.

He barked out orders with anger and determination. "Come into the light. The darkness won't help you. I know exactly where you are and I don't have to see you to know if you move. I can dodge your arrows all night without seeing them. If you try to run, I'll catch you. I'm a delver and you won't be able to escape."

"I know who ya are." Evan Chase spat as he walked into the flickering, wavering light. A second arrow remained in his bow string, the string pulled back slightly. "I don't intend on runnin'."

"And what is it you do intend on doing?" Ryson asked in a low cold voice. "Kill me with an arrow? Best of luck."

"That first one wasn't aimed to kill ya," Evan sneered back. "I need to have a word with ya first. That's why I aimed for your knee. I didn't think you knew I was on ya, but I should have figured that from a delver." He said the last word with absolute disgust; as if there was nothing worse he could call someone.

"I was on to you long before I built this fire," Ryson scoffed, hoping to demean the tracker, for he understood the hate in Evan Chase's words and in his eyes. "Even with a shag to distract me, I sensed you. None of your kind can hide from a true delver." He said it proudly and watched with satisfaction as Chase's eyes burned.

"My kind? You watch your mouth."

"Let's get on with this," Ryson demanded with his own look of disdain. His expression made it clear he found the encounter tiresome, annoying. "You can try firing arrows at me all night, that's if I let you, but you still won't hit me. You know it and I know it."

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't." With long practiced precision and swiftness, the tracker pulled the bow string fully back and let the second arrow fly. It passed harmlessly into the darkness beyond the range of the firelight. Ryson was a full stride away by the time it passed where he had been standing. The quickest movements of even the fastest humans appeared as slow motion to the delver.

Ryson grunted his disapproval at the pointless attempt. "Let's hope you know for sure now. I can move faster than you can think. That's obvious."

Anger erupted in the face of the tracker. His cheeks turned crimson, noticeable even in the yellow and orange light of the fire. He tossed his bow to the ground and pulled a long hunting knife from a sheath of animal skin at his waist. The blade, nearly as long as Ryson's forearm, sparkled with sharpness. Chase gripped the brown wooden handle with furious tension.

Ryson laughed a hearty laugh. He kept his eyes on the tracker, but they glistened in enjoyment of the spectacle. "Now you're just being ridiculous. If I can dodge your arrows, don't you think I can dodge your pathetic attempts at trying to stab me?"

The tracker grimaced but said nothing.

Ryson allowed his own laughter to subside. He took a deep breath, allowed his mirth to drift back to serious concentration. His muscles tensed ever so slightly, as if preparing to spring upon his foe. Controlled determination filled his form. He glared at the tracker with intensity previously unmatched. Even the tracker with all his hate and prejudice retreated slightly from the scowl.

"I'm not going to waste much more time with you. You said you wanted a word with me." Ryson's words tumbled from his mouth in a bitter snarl. "This is your chance. What is it you want?"

Chase sized up the delver's defiant stand. He decided to press for the scraps of information he desired. "I want

to know where ya've been and what you're up to."

"Why?" Ryson mouthed the one word question as his eyes drove nails into the tracker's own face.

"It's a job," Chase replied with a noncommittal shrug.

Being a delver and accepting commissions from others to explore lands and complete tasks, Ryson understood the tracker's simple answer. "Who hired you?" he demanded with authority.

"Conspire," the tracker answered without hesitation.

"Why?" Ryson repeated.

"I don't know, didn't ask. Don't care," Chase said with finality, making it clear he wouldn't say anything more of it.

Ryson shook his head with as much disbelief as disgust. "So you just want me to tell you what I've been up to? That's absurd. You're a tracker. You've been following me; you should know where I've been."

Chase grunted a satisfied snort. He found great delight in explaining things to the delver, as if it made him better, smarter than Ryson. "Not exactly. I started only a day ago. I found both of your trails in the trees of Dark Spruce. The older one went off to follow the trail of the tremor. The other was going to lead me to the desert. I'm not a real lover of the forest so I took the fresher one, especially since it would get me out of these cursed trees. Found your trail in the sand pretty easily, but ya know what? Soon as I got started into the Lacobian, I saw you and a lot of others coming back to me. I got out of sight and waited for you to pass. I figured as long as I had you in my sights, I might as well not lose ya."

"So you decided to follow directly and forget the trail," Ryson acknowledged. "I still don't see what you need to know."

Evan decided to take advantage of the opportunity to throw yet another insult. "Delver's ain't too smart, are they? I said I had a job. Conspire wanted me to follow your trail from beginning to end, wanted to know all about where you've been and what you've been up to. Told me I should follow the trail, but I like to do things my way. Now, I can't say what ya found when you followed the tremor and what made ya turn back to the desert. I can't even say what you found out in the desert, but I saw what you had with you. I figured the girl was with you in the forest. I saw signs of two when you first went in. But those other things, I don't even know what they were, let alone why you were leading 'em out of the desert. I figure I can get what I need to know out of you. You'll tell me where you've been and what you've been up to, won't ya?"

"And if I don't?" It was more of a taunt than a question.

Chase's face turned even brighter with the crimson hue of his emotions, of his hate for delvers. "If you don't, I'll cut you a little at a time." He held the knife threateningly toward his adversary.

Ryson held his laughter in check this time. He pressed the tracker. "That's not even a threat. I could leave you behind in an instant. I could be out of your sight so fast, you won't know in what direction I left. As for following my trail, forget it. I won't leave one. You know it and I know it."

"I also know something else," Chase responded belligerently. "I may not be able to pick up your trail, but I can pick up the trail of the girl and those things she's with. They're no delvers, they're careless. I can get what I need to know from them. I know you wouldn't like that, that's why you led that hairy mountain monster away from them. Yeah, I saw that thing shag followin' ya. I picked him up about the same time I saw you

come out of the desert. I stayed clear of that thing, but I kept my eyes on what you were doin'. I saw ya set the phony trail to keep him away from your friends there. I won't follow no fake trail. I'll go right after 'em, even if it means followin' 'em in the forest. You wouldn't be at all happy about that, would ya?"

"No, I wouldn't," Ryson growled. "So you should know I won't let you."

"So how ya gonna stop me?" the tracker responded with a new gleam in his eye. "Ya gonna fight me? If you do I have my chance to cut ya. Or you can run, and I'll cut the girl." He paused to enjoy the dilemma he left the delver with, but then made it clear which option he preferred. "Now, I don't really want to go after those others. I want to hear what you got to say. I want to hear it from you. You're the one I'm supposed to follow. I want to know what you found while following the quake, what you found in the desert, what those things are that were with you and why you're bringin' 'em out of the desert." He paused again, and fixed a glance upon the sword at the delver's side. "I also want ya to hand over that nice sword of yours. It'll fetch a nice price. Reward me for dealin' with a filthy delver."

"I can't do that," Ryson said simply.

The tracker offered Ryson the only other option he allowed. "So then you want me to start after the others?"

"I can't let you do that, either." As clearly as Mappel's words over protecting the sword echoed in Ryson's mind, his acceptance over protecting Holli and the algors rang in his spirit. He would not let this man take his sword or hurt those that had previously traveled with him.

"Then, you're gonna have to stop me." The tracker's smile grew for but a second, then it disappeared completely. He turned to his left with a sharp upheaval of motion. His eyes left the delver as if Ryson had vanished. It was as if something took hold of his mind, forced all knowledge of the delver from his consciousness. Chase's face now turned white as both hands now gripped the handle of the long dagger, but it was no longer held out at the delver. He stammered at its new target, but no words escaped from his mouth.

She walked into the firelight as softly as a summer's breeze. Dried twigs refused to snap under her light step as she entered the campsite without making a single sound. She stood but a few paces from the tracker's left hand side and almost directly across the campsite from Ryson.

Ryson was no doubt as surprised at her emergence as the tracker. He had not sensed her presence at any point during his travels. Indeed, he was not sure he sensed her now. She gave off no scent and still made no sound, but he could not deny his own eyes or the troubled response of the tracker. The delver shaded his eyes from the fire in order to make a closer inspection.

She wore a long dark brown coat which stretched to her ankles. It swirled about her lightly, but the fabric made no noise. It was buttoned up tight to her neck. Her arms hung low in front of her, her hands clasped together at her middle. She wore no rings and no necklace. Short dirty blonde hair hung just above her shoulders. Her face mysteriously avoided the firelight. Only dark green eyes reflected any light at all, and they remained fixed on the tracker.

Ryson stepped to the side, moving the fire away from his path of sight to the stranger. Still, he could not obtain a good view of her face.

"Who are you?" he demanded sternly.

The woman made no acknowledgment. Her stare remained fixed upon the tracker. She stepped, or rather glided towards Evan Chase. Her hands unfolded and reached outward. They grabbed him at the shoulders. Long nails dug into the hides which made his shirt. Ryson believed he could see small stains appear at the end

of each finger. She had drawn blood and it seemed to delight even amuse her. As her mouth curled with a tight smile, Ryson saw something else for the first time. Fangs. Fangs in a human mouth.

The woman opened her mouth as she held Evan in an unbreakable grip, a grip as strong as a man's over twice her size, perhaps a grip like the shag's. When her mouth opened, the light which avoided her face glistened off the two snow white fangs. She turned her head slightly and pulled the tracker's left shoulder into her bosom. His neck was within a hand's span of her mouth.

The tracker found his voice. A soul shrieking howl erupted from his lips. In the last seconds of his life, he plunged the knife into her midsection. He turned the blade back and forth, pressed it ever deeper.

The woman paid no mind. She thrust her head downward and the snow white fangs turned red in Evan Chase's blood. One single word tattooed itself in Ryson's mind.

Vampire.

It was nearly inevitable, and not at all surprising. Ryson Acumen would reach a point where he would have to question his own sanity, wonder if he could define the borders between runaway nightmares and reality. Was he now simply walking through the land, half asleep, half awake, but totally immersed in dementia? With each step of the journey, with each new encounter, logical, reasonable thought would demand an examination of this possibility. The delver had reached that point.

In the flickering firelight, the unidentified woman - the vampire - maintained her hold on the tracker, both with her hands and with her fangs. Her face remained a shadow. Her fangs also now dodged the light, for they were fully embedded in raw flesh. Only her hair and her swaying, silent coat were truly clear to the delver's eyes. That, and of course, her victim.

Evan Chase struggled as first, desperately twisting the knife which was embedded in the midsection of his attacker. His eyes betrayed his fear, the whites glowing hotter than the fire. Thankfully, his screech of pure terror died away, replaced by grunts and moans as he worked with frantic hysteria upon the knife's handle.

The woman ignored both his snarls and the knife. Despite the vicious grinding of the long blade, there was no sign of pain or even harm. Ryson imagined the wound in the woman's abdomen must now be cavernous, large enough for nearly every organ to simply fall out, yet he could not find even the slightest trail of blood leaking to the ground. The only sign of blood remained on the shoulder of the tracker, and just below the area where the vampire's mouth held him. A small dark stain blotted the collar of his shirt. It grew no bigger even as the sharp teeth remained in the tracker's jugular. The woman was not allowing any of the red liquid to escape her hunger.

With finality, the trackers eyes closed. His hands fell from the blade and dropped to his sides as his knees buckled. He was no longer struggling, or for that matter, sustaining his own weight. The color of life left his cheeks as surely as the blood was drained from his body. His head drooped forward, fell against the shoulder of the woman that now held him up to finish her feast.

It was not unwillingness to help the tracker that kept Ryson from moving forward, it was not fear. It was the question of his own sanity. Could this really be happening? Perhaps, it was no stranger than speaking to ghosts, running from shags, or meeting algors, but this one vision shattered the confidence in his ability to reason.

Ryson Acumen heard most of the stories involving the legends, including the stories of vampires. He was also sure he heard the word spoken when he and Lief Woodson went to explore Sanctum. He might have even said it himself. Vampires. They existed in a time when goblins and shags, like the ones he had already seen,

walked the land and challenged the order of Uton. Yet even as he accepted the existence of goblins and shags into his reality, he was not sure he could accept this, not sure it was truly happening.

Delusions. A new word exploded in his mind. It was the alternative he faced. Was he bending the border between dreams and reality? Was his mind calling on his memory of the legends in some bizarre and uncontrollable way. Was any of this really happening?

He was not given a chance to answer this question. His shock and uncertainty were broken by Evan Chase's collapsing body. No longer in the grasp of the woman's hands or teeth, he crumbled to the ground in a thud which sounded hollow.

The woman turned her attention first to the knife in her stomach. She pulled it out with indifference. The blade shined clean in the firelight. As she tossed it away, Ryson's eyes followed the sparkling blade in disbelief. The woman chuckled lightly and Ryson's eyes returned to her. He still could not distinguish a single feature of her face other than her sparkling green eyes.

"Should I make a glutton of myself this evening?" Her voice was cold and warm, appealing as well as repugnant at the same time. "I have walked a long time alone. It would be a shame to let you go."

Ryson bit back his fear, made every attempt to clear from his mind the doubts of his sanity. If he needed to question his reasoning, this was not the time. Still, the questions nagged at him and he remained at a loss of what to do. The woman made no immediate sign of approach, and Ryson found strength in the distance that remained between them.

"Why did you do that?" He was not sure why he asked that particular question, but he felt a need to understand the horror of what he witnessed.

"It was necessary," she responded simply. She licked her lips but made no other movement. The fire glistened only for a second against the fangs which were again hidden behind those same lips.

"You killed him," the delver emphasized.

"He will walk again."

Ryson shuddered at the thought.

The woman laughed a laugh that contained no warmth at all and it chilled Ryson to the marrow. "It is not so bad; you will see that for yourself."

"No," Ryson protested weakly.

"Are you sure?"

"I won't let you near me."

The woman stood silent for long moments. Her eyes glistened like emeralds in bright sunlight. Ryson felt a biting cold in his soul.

"You are a delver," she announced suddenly. "You do have the power to avoid me, but do you have the desire?"

Ryson's thoughts turned as gray as an early morning fog. A dull throbbing obstructed any attempt to organize

them.

"What are you talking about?" he gurgled.

"You want to run don't you?" the woman murmured. The coldness disappeared. Her voice was now almost enticing. "But you won't. You want to know more about me, don't you?"

Ryson managed a nod.

"I see your thoughts in your face. You think I'm a vampire, or a dream. Maybe I'm both. You no longer know what's real. I can help you with that. I can give you the answers to everything you ever wished to know."

Ryson could not lift the growing fog which swirled about his every thought. The woman seemed to inch forward, but he was not certain.

"So many things you have seen and felt." The woman continued with a soothing, knowing voice. "So many things with no answers. You want those answers, you need those answers."

Again, Ryson nodded. His tongue was as heavy and as confused as his thoughts. His ability to speak had left him.

The woman was indeed closer to him now. The fire was no longer between them. It was behind her and even her coat was now hidden to him by the shadows. Her eyes, however, remained visible even as they sparkled with the warmth of spring.

"I can end your confusion; bring to you the knowledge of what you so desire. Isn't that what you've always wanted? A delver's dream come true? And there is no emptiness in my promise. You know that. I speak the truth. Give yourself over to me and you will know more than you have ever known."

The words rang crisp and clear in Ryson's ears. He heard them, understood them. Every syllable she spoke cut through the fog, cut through the confusion. Yet both remained after the echo of her words died away. He could not order his own thoughts, or make his own decisions or judgments. Her words were so simple, so profoundly true. He could not help but accept everything she said, simply because she said them.

He stood still, captivated by the eyes which somehow stood out from the darkness. No other movement detracted his attention. She also appeared to stand motionless, even as she crept closer.

She now stood within arm's reach. The bewitching words ceased to flow from her lips. All encompassing silence. The birds, the insects, all sounds of the surrounding forest and hills halted. Even the crackling of the fire died away. Was it the cloud in his head which blocked out the sound, or did even fire obey the command of the vampire?

Ryson stood in no condition to consider the question. The heaviness of the moment drowned out nearly all consciousness. He slouched, but remained on his feet, and continued staring into the emerald eyes.

She was on him. She held him with the same grip as she held the tracker, pulled him toward her with the same force. Her eyes remained locked with his as she pulled him closer, and he could not resist her.

Ryson was not even certain what was happening. The fog rolled through his mind even when her nails cut into his own shoulder, just as they broke the skin of the tracker. He did not feel the pain. He did not feel fear, until she turned her eyes to his bare throat. With the break in the stare, a small degree of the confusion and the fog lifted. He knew where he was and what was about to happen. He felt the piercing pain in his upper arms from

her grip.

The small hole in the blanketing fog gave way at first to a scream of fear. Then, miraculously, his delver instincts rushed through the gap. He was aware he was in great danger. He needed to save himself.

Instinctively, his fingers found the handle of the Sword of Decree. As his hand encircled the hilt, all confusion and doubt evaporated, cast away like the outgoing tide. A certainty - a sharp purpose and understanding filled his mind. This was no dream and he was not insane. He could feel the energies of the sword rise through his arm. He even felt the energies that filled the air. He sensed their impurities, the taint given to them by the sphere, but he acknowledged their presence. The sphere was real, the goblins were real, the shag was real, even this vampire was real. And he knew now how to deal with her.

It was at that moment that delver swiftness saved his life, saved his soul. His right arm free, except for at the shoulder, he pulled at the hilt with all the speed he could muster. The blade came free of its sheath and stood boldly out in the night air.

Just as the vampire was about to sink her teeth into her second victim, she howled in pain. She released her hold on the delver and stumbled away.

Ryson Acumen held the sword proudly and showed not the slightest sign of surprise. The firelight, as well as the distant starlight, radiated off the sword with magnified brilliance. The campsite was as bright as noon day, and the beams of light burned the revealed skin of the vampire.

"Vampires hate the light, don't they?" Ryson growled with anger. In this one encounter, he would learn to hate vampires over all the other creatures of the dark. He loathed having his mind controlled, despised the powers to confuse and entice with false hopes. He cursed them. He cursed the vampire and would never forget what she had been able to do to him. In that moment, he wanted revenge. "Fire can't harm you, but this light can. It's not just fire, it's the starlight magnified. It's as harmful to you as the sun."

The woman, now hunched over but still on her feet, did not reply. She made a quick break for the darkness and the safety of the trees. Her speed was surprising, but no match for the delver's.

He cut her off with ease and again held the sword to her face. "You're not getting away."

She hissed. Her face was now clear to him, revealed by the light of the sword. Pasty gray skin clung closely to her skull. The eyes, which were now more gray than green, retracted into her sockets. Long eyelashes, a petite nose, and blood red lips gave the sorrowful feeling that she attempted to appear more feminine than the rest of her face would allow. That same face now contained two scorch marks, one on each cheek.

Ryson looked back into her eyes. He bore down into them as he challenged her to take control of his thoughts once more. Whether with this sword or without it, he vowed never to lose such a battle of wills in the future. He was unprepared for this first meeting. It would never, ever happen again.

The woman still wished only to escape. She tried to turn and run in the opposite direction. Again, she found the delver swooping down in her path.

Angered further by the vampire's attempts to run, Ryson jabbed at her arm with the point of his sword. It barely touched her, did not even break the skin, but she screamed in agony. The brown coat smoked at the point of contact. She dropped to the ground in a heap, rolled to her knees and pleaded for him to let her alone.

Ryson did not hesitate in his reply. "I can only do that if you swear on what is left of your soul that you will not harm another living creature again."

Her head shot up in anguish, surprise. "I can not do that!" If she had been able, tears would have been streaming down her burnt cheeks, but she had lost that ability. "I have no control over what I am!"

"But you must honor such a promise." Ryson did not know how he knew that, but he did. "You will swear to me by the last remnants of your soul, or I will not let you go."

"You would kill me? I know you deliver, I have felt your thoughts. You can not kill me." It was more of a plea than a statement.

"It won't be me that ends your life, I will let the sun take care of that. I will only keep you here until you swear."

"But I must do what I must do. I could no more cease tasting blood than you could stop taking breaths of the air."

"I'm not giving you a choice. Swear or face the sun."

The vampire's words screeched from her mouth fast and wailing. "Let me at least stalk the animals. I will avoid humans and delvers."

"No! Absolutely not! You will harm neither man nor animal, not even the smallest of rodents."

"I will not survive. You give me no choice."

"Then take the sun," Ryson stated with cold indifference to the vampire's plight.

The woman shook uncontrollably. She searched the night, but found no hope. She made one last plea. "Give me at least the creatures that would also prey upon your kind. Allow me to stalk the shags, the river rogues, the goblins."

Ryson hesitated. He did not respond.

The woman took this as a sign of hope and seized upon it. "You must allow me at least that. These are creatures that are aligned against delvers. They would not think twice in slaughtering the helpless. I would be doing you a service." She paused but for a second, then spoke up in a clear voice before Ryson could deny her. "I swear by my soul I will only stalk shags, goblins and river rogues. The rest I will leave unharmed."

She waited.

Ryson heaved a heavy breath and finally nodded. He returned his blade to his sheath.

She rose with a contemptuous expression. She showed no gratitude. She grimaced with anger and disgust. "May the wicked feed on your bones, and may your soul be cast into the void." She spat.

Ryson shrugged. Then, he remembered the tracker. He looked to his pale lifeless body.

"What of him?"

"His fate is sealed." Satisfaction pursed her lips. "If I'm lucky, he will see to your end."

Ryson ignored her. "He's not turned yet. He's just a corpse."

"That will change in three nights from now."

"No, it won't," Ryson answered with a determined edge.

The vampire eyed him suspiciously as he walked over to the prone body. She hissed as the blade of the Sword of Decree was again free from its sheath. She held her hand up to her face to block the light but peered through her fingers to witness the delver's movements.

Ryson took a deep breath, steadied himself, and with one thrust, pierced the still heart of the tracker. He removed the blade as quickly as he plunged it downward, wiped it clean on the clothes of the tracker and returned it to its sheath.

"You killed him!" the woman condemned as she lowered her hands.

"No, you killed him," Ryson said flatly. "I saved his soul. Now he will remain nothing more than a corpse. I would have asked him to do the same for me."

The woman hissed and then fled.

Ryson took the time to bury the tracker. Evan Chase would not rise again.

Chapter 19

"What's your business here?" Surliness and suspicion filled the guard's voice. He stood in front of Ryson, menacingly blocking passage of the main road into Burbon. He was only slightly taller than the delver, but much thicker. The density of his biceps, forearms and wrists gave his arms a short and stubby appearance, a dimension that contrasted sharply with the long, narrow spear held tightly in his hand. His nose was large, puffy, and bent slightly to one side, the obvious result of one too many breaks. His eyes narrowed as he glared, but he could not hide the blood shot corners.

The guard's position of challenge did more to provoke the delver than frighten him. Ryson wanted to know why he was being questioned. There had been no guards at this post during his first trip into Burbon back when he was just investigating damage done by the quake. He didn't appreciate the guard's tone or the disapproving stare. And he didn't like having his passage blocked. No delver would. Impeding his freedom of passage was like removing his right to think. As to the guard's hulking physique, such attributes meant little to a delver. Ryson could run circles around him, turn him into a plodding buffoon grasping at air if he so desired.

As Ryson was about to protest, probably vehemently, he noted other guards closing upon him. He immediately sensed their fear and mistrust. Two joined the first guard's side and formed a semicircle around him. Three others took strategic positions farther back and along the side of the road. They all appeared weary as well as suspicious, and they all carried long sharp spears that they were prepared to use.

The jagged edges glistened of polished metal, but the points were smudged with a damp greasy substance. Ryson had heard of dreadful wars where men carried spears greased at the point with tar coated poisons. These guards were obviously also familiar with such tactics, for there was no other reason to grease a spear tip if not to hold poison fast to its razor sharp blade.

He didn't believe the guards were skilled enough to hit him, but one might just get lucky. In truth, the odds against such a strike were astronomical. With a poison tipped spear, however, the slightest graze against his skin might be fatal.

He felt the pull of the Sword of Decree at his side. It reminded him not of the existence of a weapon so close to his hand but of its importance as stated by Mappel. It also reminded him of what was still left to accomplish. His mission was near complete. He needed only to return the sword to the elder elf, a deed he could complete with near mindless ease. Such a revelation narrowed his own options. It would be foolish to take even the smallest risk at this point, so he bit down on his anger and swallowed it like loose spit. He appeared to cooperate, giving a smile rather than a sneer. He rubbed his hands together then clasped them up by his chest, keeping them well away from the hilt of the sword.

"My name's Ryson Acumen. I was here several days ago. I'm from Connel. I was sent to check on the damage done by the quake and to see if you needed any assistance from our town. Maybe you remember me?"

"I don't." The guard continued to glower. "That explains what you were doing here then. It doesn't tell me what you want now."

Ryson raised an eyebrow. "Now? Now, I'm back to see how things are going. I spoke to your Mayor Stevens last time, a tall thin man, brown hair, gray around the edges. I wanted to check with him again, make sure that he received everything he needed."

Ryson had hoped if he described the mayor it might reduce the strain still apparent in the guard's tight jaw. It did not. If anything, the guard's scowl deepened.

"The mayor's no longer in charge here. The captain of the guard is." The guard spoke bluntly as if he didn't care how his statement sounded. "If that's the extent of your business, you may as well head back to Connel right now."

The last was given in the clear tone of an order.

Ryson held up his hand asking for another moment. This turn of events immediately interested the delver. He wondered what might have transpired to cause such an event as the guard taking control of the town. Rather than turn away and make an immediate heading toward Connel, Ryson persisted with his hopes to gain entry into Bourbon. "I am also here to take a rest from my travels. I've been as far as Pinesway these past few days."

Eager curiosity filled the face of the guard to Ryson's left. He could not keep himself from interrupting.

"You've been to Pinesway? What is the news there?"

The head guard spoke sternly and rebuked his subordinate. "Keep it quiet. That's not our concern."

"But I have a brother stationed there."

"It's all right," Ryson stated quietly. He was carefully piecing together the most obvious of the clues. He turned them into an image of what he was facing and how he might turn the encounter to his advantage. The existence of guards at the town's main road, as well as their poisoned tips spears, indicated they were at least slightly aware of the changes taking place around them. Little else would justify the unseating of the mayor and the need for stationed guards.

By their own faces, he was certain they must have experienced something of this madness first hand. Their bloodshot eyes and obvious weariness indicated little sleep over the past two or three days. Perhaps, mountain shags or goblins had ransacked part of their town, or perhaps they were hunting a vampire or a river rogue. It was difficult to distinguish which might have installed their apprehension to wayward travelers, but it was a safe bet it was connected to the magic.

Ryson decided to deal with their anxieties directly, although somewhat discreetly, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. "I understand your caution. Like I said, I've been traveling these past few days. I've seen many strange things. Things I can't understand, or even wish to."

"What is it you saw?" the head guard demanded sternly, more interested in the stranger's sightings than in the state of Pinesway.

Ryson could not as of yet determine what exactly had the guards, the whole town, so unnerved. Thus, he did not wish to speak in detail. If the guards had a run in with shags, they might interpret the description of the undead as the ramblings of a lunatic. He played out his hand cautiously, acting as if speaking too much might bring a return of the insanity. "I really don't like to talk about it. I even wonder about my own eyes, hoped that it was the fading sun playing tricks on me. But whatever it was, it left me wanting to return to the safety of a town as soon as possible."

The head guard continued to size up the delver. He frowned, unsatisfied with Ryson's response.

Ryson sensed his growing impatience. He spoke with as much detail as possible without alluding to one particular monster. "What I saw, I saw in the shadows. It did not appear human. It left me cold and I do not like to talk about it." He felt that would suffice whether the town suffered at the hands of the goblins, the shags or any other dark creature. He then turned his attention to the guard with a brother in Pinesway. "I can assure you, however, that when I left Pinesway, it remained intact with the townspeople still in charge. There

was no sign of any damage other than the quake, and I heard nothing of casualties to the town guard."

The news appeared to settle all of the guards, but they still made no sign of allowing Ryson to pass. He decided to press the issue.

"I've told you all I know, even things I didn't wish to. For now, I hope you will let me visit one of your fine taverns. I was hoping to obtain an ale and some food before returning to Connel. Surely, you would not deny me that. I only hope to add to the pockets of your own merchants; yours as well for keeping this town, and myself for that matter, safe while I'm here." He carefully pulled coins from his right front pocket. He did so slowly, allowing the guards to watch his every move. He handed gold to the guard in his path, silver to those on his sides. He even flipped coppers to the guards in the back.

"Hopefully, you'll see that as my thanks for keeping this town safe. I will eat easier and I'll leave as soon as I have eaten."

The guard in front of him looked at the coin in his hand. His face softened. "Stay the night. It's not friends from Connel that worries us," he said surprisingly. "If you wish to return to Connel, you can leave in the morning. That way you'll reach it before night falls. No sense in traveling at night if you don't have to."

Ryson was about to reveal that he was a delver and his speed would allow him to reach Connel before this day ended. Before he muttered a single word, though, he changed his mind. He wasn't certain how they would react. He had come across many humans that mistrusted delvers. The guards were somewhat friendly to him at this juncture. Right now, he was nothing more than a traveler from Connel, not a delver out poking around. No sense in changing that, and perhaps invoking a change of heart as well.

"Very well then, thank you. I need the rest."

Ryson had no real intention of resting. Once he obtained entry into Burbon, he would look around with a curious eye, try and determine the problems which led to stationing guards on the roads and relieving the mayor of his duty. Before, he could take a step, however, the head guard addressed him with more than a hint of authority, as if a captain speaking to a private.

"I suggest you keep that handy." The guard nodded to the jeweled handled sword at Ryson's side. "The nights have gotten pretty strange around here. We're doing the best we can, but we can always use extra help. If we call for you, we'll expect you to lend a hand."

"Certainly." It now became clear why the guard was allowing Ryson to enter as well as stay the night. He was as anxious as the others, worried that their numbers were too small to handle whatever it was they faced. He saw Ryson as another man to be drafted into his army.

"Don't disappoint us," he said sternly. "And don't go bothering the Captain about anything. He has enough to worry about. Remember, the mayor's gone. If you had any business with him, it's finished now."

"Understood," Ryson said plainly.

He stepped around the head guard, who did not move, and walked deliberately but slowly toward the collection of buildings and houses which made up the heart of Burbon. He felt their eyes on his back, but he did not turn. He stepped as if nothing more than the burdens of travel wore upon his shoulders. He heard one of the guards mutter, but could not make out the words. He sensed another following, but again he showed no concern or even acknowledgment. The guard would remain far behind, but within view to see which inn Ryson would select. It seemed obvious they were intent on knowing where he would be if and when they wanted him to lend a hand.

He forced the thought of the follower from his mind. He concentrated on the town itself. The roads formed neat rows of parallel and perpendicular lines. Some were comprised of stone, some of pitch, and some only of dirt. Everything was straight and organized, though, and he could find not a single curve in any of the streets or alleys.

The buildings matched the symmetry of the roads they lined. Whether private home or merchant shop, inn or church, every structure stood evenly spaced apart and an equal distance from the road. Signs were simple and to the point. Nothing lavish stood apart from the rest. Even the noisiest tavern appeared to conform to the building standards of every other surrounding structure. Stone walks and paths marked direct lanes to doors or to neighboring properties. Each corner was marked with a lamp post. Glass covered lamps remained dormant in the afternoon sun. Ryson bet they were lit at the same time by the same person every evening. He had seen these sights before during his first trip to Burbon, but never really noticed the regimented consistency, the hard-lined conformity.

"It's no wonder the guard took over," Ryson muttered to himself as he passed buildings which now all melded together. "They like things steady here. I wonder how they're going to react to the return of the magic."

"Excuse me?" A passerby overheard him and shot a questioning glance. He looked to be nothing more than a merchant carrying his receipts to the bank, but he now wore an expression of dissatisfaction.

Ryson nodded his head in acknowledgment of the newcomer. He spoke with calm assurance. "Good day, sir. I'm looking for a tavern or an inn. I'm hoping to find one with a show, music, magic, anything. It's been a hard day. I could stand with a little humor. Anything, you can recommend?"

The look of dissatisfaction turned to confusion. The merchant thought he heard the stranger clearly speak of the return of magic, but now he was not so sure. He conceded he might have misunderstood, but made no apology. "The Borderline has a string quartet. Down the block." He pointed then turned quickly. He obviously wanted nothing more to do with the stranger.

"Thank you," Ryson said to the merchant's back. When he was clear of being overheard, he again spoke only to himself, this time in a whisper. "I won't allow that to happen again."

Out of the corner of his eye, he picked up the guard which continued to follow him. "I might as well put an end to this, too."

Ryson picked up his pace as if the merchant's directions assisted him on his way. Brisk steps carried him quickly to the front of the Borderline Inn. Soft, but uplifting music wafted from the open front window. His ears tuned to it quickly.

"Two guitars, a cello, and a double bass," he stated with confidence as he walked through the door.

The sight of the quartet in the far corner confirmed what his ears already told him. Four musicians worked effortlessly on the instruments Ryson named before entering. They played by memory, for no sheets of music appeared before them. Ryson guessed all but one of the guitar players had been together for many years. Their hands flowed over their instruments with nary a glance from one to another. Only the second guitar watched the others for cues in tempo. The other three played as if guided by the same hand, an ability which reminded the delver of the algors.

The current musical selection filled the room with comforting ease. It blessed the air with inspiration, no where near as gay as a march, but uplifting enough for all to feel they could face their troubles, or at least forget them. Such melodies would continue throughout the afternoon and into the evening. Not a single song of melancholy would escape these instruments on this day.

The tavern was about one third full. A whisper of conversation hung in the air, but for the most part, the patrons remained quiet. Their intention was clearly upon allowing the cheerful music to wash the anxiety from their minds.

Ryson moved to a small table roughly four steps from a long bar. A young female barkeep gave him a smile from behind it. He nodded and returned the smile. Rather than take the seat at the table, he moved to the bar.

She threw a towel over her arm as he placed himself upon a stool. When he carefully moved the end of the sheathed sword to keep it from striking the bar, she appeared even more grateful for his appearance. She stepped up to his place and quickly wiped the bar surface with the towel before replacing it over her arm.

"What would you like?" her eyes grabbed his. Medium length black hair hung freely about her shoulders. Bangs covered her forehead and kept attention on her hazel eyes.

"I'll have an ale please."

"Dark or light?"

"I think I'll stick with light," he grinned.

She bit her lip gently, still grinning, and nodded. She whisked about gracefully. With fluid movements, a tall glass was soon leaning under a flowing tap. With a rap of her elbow on the lever, the flow ceased just as the light golden liquid reached the rim. She placed it in front of him with another smile.

By then, Ryson had a gold coin in his hand. He slid it toward her. "That's for you, not for the ale. I'd like to run a tab for that. I think I'm going to be here a while."

"Certainly," the barmaid was obviously happy with this news.

"Do you have any stew?"

"Vegetable. Potatoes, carrots, celery and onions."

"That'll be fine. I also need a room. Who would I see about that?"

"I can take care of that. There are plenty of them available. I'll have a key and number for you before you're done with your supper."

"Great. Thank you ... uh ..." He paused, waiting for her to reveal her name without him having to ask. She did not hesitate.

"Linda."

"Thank you Linda. I'm Ryson, Ryson Acumen." He held out his hand which she took with a gentle shake.

"Nice to meet you." She paused, seemed to hesitate. She wanted to speak but she held her tongue.

Ryson picked it up immediately. "What would you like to know?" His tone contained warmth and invited her to speak freely.

"I couldn't help notice your sword. Are you here to help the guard?"

"Actually, I was here to see how you were all recovering from the quake. But it seems as if that's old news and the least of all our problems." His expression was a knowing one, one which indicated he was aware of the madness which was now creeping into this border town. "I spoke with the guards, though, and they mentioned they might need all the help they can get. I didn't protest."

The smile lingered on her lips. "So you will help?"

"I'll help as long as I'm here."

"How long might that be?" Her eyes widened with hope and curiosity.

"For today and this evening. I have to return to Connel tomorrow morning."

The smile disappeared, and the delver was sad to see it go. She sighed and turned to leave. "I'll get you your stew and see about your room then."

For some reason he felt the need to explain, the need to bring back the smile to her face. She had shown him a moment of kindness. He did not want to accept that kindness under false pretenses, did not care to perpetuate the secrecy he had kept upon entering her town. He needed to open up to her, to tell her more than he had told the guard. He reached out with delver swiftness and gently took her arm just above the wrist.

She looked back at him with surprise, but not with aversion. She made no attempt to remove his hand. She only waited for an explanation.

"Before you go and get me that room," he whispered, "there's something I should tell you which I didn't tell the guards." He looked about before continuing to ensure no one was paying attention to them. No one was. "I'm a delver."

She looked at him with a bewildered expression, as if the statement meant nothing to her.

He continued to explain. "I'm full bred. I've been through the forests, the desert, and the hills west of here. I've seen some things which I never would have expected to see in my life."

The smile didn't quite return, but something akin to compassion filled her eyes and her expression. "We've all seen or heard strange things lately. As for you being a delver, that means little here, at least to most of us. It's not the delvers we're worried about."

"What is it you're worried about?" he continued whispering, but his tone contained the seriousness of his intentions. "I've seen different things in the past few days, things that almost defy explanation. I know your town must be facing something of that sort, but I don't know what."

It was Linda's turn to see if anyone was watching them. She noticed a man at the end of the bar finishing a brandy. He looked up and spotted her. He waved for another round.

"I'll be right back." She slid her arm away from his, almost reluctantly, and tended to the patron. She returned quickly.

"I don't know what it is you've seen," she began, "but I know what I have." She hesitated, as if she knew he would not believe what she was about to say. She spoke of it regardless. "Little creatures, little monsters with crossbows. I saw them myself. They came into town just after sunset. It was still just light enough to see them. They came in and attacked the general store at the northern edge of town. They took all the food and weapons they could lay their hands on. No one was ready for them. They were in and gone in an instant. But a lot of us

saw them. At first the mayor didn't believe the story, said it was a hoax. They came back again the next night. The captain of the guard took over after that. We've seen them again but they ran from the guards."

"Goblins," Ryson stated simply.

"Excuse me?"

"They're called goblins." He searched for better words, words to help her understand, but none existed. He considered the best way for him to explain his knowledge. "You don't have a Church of Godson here, do you?"

She shook her head.

It did not surprise Ryson. A town like this one, a town of order, wouldn't have much patience for followers of Godson. He tried to explain the best he could without a familiar reference point.

"The legends, the Book of Godson, they talk about creatures that used to walk the land. The goblins are one of those creatures. Apparently, they're back."

"You can't be serious?"

Ryson took no offense. He spoke calmly and rationally and pointed out the underlying frankness of the situation. "Are you serious about what you saw? Little creatures with crossbows? I can describe them for you as well. They had puffy swollen faces and large eyes. They wore breastplates of some kind of armor. They were mostly bald but had wisps of hair."

"You've seen them, too."

"They're goblins," he repeated patiently. "And I've seen them in Dark Spruce Forest."

"Why are they here?" Linda demanded pleadingly.

Ryson considered telling her of his meeting with the elves and of the sphere. He wished to continue the pure openness of the conversation. These fleeting moments had a cleansing effect upon his mind and his soul, as if finally speaking the details of his journey was proof enough they truly occurred.

He stopped himself, however, and did not speak of the sphere. It was not time, not yet. This poor woman, the entire town for that matter, was not prepared for such sudden changes. If the goblins had sent them into turmoil, what would knowledge of the sphere do for them?

He spoke honestly, but as he refrained from telling the guards of his heritage, he stopped short of mentioning the sphere of Ingar. "I assume they're here to steal supplies from your town. They appeared disorganized when I stumbled upon them in the forest. I know that doesn't tell you much but I have as many questions as you do. Right now, I'm just trying to make it through one mystery at a time. I know now that I have to return to Connel tomorrow. One of the oldest Godson churches is there. Hopefully, I'll find out more when I get there."

He stopped and waited. She seemed to want to ask more questions, but could not find how to pose them. He decided to place her attention back on himself and away from the goblins. "Anyway, I thought you should know that I'm a delver and what I've been through before you decided to get me a room. If you want, I'll leave now."

"No, I want you to stay," she responded firmly. Her eyes revealed a strength that even surpassed her tone. "I'll

get you your stew. We do need all the help we can get, even if it's just for one night."

Ryson bid her to stay for one more moment. "I have to ask you one more favor. Keep what I've said between the two of us. I don't want the guards to think I was lying to them. I just didn't know how they would react to me being a delver. I would also rather not have to answer questions about goblins just yet. I need to find out more for myself. I really don't have all the answers."

The smile finally returned fully to Linda's lips. It made it clear to Ryson that he could trust her. "I won't tell anyone. I know a little about delvers. They want to know everything they can about just about everything. Others know that, too. If word gets out, the captain may question you. It wouldn't be bad, but it might delay you. I doubt that would help you."

"You understand the situation very well," he complimented. "Time may or may not be important. I'm not sure, but I do get a little anxious when someone holds me up."

"I understand that, too." Her smile grew. "With that thought, let me get you that stew."

The stew was hot and fresh. The vegetables were probably up from the south where they were already harvesting the first rewards from an early planting. Only some of the potatoes tasted as if they were taken from a long season of cold storage. The bowl went down quick and he asked for a second with a slice of fresh bread.

The rest of that afternoon was spent in casual conversation with Linda, listening to the news from those who entered, or simply listening to the music. Ryson realized that he direly needed this moment of calm, far more than he needed sleep in fact. He had slept on his journey, but he never truly relaxed. Every moment was spent on guard. In this pleasant inn, he could finally afford to drop that guard. His tensed muscles eased slowly but surely. The ever present watchfulness evaporated, though not easily and not at first.

The first few times the door swung open, it jerked at his attention. He almost expected to see a band of goblins or a mountain shag barge inward, but only tired townsfolk stepped into the room. As time passed, the opening of the door would not even call for his glance.

He allowed his weight to sink into the soft cushions of the stool. His arms rested upon the bar top. He gladly told Linda stories of his adventures, but not the most recent. He kept his stories to the times before the quake, before everything had changed. He told her of exploring the hills northeast of Connel, the caves he found. She listened with genuine interest and asked many questions of why he did what he did.

They kept the conversation between themselves. For the most part, the other patrons let them be, except for when their glasses ran dry. Most knew Linda and were pleased to see her speaking with a young man. They also spied Ryson's sword. They were pleased to see that as well. The townsfolk carried no arms themselves for that was the job of the guard in this disciplined town. But they were all apparently aware of the raids and were relieved to see someone in their midst who appeared able to protect them.

Night crept across the town. More lamps and a fire in the stone hearth were lit. More and more people filled into the room. Obviously, they didn't like being alone the darker it became. Soon, even the free space offered to Ryson was needed, and he and Linda had to give up their privacy. They would no longer talk about delvers or explorations. They barely talked at all for Linda was now almost constantly busy, even with the help of newly arrived serving maids and lads.

She was able to manage one small moment to whisper a request of her own to Ryson. "I may not get a chance to talk to you again before you leave tomorrow, but I'd like to ask something of you. After you go to Connel and find out what you can, I have a favor. When you've learned all you can, come back here and tell me what's

really going on. I know it may take you a while, I don't expect you to be back in a day or maybe even a season, but I would like you to come back. I'll still be here. And I'll want to know what you found out."

"Agreed," Ryson said with a smile of his own.

She brushed his arm and expressed her gratitude with a smile that Ryson was now accustomed. She walked away reluctantly to the calls of patrons at the other end of the bar.

Ryson watched her move away for only a moment, before his attention was ripped from the barmaid with the ringing alarm of his own instincts. He jerked his head upward, sat erect in his chair lifting his ear to the highest point. He directed it toward the front of the inn. He focused his concentration on ignoring the din of the patrons around him and picking up every sound beyond the walls.

"Godson!" he muttered almost angrily.

The rest of the patrons went about their business. The talk was louder now, forcing the musicians to increase their own volume. All attention was on the business of the room. No one looked to the doors or to the windows. Their troubles were forgotten as they were together. Drinking, eating and speaking with friends and neighbors, they forced the recent misfortunes from their forethought.

Ryson maintained his position for a moment more. His eyes bore a hole through the door. His ears continued to sift through the clamor to pick out every vibration which warned him of danger. With a deep breath, he leapt from his stool.

Only a few noticed him at first, but all eyes were on him when he demanded the musicians cease their playing. As they conceded and the crowd grew to a silence, the reasons for his actions were now clear to all. The attention of every patron and every servant flew from Ryson to the door and windows.

Angry shouts rang out in the streets. They came from every direction, but thankfully, a distance from the front of the inn they occupied. The closest sounded many blocks away. Shuffling, running feet echoed in the distance. Orders of command echoed through otherwise silent streets, silent until a distant response brought a shiver to them all. Guttural voices answered in concert to the shouts of the guards. They carried contempt in tone and revealed great numbers.

Ryson recognized the voices and matched it to that of the goblins found at the base of Sanctum Mountain. They were attacking en masse, using the dark to their advantage. Their shouts lasted for but a moment, a defiant challenge for the guards to meet them. Beyond that, they would make no further calls to reveal their position.

Ryson considered what he learned of the goblins from his talks with Lief Woodson. If the elf's words were true, and Ryson had no reason to doubt them, the goblins would slaughter all they could lay their hands upon. The delver turned his attention back to the crowd within the Borderline Inn. He spoke with an iron will.

"Listen to me all of you. Stay calm and you will survive this night. Panic and you won't." He spoke clearly but quickly. "I'm going out there to see what I can do, only you can help protect your safety. Dim the lamps but get that fire burning hot."

No one questioned his authority. The sword at his side punctuated his command, and his orders were carried out without challenge. Linda threw three heavy logs on the fire as the other servants and a few patrons either extinguished or lowered the flames within the lamps. The corners of the room grew dark as the blazing fire was now the only true source of bright light.

Ryson continued giving orders. He pointed to three large men he presumed to be farmers sitting at the bar. "You three. Break at least three dozen legs off of those bar stools. Wrap the ends tightly with rags dipped in oil from the lamps. They'll make good torches. The rest of you move either behind or around the bar. Stay away from the windows and doors."

Ryson stepped aggressively to the door. His hand was now firmly wrapped about the hilt of his sword but he kept it sheathed. He opened the door a crack and gazed carefully outside. With sudden swiftness, he threw open the door. His arm left the door knob and whisked outside. In a blur, he had a hold of a confused, frightened woman and yanked her inside.

"It's alright," he comforted her as he directed her toward the others inside and shut the door behind her.

As he continued with his ear pressed upon the door and an eye upon a neighboring window, every person within the tavern followed his instructions. Soon the torches were constructed and the people were huddled in the center of the room.

Ryson looked back to them and gave his final commands. "Light two of the torches. Keep the rest ready by the fire. I want you two men at the door with the two lit torches. When the rags start to disintegrate, throw them back in the fire and light two more. Keep someone near each window but stay to the side and don't make a target of yourself. And watch for breaking glass. If something tries to get in, call for a torch and burn it. Keep the front door closed but unlocked. If you see one of your own running through the streets, get them inside quick. If something else tries to get in, put a torch in its face. You'll know what your enemy is when you see it. I'll try to keep an eye on this place, but I have to help outside. Your safety is as much in your own hands as anyone else's."

"We'll be alright," Linda called out, but she could not hide the look of concern for herself, for those around her, or for Ryson.

He nodded, opened the door, and leapt outside. The door shut behind him.

Once clear of the front of the tavern, Ryson crouched and surveyed the area. He quickly located a dark spot near a corner alley away from any lamp post. He moved to it in a heartbeat where he could use his night vision to assess the raid.

At the center of town and toward the east, the lamp lights remained lit, but many others at the western edge of town were now out. Darkness seemed to swallow an entire section of buildings. Shouts of the guard were replaced with shrieks of pain. Soon silence enveloped the area as much as the growing darkness. Shrouded rustling was now the only sound he could detect in that direction.

Orders of other guards could still be heard at the opposite side of town. They were moving closer to confront the sizable band of invaders, but they were moving slowly, cautiously.

Another light to the west was extinguished. The goblins were quite aware that the guards would have difficulty seeing in the dark. They were extinguishing the lamp lights systematically, probably sending out forward observers to handle the task while groups of others hid in the shadows with crossbows loaded.

Ryson gave another heed to the slowly approaching guard. He gauged their distance and speed and compared it to the closing edge of the darkness. The goblins would reach the inn before the guard. They would see the fire within and move to extinguish it.

Ryson bit down hard on his lip, almost drawing blood. He looked down at the sword, the hilt still in his grasp. "It'll give off a beacon every goblin within the town will see," he grumbled. His hand released the handle and

shot into his bag. He pulled out a rope and his knife. The knife went into its familiar spot between his teeth. The rope stayed in his hand. He darted towards the darkness.

With great care, the delver set about his initial task of locating the closest goblins, the ones responsible for extinguishing the lamp lights. He spotted them quickly after but four blocks. They moved with precision as they extinguished one lamp light after another. Moving in pairs, they climbed the posts using themselves as ladders. They were nothing if not efficient in this task, but they also seemed most absorbed by it. Their focus fixed solidly on this single objective and they paid little attention to anything else going on around them.

Moving within the shadows, staying out of any light, Ryson used his superior vision to pick and choose a path that led him around the lead goblins. Ryson passed them with ease, noting their single-mindedness of purpose. He wondered if any goblin could carry out more than one task at a time.

Once beyond the border of light and dark, Ryson moved with greater care. He sniffed the air, listened to the late night breeze before venturing around a corner or passing an intersection of roads. In but a few steps, he located a secondary group of foes, a handful of goblins a block behind the point.

He counted four, crouching in the darkness at the side of the road. They waited impatiently for the lead goblins to accomplish their tasks before they would venture forward. These creatures used the vanishing light as their cue. Their crossbows draped across their arms in firing position, they moved in concert. They noted movements in darkened buildings, obviously frightened townsfolk trapped in their homes that darkened their own lights hoping to be overlooked. For now, the goblins passed them. It was their mission to eliminate the guards first. If there was time, they would return to take care of the helpless and unarmed.

Ryson let the goblins pass before taking a position directly behind them. He stopped when they stopped, waited when they waited. When they moved again, he was on them.

The rope he held was short, but long enough for him to wrap around three before they even knew he was there. He pulled on it, hard. All three fell to the ground. Their cross bows dropped from their hands. One went off when it hit the ground. The short bolt sliced the air but harmlessly plunged into the side of a building. The other two remained cocked, but the bolts fell out of their firing position.

Ryson took both ends of the rope in one hand and held firmly as he set upon the fourth goblin. The rope pulled and dragged the first three, keeping them off balance and helpless. Their groaning alerted the only free goblin within their midst. It turned to face its attacker, but its crossbow was knocked from its hands by a swift kick before it even saw Ryson's face.

The dagger stayed in Ryson's teeth as his free hand slashed through the air to the goblins belt. He had the handle of the short sword before the goblin moved its arm. Showing only slight compassion, Ryson swung the flat part of the blade down upon the goblins head. It struck with a resounding thud, but made no cut in the scalp. The creature would live, but hopefully within the confinement of cells and under the watchful eyes of the town guard.

Ryson turned to the other three and knocked them upon their heads equally as hard. Only one was able to draw his sword in time, but the goblin was no match for the delver's speed and agility.

Ryson turned an ear to the heavy darkness off to the west. The clamor of the scuffle obviously alerted a larger party of goblins. He could hear them moving up fast, probably expecting to meet with the main body of the human guard.

For now, the delver ignored them. He spun towards the goblins at the point who were now working on yet another lamp. They were too busy to notice what was going on behind them. Ryson ran toward them at top

speed. The short sword remained in his hand just as the dagger remained in his clenched teeth.

One was leaning against the post standing on the other's shoulders when he reached them. He grabbed the higher goblin in one hand and tossed him like a handful of hay. It hit the ground in a heap, rolled over with a groan, then went silent.

With glaring eyes Ryson brandished the newly acquired short sword at the second goblin's throat.

The goblin backed against the post. Its small puffy hands seemed to tremble in indecision.

With his free hand, Ryson took the dagger from his teeth. With a weapon in both hands, he stood menacingly over the creature, ready to strike with both blades.

"Don't!" he growled and pointed with his eyes to the sheathed sword at the goblin's waist. "Call a retreat," he ordered again.

The goblin did not move.

Ryson instantly recalled his first encounter with goblins. He remembered how the mention of his name appeared to stir a reaction as well as compliance from that goblin, and he spoke with blood-boiling anger. "My name is Ryson Acumen. I'm a delver and you won't escape. I'll see to that."

The goblins eyes widened ever so slightly. He looked down the road toward the approaching goblins. They were barely in sight and moving too slow for his liking.

"You will let me go if I do, yes?" the goblin demanded with as much fear as loathing.

Ryson bit back his growing anger. "You, yes. That is if you call for the retreat right now. The other one and the four back there are my prisoners. Now call retreat or you won't be so lucky!"

Without hesitation, the goblin opened its mouth and called out with strange, unintelligible words.

Ryson kept his attention upon the goblin in front of him but listened for obvious signs of retreat to the rear. Whatever the goblin said, it clearly sent the desired message. Ryson heard the distinguishable sounds of scurrying feet. The goblins were moving away fast, out of the town.

"Now you must let me go," the goblin demanded with a nervous watch upon the two blades which continued to threaten him.

Ryson sensed the swirling emotions in the goblin. The fear for its own near worthless life, its lackluster indifference to those it helped kill, and its bubbling desire to strike out against the delver. All such sentiment was as clear to the Ryson as if it were carved in the goblin's breast plate. While it did not reach for its sword now, instead waited for the promised release, it was clear that the goblin would return with malicious intentions.

Ryson thought of the town and Linda. They were lucky he was here this night, but he would be gone in the morning and unable to protect them. If the goblins returned, many more would probably die, maybe even Linda.

If he stayed, the Sword of Decree would stay with him. Again, his vow to Mappel echoed in his ear, this time it mocked him. He had done all that was asked of him. He assisted Lief in reaching Sanctum and helped bring Shayed's word to Mappel. Even now, the algors were probably reaching Connel. He need only return this

blasted weapon which he did not want in the first place. It was all that required his departure from Burbon, but he could not ignore it. He had to leave, yet he had to protect this town as well.

Ryson turned one option over in his mind. He needed to convince the goblins that Burbon was not a worthy target for their ill-will, and he had a messenger before him. He stared deeply into the swollen face of the goblin.

"Before I let you go, I want to know your name."

The goblin sneered, but could not help recoil from the delver's searching stare. It responded with a whining protest. "That was not part of the deal."

Ryson shook his head and exhaled heavily. "That's alright. You don't have to tell me anything. I know your scent now. I'd be able to find you again if I had to look through a hundred goblins. But I want you to know that I'll be watching this town. If anything happens to it, I'm coming after you and you will answer to me. Understand?"

The goblin only spat.

With the swiftest of strikes, he smacked the goblin on the shoulder with the dull edge of the short sword. The motion was so quick it defied the goblin's vision. It was meant to punctuate Ryson's own intentions, to prove his words were no idle boast. "Remember what I said. I'm a delver and I will find you."

The goblin's expression turned to sullen concern and Ryson believed his words had found their mark in the goblin's cowardly spirit.

"Move!" Ryson shouted. "Or draw your sword. Take your pick."

The goblin chose the former and sped off into the night.

Ryson watched with grim satisfaction. He truly doubted this goblin would return, and he could only hope it would convince any others to avoid Burbon as well.

He allowed the fleeing goblin a few moments before addressing other important matters. He lifted the fallen goblin off the ground and brought it to the other four that remained unconscious in the road. He tied them all together before leaving them.

With the town still dark, he took the time to make a careful reconnaissance of every street and every alley in the western part of town. He found the tracks of the goblins and followed them to ensure they had all left town. None remained. They did, however, leave their mark.

Ryson found the bodies of eight guards scattered about the streets and alleys that remained in darkness. None were left alive, though most probably died in slow agony. The short arrows were not shot to kill immediately. They plunged into the stomach, the upper shoulders, the thighs and the back. One had as many as a dozen riddled among his limbs.

Ryson again remembered Lief's words regarding the goblins and his distaste for them. The elf had warned Ryson that the goblin cared little for the sanctity of life, would not care for the life of a delver, or apparently a human. The proof was all around him. He threw the short sword to the ground and finished his reconnaissance.

Satisfied that the immediate danger had ended, the delver returned to the captured goblins, finding them

surrounded by a half dozen guards. Many of the lamps were being relit and Ryson saw them clearly as he approached.

The guards wore minimal armor and carried spears just as those that stopped him that same afternoon. One, however, wore a long sword at his side and a vest of red cloth over his chest plate.

Upon noticing Ryson stepping forward, the guards turned and held their spears with menace. The man with the sword, though, merely cast a suspicious glance. He called out with a commanding tone.

"Are you responsible for this?" the question boomed out across the silence.

"I am," Ryson stated simply and continued walking forward as if the spears meant nothing to him.

"And what of the creatures responsible for the raid?"

"They're called goblins and they're gone," Ryson replied flatly. He walked past more than one guard, considering them nothing more than gnats buzzing around his ear.

"Stand down your arms!" came an order from the red vested soldier to which the guards reluctantly adhered.

"You're the captain?" Ryson asked as he now stood in front of him.

"I am. Who might you be?"

"Ryson Acumen."

The captain nodded and looked to the sword which remained sheathed at Ryson's side. "I was told of your arrival. You're the stranger from Connel. Tell me what happened here?"

Ryson treated the command as more of a casual request and responded in kind. "Your men told me this afternoon that they might need my help. I heard the commotion and simply did what they asked."

The captain shook his head slowly but succinctly. "That's not what I mean and you know it. I want to know how you were able to capture these goblins and thwart their attack."

"I'm a delver," Ryson admitted. "I was able to sneak up on the forward attackers before they saw or heard me. I took them out and forced one to call the retreat."

"Any reason why you didn't reveal that little secret to the guards this afternoon? If you did, I would've known about it." The captain did not hide his annoyance with this simple fact.

Ryson revealed his own irritation, which was of a greater degree than that of the captain's. "And what would you have done if I did tell them?"

"I would have wanted to see you."

"And you would have asked a lot of questions, kept me under wraps until you could figure out what to do with me. Isn't that right?" The delver's words snapped from his mouth. It was the tongue lashing he wanted to give to the guard that blocked his passage earlier that day. He had found the man in charge, the man ultimately responsible for the stationed guard, and he bore into him. "You probably would have kept me locked up until you could ask all your mindless questions. Well if I allowed that, I wouldn't have been able to save you the way I did. You would have all walked right into annihilation."

"Don't tell me what I would and wouldn't do!" the captain started angrily, but Ryson wouldn't let him finish.

"I'm not going to argue with you," Ryson flashed. "You and I both know what would have happened. Just be grateful it didn't. You have eight comrades dead back there. I kept there from being more. Now I've given you four prisoners to question, that should help you learn how to protect yourselves from these things. And by Godson you better learn. I gave one of them a warning to leave this town alone. I told it I'd hold it responsible for anything that happened here. Well now, I'm telling you the same. These things won't go away just because you want them to. You have to do more than just carry around those stupid spears. Build walls and gates. Put guards in towers that are able to recognize when trouble's near."

The captain's eyes blazed with fury. "You dare tell me how to protect this town. I have served in over ..."

"I don't care what you've done in the past. I know it didn't help those eight men that are dead back there. Just remember what I said. I'm holding you responsible for the safety of this town. Now I've done more than my share, so I'm not going to stand here and waste time with you. I left some people at the Borderline Inn. I'm going back there now. If you want to join me and see what they say, that's your choice. But if you want to try and stop me, well good luck. I don't tire easily."

He gave the captain a glaring stare of defiance before walking away. As he did, he called out one more time to him. "By the way, I'm staying for the night, but I'm leaving for Connel tomorrow. Don't even think about stopping me. I'll make you look bad."

As Ryson turned back toward the inn, he reigned in his open hostility. He tried to force the unpleasantness of the evening from his mind. For the moment, the guards let him be. This allowed him a respite to clear the anger from his thoughts.

As he reflected upon his own actions, he realized how ill-tempered he himself was becoming. The captain did nothing beyond his own duty and nothing to truly solicit Ryson's ire, yet Ryson was more than willing to apply a tongue lashing. He had found it satisfying, and that in itself seemed out of place for his usually good-natured character. Maybe it was his first encounter with the guard that brought out his hostilities. Maybe it was the tension created by the drastic changes in the land. Or perhaps the taint of evil in the magic was now reshaping itself to infect other races as well as the elves.

With this unpleasant thought, Ryson wondered how the taint would eventually destroy them. Would the poison simply lead to slow agonizing illness and death, or would it bring insanity? Was this the start of a violent madness which would turn them against each other? He cursed the sphere, cursed the changes.

Chapter 20

Open air. Whether it is in thick forests, tall mountains or the congestion of bustling human towns, this was not the place for dwarves. Tun and Jon Folarok were uncomfortable the moment they left the underground city of Dunop with their elfin escorts. They were as unhappy with the lush cover of Dark Spruce Forest as they were with the open roads built by the humans. The thickest cluster of intertwining leaves and branches was no substitute for solid rock.

Dunop rested nearly a league under the surface, a city within the rock, and a home for countless dwarves. Tunnels served as alleys and streets, hollow caves as homes. Snaking channels supplied underground water for a myriad of purposes, just as tubular openings broke through to the surface to supply air and ventilation. A wide open cavern sat in the middle as the town center. Tunnels of varying heights and widths spiraled outward to the far edges of this underground city like a massive spider web and formed pathways for all travel.

Some of the tunnels expanded beyond the borders of the city. Most of these were isolated byways to neighboring dwarf villages or cities. Only a handful branched beyond the crust of the land and into open air, and these were seldom used.

There were but two reasons for a dwarf to venture outside the security of their tunnels. One, to scout the activity of humans digging mine shafts near their underground cities, and two, to obtain resources which were not available beneath the surface of Uton. They normally did not gather such necessities themselves, but depended upon trade with the elves.

The dwarves continued an uneasy but mutually advantageous relationship with the elves throughout the ages, beyond the time of division. They traded stone for wood, as well as gems for food. As for the rest of the inhabitants of the outside world, the dwarves held little care.

Tun and Jon had left Dunop with their elfin escorts after sunset to reduce the pain to the dwarves' eyes. Neither Jon nor Tun had spent any extended time in daylight and they were not accustomed for the onslaught of the bright rays into their naturally widened pupils.

Centuries of cave dwelling, and tunnel travel brought the entire dwarf race the ability to see in limited illumination. They lived by the light of small fires, and the reflection of light from the outside world. Strategically placed gems and silver coated mirrors delivered adequate lighting through the smallest of tunnels and air holes, but it could not compare to the broad, direct rays of the sun. It would take time for their eyes to adjust.

There were other adjustments to make as well. Their lungs were not used to the high oxygen content of free air. Taking small breaths and exhaling infrequently, the two dwarves reduced the lightheadedness that enveloped them as they closed upon Dunop's exit to the outside. The air of their caves might have seemed stale to the elves, but it was the air breathed by Tun and Jon for all their lives.

Their leaving was also not done under the best of circumstances. News brought by the elves was unsettling, bringing a wide array of curses and doubt. The Sphere of Ingar was never a topic which enthralled the dwarf people and the fact that it was now loose and endangering the land angered and clouded their thinking. When the elfin representatives declared that the dwarves were needed to destroy the Sphere of Ingar rather than re-entomb it, it simply added to the chaos.

Magic was something the dwarves learned to live without with greater ease than any other race. They were the most resistant to its forces as well as the least capable of utilizing it for their own purposes. Even during the times of legend, when sorcerers were common, there were only a few dwarves with the power to make any true use of the energy which graced the land. To nearly every dwarf, magic was an aid to the other races, a

detriment to theirs, and a central reason for their bloodiest battles, thus the dwarves gladly accepted the task of entombing the sphere long ago at the elf Shayed's command. It was with such vigor, that Sanctum became the nearly impenetrable fortress it now was.

Returning to Sanctum, however, now stirred an eruption of emotion. Those fearing the sphere argued that the sphere must be dealt with no matter what the cost. If it had to be destroyed, then so be it. They survived the times of legend when magic was free in the land, they would learn to do so again.

The separatist dwarves, those fearing the outside world and especially the humans, insisted there were other things, more dangerous things, to worry about. They insisted the dwarf people remain out of all external dealings. Let the sphere spit out its tainted magic, they argued. Better than giving the humans a chance to show how they could use it to take over what was left of the surface, and perhaps even the underlands.

The royal family of Folarok was as well divided. King Bol and his wife quarreled for nearly an entire day without settling the matter. Bol sensed a need to assist the elves while Queen Yave belabored any task which might lead to dwarf involvement in the affairs of other races. The argument grew heated over the passing time and the elf escorts were forced to wait as the royal family bickered over what direction to take.

The eldest son, Tun, and heir to the throne, agreed with his mother. The problems of the outside world, now almost completely manipulated by the humans, were no longer their concern. How many caverns were lost due to the endless mining operations of the humans? How many cities did they have to destroy themselves to keep the humans from uncovering them? All that work was done to keep the existence of the dwarves a secret from the humans. Now, Mappel of the elves simply expected them to come out of hiding and make their presence known to all? The idea was simply absurd. The great city of Morred was reduced to rubble only twelve seasons ago because the humans began to drill directly over the city center. Was that now done for nothing?

King Bol rebuffed his eldest son. He reminded the brash prince of other considerations, of the elves, an important ally to the dwarves. Even if the dwarves could somehow escape the tainted magic, what of their friends? Could they simply allow the elves to perish? The relationship between the two peoples was as important as any relations with neighboring cities. Sending assistance was not only a moral obligation, it was necessary for their very survival. Or, he questioned, did Tun really believe the dwarves were ready to return to the outside in order to obtain wood for fires and food to eat?

The younger of Bol's two sons, Jon, attempted to remain a casual observer of the argument. It was not his place to make such weighty decisions. The throne was not his, would not be his, and he did not want it.

Unfortunately, Bol always managed to drag Jon into any conflict with Tun. Perhaps he only sought an ally, for Tun always seemed to take the queen's side and Bol found himself outnumbered and unable to get in more than two words at a time.

Jon never appreciated his father demanding an opinion of him. He did not wish to be in conflict with any of them. Over the long years, however, he learned Bol would drive him incessantly until he spoke his mind. Recently, Jon stopped even trying to refuse. He no longer wished to deal with the constant prodding, thus he spoke out at the king's first request. But he also learned to speak with a guarded tongue, with a voice of caution yet guarded optimism. He would never say that one or the other option was correct. Instead, he would point to the validity of both arguments and pull a compromise solution out of his desire to remain as neutral as possible.

Such was his reaction in this case. Based on what was told to them by the elves, he concluded that both options held little that was good for the dwarf people. Destroying the sphere meant a return of magic and all the evils that come with it. Ignoring the sphere meant leaving the elves to die; clearly two propositions where

the dwarves would suffer under each scenario. He could only offer that someone should go speak to Mappel to see if there was yet a third option.

Bol frowned and Tun glared but neither spoke outwardly against the calm logic of Jon's words. Bol decided that two dwarves would accompany the elves to see Mappel, Jon and Tun. The two dwarves grimaced and attempted to sway their father's decision. Bol would not budge. Such a weighty problem required the future leaders of Dunop's attention. They would depart immediately.

Upon their leaving, Bol made a jarring quip toward Tun that he should take heed of his younger brother's wise advice; a common remark that managed to always drive Tun further from his brother.

Jon groaned silently, hating being placed in such a tense situation. He had no quarrel with his brother, no desire to compete with him or steal his glory. In fact, his only wish was to take a position on the board of council for the constant renovation of Dunop's construction. He had no desire to lead or solve the problems of his people. He clung to the natural born tendencies of the dwarves, to dig and tunnel through the rock and earth, to design artful yet practical caverns for all to see and enjoy. For now, though, he accepted his role and followed the edicts of the king, his father.

Tun and John followed the elves through a seldom used tunnel which led to a long overgrown section of Dark Spruce. The weeds were high around the opening and only one nearly invisible trail led deeper into the forest. The two dwarves would be taken directly to Connel to make up for lost time, but they would bypass the busy roads and all villages.

They traveled at night through dark pastures and empty fields. Elfin escorts kept bows ready and watchful eyes for river rogues and shags. The dwarves moved sullenly at the direction of their escorts. Travel on the first evening stopped just before sunrise as the dwarves fashioned a trench in a field left to fallow. Both elf and dwarf remained out of sight during all of daylight.

As the second night fell, they took to travel once more, reaching the outskirts of Connel almost exactly at midnight. They noted human guards on horseback taking position at odd places. It would be difficult to sneak around them but not impossible. They were unaware that these were the men sent out by Consprite to escort them to the Church of Godson. Through elf cunning, they avoided all contact and brought themselves to the steps of the church without being seen by a single human.

One of the escort elves rapped on the door lightly to announce their arrival, but did not wait for anyone inside to answer. He opened the door himself and whisked the entire party inside.

After brief introductions, the escorts were on their way back to Dark Spruce, and the newly arrived dwarf princes were directed to a meeting room in the basement of the church.

The two dwarves found it quite comfortable in this room. A stone staircase led straight down to a vast chamber where walls were comprised of dark gray bricks. Small lamps on the walls gave enough light to read by, but little more. The air was slightly stale and musty, very much like the air of their home. The heels of their boots clicked against the granite floor. There was not a single window to be found. Except for the large oak door at the top of the stairs, the room was completely enclosed. It gave the dwarves a sense of security they had longed for since leaving the tunnels of Dunop.

The room contained several long wooden tables, not as sturdy as the oak door, but sufficient to hold the meals for many hungry men and women. Long benches rested at opposite sides. Most were empty except for those about a table at the head of the room. There sat four; Mappel and Lief, the interpreter Stephen Clarin, and the Reader Matthew.

They all watched the two newcomers approach. Mappel and Lief simply nodded. Stephen showed slightly greater interest, but the reader stared in wide-eyed wonder.

The two men that approached their table would barely reach the top of Matthew's chest, but their shoulders were wider than any other here. Jon and Tun both wore long beards which hung from their chiseled features. The hair on their heads also draped long past their shoulders. Tun's was as dark as coal, while Jon's contained slivers of gray. Though younger than Tun, Jon allowed the tensions within his family to take their toll upon him, and thus, streak his hair with silver markers of his worry. Both pairs of eyes sat under bushy eyebrows and wrinkled foreheads, and each had fierce noses. They wore capes of dark purple and gem encrusted chest plates marked with the family crest. Tun carried a wide single-bladed maul upon his belt, sharpened by the hardest gems. Jon's weapon hung less conspicuous, nearly behind his back. It was a dull headed mace, much smaller than Tun's axe and with no sharp edge.

The two approached slowly while gauging their surroundings as well as those that watched them. Jon's expression softened at the sight of the elves, but Tun continued to glare warily at all.

As the two dwarves stepped up to the table, the other four rose to greet them.

Mappel smiled softly as he offered a greeting. "The presence of the two princes warms my aging heart. I could not have asked for more. It has been a long time since I have seen either of you. If I recall, Jon had still not grown his beard. I see now that he is graying before his brother," the elder elf chuckled warmly, for indeed the sight of the princes offered him great hope. He would not have to waste time speaking with an advisor or counselor. Their arrival meant the dwarves held no doubts of the severity of the situation. Time saved. Mappel made dignified introductions, presenting both dwarves to each at the table.

Lief nodded and bowed slightly to the two brothers. He then returned to his seat upon the bench. He sat rigid, clearly less comfortable than the dwarves with being in this cave like atmosphere.

Stephen Clarin smiled deeply at their introduction. A flicker of recognition appeared in the eye of the interpreter. He was indeed delighted to meet two of the dwarf people, happier still to find they belonged to the royal family of Folarok, as if that name meant something to him.

As for Matthew, he gaped with an open mouth at the sight of the dwarves. Short, sturdy men with gray faces seemingly chiseled in stone. Their arms were scant in length but thick in muscle. Matthew would not have been surprised if they could dig through stone with nothing more than their powerful fingers. They spoke with deep but soft voices which barely echoed off the far corners of this hollow room. He would later learn that dwarves controlled the pitch of their voice to reduce all echo to a minimum, a quality absolutely necessary for people that lived in caves. If all the dwarves in Dunop let their voice echo from the roofs of their cave city, Dunop would crumble within a year upon its deaf inhabitants.

With the introductions complete, Jon and Tun joined the others on a bench. Tun took the lead and placed himself down across from Mappel, then directed Jon to take a place by his left. They sat side by side, but subtly separated from the humans and elves. The space between the dwarves and the others at the long table was miniscule, but no less obvious. The underlying message of division was not lost upon Mappel, causing his smile to fade, but he quickly bit back his own anxieties and addressed the prince with ease of tongue.

"I hope your travel was without burden," Mappel began but Tun cut him off.

"Our travel is not the point of this meeting," he spoke with the authority of a king, as if his father had already passed on and it was now his word which was law. "Your messengers brought disquieting news to Dunop, news I would like explained immediately."

"Very well," Mappel stated with an even voice. He quickly, but thoroughly, described the events which led to the calling of this meeting. He began with the quake and Lief's early suspicions. He noted the arrival of Ryson Acumen into the fold and the journey to Sanctum, including the meetings with goblins and undead alike. He told the dwarves of the return of the magic and all it had brought with it. He told them, with gravity edging his voice, of the appearance of Shayed's spirit at Sanctum. He allowed Lief to tell in exact words what was spoken. When the younger elf finished the verbatim description of the event, Mappel cast a cutting stare at the older dwarf.

"It is why this gathering now takes place. In order to follow the instructions of Shayed every race which played a role in the Wizard War must again come together. To this end, I have sent word to all the races. Your arrival here is greatly appreciated, but it is also greatly necessary, as is the presence of everyone at this table. I can not help but feel we are all being guided by benevolent forces. Otherwise, I would have never dreamed of such a swift gathering of such needed elements. Sanctum must now be breached by our own forces. By those that are gathered here now, I believe we are well on our way of obtaining that goal. We must reach the sphere and destroy it. Otherwise, it will lay waste to the land."

Tun, who during the dissertation listened intently, but appeared skeptical at many points, spoke with his heavy doubts dripping from every word.

"You know this for fact?" he asked dubiously.

Mappel took no offense. He answered the question with the calm of an even sea. "It is fact that the sphere was buried long ago to protect the land and its inhabitants. It is fact that it is again free. It is as much fact that the taint of poison remains upon the energies which now flow freely from the sphere over the entire land. Yes, these are facts that can not be denied."

"But is it a fact that the sphere will obliterate the land? Is it a fact that it must be destroyed?" Tun continued to question.

"These are the words of Shayed," Mappel spoke in earnest. "They mark the words of the last soul to speak for every race. We have but no choice to heed her warnings and her instructions, and to accept them as fact. The sphere must be destroyed."

"Just like that? With or without the consent of others with as much stake as you?"

Lief joined the discourse and he scowled and grumbled with impatience at Tun's doubts. "You are not being poisoned as we are."

Mappel kept his eyes on Tun but held a hand toward Lief. "The magic will turn the taint of poison to all races eventually. Debating whom is more at risk is not an issue. It is true, we all have the same at stake."

"Do we?" Tun raised his voice slightly to accent his disagreement. "Will the return of pure magic, as you insist is the only solution, benefit all equally? I think not. I think there are other alternatives we might explore."

"You do not understand." Mappel's words carried more a plea for comprehension than any other emotion. "The wisdom of Shayed has made it clear we have no other choice. The sphere must be destroyed. We must all learn to live with the consequences, for there is no alternative."

Tun seethed. A storm of anger washed over his cold countenance. "It is you that doesn't understand. Elves. Humans! You are the most perverse at bending the magic to your own will. Little do you see how the magic was no more than a curse to my people before the time of the sphere. We have no great desire to see the return

of magic. Elves and humans, however, will see their ranks of sorcerers and wizards grow. Even the lowly algor will benefit by generating healers. My people have no such natural tendencies to gain such benefits."

Mappel refuted the claim, spoke with hardened determination to make the dwarf prince see the clear logic. "It is not from this standpoint we make this decision. We base it on the instructions of Shayed, who has always spoken for all."

"She may have spoken for every race, but her spirit is still elf," Tun uttered, not trying to sound disrespectful but making it clear that he was not convinced. "I do not question her appearance before Lief Woodson and Ryson Acumen, and be advised this is something I could do. The return of a spirit so old could have us arguing in itself for days. I will, however, give you the benefit of this doubt. I believe Shayed spoke upon Sanctum, but I question her instructions. The destruction of the sphere goes much further than simply entering Sanctum, something which was never meant to be done. It holds consequences beyond that. You yourself must admit this act will cause the return of wild magic back to the land. This is something which affects the lives of my people as the poison affects yours. The dwarves can not afford to place their very existence in the hands of others with their own interests at stake."

Mappel held his voice steady. "You must acknowledge that even dwarf scrolls confirm Shayed's wisdom. Never before were her motives questioned as biased toward the elves."

"It is not being questioned now," Tun stated roughly. "What is at issue here is the right of the dwarf people to make decisions for themselves. While you might not wish to examine what such actions will mean to my people, it is my responsibility. One day I will be king in Dunop. My people will have to trust in my wisdom and my judgment. Will they be so willing to cast faith in a dwarf who does not truly care for their well being?"

"Your presence here now attests to your worthiness to be their king. Your concern for their safety affirms your compassion, just as your desire to seek more attractive options establishes your sense of duty to all your people. But your unwillingness to accept the undeniable detracts from all these qualities. As a leader and as an heir to the throne, you must accept the situation when there is no easy answer, when you must make a difficult decision and choose the lesser of two evils. You say the return of magic will not benefit your people. I say the alternative is the extinction of us all, including the dwarves."

"I am not ready to concede that point," Tun responded firmly.

Mappel sighed and looked toward the younger prince.

Jon watched and listened carefully, but he had not yet offered a single opinion. Now, he avoided the gaze of the elder elf, uncomfortably examining anything else around him.

Mappel would not let him escape. "And what of you, Jon? Do you agree with your older brother?"

Jon coughed before answering. His voice was steady, not a tremble escaped his lip, his tone soft and balanced. "I agree with weighing all the options," he said carefully as if his head waited on a chopping block and the wrong word might lead to the swift swing of a blade. His brother's stare made it feel as if it was.

Jon continued, avoiding his brother's scowl and maintaining a sweeping view of all the others at the table. "The emergence of the sphere from Sanctum seems to be a certain fact. In our travel, I noticed signs I could not ignore. It is also difficult not to simply sense the change in the air itself. Establishing that the sphere is free from its prison means we all, every race, now face a great dilemma. The sphere must be dealt with. If the only alternatives are destroying the sphere or facing extinction, I would have to agree that the sphere must be destroyed. However, if it is my brother's contention that other possibilities exist, I would suggest we seek

them out and weigh their worth as well."

Mappel found little encouragement in Jon's carefully weighted response. Why could they not understand that Shayed had stated there was no other option? He wondered how long they might debate the issue before accepting this one undeniable fact. Such a thought brought another concern, one he was willing to share with the hesitant dwarves.

"I will remind you that while time has not yet become a factor, it may yet have its relevance. The taint of poison will eventually cause greater sickness in my people as well as other races as it attunes to them."

If not a deaf ear, Tun Folarok turned an apathetic one towards Mappel's concern. "Unless the enemy is at your gate, there is always time to ponder the alternatives."

"Then let us hear some of these alternatives!" Lief demanded emotionally. "Your brother has admitted the sphere is free, admits something must be done, but offers no option. What of you? What else can be done?"

"Close the fissure," Tun said bluntly, in blatant rebuff of Lief's outburst.

Mappel interceded and attempted to bring a calm tone back to the debate. "According to Shayed, the sphere will break free again. You must remember that the sphere has gained an awareness of its burial. Enclosing the sphere is no longer a viable solution."

"Maybe Shayed is mistaken," Tun argued still glaring at Lief. "How will we know that simply closing the fissure in the mountain won't suffice unless we try it? If it was nothing more than a natural occurrence which broke the mountain side, sealing it would solve the problem. The sphere would remain buried and we would all return to our normal lives. Would anything be lost in trying?"

"Time," Mappel replied.

"Time may be gained as well. The truth is we have no way of knowing. You are worried about the poison flowing freely over the land. Sealing the fissure would end that, at least temporarily, perhaps permanently. Once the opening is sealed, you could station guards at Sanctum to watch for changes. If you so wish, we could continue these talks after the fissure is closed in order to discuss how to deal with such matters in the future. If the energy breaks free again, we will know that the attempt failed, but we will be better prepared for other options. If the sphere needs to be destroyed, at least we will know we tried other alternatives first."

"And what if the sphere grows stronger in this time? What if the chance to destroy it fades as we wait outside?"

"Is that a fact or an assumption?"

"It is an assumption based on fact. The sphere has obviously grown strong enough to break free this time. A power it did not have when it was first buried. That in itself allows me to conclude that it is growing stronger as time passes. I also return to the words of Shayed. She has stated that the sphere is gaining a greater consciousness of its surroundings. At this time, it may not know we are aware of its freedom and wish to end its threat to the land. That would be a distinct advantage if we were to make an assault upon Sanctum. If, however, our first attempt is to simply re-bury the sphere, it may consider us a threat in the future. The sphere has great power. If it wishes, it could block us from ever coming close again. We must make our first attempt a successful one. There is no room for trial and error."

Tun shook his head strenuously. "That is simply more conjecture on your part. Again, I do not wish to sound as if I'm questioning Shayed. In respect for her contribution to all the races, I would not do such a thing. I will,

however, question your interpretation of all these events. You are making a large assumption when you state that the sphere may block us from entering Sanctum if our first attempt is to close the fissure."

Lief spoke again, this time with greater control. "Do you know how difficult it would be to close that opening? I saw it. Not only is it protected by an invisible barrier, Sanctum is a mountain of solid rock. This is no mound of dirt or loose gravel. Once granite is broken, you can't simply stick it back together. The only thing you could possibly do is fill the opening up with loose debris. What will that accomplish? If the sphere has the power to break through solid rock, it will surely brush away loose dirt."

Tun grimaced. His face became flushed, but he too maintained a semblance of control. "First, I am not yet convinced the fissure was caused by the sphere. In fact, I find that difficult to believe. I will grant that natural tremors are rare for the area of Sanctum's base, but it is not an impossibility. This may be nothing more than a once in a millennium occurrence. It may never happen again, ever. Second, I will thank you not to tell dwarves about their greatest talents. You speak to me as if I know nothing about rock and dirt. I know more now than you could learn in a dozen of your lifetimes, and I know how long elves live. My brother is far more interested in these aspects, so I will let him answer if it is possible to seal the fissure giving it far greater strength than it had before the quake even occurred."

Jon blinked but did not hesitate in answering. While he found little encouragement in the subject matter of the sphere, speaking of reconstructing Sanctum allowed him a topic of comfort. "I believe that any fissure can be sealed effectively. And yes, the structural integrity can be reinforced to maintain greater stress. As for the seams, they can be sealed to a point where not even an expert builder could locate them. As for the time ..." he hesitated as he put a hand to his chin. His gaze coursed the ceiling as he made calculations in his head. "With skilled dwarves, I doubt time would be a factor at all. If I had a look at the fissure, I would be able to give an accurate estimate."

"Then, maybe that is our first step." Tun took back the reins of the conversation. "Escort us to Sanctum. Let us look for ourselves."

"That may be a mistake," Mappel dictated with tenacity. "Countless approaches to Sanctum may give warning to the sphere. I do not think we can afford to lose the advantage of surprise."

"You speak as if the sphere is capable of thought," Tun replied almost mockingly.

The flippant tone of the remark was too much for the elder elf to accept. "It is!" Mappel said with his frustration finally becoming apparent. "I will continue to point to the words of Shayed until this ceiling falls upon your stubborn head. We can not re-entomb the sphere. That course of action is no longer available to us. In her own words, she stated the sphere must be destroyed. And she also stated that it now has an awareness. It also has the ability to react, although again by Shayed's admission, its reactions are slow. We must take advantage of that. Wasted efforts of examining the fissure or closing the fissure can not, will not, be tolerated. I will send an army of elves to be slaughtered in Sanctum to destroy the sphere before I allow you to approach the mountain."

Stephen Clarin stood up from the bench before Tun could respond angrily. "Do not drive us all apart," he stated with an emotional plea. Tears filled his eyes even as a smile grew upon his lips. His face glowed with an inner joy as if his soul was touched by singing angels.

His sudden outburst brought the attention of the others upon him. He took the time to look in each of their faces, all the while he appeared as if listening to some far away voice. The glow about him grew in its radiance. His smile deepened, a smile of a prophet touched by God. He could not tremble for such was the power in the revelation before him. It strengthened him, doubled and re-doubled his faith. He held his shoulders as broad and erect as the dwarf prince. When he continued to speak, determination as well as bliss

accented each word. "These are the two dwarves I see entering Sanctum. They will enter with others. I will be there, Lief Woodson will be there and another elf. I see the name of Ryson Acumen and four others as well. I can not yet identify them, but they will be there. We will enter Sanctum as instructed by Shayed, enter with the will and the desire to destroy the sphere."

Silence filled the chamber. Even Tun held his tongue as he examined the interpreter with a perplexed expression. Indeed, all eyes were now upon Stephen. The joyous glow surrounded them all now and removed the anger and frustration from each. Mappel found his voice first.

"You did not speak of this when you first told me of your visions."

"Godson did not make it clear to me until this moment," Stephen responded. "When the two princes entered this room, the vision began to clear in the back of my mind. I tried to listen to the conversation, but Godson's word would not be denied. The more I tried to concentrate on what was being said, the clearer the picture became. I will be involved as will the others I spoke of, including Tun and Jon Folarok."

"What is this?" Tun asked with only curiosity toning his words. He showed no anger or irritation at the assumptions of the interpreter.

It was Matthew who responded. "He is graced by Godson, Tun Folarok. He has been given the gift of foresight as well as insight. He has revealed the secrets of the prophecies of Godson to us. He is now proving to be a prophet as well."

Tun said nothing. He simply stared at Stephen in wordless wonder. The interpreter stood with such an expression of pure enlightenment, he doubted anyone could question anything he said.

Stephen returned the look with tears now rolling down his face. He spoke with a gentle voice. "I don't expect you to lose your doubts with this revelation, although I have lost mine. It is the will of Godson you will be convinced, I will simply let it happen. Hold to your doubts as long as you wish, in the end, you will see the truth."

A response came from across the table but not from the dwarf.

"You're telling him to continue to argue the point even after what you have seen?" Mappel asked with great surprise.

"He may do as he wishes. I have faith that all will be as I have seen."

Tun finally found his voice. He spoke to the interpreter allowing the greatest degree of respect yet shown. "You puzzle me interpreter. I almost would like to think this is some kind of trick, but for some reason I see in your face that it is not. I know of Godson and the power he has over his followers as well as the very land itself. I will not question that power, but I will do as you say. I will hold to my doubts. If it will be as you say, I can only assume there is something left to be done yet to convince me."

Mappel blinked his eyes in bewilderment. He could not fathom what had happened before him. Even as Stephen returned to his seat, he had no idea of what to say or do next. Nothing had been settled, but it seemed as if all debate had ended. Stephen had advised Tun to hold onto his doubts until the dwarf himself had seen clearly to release them. He looked about the table in confusion.

"What is it we must do to remove your doubts, Tun?" the elf finally asked.

"I don't know," the dwarf responded with less combativeness in his voice. "But I still hold to them. The return

of the magic is very unsettling to me. As such, I will not rush headlong into any decision which involves destroying the sphere until I am certain that it our only option."

"If Shayed's word can not convince you of that, I don't know what can. It seems as if we are at an impasse. Do you suggest we simply wait here until you have a change of heart?"

"There are others still to arrive. Is that not true?" Jon asked, initiating the conversation for the first time.

"Yes," Mappel replied. "Ryson Acumen will bring representatives of the algors."

"Ryson Acumen is the delver you spoke of?"

Mappel nodded his head.

"Then I suggest we wait until their arrival. Their input might affect what is to happen next."

"So you are saying we should just sit here and wait?" Lief now asked incredulously.

"I can not abide by such a waste of time either," Mappel added. He searched desperately for a way to end the deadlock, a way to bring Tun into the light of understanding. He grasped upon the symbol of his dilemma. "There are enough gathered here right now for us to make significant strides to achieving our goals. The secrets of Sanctum have endured hundreds upon hundreds of seasons. They must now be revealed. At this moment, we already have the ability to reveal three fifths of the mystery. Perhaps if I begin by revealing what the elves have placed in Sanctum, I will gain the trust of Tun, and he will see that ..."

Stephen Clarin stopped him with a wave of his hand. "It is still not yet the time for that. With the grace of Godson, the algors will be here shortly, and with them, the delver Acumen. We should wait for their arrival. Let the dwarves listen to the words of Ryson. He has been at the forefront of all of this. It may be his role to bring them to understanding."

"I agree," Tun said with a nod. "I do not wish to hear the elf secret of the tiers at this moment. Such information is dangerous. The arrival of the algors may mean nothing to us, and I will not so willingly reveal the secret which keep the dwarves safe from evil magic unless it is as the interpreter says. I will wait for the doubts to be removed from my mind. For me, that will be the only time I will reveal the dwarf secret of Sanctum."

"Then we have nothing more to do than wait," Mappel said with an almost painful shrug. He hoped the suggested inactivity might force someone into compromise. Instead, it allowed the interpreter a moment to make an unsuspected announcement of his own.

"There is something I have to do," Stephen spoke as he stood. "Something has been nagging at my thoughts which I must see to. It has a lot to do with what is happening here, but it is not yet clear to me. I have to leave but I will be back shortly."

He left abruptly with no further explanation. Every other pair of eyes watched him leave.

Chapter 21

"It is good to see you safe, Ryson Acumen." Mappel extended a hand. As the delver responded in kind, the elder elf allowed a small smile to grasp his lips. They stood alone in Matthew's private chambers. A host of others waited in the basement meeting room, but Mappel requested they speak alone before the delver was brought before them. It was the elder elf's wish to explain the occurrences of the past few days, but he began by asking the delver about his own journey.

"When Holli brought the algors here, she told me what had happened in the hills. Mountain shags." He sighed lightly. "I can not believe that only a short while ago even I doubted Lief Woodson's word when he warned us of the danger in the air. Now we face so many things, so many uncertainties, including mountain shags. But by your appearance now, I can assume that all went well?"

"I handled the shag alright, but I can't say my trip back wasn't without its problems." Ryson's expression bordered on exasperation. "Things are starting to fall apart out there, and fast."

Mappel waited for the delver to continue with an expectant, yet curious expression.

"It seems vampires are now loose in the land and goblins are making raids on towns," Ryson explained with heavy emotion. He coughed after he spoke as if the words left a bad taste in his mouth. "I don't know how this will affect any of the plans you've made, but I can tell you the people and guards in Burbon are near total panic. I would expect the same in Pinesway. They're closer to the forest. I don't know how the people in Connel have reacted to your presence here, but I doubt you would be welcome in either of the other two towns. They're edgy about anything that looks even slightly out of place. Trust is stretched to a limit. I apologize for how this will sound, but if they saw you for what you are, they'd lock you up as a threat, or worse."

"I understand." Mappel's attention momentarily fixed upon the staff in his hands. He stared at the fine grooves as if each represented another factor of the present dilemma, another external force trying to exert its own influence upon them all. "The land is in turmoil and it seems most humans with it. It is probably no surprise to any elf that the humans would treat us with the utmost mistrust. Their ignorance of the past has led them to their own confusion. While it would not justify such actions, it would not be unexpected. I would have to agree that revealing ourselves in such places would remain inappropriate at this time. Thankfully, however, our path does not end in Burbon or Pinesway. It will lead us from Connel to Sanctum."

"How have you fared here?" Ryson asked with a raised eyebrow.

"The magic has been slow to reveal itself here," Mappel offered with a look of relief. "What has happened has been kept quiet. Connel's own location has also helped serve to this end. With other border towns closer to the wilderness, there are more inviting targets. I imagine that the dark creatures have also not forgotten Connel's history. The ancient wall would remind them of their greatest loss. I doubt any goblin party would hasten to raid this town."

The delver found such theories less encouraging. "Even if there hasn't been a raid here, I know word is spreading. Soon, people are going to start hearing stories. Everyone's going to start looking for an answer. When I came in to town this morning, I saw everyone looking over their shoulders. I also saw guards on horseback at the town limits."

"I can not deny the truth in your words," Mappel conceded, "but for now we remain hidden, even the algors were brought to us without raising a single suspicion. Our presence here has been kept a secret, helped oddly enough by Mayor Consprite. He does not know of the dwarves' presence, but he knows of mine and the algors. Those guards were his men, and they helped escort the algors here, keeping it as quiet as possible."

"Consprite did that?" Surprise and suspicion edged Ryson's words and the tone was not lost upon Mappel.

"I am perplexed by the man myself. He has kept his distance, yet has made it clear he wishes to be involved. His men did as promised, yet they appeared more elusive than helpful. Through Matthew, we have been sending him information, telling him only of what he needs to know. I doubt it satisfies him, but he appears content, at least for now. I do not trust him. Am I misjudging him?"

"I doubt it," Ryson responded in earnest. "I've only spoken with him a few times, but I never met anyone who was more ambitious. If he wishes to be involved, it's probably because he believes he can benefit."

"Of that, I am certain, but we will all benefit if our mission is successful."

Ryson shook his head with a near sorrowful expression, as if it pained him to discuss the subject of human greed and overabundant ambition. "That's not what I mean. The mayor won't see anything advantageous in a general gain for the land. Consprite will want to gain personally. It's not beyond him to take advantage of another's misfortune."

"Then, my initial judgment has been correct. I can not dismiss the perceptions of a delver, especially upon a subject I know so little about. The mayor will be dealt with only as needed and always warily."

"Good idea," Ryson nodded.

Mappel moved on with urgency, as if it pleased him to leave behind discussions of Mayor Consprite. "What about the vampires you spoke of?"

Ryson hesitated. The thought burned his mind like acid. He tasted the bitter anger on the tip of his tongue.

"It's not a pleasant story," he finally admitted. He told the sequence quickly and briefly, speaking in short pointed sentences. He gave an adequate account to be accurate but refused to recount anything with great detail. He spoke of the most important specifics, being followed by Evan Chase, Chase's demise, and the final conflict with the vampire herself.

The mention of Evan Chase and his reasons for following the delver cast the discussion back upon the mayor. Mappel displayed more than a hint of annoyance. "So Consprite sent out a tracker to find what you had been doing. I do not like that. It indicates he may not accept our decisions. I should like to treat him with as much care as we would treat another vampire."

"That reminds me," Ryson interrupted and his attention descended to his belt where the Sword of Decree hung sheathed. "It's time for me to return this now. To tell you the truth, it's the main reason why I came back to Connel. Had it not been for the sword, I might have stayed at Burbon to help protect them against goblin raids. But I knew it was important to you, so I knew I had to return it. I've learned how special it is, and I understand why you made me promise to look after it with such care. I wish you would have told me of its other powers, though. It does more than burn an enemy; it can free your mind. That in itself saved me from the vampire. I can't explain it, but I knew what to do as soon as I grabbed the handle."

The statement confused Mappel. He sifted through the words as if a puzzle, or a mystery where the perpetrator was known but not the crime.

"You are certain?" Mappel questioned with a wrinkled forehead.

"Absolutely." Ryson returned Mappel's questioning looks with a confused demeanor of his own. "Didn't you know that?"

"No, I did not," Mappel said firmly. "Such power is not supposed to be. Could it have come from something else, something other than the sword?"

"I don't think so." Ryson fought through the ugly images of his encounter with the vampire to establish his certainty. "No, it came from the sword. I know it now and I knew it then. Do you want to try holding the handle?" He went to dislodge the scabbard from his belt.

"No, I can see the truth in your eyes," Mappel answered.

Ryson continued unfastening his belt. "Well, its time for you to take it back anyway. It has been quite an honor, but it belongs to you."

Mappel made a statement which could do no less than shock the delver. "Not anymore. Leave it at your side, Ryson Acumen. I do not know why the sword is now blessed with a new power, but it was blessed in your hands and there it must stay."

Wide-eyed, Ryson refused. "I can't accept this."

"If you deny it, you are denying providence. None of us are in a position to do that."

"But this is a magical item that belongs to the elves. You've guarded it for so long."

"Yet it never earned its name in our hands. Now it has. If it will now reveal mysteries to you by some act of benevolence, then the Sword of Decree will belong to you."

"What if it's just the effect of the tainted magic in the air?"

Mappel shook his head. "According to Holli, she used the sword against a monster at the edges of the Lacobian desert. She claimed no powers of any kind. And you yourself just stated with certainty that the power came from the sword. No, Ryson Acumen, the blessing has occurred in your hands and we are in need of all the blessings we can get. You must hold onto the sword."

Ryson stood silent. Not knowing what else to do, and not wishing to insult the elf, he finally accepted the gift. "Thank you. I'll try to wear it with honor."

"You already have," Mappel said sincerely. "Now, however, we must come to more difficult matters. With your assistance, we have achieved a great stride toward our goal. In the basement of this church, in a town as time-honored as Connel, we have gathered representatives of the dwarves, the algors, as well as the humans and elves. I am pleased that this gathering has taken place so quickly. Never could I have imagined that the races involved in the tiers of Sanctum would be together in one place during my lifetime. Yet, it has happened, and it is now. There are, however, two problems."

Ryson listened intently as the elf continued with an explanation.

"The first is that you are the only delver in our presence. You have already admitted to a lack of knowledge over what the delvers placed in Sanctum to guard the sphere. Every other key is now within our grasp. Even the human element is here. Stephen Clarin is the interpreter of the book of Godson. Matthew told me he spoke of the interpreter to you?"

Ryson nodded. "Yes. Yes, he did. That's why he was so worried about the quake. This interpreter was able to foresee many things, but he didn't predict the quake. He's here? Now? What can he tell us about what's going on?"

Mappel shook his head sadly. "Precious little I'm afraid. It seems he believes the sphere defies even the prophecies. He can not predict the outcome of this event, although he has experienced a vision which yet brings us hope." Mappel quickly yet thoroughly explained the visions as witnessed by the interpreter. He emphasized Ryson's involvement in entering Sanctum, hoping to make it clear that the delver was expected to be part of the force.

Ryson exhaled deeply but did not decline. "It seems I can't get away from this. Truthfully, I was hoping to become more of an observer after I helped bring back the algors. I never hoped to be included any further."

Ryson's thoughts returned to Bourbon and Linda. He would have liked to return there, to help them all. He remembered his promise to go back and tell her of what was truly happening, but as he did, he recalled everything she said. It became a blueprint in his mind. She asked him to return when he discovered everything he needed to know, even if it took a season. He faced the true crux of his dilemma with that simple edict ringing through his head. Would he be satisfied if he walked away now? Could he truly turn away from the opportunity to enter Sanctum? Every instinct that was his, every natural desire demanded he follow this to its end. He spoke with that conclusion.

"I can't tell you it makes me happy, but as a delver I can't refuse the opportunity to explore a monument such as Sanctum. If you invite me to go along, I will have to accept."

"It is more than invitation, it is an urgent need. We need you, and in all honesty, we have need of the Sword of Decree. I might have been hasty to offer it to you as a gift, but I see now in your eyes it was no mistake. Without it, we would not pass through the tribulations of Sanctum, and without you, we would not fulfill the vision of the interpreter."

"Then I will accompany you," Ryson responded, accepting his fate.

"It is good you feel that way. We will need you then, and we still have need of you now. This returns us to the first problem. Assuming we convince those that are present to reveal the secrets of what lies ahead in Sanctum, we will still be missing one part of the puzzle. No one present knows the delver's portion of the secret. Stephen Clarin is aware of what the humans placed within the mountain, but he has no idea of what the delvers placed. No one does. I am hoping that you might direct us in that matter."

Mappel looked to the delver expectantly, but Ryson could only shake his head.

"I just don't know," he admitted. "I don't even know where to begin. I was told of the importance of Sanctum as a kid, I was also told to avoid it. As far as I know, no one knows what's in there. It's kind of strange. You would think that Sanctum with all its secrets would be a place which would really call to a delver. But it hasn't, until now. It was one of the only places that delvers accept must not be explored."

Mappel spoke as if his hopes were quickly draining from him. "There is no one else you might know that we may ask?"

"We could go to the Night Watch Inn," Ryson offered. "There are other delvers in Connel. One of them might know, or at least might know where to go to find out."

"But you wouldn't know which is the best suited to ask?"

"I've spoken to almost all those with delver blood that spend time in Connel. None stand out as someone that might know what we need."

Mappel frowned. "I do not covet the idea of indiscriminately speaking to delvers at the Night Watch Inn,

plodding about carelessly, hoping to stumble on information. We have done so well for ourselves so far. We have worked for the answers and they have come to us, some miraculously. I can not accept that we were meant to sift through the land for this secret as if searching for a single ant in a mountainous anthill. There must be another answer."

"Well, there's none that I can think of."

Mappel stood leaning upon his long staff. His eyes focused on nothing in particular. Long drawn out silence hung in the room like a giant tapestry. He became as still as a statue. If not for the slow relaxed breaths or the blinking of an eye, Ryson would have thought him carved of stone and painted to appear life-like.

Ryson arched his neck and examined the wooden rafters of the ceiling. He waited patiently as Mappel continued his pose of reflection.

Finally, the elder elf broke his silent concentration with a weary shake of his head. "I do not like this, not being able to decide what to do. Just as our other problem, there is no conceivable solution. I am left groping for options that do not seem to exist. Why are we brought so close, yet left without a final answer?"

"What is this other problem you're talking about?"

Mappel sighed heavily with frustration. The topic was a weight on his shoulders that he would have liked nothing more than to cut free. "It is the dwarves, mainly Tun. He is a prince, son of Folarok. He is here with his brother, Jon. He is not convinced the sphere must be destroyed."

"Does he know what Shayed said to me and Lief?"

"He knows. He does not doubt the exchange occurred, and he does not truly question Shayed's wisdom. Unfortunately, he wishes to explore other opportunities."

"Even though Shayed said we had to destroy the sphere?"

"You must remember that the dwarves are not fond of the thought of magic. They believe it never truly benefited them. Tun Folarok echoes that belief in my ear at almost every chance. He has been told that both he and his brother are part of the interpreter's vision. It did little to convince him. In fact, it may have made things more difficult. He now states that if something such as the will of Godson will lead us, then the will of Godson will bring him the light of understanding. While he sits and listens, he only responds that nothing miraculous has yet occurred to sway his position. If he is waiting for some kind of miracle, I don't know if we will ever convince him.

"His brother, Jon, is more reasonable, more rational, yet he is cautious. He wishes to remain loyal to his brother as well as avoid his anger, thus he will not speak out against him. If it were just him, I am certain we could move forward, for he also knows the secret of Sanctum."

"Then why do we need his brother?" Ryson questioned. "We can leave Tun to wait for his miracle if we can convince Jon to help us."

Mappel's voice was thick with dissent. "They have been sent together by the king, and so together they will listen to our requests. Tun is the elder and has the right of the throne. Jon would never consider opposing his brother. Unfortunately, it is Tun who we must convince, yet he gives us little opportunity."

Mappel looked over his staff as he pieced the problem together. Hoping he himself might find an answer previously overlooked, he outlined the difficulty with a precise tongue. "The problem has been complicated

further by Stephen's vision. Stephen sees both Folarok princes entering Sanctum. This is what truly creates the misfortune of our situation. I use it to explain that Tun must assist us. Tun uses it to accent his doubts. We traipse around in circles. I can not ignore the vision. Because of this, I am certain Tun must be made to see the reason of what we must do, but I do not know how to convince him. I keep hoping he will see what must be done on his own accord, but he shows no sign. He waits for divine intervention, so I wait as well. But I do not know how much longer I can wait. All I know is that Stephen believes they are both integral to our plans, and therefore we can not ignore them."

"Is Stephen certain about this vision?"

"He is. I am as well. For some reason, I now have great conviction in the visions of the interpreter. It was something to behold, the calm serenity, the sense of joy on his face when he revealed to us greater details of his vision. It is hard not to have faith when one witnesses such a thing. As I said, he believes you have a major role to play yet in this challenge. I believe it would have saddened all our hearts if you declined. It will sadden us as much if Tun can not be convinced. I am hopeful that we will match Stephen's vision exactly when we send our force into Sanctum.

"Lief Woodson and Holli Brances will represent the elves for this endeavor. This meets with the interpreter's approval, who will go himself. He has also ventured forward and brought another into our fold. A human woman named Lauren. In his vision, the group numbers ten, and he insists she must be one of them. That leaves but three yet to be decided. I believe, as does Stephen, that at least two will be algors. The algors have agreed to the overall plan. None of their group has spoken against it. In fact, they speak as one voice."

"Tell me about it," Ryson replied with knowing exasperation. "It's kind of unnerving to hear them speak together. It's worse, though, when they disagree. They all speak at the same time; they don't listen to each other. They just start yelling out what they think."

"Luckily, I have not yet witnessed such turmoil," Mappel stated with thankfulness in his words. "Overall, it has been quite easy to convince them of the need for their assistance. The only matter which concerns me is that I don't know which two should be part of the ten, and they don't seem prepared to make any choice to that end.

"Finally, there is the last spot, the tenth member of the party. Whoever it shall be, it remains a mystery. Stephen can not clearly decipher the image."

"Maybe it's another delver," Ryson offered. "There's two of everybody else; two humans, two dwarves, two elves, and two algors. Maybe the tenth will be a delver that will answer the mystery to that tier."

Mappel shrugged wearily. "Perhaps, and perhaps not. Stephen is at a loss to describe the tenth. We can only wait for answers and time now weighs upon us. I was hoping your return would end that wait."

"I don't know what to tell you."

"No one does." Mappel waved his hand.

Ryson considered much of what had been said. Questions popped into his mind over the new arrival. "What do you know of this Lauren?"

"She apparently has great natural ability to control the magic which is now free. She is quiet and I do not know how to judge her. Stephen, however, states she is as much a part of our struggle as any other. He also states her abilities will be needed when the human tier is to be overcome."

"She's a sorceress?" Ryson could not contain his surprise.

"Apparently so."

"Really? I would have never guessed that any human would have practiced such a thing."

"You misunderstand. She has not been able to practice the art because the magic had been contained until now. She does, however, have natural abilities and tendencies that allow her to manipulate the energy with greater control than other humans. It is just like the other races, except for maybe the dwarves. There are always some more attuned to magic than others. Some say it is inherited, some say it is random. They will hear the whisper of spells in the air. Instinctively, they sense how to draw in the power, manipulate it. With time, they will learn how to control the power and it will be up to them how they use it. According to Stephen, Lauren has mastered much in the past few days, although it still worries me that our fates may rest in the hands of a novice magic caster."

"It doesn't sound like we have any choice or that we should have any concern either," Ryson offered, hoping to rejuvenate the elf's apparently dwindling confidence. "If the interpreter says we need her and that she can help us, that in itself is important. After all, this man's apparently blessed. And if she's part of that vision you witnessed him having, that's only more reason to believe in her."

Mappel did find relief as well as comfort in the delver's words. "It is a privilege to be near you," he stated with great sincerity. "You have a way of inspiration about you."

Ryson looked to the ground humbly.

"I am glad we took the time to have this talk," Mappel continued. "But it is now time to present you to the others."

Without another word, Mappel turned as he motioned for Ryson to follow. He stepped with the weariness of his age, but with the determination of his strong will. His staff clicked loudly against the stone steps that led them down into the cellar meeting room. The echoing thumps announced their entrance to all who waited below, human, elf, dwarf and algor. All of which grew silent as the two forms moved beyond the last step and into the heart of the chamber.

Ryson's eyes adjusted instantly to the lesser light of the basement. He nearly laughed in disbelief at the odd assortment of individuals. Such an array of oddities would have sent him reeling headlong into utter confusion had he not been through so much. Now, such a sight brought more accepting humor than gasps of disbelief.

The ten algors huddled together in one corner. Their large bulging eyes focused on him in tandem. They nodded together as if choreographed, their heads moving at exactly the same angle and speed. They appeared quite content.

Such was not the case for two broad shouldered, bearded men who sat separated from the others. One with coal black hair maintained an air of aloofness as well as defiance. His back remained straight, although his feet barely touched the ground from the bench where he sat. He kept his eyes locked on the delver, but stared without making any sort of acknowledgment. The other, with slightly graying hair, sat with a slight slouch. He remained observant of his surroundings, but by his positioning it was clear he was less antagonistic to the cause than the other.

Ryson noted Holli Brances and Lief Woodson in the center of the room. He nodded to both. They sat with three humans. He immediately recognized Matthew, but the other two were strangers.

The female had to be Lauren. He had a difficult time assessing her age. Her face appeared youthful, but fresh lines of bewildered worry aged her complexion. Her hands were knotted before her as she clasped them with constant tension. Her clothes were fine enough to indicate she had come from a family of limited success, perhaps she was the elder daughter of a merchant, or perhaps the young wife.

The other was a young man who watched with a broad smile. Radiance glistened from his face, almost enough so that it appeared brighter than the light from the small candles. Ryson could not keep his eyebrows from shooting upward into a questioning expression. There was no other human about, besides the woman and Matthew. He did not have a true expectation of the interpreter, but he was not prepared for such youth.

He looked about, wondering if there might be another answer, maybe this youth was only an aide of the interpreter, but there was no place for another to hide in this room. If the interpreter was before him, it had to be this person. His assumption was confirmed upon the introductions handled by Mappel.

"I knew you as soon as I saw you." Stephen smiled happily upon their introduction. "You are of great importance to us all."

Ryson tried to shake the surprise from his face. He offered his hand to the youth. "Thank you, but it seems to me you're even more important. It's an honor to meet someone blessed by Godson."

Stephen could not refrain from casting a glance to Ryson's side where the sword hung proudly. He smiled wider but said nothing on the subject. Instead, he turned to the woman beside him.

"This is Lauren. She prefers that I don't use her last name."

Lauren held out her hand, but returned it to its knotted fold after quickly and gently shaking the hand of the delver. She tried to keep her eyes focused on that which was around her. It was an obvious struggle for her to keep attention upon the matters discussed in the church cellar.

Ryson saw turmoil in this woman, the same turmoil he experienced as a youthful delver discovering his own unique abilities, but he was not afforded the opportunity to converse of such matters, for Mappel quickly guided him to the dwarf princes.

"This is the one I've told you about ..."

Mappel's words were cut off by a great commotion upstairs. There were only a few followers of Godson in the church at the time, but it sounded as if there were dozens. Shouts of surprise were heard from both the street and the upper chambers. The heavy thud of a door being thrown open and hitting a far wall rang through the cellar. The patter of running feet spread over their heads as if the followers were scattering in every direction at once.

Silent confusion overtook those gathered. All eyes were pointed upwards, although in different directions. All the algors spied the same spot over their heads. The dwarves scanned the entire ceiling, trying to follow each noise. Holli Brances looked only briefly toward the top of the staircase before she became the first to react, immediately followed by Lief.

Holli leapt over a table with balanced grace. She cocked an arrow in her bow as she took a position behind the table closest to the stairwell. If anyone was to get to the others, it was clear they would have to get through her first.

Lief bolted to a strategic stance in a corner opposite Holli's position, creating an angled crossfire. Anyone entering the room from the stairs would now face a hail of arrows from both directions. The two stood silent,

emotion cleansed from their faces.

Ryson moved up to Holli's side. His hands were steady as he drew one hand near to the handle of his sword. The other he placed in his bag and quickly recovered his dagger. He kept it in his left as his right remained free, ready to unsheathe the Sword of Decree in a moment's notice.

At the back of the room, each algor calmly removed a sling from their respective pouches as well as finely rounded stones. They did not immediately load their weapons, instead they waited and watched patiently.

The dwarves stood from their bench, rather unceremoniously. A human bench was not designed for their stature, and they struggled to be free from it. In a display of displeasure, Tun kicked the bench over in order to step back to clearer ground. Holli and Lief paid no attention to the crash of the wooden bench, but everyone else jumped with a start. Tun made no sign of apology. Instead, he freed the great maul from his belt and stood ready with an angry stare.

Jon also stepped toward an open area, but his mace remained attached to his belt. His hand was at his side ready to free it for use, but for now, he watched with cautious eyes.

Matthew and Stephen remained at Lauren's side. Her eyes were closed. She mumbled something to herself and then spoke aloud.

"No, it's alright. Don't be alarmed."

Most turned their attention to her, even as the door to the cellar stairs whisked open, but Lief, Holli and Ryson kept their focus on the first visible step. They were the first to see the huge gray foot which broke the plane of the doorway. It dropped down and landed upon the top step with a dull thud. Immediately, a second foot of equally mammoth size moved into the light of the cellar lamps and fell upon the next step down.

Ryson's eyes grew as wide as their sockets as he witnessed ankles and shins roughly the size of huge tree trunks. Step by step, more of the visitor became revealed to all those that watched in awe. It barely fit through the arch of the staircase. Had the clearing for the steps been the span of a hand narrower, the passage would not have allowed entry. Even now, the mammoth visitor was forced to bend and twist to pass through the tight fit. When the newcomer finally moved beyond the last step and fully into the basement chamber, he continued to slouch so as not to scrape the top of his head upon the ceiling.

Ryson's mouth hung open ever so slightly. He blinked once, then again, but the sight remained before him. When having to describe the cliff behemoth to others in the future, he would simply ask the listener to imagine what a giant boulder would look like if it grew arms, legs and a head. Put a green and brown tunic over it, and you would have what Ryson now witnessed.

The skin of this giant looked as rough as sand paper and as hard as rock. The head, held lofty in the air upon a short powerful neck, was round but flat on the top. Deep rounded sockets held innocent blue eyes. A deep short slit under a round pudgy nose formed the mouth. There was no hair anywhere to be seen. None of its muscle structure appeared under the thick hide, and thus, it appeared as one solid, rather inflexible mass as opposed to a composition of bone, muscle and skin.

Both Lief and Holli lowered their bows as the giant stood motionless before them. Ryson's dagger dangled in his hand, but astonishment precluded any decision of using it.

Lauren spoke first. "He means us no harm." Her voice held a certainty as if this was a common fact.

"Of course he doesn't," Mappel echoed in a voice filled with relief. His eyes, however, darted back and forth

from the cliff behemoth to the ceiling overhead. His expression revealed his misgiving over what was occurring beyond the basement chamber. Voices of panic still cried out both in the church as well as in the streets beyond the door.

"I am afraid my entrance has upset many, but the will of Godson is clear. Nothing must stand in the way." The cliff behemoth's voice carried as if a feather blown by the wind. It was soft and gentle, but it flowed to the furthest corners of the room. Its soft melody was a stark contrast to the newcomer's physical appearance.

Mappel's eyes fixed upon the cliff behemoth. He now ignored the clamor over his head. Stephen Clarin also looked on in increased interest, but it was the elf that asked the question that burned both their minds.

"Why has Godson's will brought you here?"

The behemoth spoke in the same soft tone. "It is our task to deal with the sphere. It is the will of Godson."

Stephen Clarin stood and he blurted out his own revelation with both excitement and amazement. "You are the last of the group! It is all clear to me now! You are the tenth!"

The interpreter's outburst ripped Mappel's attention from the cliff behemoth. The elder elf took a hand from his staff and rubbed his forehead in weary confusion.

"This is all happening much too fast," he admitted.

"No, it's true," Stephen insisted. "I could not see him because I could not understand what I saw. I thought it was a shape that still had not taken form. But it had! And it was that form!"

"I do not understand everything he says, but most is very clear and I do know the will of Godson," the cliff behemoth spoke to all in the room. "I am to accompany you to the mountain you call Sanctum. There we must deal with the sphere and end the threat to all Godson's followers."

Matthew moved from his place and stepped forward to meet the giant. "I am Matthew. I am the reader for this church, it is a Church of Godson. I do my best to follow the ways. I have read about cliff behemoths, how they devote their lives to the word and the ways. It is an honor to meet you."

"I am indeed a cliff behemoth. My name is Dzeb. And it is a pleasure to meet a human who has not forgotten the word."

Matthew could not help but smile broadly. The appearance of a cliff behemoth did as much to strengthen his faith as all the revelations of the interpreter. "Thank you, thank you. All of the followers of this church do their best to remain faithful, though we would never boast of matching the faith of your kind."

Dzeb nodded in appreciation of the benevolent words, but this friendly meeting was quickly interrupted by Mappel who appeared to regain his composure.

"Come forward Dzeb. It is true what you say. We are preparing to deal with the sphere, but there is much I need to ask you. Much that may help us on our way."

Dzeb walked further into the room as Lief, Holli, and Ryson followed behind. A bench would not hold his weight so he continued to stand, although in a hunched position. Everyone else in the room now also stood in respect for the cliff behemoth's difficulties.

"There is little to discuss," Dzeb said with the same comforting voice. There was no hostility in these words,

no sense of defiance or challenge. He spoke as if everyone was already in agreement. "The angels of Godson have brought the message, a message received by all cliff behemoths. I knew of your presence here before I entered this building. I am to accompany you to Sanctum where we must deal with the sphere. It is very simple. This man knows that." He nodded to Stephen Clarin. He then turned to another. "This one knows as well, although the knowledge is not yet clear to him. It will come as time passes."

"You mean me?" Ryson could not control his surprise.

"Yes. You are the deliver?"

"Yes, but ..."

Dzeb did not let Ryson finish. "Give yourself time deliver. You will understand much in the time to come. What is your name?"

"Ryson Acumen."

Mappel took the opportunity to introduce all to the cliff behemoth. When he was finished, he pressed for greater details of the giant's knowledge of the sphere.

"I do not wish to insult you, Dzeb," Mappel spoke guardedly, "but I must know why the cliff behemoths feel they must participate in this matter. You must tell me more than it is Godson's will."

"Should that not be enough?" Dzeb questioned.

"To your people it would undoubtedly be enough. To many in this room, it would be enough as well. But there are those that see things differently than the cliff behemoth. You must at least acknowledge that."

"Yes, that is true." Sadness did not show on the giant's face, but it was now evident in his voice. "It seems as time moves on, more move away from the word and the way."

Mappel quickly took the reins of the conversation as he endeavored to direct it toward gaining the knowledge he so direly needed. "I do not wish to dishearten you and by no means do I question your intentions. The help of a cliff behemoth is a benefit I would have never dared hope, but cliff behemoths were not present during the Wizard War. Your kind was not concerned with the sphere during its entombment. Why now?"

"The sphere has changed," Dzeb answered simply. "The Wizard War was a conflict of individuals, those that wanted the magic free and those that wanted the magic removed from the land. Such matters are not the concern of Godson, thus they are not the concern of cliff behemoths."

"But what of the taint?" Mappel persisted. "The taint was a threat to all."

"True, but the war was not about the poison in the air. Had it been, we might have joined. At first, the battle was about stopping Ingar. We watched closely at that point. The outcome would impact the land, but Ingar was defeated. After that, it became a battle over what to do with the sphere, individuals arguing over what should be done, arguing over a choice. We kept our distance."

"We argue over that now," Mappel said with an edge, and he glanced over his shoulder at Tun. "We are trying to decide what to do about the sphere and this threat."

"Has this one not told you what must be done?" Dzeb pointed to Stephen, his large finger cut the air like a giant spear.

"He has, but others still need to be convinced."

Dzeb merely shook his head as he dropped the accusing finger.

"Tell me what you believe is going on with the sphere now?" Mappel urged. "That may be what some need to hear in order to convince them of what we must do."

"It is challenging the will of Godson." For the first time Dzeb's words sounded almost harsh, but they soon returned to the soft tone which was their norm. "This can not be allowed."

"It is true then," Stephen blurted out with a half gasp. "How can this be possible?"

"All living things have the freedom of choice," Dzeb announced kindly. "That too is the will of Godson and perhaps the most important ingredient of life in this land. We all choose what path to follow, whether it is in the light of Godson or in the dark paths. The sphere has become conscious, and therefore it has the ability to choose. Usually the choice of one has little impact on the land. In rare cases, a choice of an individual can affect thousands of creatures. In this case, considering the power of the sphere, its choice affects us all."

"Then the sphere is alive?" Matthew asked, nearly dumbfounded by the possibility.

"I would say no." Dzeb spoke almost cautiously now. "It is my belief that only Godson can grant life. Awareness and consciousness is another matter. Dark forces have been known to grant such powers, but they can not create a soul. I know this is very confusing, but it is the best I can do to explain. It is told that such things will be made clear to us when we all finally meet Godson. The important matter is that the sphere is now conscious and aware of its surroundings. It wishes to destroy the land. For what reason, I do not know. It is our honor to stop this. I will accompany those you send to Sanctum and we shall deal with the sphere."

Mappel still struggled for greater detail from the cliff behemoth. "You keep saying that, but I don't understand what you mean. How do we deal with the sphere?"

"It must be destroyed."

Tun quickly raised a challenging voice. Even though Dzeb stood much more than twice his height, the dwarf looked at the giant with unrelenting defiance. "Of that I have still not been convinced."

Dzeb calmly eyed the antagonistic Tun for but a moment. "Now I understand." He slowly turned his head toward Ryson. "Give him your sword," the giant requested. "Let him hold the handle with the blade free of its sheath."

Ryson shrugged, but did not hesitate in obeying. He carefully guided the sword from its scabbard. As more of the blade became revealed, it glistened with greater brilliance. It soon magnified the candlelight surrounding it. Tun and Jon squinted only for a moment, but even their dwarf eyes soon grew accustomed to the silvery illumination. Ryson carefully gripped the blade at its center and extended the handle toward Tun.

At first, the dwarf remained frozen in place, his arms folded across his chest. Finally, he extended one hand and took hold of the handle. As he did, the gleaming light of the blade appeared mirrored in his face. The defiant expression softened, and he looked about the room as if seeing all for the first time.

"We must destroy the sphere," he said calmly.

Jon looked at his brother with both confusion and concern. "Are you sure, Tun?"

Tun released his grip on the handle as he let Ryson take hold of the blade once more. As the delver sheathed the sword, Tun's understanding remained.

"We have no choice. If we do not, we will all be destroyed."

"And what of the magic?" the younger dwarf pressed.

"We must learn to live with it. We have no choice."

"Then we also have the miracle we have been looking for," Mappel announced with renewed hope and excitement.

"Do not confuse miracles with enlightenment," Dzeb counseled. "We have been but shown the way. There is much yet to be done."

"Then let us be started," Mappel replied quickly. "Let us take advantage of what has happened here. Let us remember this moment as we set out to accomplish what we must do."

Heads nodded and turned about from one to another. Murmurs of conversation broke from nearly every direction. The chatter brimmed with hope as yet another difficulty was overcome by the apparent means of providence.

It was Ryson who called for attention and brought the focus of the meeting back upon those difficulties which yet remained.

"I don't mean to bring everyone down, but let's not forget what we still have to do. We still have to enter Sanctum. There are still the mysteries of the tiers, and there is still one we don't know. There is no one here that knows what the delvers placed in the mountain. It may take time to uncover that secret."

"I am afraid, young delver, that will not be possible," Dzeb said kindly yet firmly. "While the angels which spoke said it would be the decision of those here as to who would go, they made it clear when we must go. We must leave for Sanctum today, before the sun passes overhead."

The hush held. Sanctum now! No further delay. It was like a death sentence.

Mappel broke the silence with a steady voice. "Listen all of you. We have been led through these most important times so far and have accomplished much. We have done so without the help of ancient prophecies. In every case, we have accepted the circumstances dictated to us. We must continue to do so, and we must do so without hesitancy. If those that enter Sanctum must face a tier without knowing of the danger, we must hope that some way, some how, they will overcome the obstacle as other obstacles have been overcome. It will be enough to reveal those secrets we do know. We have four of the five parts. Let us tell them now. I will begin and state what the elves have ..."

Stephen Clarin cut him off abruptly. His voice was full of force.

"No!" The sharp, near angry retort caught the elder elf unprepared, but Stephen continued to speak with forceful determination. "This isn't the time! I have told you before that we will know when the time has come. The only way it would make sense to reveal them now would be if they could all be revealed together. We are missing the one secret for a reason. The secrets should remain just that. They should only be revealed in Sanctum, to those who face the danger."

"That is an unnecessary risk," Mappel argued.

"But it is a risk we must take. You have put faith in my visions. If that is to remain, you must accept everything I see. We can't pick and choose. We can not say I accept this, but not that. I know that it would be a grave mistake to announce the secrets now. If we leave on this day, we leave without revealing what we know. Otherwise, you might as well refute everything I've told you. There is only one way we can proceed at this point. Everyone that must enter Sanctum must know their portion and must be prepared. I know what the humans have placed in Sanctum. I will keep that knowledge to myself. When the ten, of which I am included, face the human tier, I will direct them as to how to proceed. The same will remain true for the dwarves, the algors, and the elves."

"I agree," Tun replied sharply. "I will feel safer if I do not know of these secrets until absolutely necessary."

Mappel could not accept the arrangement. If something had happened to the party of ten, there would be no way to regain the information. If the secrets were brought into Sanctum, they could be easily lost, perhaps forever. How much time would be forfeited in finding the other human with the proper knowledge, or finding algors willing for another siege upon the legendary monument? He spoke of such fears to press his point.

"And what if a mishap falls upon one of the party and the secret becomes buried in an untimely death. I loath to speak of such things, but you are entering Sanctum. If something should happen to you, Stephen Clarin, how would we continue our struggle? The risk is high. We must do whatever is necessary to reduce the risk. Remember, you yourself can not foretell the success or failure of this mission. Should you fail, the rest of us will still strive to destroy the sphere. If we speak of the secrets now, openly, we allow for hope in such a case."

The interpreter made no indication of backing away from his proposal. It was part of his vision, and thus part of the word of Godson. "If such a thing may happen, and Godson willing it won't, we will face the unknown tier as we will face the delver tier, prepared for the worst but determined to overcome what might await."

"He is right," Lauren added as she looked toward the staircase with renewed distress. "There are other considerations as well. This is no longer the place to discuss such secrets. There are now ears above us, waiting for answers." Her anguish grew, her alarm more evident than ever. Her mouth hung open, ever so slightly. She stared beyond the ceiling, beyond the walls of the church. She saw into the streets. Her own vision, magical sight, spread like a falcon taking wing. After moments of silent staring, she blinked repetitively. Her voice wavered as she stood with near consuming trepidation. "There is also danger growing outside. We must decide quickly!"

The algors finally spoke up, and as was their norm, the ten spoke in unison.

"We agree with the interpreter. We will hold our secret, but there is one more thing to be determined. In order to match the vision of the interpreter, there is only to be two of us which must go. The rest will stay here. The delver will choose which will go and which will stay."

"Again?" Ryson heaved a heavy sigh. "You can't keep asking me to make these decisions. Let Stephen decide which of you best match his vision."

"I can not distinguish between them," the interpreter said sadly. "I only know that two should go. I don't know which two. Which of them knows what is hidden in Sanctum?"

"We all know," the algors responded in chorus.

Suddenly the algors began speaking separately, one after another, sometimes at the same time.

"We are a community of individuals, but none knows more than another."

"You can not ask us to pick among ourselves."

"We all wish to go."

"We all understand if we have to stay."

"There is none of here which will assume to make such a decision."

"If you say that only two may go, then you must tell us which two."

"The delver has picked wisely before, let him pick again."

The cacophony of opinions continued until Lauren made a distressed plea. "We don't have time for this. I feel as if these walls might soon become our prison."

"Very well, very well," Mappel urged. "Ryson make your choice. Do not dwell upon it and do not torture yourself. Simply choose and let us be off."

Ryson closed his eyes as his body became filled with tension. "I don't like this," he mumbled to himself. "I have no idea of knowing." With shoulders slouched, he opened his eyes and pointed to two, hoping to be as random as possible.

"It is done," Mappel stated as if punctuating the selection. "I do not believe, however, the remaining algors should stay here. If danger is closing as Lauren sees it, we must all leave together. Those algors not chosen may remain with myself and Matthew outside Sanctum as the others make their journey into its midst, unless of course there is an objection."

At first Mappel looked toward Tun, wondering how he would respond to the accompaniment of algors that would far outnumber any other race. He said nothing, his face still softened from his experience with the Sword of Decree.

He looked next to the algors. They also remained silent.

"Please let us go!" Lauren cried, near begging.

"Get the algors their cloaks," Mappel instructed both Lief and Holli. "It is mid-morning with many around. I dislike leaving at such a time. We must at least make an attempt to avoid attention."

Holli and Lief moved with swiftness.

The dwarves kept coats by their sides and gathered them around their shoulders. If they kept their hoods up and hid their beards, they would appear as nothing more than powerful youths, not yet done growing.

"What about Dzeb?" Ryson asked. "How are we going to hide him?"

"You can't hide him," Lauren stated, still beseeching the others to move quickly. "Many saw him enter the town. They know he's here. That's what brought so much attention on us in the first place."

"Then I will leave as I entered," Dzeb said firmly.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Matthew stated with a hint of sadness. "Many humans will hate you simply based on how you look. With what is going on in the land, they might attack based on nothing more."

"I will trust in Godson to protect me."

"We couldn't hide him if we wanted to," Mappel said with finality. "His height and size would make any attempt foolish."

Lief and Holli had returned and the algors were quickly fastening their cloaks. The party gathered together near the stairs, but Mappel stopped them for one last moment.

"Alone we face uncertainty, but together you can overcome the mysteries of Sanctum and the threat that burdens the land. Forget now of what you don't know, and bring to mind that what you do. I ask of each of you that will enter Sanctum to consider what you know of what lies ahead and if you have the means to deal with it. Keeping our secrets does not mean denying the ability of the party to overcome the obstacles. I will tell you now that although what awaits you in the elfin tier will not be easily passed, it can be done with what you now possess. What of the rest of you?"

Tun answered first. "The dwarf tier is first. My brother and I are prepared with the proper knowledge. If those that follow us will follow our instructions, we will succeed in getting through the first tier."

"The human tier is next," Stephen followed. "Lauren is the key to our success there."

"And what of the algors?" Mappel looked to the entire group, but only the two selected responded.

"We shall pass," they said together, with greater confidence than either the dwarves or Stephen.

"Then there is nothing left to do but go forward."

Chapter 22

At Sanctum's peak, the spirit of the elfin sorceress Shayed peered to the east. Her translucent face revealed neither joy nor desperation. Growing winds from the west passed harmlessly through her transparent form. Even as small amounts of dust and debris swirled about the ground, she floated unaffected by the gusts. The growing clouds in the far west seemed of even less concern to her. The air remained dry, though the temperature had fallen from its unseasonable highs.

"They are together. They know what they must do, and they will soon be here," she murmured to herself with a nod. Again, it was impossible to read any emotion from the spirit. It was as if she simply acknowledged the inevitable, as if she never doubted this moment would arrive.

She could see them, although seeing would not truly describe the basis of her awareness. It was more like understanding, or the completion of a thought. It was as much like searching for an elusive word or melody that escapes until it finally comes free in voice or in song. It took no special sorceress power for her to reach this point of comprehension. Simply being a spirit allowed her greater awareness than when she had walked upon the land as a mortal. That awareness grew sharper, crisper when it centered upon all things connected with the sphere.

Such was her link with the talisman. What was of importance to the orb was important to her. The two intertwined so tenaciously, her very presence upon this plane of existence was attributable solely to the peril created by the sphere. Anything relevant to the matter became as clear to her as stars on a cold, crystal evening.

Shayed could sense each of them. Even at this moment, she knew they remained gathered in the basement of the ancient church, although they hastened to leave. There were none missing. All that were required, all that were needed, were there. Each now intended to help save the land; that was now clear to her as well. The doubts had been lifted, and nothing was left to obscure the cause.

The image of the church remained crisp in her mind. It brought with it echoes of Connel. Memories of her last living days in Uton flooded back to her. Even now, she could still remember the great conflict between the forces she aligned and the magic casters. The stone church, where people prayed when the Wizard War reached its fury, served as sanctuary for many during the last terrible night of pitched battle. With the knowledge obtained upon her own death, she now knew how important those prayers were. Beyond the steps of the church, she could sense the ancient wall. She could almost feel the solid, powerful stones the dwarves labored to build around Connel. To this day, it remained mostly intact, just as the church stood upon its very same foundation. The image of the church and the wall allowed her a moment of confidence. If they again served in some way to aid those that battled the sphere, so much the better.

Her resolve to defeat the sphere never waned, even in these moments of reflection upon the past, even as she realized how much of her life, how much of her essence, was intertwined with this horrible device. It was during these moments of self inspection, however, that she accepted the link between herself and Ingar's sphere.

It gave her purpose in life, and again in death. It brought her fame and a place in the legends during her mortal existence. Now, it allowed her to return to the land, even as a spirit. Such moments in history were rare in themselves, reserved for angels and messengers of greater power, but again she found herself at the forefront of a battle where all life hung in the balance. Again, her link with the sphere made her very existence as important as any in the land.

Still, her purpose remained as if forged in steel. She would see to it that the talisman was finally destroyed, removed as a threat forever. However, in the conclusion of that joyous moment, she knew within herself that

her own importance to the land would diminish as well. She could not help but wonder what its final destruction would truly mean to her. Certainly, she would savor the victory, relish the knowledge that the threat to the land was defeated. But would there also be emptiness in the face of final success? Could she be so vain that it might bring her sadness to see the end of that which brought her glory? She knew she could not avoid the pride which would accompany destroying the sphere. That, in itself, brought her no shame. It was the void which began to open when her thoughts latched to a time beyond the orb. She did not know if she could find fulfillment without purpose. The sphere offered purpose, but only as long as it existed.

Troubling thoughts.

Troubling enough to keep her from noticing, or even sensing, the stir behind her. The very fabric of time and space dwindled and unraveled in an area no bigger than a large man's fist. During a time when tainted magic spilled over the land and the destinies of all living creatures were in the balance, even such a small disturbance held the potential for enormous consequences. It afforded an opportunity for the essence of another to take hold in this existence, one who was also long connected with the orb.

The small, wavering opening became a conduit and it crackled inaudibly with energy. Red embers, as deep in color as any rose in the land, pulsated adrift in mid-air. The energy broke free from the spatial rent just as the distortion closed. A crimson ball remained just as would a mystery as to why the distortion occurred at all. Some would say it was the sphere searching for an ally that rent the fabric of time. Others would argue it was the efforts of the ally himself that caused the break.

The energy which first existed as a pulse of red light grew in size. It swirled about, taking shape, forming greater detail with every second. The red tint remained even as the pulsating energy elongated, grew proportionately, creating a body with limbs and a head. As if molded from scarlet flames without heat or smoke, the shape of a man now appeared upon Sanctum's summit. A cold expression of malice, or perhaps insanity, clashed with the red glow that punctuated its existence. His shaven head glowed brighter than any other part of his form. It held the crimson pupils that now fixed upon Shayed's back.

With a silent wave of scarlet translucent arms, red chains crystallized from the very air. Like demon serpents, they slithered through the sky with knifing speed and wrapped themselves about the elfin sorceress before she could raise an arm in defense. Another wave of an arm and the very air around Shayed shuddered in upheaval. Just as the red chains restricted her movement, a field of crimson encircled her, blocked her path in every direction.

The sudden manifestation of the magical chains ripped Shayed's focus from events far away and brought her attention back to the here and now with sudden fury. The chains swirled round and round about her, tightening with every curl. Forged of magical energies, these chains lacked any material substance. Instead, they surged with power and the ability to contain even the movements of one that lacked physical form.

In the wink of an eye, the barrier appeared, completely encasing her. The land before her turned crimson as she peered through the walls of her newfound prison. Unable to move her arms or legs, due to the restraint of the chains, she willed her form forward. Floating on air with the bonds still about her, she collided with the wall of the force field. It would not let her pass. It was as mystically charged as were the chains, and it prevented her movements with the same efficiency.

Caught off guard, confused and angered, she spun herself about inside the bubble of red. With every move, the chains grew tighter. As she faced her attacker and met his face with recognition, her anger turned to fear. She muttered but one word as she recoiled, but her back struck the wall of the force field and ended any hope of escape.

"Ingar!"

The wizard said nothing. He stood with arms ready as he scanned the effectiveness of the restraints he forged. A careful eye probed every inch of the barrier, looking for gaps or imperfections. He then focused upon the chains. He studied each link as he circled her slowly.

From outside the sphere, her clear white shape took on a pink hue, a result of being behind the crimson field. The shade, however, was far from a healthy pink. It manifested itself more as infection, like the swelling, irritated tissue around an open sore.

Ingar cared little about the field's effect on her appearance. He concentrated upon its ability to hold Shayed. Satisfied, he turned his back upon her, moved away as if she was completely removed from the mountain top. His indifference to the sorceress was replaced with cold disgust as he peered toward Connel in the same way as she had done previously.

"So they do come. An interesting dilemma." His words vibrated with intensity.

Shayed found her courage and her voice. She bellowed a command with all the strength of her being, though it was severely muffled within the confines of her prison.

"Release me!"

Ingar kept his back to his prisoner. He ignored her. The focus of his thoughts remained squarely upon those at Connel. He was aware of them, just as Shayed was, but he spoke of them with contempt. "I don't know if I could stop them all," he mumbled to himself. "I will be weak for sometime. I have already used a great portion of my strength. I do not believe I have enough left to deal with them directly. It will take time for them to get here, but not time enough. Dwarves are very resistant, and the two are of royal blood. They will surely be difficult. There is also something very special about that delver. I sense trouble in him."

His expression went blank for long moments as he peered off toward the east in a lost daze. Even as Shayed again called to be released, he continued to place his attention on the small alliance which even now was beginning the final journey to Sanctum. One by one he went through all those gathered together. He snapped back to attention with a nod of his head. "And a cliff behemoth! They do come prepared."

Yet again, Shayed screamed with fury. "Release me, Ingar! Do not be a fool!"

He stood as if he could not hear her. He looked down the face of Sanctum Mountain. "Perhaps a rock slide. That might stop them. Ah, but the delver is quick, both of sense and of foot. He will warn them. At best, I might catch a few at random. The elves are also very quick. They might save those that are slower, and cliff behemoths have been known to stop landslides single-handedly. It is not a good plan.

"Another choice is to eliminate a selected few. It would be within my power by then to kill the elves and the humans. To be rid of them would certainly hinder them. Their secrets would die with them, the others would never pass what awaits them."

Again he paused before shaking his head. "Then again, they may yet succeed. A cliff behemoth is a surprising creature. He might overcome what can not be revealed, and there is something of the delver that still concerns me. If he is with them, they will always have a chance."

Trying not to struggle against chains which tightened with every reflex, Shayed made one last attempt to gain the wizard's attention. "Ingar, listen to me. You don't know what you're doing. If you will not release me, at least listen to what I have to say. I know what is happening here."

Ingar did finally turn from his lofty perch and moved back to the flattened ground where Shayed remained

imprisoned. He studied her carefully. "You do know what is going on, don't you? Perhaps that information can be useful to me."

Shayed discounted the expression of animosity that ruled the wizard's face. Instead, she focused her will, directed it through the barrier of her prison and directly at Ingar. "It will be useful for you to let those that come complete their mission unimpeded."

"And why is that?" the wizard demanded with a sly reproach.

"Because the sphere threatens the land with obliteration."

"I am aware of that, that is why I am here," Ingar said simply. He did not need to hear the idle ravings of this sorceress. She did not see the sphere as he did. However, she might have different insights on the party of would-be invaders. She might know more of their intentions, more of their weaknesses which he might exploit. "What is it you believe will happen here and how will your followers strive to carry out your bidding?"

Shayed fought not against the chains that held her, but against the insanity, the cold uncaring which gripped Ingar. "They're not carrying out my bidding, they're doing what is necessary to save themselves and the land. I do not know how it came to pass that you were able to come here, but you must release me. If you stop those that come, you will cause the end of everything in the land. The struggle will end and you will crumble as well."

"That is not completely the case," Ingar stated plainly. "Indeed the land will be altered. That which was, will no longer be. That is the price for a glorious new beginning. The power of the sphere will bring a new order. True, those that lived will die, but they will be replaced. An end will come to the misdirected way of the land. Obliteration will not be a curse, but a blessing, as the new power will remove this futile struggle between external forces."

The idea was beyond evil, perhaps beyond insanity. What could anyone gain by the obliteration of all things? Shayed replied with an attempt to reveal his folly. "And what of you? Will you not be removed as well? Will you allow yourself to be destroyed to carry out this absurd idea?"

"I will not be destroyed," Ingar replied callously. "The power of the sphere will protect me. The rest will not be so fortunate, even you. I will remain to become lord and master of this new order."

"You don't honestly believe that? There won't be any new order. You're being controlled, manipulated by the sphere, just as you were upon your last mortal days. Can you not see this?"

The wizard spoke dryly, void of emotion. Any anger or hostility dried in his words of arrogance. "Your tricks are useless against me, sorceress. I am enlightened by the sphere. I will not fall to such chicanery. Give up your delusions and tell me of those that are to arrive here."

Shayed responded in frustration. She growled with intensity, a stark contrast to Ingar's carefully measured words. "I will only tell you of what you already know. They come to stop the sphere, to destroy it. And I don't believe you can stop them."

"Quite sure of yourself aren't you?" he said mockingly.

She glared at him behind her red prison, but said nothing.

Making no reply of his own, he turned back toward the east. His red form floated deftly in the growing winds.

As the sun fled behind dark clouds for the first time that morning, the scarlet hue of his being glowed hotter in the wake of a darker sky. He peered down the side of the mountain and his eyes passed over the fissure in its side. He sensed the barrier which protected the gap, but allowed the magic to flow freely from within.

"That way is closed to them; perhaps I might close the other entrance." With a twist, he floated passed Shayed and towards a patch of ground seemingly no different than that which surrounded it. "This is the opening which will lead to the first tier. If I seal this with my own power they will not find a way inside. They will have to dig. Even with an army of dwarves, it will take too much time. I will grow in strength as they weaken, and I will obliterate them before they reach their goal."

He began to raise an arm, but it stopped as if it hit an unseen barrier. His head snapped up in attention as yet again he looked to the east, towards Connel. Anger and frustration filled his blood colored eyes. "A sorceress walks with them. It is not you I sense, elf. It is a human. She is weak, but unpredictable. She might find the words to break my barrier. Much would be lost if such a thing occurred. Creating this barrier would weaken me and alert them to my presence. That will not do at all. The rock slide would be a better choice."

"Allowing them free passage is the only choice!" Shayed screamed.

Ingar seemed to ignore her. "If I could just get closer to the sphere, I could drink in the power, but I am as locked to this place as you. Wait a minute, what was it you said?"

Shayed went silent, unnerved by his curious expression.

"You said to let them pass," he answered his own question. "That may just be the answer. I will let them pass. I will let them enter Sanctum and overcome the tiers. I will let them bring the sphere out of Sanctum and right to me."

"They will never do such a thing!" Shayed gasped. "They will destroy it on the spot."

"Not if they are convinced such a thing will bring them harm."

He gave no further explanation. In a moment, Shayed would understand all too well his intentions. Terror rose within her as he circled her again. This time, however, he inspected her closely and not the chains.

He raised his hands, and within the passing of a strong gust of wind, Ingar appeared just as Shayed. His face was as hers, his body was as hers. His red tint was gone, replaced by a white which closely resembled her untouched shade. His hue was not as pure, the white ever so slightly dingy, but in the growing darkness of the storm, it would not be noticed.

Shayed gasped with both fear and anger. "You can not do this!"

"Oh, but I can. The fools believe in you. They will do whatever you say, or in this case, whatever I say. They will either die in Sanctum or they will bring the sphere to me. Either way, they shall fail. I will grow in strength and protect the sphere as well as any barrier placed within this mountain. I will see to it that the will of the sphere is carried out."

"I will not let you! Do you think I will remain silent? They'll see me here and I will warn them. I will tell them to destroy the sphere."

"You will say nothing, they will neither see nor hear you."

With one last wave of Ingar's hand, Shayed vanished. Chains, force field, and all, she faded from sight.

"It is taking the last of my powers to bend the light and sound around you, but they will be renewed in time."

From a vacuum in space, where light and sound could not escape, Shayed could see out into the land but she could not be seen or heard. She had not moved from her place on Sanctum's peak, yet to any who arrived, she would not be visible. She watched helplessly as her imposter waited patiently for the arrival of Ryson and all those with him.

Chapter 23

Mappel led the group quickly up the stairs into the main chamber of the church. Godson followers nervously poked their heads around corners as they watched in trepidation of the cliff behemoth that now stood comfortably in the open space. They would have remained behind the security of those walls had Matthew not sought them out.

He calmed them first, assured them, and reminded them what a cliff behemoth stood for. The emotional swing from alarm to awe was clearly evident in their expressions. Some walked away from the security of their hiding places to get closer to the giant. Their faces filled with joy. It appeared as if their faith was upheld simply by witnessing the existence of such a creature, as if seeing Godson.

Matthew urged a handful to complete other tasks. Politely, diplomatically, he pressed upon them the need for urgency. He quickly set them upon errands as he himself disappeared down the hall which led to his personal chambers.

The handful of church followers soon returned. Wide-eyed, joyous, they walked passed the cliff behemoth and began handing out water bags and food sacks. Algors, dwarves and elves alike thanked them as they stepped away from the group but remained closer than before, as if being next to the giant added blessings to their souls.

Matthew returned with his Book of Godson in one hand and a rope in the other. Two more followers brought up the rear, also toting ropes.

"I admit that I do not know what awaits you in Sanctum, but I do know that our journey will go faster if we already are supplied with food and water. I also know that when a mountain must be climbed or descended, rope comes in very handy. I would bring more supplies if I had them, but we are a poor church."

Lief Woodson trotted forward to meet the reader and relieved him of the heavy rope. He ducked his head through the center of the coil and let it hang upon the shoulder opposite his bow. "It is more than we can ask for, good reader. Your forethought does you well."

Holli and Ryson moved forward to take the remaining ropes, also placing them over their shoulders.

"Is there anything else we might yet accomplish here?" Mappel asked of both those that would travel with him and the followers of the church they would leave behind. He was answered by silence and shaking heads. "Then it is time to ..."

"Wait!" Lauren called out with a warning as Mappel was about to direct them out the front door. Her sight again focused beyond the walls, beyond the church and into the streets. More jagged lines of anguish etched themselves permanently in her face. "Spies watch this door. Men are coming this way now."

The hush in the church magnified, but now it carried heavy apprehension with it.

"They are coming for us," she added with certainty.

Holli Brances took command with the authority of a trained elf guard. "Everyone move away from the door," she instructed firmly. She looked about the church, not for the first time, but with new intentions. She now viewed it as an obstacle to overcome. "This building would protect us well, but that is not our objective."

With strength and grace, she leapt over benches to reach the west wall. She peered out a lone window and shook her head. "This building is isolated. It is in the open and the light of day will not afford us cover. Even

now people are gathered at a distance but have their eyes upon us. It seems the cliff behemoth's entrance has brought great attention. Is there another exit?" she asked of Matthew.

The reader pointed toward a hall to his left. "Down that corridor. There is a door which opens to a smaller set of stairs at the back corner of the building."

"They watch there as well," Lauren warned as her eyes fixed upon the direction where Matthew pointed.

Holli cursed but darted down the hall none the less.

"It is best to stay put and let her assess what we face." Lief spoke out calmly. "We can do nothing but get in her way."

She returned in mere moments. "It is worse than the front door. The passage is narrow and there are fewer paths for escape. We could be herded into an ambush. If we are to leave, we use this door and we must leave now. We will be seen but that can no longer be avoided. Follow me and move quickly. Ignore everyone and everything else around you. If humans call for you to stop, ignore that as well. Stop only on my command. Lief, take the rear and keep everyone together. Dzeb I will ask you to stay low and in the center of our group." This last command was spoken with greater diplomacy, as if acknowledging it was truly up to the cliff behemoth.

"I will do as you ask," Dzeb said as if nothing could trouble him, as if their dilemma presented no true problem.

Holli nodded graciously. "It will help us greatly. Ryson Acumen, your abilities are again needed. Lauren, I will request your help as well. Ryson you must move ahead of us, scout the forward ground, but move no further than three of these human roads ahead of me. Return often with all the information you can obtain. Lauren, I wish you to remain at my side. I do not know if you understand your powers, but you show great ability to cast sight spells. They will be of great service to us."

"I'm not sure I'm casting any spells," Lauren revealed with great emotion latching upon her words. "I just see things. I don't know if I can control it."

"Then do not try," Holli said firmly. "Simply tell me what you see as you see it." She lifted her head to the rest of the group. "We shall waste no more time. We go now."

With those words, Ryson Acumen bolted from the front door and down the front stone steps. Caring little for the gawking stares of the onlookers that gathered after the arrival of the cliff behemoth, he set about searching for true threats to their advance. His darting eyes flashed upon one road, then another. His ears perked to the wind, he garnered the rhythmic beat of horse hooves in several directions. While the crowd remained scattered about, a collection of men appearing more angry than curious formed across the street. Ryson knew the sight of the cliff behemoth would keep them at bay for a while, but one troublemaker might goad the rest into an assault with rocks from a distance. It would be best to steer the party in another direction.

His first reconnaissance complete, he returned to the front door of the church.

"People are gathering," he stated plainly to Holli. "I would recommend passage away from the group across the way. I think you should move quickly. We'll startle them at first, and we can probably take advantage of that."

"I fully intend to," Holli stated flatly.

"There are also horses moving in on our position. I can't tell how many."

Holli's expression went grim. "Which way are they coming from? Can we avoid them?"

"They're as scattered as the crowd. It sounds as if they're being called in from all over town."

"It must be Consprite," Matthew interjected. "He's the one who suggested he put guards on horseback to help with the escorts. He probably had others on call to prevent us from leaving as well."

"Fire upon the fool!" Lief spat. He pulled the bow from over his shoulder and took firm grasp with a taut left hand. "Let me go ahead. I will handle Consprite."

"No," Ryson and Dzeb responded in unison, although in different tones. Dzeb's voice was calm, yet forceful, as if such a ploy could not even be considered. Ryson allowed emotion to paint his words, but it was Holli that ended any debate.

"No, Lief. We must stay together. It would be to their advantage to separate us. We will fight only if necessary, but we fight together. Let us first try to outmaneuver them. Ryson, scout passage to the right, away from those you deem most dangerous. Everyone else, follow me."

Ryson accepted the task with a nod. Without a moment's more hesitation, he was again down the steps, but now moved quickly out of sight.

Holli took the lead, Lauren at her side. Both trotted quickly down the stairs to the open road. Five algors with the hoods of their cloaks drawn tightly over their heads followed. The cliff behemoth, flanked on each side by Matthew and Stephen, bent his head as he stepped past the door and into the clearing of the open steps.

Gasps of surprise and fright filled the growing crowd. Not a single onlooker stood his ground. Even the angry men shied away from the sight of the giant. Each quickly glimpsed about for a sure path of escape in case the creature decided to turn in their direction. To their relief, Holli guided the group in the opposite direction.

The remaining five algors kept close in behind Dzeb with Jon and Tun following in their wake. The elder dwarf did not appear happy walking so far back in the line. He kept his right hand on his axe and glared with menace at the crowd. He would be more than willing to take out his frustrations upon any human that might try to lay a hand on his royal person. Lief concluded the line with his bow returned to his shoulder. He allowed a slight gap to form between him and the rest of the party, a buffer in case the crowd regained their courage. They never did.

Ryson returned to their ranks and spoke briefly to Holli. He kept his voice to a whisper as they now walked in the open. After another quick report, the delver again raced off to scout on ahead.

Word spread through the streets via shouts and cries. With every passing moment of their travel, more and more townspeople became aware of their presence. Shutters banged open, and then closed with a shiver of anguish. Children ran towards them, gawking, before being herded up and whisked away by cringing parents. The clamor revealed their position as well as if they carried a streaming red banner high over Dzeb's head.

"This will not do," Holli muttered. She searched for a quick solution and appeared to find one in the growing cluster of buildings before them.

As they moved away from the church, they found themselves closer to the heart of the town. Homes, taverns and shops were built closer together. Narrow alleys offered passage away from the growing host of prying eyes. With quick instructions to Ryson, Holli took every advantage of such offerings. She led them with twists

and turns, mostly down narrow back alleys and away from busy intersections. The din of those that had gathered soon faded in the distance as Holli's winding path lost any that tried to pursue.

The danger, though, was far from over as total avoidance of detection was nearly impossible in such a busy town. A merchant mindlessly sweeping dirt from his back door, or a townspeople passing behind his house witnessed the group with a start and a scream.

Any dogs, however, remained quiet to their appearance. Those that were loose ran up to Dzeb, licked his hand, and let them pass without the slightest bark or growl. Those animals that stood behind windows of their homes simply watched as the group passed, tails wagging as if a royal welcome. Their stares set happily upon the cliff behemoth.

In the maze of buildings in such a crowded section of town, even Matthew, who spent his entire life in Connel, became temporarily unaware of their exact position. They followed Holli almost blindly as she never lost her bearings. She kept them moving westward, though in round about fashion. To any that watched her, it was clear she never once lost her direction or sight of her ultimate objective. Her grasp over even this most unfamiliar of terrains was awe-inspiring. She moved as if she spent twenty seasons in this town, and spent that time in these very alleys avoiding detection.

Ryson's ability to relocate them was equally as stunning. He used his speed to move ahead of the group and out of sight. After scouting many directions, he always managed to find them again without the slightest difficulty. With a brief report to Holli, he was on his way only to return even after Holli led them through more twists and turns around several buildings.

In the narrow passages where they moved, his whispered words could now be heard by others in the party as they all clustered together.

"More horses are arriving," he warned. "They're staying on the wide roads, but they're checking the alleys. They're mostly listening to calls from the townspeople. Most of them are false or confused. They haven't established a search pattern. They're simply wandering about recklessly, hoping to stumble over us. If they keep that up, we have a chance."

On that note of optimism, he again ran off.

As Holli continued to move them further toward the edge of town, she could now also hear the galloping hooves of horses. The most audible of shouts shifted from surprised screams to the barking of orders. The guards were indeed closing on them as their numbers increased. They came from every direction, but their efforts remained uncoordinated as individuals moved randomly toward their position.

She turned her head to the party for a brief moment to issue a single warning. "With so many on horseback, it may be impossible to avoid them completely. Stand ready to defend, but only on my order." With her words ending in firm command, she turned back to her duty.

Holli now relied as heavily upon her own training as she did upon the continuous reports from the deliver. With savvy and skill, she zigzagged through the buildings which stood between them and the open fields to the west. She continuously altered the speed of the party, sometimes stopping them for long moments in a narrow alley as a horse-backed rider trotted past. Her skill was rewarded, the ancient wall was now in sight, but with the wall came greater risk.

The guards were now close enough for them to spot several, but through the grace of benevolent forces and by the talents of Holli, the party remained unseen. When the road ahead was clear, they moved at their best possible speed. When Holli was in doubt about what might lie around the next corner, she slowed them and

selected several alternate routes in case retreat was necessary.

As they closed upon the outskirts of the town, movement became tense and laborious. Buildings were smattered about haphazardly. The cover of narrow, dark alleys disappeared into wide vacant lots. One or two elves or delvers might have escaped detection over such areas, but not a group which included ten algors, two dwarves and a cliff behemoth. Her concerns doubled as Lauren called out a warning of her own.

"Their leader is with them now," she whispered into Holli's ear, but those around her heard as well. "He is directing their efforts. Many are being sent to the wall to cut off our escape. He is close by. I think he knows we want to head west."

The elf guard shook her head with distress, but kept them moving. If men were being sent to the wall, they would have to beat them there, although she understood such prospects were dim. Holli actually surpassed her own expectations as they reached within a stone's throw of the wall before a rider twenty paces from them called out their position.

The party stood beside a large storage facility for grain which came in from the fields. The building walls were tall, taller than Dzeb, and made of brick. Holli needed only scan the closest wall in the briefest of moments to know it would not behoove them to be trapped against it. She immediately sought other options.

In front of them, only a few strides, a wide road drifted off to the west and up a ramp over the ancient wall. It was the main supply route for farmers to bring their crops to town. Holli's sharp eyes followed the direct passage out to the western horizon. While it would lie over open ground between the corn and wheat fields, it would eventually lead toward wooded areas of sanctuary. She harshly judged its merits with tactical implications.

The open road would give an advantage to those on horseback. It offered nothing in the way of cover, but it remained a clear path to the west and ultimately to Sanctum. There were trees in the distance, trees she and Lief, and Ryson could use to thwart any attack, but they stood out of reach. She knew the group could not outrun the horse-backed guards to safety. In her final assessment, the road afforded her little strategic value other than offering greater space for maneuverability and the slim hope of escape.

Still, these small benefits surpassed that which existed in their current position. Unwilling to be trapped against the warehouse, Holli quickly ordered everyone to the middle of the road. They were in the open and away from cover, but free passage extended in several directions. With a decision made, she turned a critical eye upon her foes.

As more and more riders rambled toward them, their weaknesses, as well as their ill-will, were easily visible to the eyes of a trained elf guard. The men appeared ready for a skirmish, but not trained enough to use the open ground to their advantage. The circle they formed was loose and porous. If it became necessary, she and Lief could send enough arrows to send the lot into utter confusion and spook the horses into uncontrolled flight. For now, though, she waited with sharp eyes watching every significant move of those that surrounded her.

Ryson had returned to their ranks, but instead of taking a place next to Holli, he moved to her far left. Lief noted his positioning and moved slowly to his right. The three formed the points of a triangle with the rest of the party in between. Ryson kept his sword sheathed as Holli and Lief kept their bows strapped about their shoulders.

Tense silence gripped the scene until Matthew called out to any rider that would answer.

"What's going on here? Why are you blocking our way?"

None replied.

"I insist you let us pass," he demanded. "We have done nothing wrong. You have no right to stop us."

One of the guards, eyeing Dzeb with both fear and awe, called out the first reply. "You're walkin' around with a monster. After what we've seen, we've ..."

His response was cut short by the slow beat of a horse's trot behind him, and a callous command. "That will be enough."

Those surrounded by the guards turned their attention to the approaching rider; all accept Holli, Lief and Ryson. Their focus remained upon the guards which stood closest to their points of protection.

There were now at least two dozen riders that encircled them. Some had swords in hand, others had bows with arrows ready. They were surely not bound together by common training, as they did not allow their greater numbers to work to their advantage. Their positioning remained lax and disorganized, wide gaps remained in their ranks. They made no attempt to complement or coordinate their weaponry as those with bows found themselves clustered together. Those with long swords and best suited to block the escape routes were also far from optimal position.

The threat, however, lay not in their ability to work together, but in the cold assumption of their task. Ryson judged them as nothing more than a collection of mercenaries, hired by the mayor to carry out his own bidding. Unable to recognize a man before him, he believed they would be willing to carry out any order, no matter how unjust. The guards looked upon most of the group as nothing more than cattle, and they would probably treat them all with less compassion. Only the cliff behemoth pulled a reaction from the men beyond indifference, and that was fear.

The newcomer on horseback moved forward through the ranks of the circled men. He guided his horse with obvious difficulty, making it clear to all that he was uncomfortable sitting upon the animal. It was Consprite, and his appearance brought little surprise to all that had come to know him, especially Mappel.

The elder elf remained quiet as Matthew confronted the mayor first.

"Why have you ordered these men to stop us? You assured us they would assist us."

Consprite shook his head, his slightly pudgy cheeks jiggled, accenting his expression of impatience. "I assured you they would escort your guests safely to the church, nothing more. Don't make it sound as if I have broken a promise. That deed has been done by you. I offered my help and you were to keep me advised of anything which might stir the people. This morning I hear shouts and screams and now I find you attempting to sneak out of town. Is that keeping your word? That just won't do. The people are up in arms. They'll expect an explanation. I now also would like an explanation."

"There is nothing to explain," Mappel joined the debate. He kept his tone calm as he stepped towards Consprite. "We have done exactly what we told you we were going to do. We have brought many together at the Church of Godson, we have talked, and now we must leave."

Consprite brushed his eyebrow with his forefinger. "I assume then you have reached some consensus. Were you not going to inform me of that decision?"

Mappel responded placidly. His stance, however, was anything but relaxed. His weight remained evenly upon his feet, his staff balanced in his hands. "It no longer concerns you."

The mayor would not agree. He spoke with a near mocking tone. "I doubt that's the case. I would guess it concerns everyone. Isn't that what you told me when we had our discussion in my office? I was under the impression that whatever was happening was affecting the entire land. Has that changed?"

"Many things have changed since our first meeting," Mappel said coolly.

"But not that."

"Be that as it may, our business now calls us away from Connel."

"And that's it?" The mayor feigned surprise as he raised his eyebrows. He spoke as if he could not conceive of such a callous decision. "You would just leave, without acknowledging my role or my wishes? You are finished with Connel, so you walk away as if you were never here?" Consprite's voice dripped with sarcasm. "It is not that easy. There are debts to repay."

"What kind of debts?"

"Debts to me, of course. Your parade will certainly put me in an uncomfortable position. It may be discovered that I hid your presence from the town. That will not be looked upon kindly. There are also the escorts I have provided for you."

"The same escorts which now block us?" Matthew asked with an intensity which loomed ever higher.

Never at a loss for words, the mayor responded with a sharpened tongue. "These men confronted you because your giant friend there failed to follow the instructions we agreed upon. I was to help your guests reach the church and you would keep from causing a panic in the streets. I'm sure you saw the commotion you caused. What were my men supposed to do? Ignore it? No, I'm afraid not. If you are upset by what has occurred, it is your own fault. It also appears as if some of your other guests were unwilling to take advantage of my escorts." His eyes first washed over the giant, but they soon found the dwarves. Their hardened faces stared back at him as he noted their peculiar features. The hoods of the algors hid their faces from him, but their appearance was already reported to him. He nodded to Jon and Tun. "It seems there are other interesting things that you wish to keep hidden from me. These two I assume are dwarves. They've entered this town without my knowledge. Another breach of our agreement. Are they going to accompany you to Sanctum?"

The question hung in the air even as Consprite waited with triumphant glee. He drank in their surprise, especially that of the elder elf.

"What do you know of Sanctum?" Mappel asked, no longer hiding his contempt for the man.

"I know a great many things you probably wish I didn't." He paused to pull an item from his pocket. He held it aloft for all to see the weather beaten cover of a book in which dust had actually become embedded. To Matthew and Stephen, the book was immediately recognizable. "It was hard to obtain a copy of a Book of Godson. Not many people have one. Luckily the library archived a copy. I doubt it has been looked at in years."

At first Consprite smiled at the reactions of Matthew and Stephen. He reveled in his victory until he placed an icy stare upon the elder elf. "This book has revealed a great many things to me. I believe I know what you are after. It's this Sphere of Ingar, isn't it? It would explain a great many things to me. I imagine you're going to Sanctum Mountain to try and stop the magic which you believe is now free. Let me ask you this, does it still contain poison for the elves?"

"It will contain poison for all," Mappel snarled.

"I don't know about that, but it does contain great power. I want to know what you intend to do with it. What are your plans when you reach Sanctum?"

"That does not concern you."

"It does, if I don't let you leave."

"Again I demand to know by what right you hold us." Matthew growled, his cheeks turning red with anger.

Conspire nearly laughed at the reaction. "Do you think with all that is going on I have to answer such a question? You talk as if there's someone I have to answer to. That simply isn't the case. No one would fault me for throwing all of you in prison, especially if they found out who and what you are. The people of this town will be very upset to know that monsters were hiding in that church of yours. What do you think they will do when their courage grows? I bet they'll consider burning that church right down to the ground. If I'm not around to keep order, it will surely happen. Now, I can be persuaded to keep a guard over your church, and allow you to pass, but it will take much more of your cooperation."

"More likely you mean that if we don't do as you say, you'll see that it's done," Matthew roared with anger. "I am not so blinded by my faith that I can't see a threat. If there is any burning to be done, I'm sure you'll be at the heart of it."

Conspire snickered, then acted to appear hurt, as if wounded by the barb. "You do me injustice. I have been on your side all along. It is the townspeople that will take the action. Mobs are an angry and unmanageable lot."

"What of the spies?"

The mayor looked about to find the source of the question. His eyes narrowed upon Lauren, her face a mixture of uncertainty as well as challenge.

"Do I know you?" the mayor wondered aloud.

Lauren hesitated only for a moment before her voice boomed with new found confidence. "I doubt it, but I know you, more now than ever, probably more than you would ever believe. I live in this town. I know that the people would not simply burn anything without prodding from the likes of you."

She stepped toward him. Her eyes locked upon him, bore through his outward shell. Any hint of her trepidation evaporated as she saw into the caverns of his conniving, greedy soul. "I also know of the spies you placed around the church to watch us. I read you as easily as a tavern sign." Indeed, Lauren's eyes glowed with new found power and they uncovered the mayor's deepest thoughts and intentions. "The escorts, the spies, even your intentions now. I see them all. Tell them what you really want, mayor. End this charade. You want the sphere for yourself. You want to unravel its secrets and learn to tap into its power. You have a twisted soul, Conspire. You would kill us all, even these guards that now serve you if it meant truly grasping this power."

"Nonsense,"

Lauren cut him off before he could continue. Her words fiery hot, the power which was now hers to command coursing through her spirit. "Save your lie. I hear it ringing in your head before you say the words. You were going to say you only want to help, that you would accompany us to Sanctum with some of your men at our side. You would leave men here and at the church to keep peace."

The mayor's eyes widened with surprise. "Who are you?" he asked again. "How did you know what I was going to say?"

"Does it matter, because I also know you lie. You will use the guards to take the sphere when the time is right."

At first, Consprite did not reply. He merely sat uncomfortably upon his horse, considering his options. Finally, he spoke with cold expression and bitter words. "Be that as it may, you have little choice. If you wish to proceed to Sanctum Mountain, you must allow me to accompany you. Otherwise I will not let you leave."

Neither Mappel nor Matthew reacted first, nor did Lauren. Before they could say a single word in response, a reply came from an unexpected source within their very midst. It came in the form of the smallest action, without a word of bravado.

Very placidly, very deliberately, the cliff behemoth took a step. His calm blue eyes gazed off down the road to the west. He spoke not a word. Gently, he placed a hand upon an algor's shoulder and made it clear he wished to pass. He took another step and his direction was now clear, he would leave Connel whether Consprite allowed it or not. In truth, he moved as if the guards and Consprite were no longer there. Every eye was now on him. Even Holli allowed a glance over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of the giant's movements. None followed as all remained in place, yet Dzeb moved forward as if nothing mattered.

"What's that thing doing?" Consprite demanded, but a hint of fear broke through his words.

Mappel did not answer. No one did. They simply watched as Dzeb strode up to the horse backed riders that blocked the western pass of the road. The horses reared back and the surprised, cautious guards allowed them to do so. With silent, peaceful grace, as if walking through an empty park at sunrise, Dzeb stepped past the circle of riders. Nothing now stood between him and the ramp which passed over the ancient wall.

Consprite shook the confusion from his thoughts. Anger swelled in him as he watched the cliff behemoth walk past his guards as if they did not exist.

"Stop him!" he ordered.

Nearly every guard waited motionless for another to take up the task. Finally, one bowman at the edge of the road decided to act. He fired a single arrow at the back right shoulder of the giant. It sliced through the air with perfect precision and met its mark with pinpoint accuracy, though the result was most unanticipated by the bowman.

The steel tip of the arrow, razor sharp, failed to penetrate Dzeb's body. A small fleck of his hide skipped away from his back, but that was the extent of his injury. The arrow fared much worse. The steel-tipped arrowhead flattened as the shaft shattered. Small splinters of wood rained everywhere as Dzeb stopped moving.

He turned with patience, back towards the circle of men. His eyes betrayed the sorrow in his heart as he stood gazing at the guard with the empty bow still in his hand. For that man, all eternity passed in a single heartbeat.

With his eyes growing sadder by the moment, Dzeb reversed his direction and stepped more forcibly towards the bowman. The other men clustered about this marked guard guided their horses back and away. The bowman stood alone and too frightened to direct his horse toward an escape.

Dzeb mouthed a word loud and clear. Its meaning was lost on all that watched, except for the horses. At once they calmed, and not one animal let loose even a single whinny. Even the horse upon which the bowman sat, waited patiently for Dzeb as he stepped ever closer. If the bowman kicked the horse with all his might, it

would not move the mare an inch.

Dzeb reached out. His mammoth hand extended slowly outward. First, it found the snout of the horse. He patted it gently. The mare closed its eyes as if calmed to sleep. The gray hand of the behemoth, with powerful fingers extended, moved onward and reached out toward the guard. Dzeb closed his palm around the bow and lifted it deliberately from the guard's grip. He held the weapon over empty ground as he tightened his fist. The center of the bow crumbled, the taut string went limp, the remnants dropped to the ground as harmless as dust.

Consprite watched first the giant, but then the faces of all those around him. He saw the panic rise in his men and smiles of satisfaction appear upon Mappel and his followers. Anger swelled within him, and he growled though gritted teeth. "Use your swords you fools! Stop him!"

Those men that found the strength to overcome their fear drew their weapons, but their horses would not move as they directed. They shouted and kicked, but the animals remained in place, as if the horses were nothing more than stone statues.

In that moment of utter chaos, it was the algors that acted, and as was customary, they moved in unison. Ten slings appeared with ten rounded stones in place. The swinging bands cut the air and the stones fired simultaneously. Ten separate targets were selected, and ten guards fell to the ground.

Ryson, Holli, and Lief moved with almost the same precision. With delver agility, Ryson leapt upon the closest rider. He knocked the guard from his perch on the saddle and sent him sprawling to the ground. He leapt off that horse and on to a second, again sending the rider flying. He dismounted four riders with ease, two remained unconscious upon the ground, and the other two ran swiftly to safety. The horses remained in place as if nothing had happened.

Lief drew his sword. As guards tried to move their horses, he slapped them hard on the wrists with the blunt edge. Their swords or bows dropped harmlessly to the ground as he disarmed three before a fourth was prepared to duel with him from an unmoving horse. While the guard had the advantage of height from the saddle, he could not maneuver. Lief quickly moved in from behind and with a sword point at the man's neck, forced submission.

Holli took her bow from her shoulder but at first left the arrows in their quiver. She grasped one end of the bow with both hands as she heaved it back. With great force she swung at the nearest rider. The thick wooden bow struck the guard's chest. He flew backwards out of the saddle and landed upon the ground dazed, if not seriously hurt. Again, the horse remained unmoving. It showed no sign of distress as Holli jumped on its back.

Firmly in the saddle, Holli finally drew an arrow. She readied it in the bow string and pulled back with steady force. She kept her grip on the string as she called for Consprite's attention.

"Tell your men to disarm, now!" The arrow pointed unmistakably at the mayor's throat. "It will be a painful way to die," she urged.

Consprite's face turned gray, then white. The female elf's resolve was not a matter of question. Had he hesitated, she would have let the arrow fly.

"Do as she said!" he yelled, but the words blurted from his mouth in more of a yelp.

"Now have them dismount!" Holli's hands remained steady upon her bow, the string remained taught.

"Do it!" he instructed, and those that remained in their saddles dropped to the ground.

"You too," she gave her last command.

The mayor struggled to move as quickly as possible. He cursed, his face glowed red once more with both fear and embarrassment. At first, he could not decide how to remove himself from the perch of the saddle. He looked to his left, then his right. He pulled up his right leg, shook his head in alarm over falling, and changed to his left. Finally, he struggled and fumbled his way out of the saddle. His right foot would not clear the stirrup and he ended up on his backside. He cursed again, and went to lift himself out of the dirt covered road.

"I think you should stay there," Holli advised. She lowered the tension on the bow string, but the arrow remained in place.

Consprite bit back an angry retort, and remained on the seat of his pants. His horse stood placidly by him. It made no movements as Mappel stepped up to grab its reins.

Mappel considered the horse before him, just as he swerved his head about to consider the many other animals within his grasp. An idea of their service leaped into his mind.

"Dare I say, that again providence has intervened," he spoke gently, but all could hear him. "Is it luck or a turn of fate that we now have the means to reach Sanctum before nightfall?"

Holli joined in immediately. "The horses would give us a great advantage. We would not have to make a single camp. We could stay on the roads along the farms and bypass the human towns between Connel and the mountain." Her mind calculated the entire journey which lay before them. She posed a question to herself as well as the entire group. "But what of the thickening forest? The horses will slow us when we reach Dark Spruce."

Mappel shook his head serenely. "They might slow us, if you simply refer to the elves and perhaps the delver. You must now, however, think with greater scope. The horses will help those that can not walk within the trees, such as Matthew here, and Stephen, and our good friends the algors and dwarves."

"I considered that from the start," Holli corrected him quickly but politely. "I wonder more about when the trees thicken and block most passages. What about paths in the forest that prove too narrow for the horses?"

"We could head northwest," Ryson called out the suggestion. "We could pass through the edges of Dark Spruce and then cut south to approach Sanctum. We would lose a little time in the beginning by not heading due west, but we would make it up and more as we close in. Besides, if the path is too narrow for a horse, then I doubt it would be wide enough for Dzeb."

Holli seized upon the last statement, still unsure if taking the horses would give them a true advantage. "That is another point. What horse here can carry the cliff behemoth without collapsing after a minute's ride? Would it truly help us to leave a trail of exhausted animals?"

"There's a cart at the front of that building," Lief asserted as he pointed to the warehouse. "If we hitch two of the horses to the cart, they could carry Dzeb with ease."

Holli nodded in agreement. "That would solve most problems, though we would have to leave the cart at the base of Sanctum. Dzeb would have to climb on foot."

"I expect all of us will at that point," Ryson acknowledged. "After a full day's ride with little rest, none of these horses will be in any condition to take a slope as steep as Sanctum's. The important thing is that we will reach the mountain before night falls."

Dzeb interrupted the discussion with a point seemingly overlooked by the elves. "If you are talking about taking these horses, I would have to decline for other reasons." His voice was melodic, but no less firm. "These horses do not belong to us. No matter what these men have done, it would not be right for us to take them. The cart also does not belong to us."

"I'm sure this man won't object to giving us his horses, would you?" Holli's tone did not hide the edge of a threat. Her hand still held the bow as the tip of the arrow again bore down upon Consprite's throat.

Dzeb maintained his serene yet unshakable tone. "I can not accept that, either. I can understand what we have done here to this point, for in truth we have done no harm. To threaten and steal is another matter. I can not, will not, be a part of that."

Lief could not hold his tongue. "You would risk the land for the sake of these men that were willing to slaughter us all?! Fire upon you and your Book of Godson! There are times we must do what we have to in order to survive. Taking these horses would be no different than you crushing that guard's bow."

"I already regret that action," Dzeb replied with more than a twinge of sadness. "It was, however, necessary."

"As taking the horses is necessary!"

"We have other choices," the cliff behemoth reminded the elf with no hostility in his voice.

"Fire upon you and your other choices."

"Wait a minute, what if we pay for the horses?" Ryson quickly asked while walking up to the cliff behemoth. "What if we pay for the cart as well? We would simply be acquiring what we need for the trip by totally acceptable methods. Would that be alright with you?"

Dzeb did not protest. "It is stealing I am against."

"Very well, then." Ryson turned and trotted toward Consprite. He first looked about him to ensure the count of the party. "I will need twenty-one of these horses."

"They're not for sale," Consprite snarled.

Ryson was not shaken for a moment. "Oh but they are. You see I had a bargain with the town council, of which you belong. I'm sure you remember. I was to scout out towns to check the damage of the quake. I was paid only half when I started out. I was to be paid the other half when I returned. Well, here I am, and I want my payment."

"The town council no longer exists," Consprite replied with irritation flooding his voice.

"But you are here and acting as mayor. That makes you responsible. Do you have my money?"

The mayor said nothing.

"I didn't think so. Therefore you have broken your end of the bargain, but I am willing to make a deal. I will take twenty-one of these horses now. In return, I will forget your debt as well as return to you the entire portion of the initial payment." Ryson flipped a bag of gold coins in to the lap of the mayor. "That bag contains more than I was given when I took on your job, I expect you to give the difference to the owner of that cart. More than fair."

The delver turned and looked toward Dzeb. "The horses are rightfully ours, do you agree?"

Dzeb nodded and gave a warm smile. "It is the will of Godson."

Chapter 24

Lief and Ryson hitched the warehouse cart to two of the stronger horses. Upon completion, Ryson guided the cliff behemoth to the cart's front where he could hold the reins. The axles creaked and groaned under the giant's weight, but they would hold.

Ryson leapt upon a chestnut stallion and motioned for the others to follow suit. The horses remained motionless, as if in the deepest of sleeps, and each of the group had little difficulty in reaching a saddle. Even Tun and Jon, both forced to hoist themselves higher than their short legs would allow, found it easy to mount a horse which stood as still as a stone.

Dzeb mouthed another indiscernible word, a word with no meaning to any there, save the horses. The animals stirred immediately. Some fussed and reared as if startled from a dream. Their new riders took firm grip of the reins and reassured their mounts with pats on the neck and soothing words.

"I guess we should move along," Ryson suggested as he nudged his horse forward.

The party left the mayor and his guards behind as they took to the road leading west. Only Holli looked back. Her vision swept across every guard, watching them all, especially those with bows. Her own bow remained in her hand. She held it up ever so slightly when her eyes locked with Consprite's. Her message was clear. If he tried to follow, cliff behemoth or no cliff behemoth, she would pierce him through the throat.

With the continuous beating of horse hooves, the mayor and his mercenaries soon dropped from sight. The spirits of the wayward travelers lifted as the sun hung brightly overhead. Warm rays filled the air. Trees, flowers, and the growing crops fed upon the light, reaching higher toward the sky. Birds chattered off in the distance, some simply ignoring the scattered scarecrows as they swooped down upon ripening fields of grain.

The promise of this gorgeous day, however, would not last. A growing wind from the west brought attention to thickening clouds on the horizon and cooled the air enough to allow the algors and dwarves to maintain their cloaks about them. No true surprise, for all but perhaps the dwarves knew that the growing season produced quick moving storms. Even the algors in the Lacobian Desert witnessed small squalls during this time in the cycle. It was the one season when even a desert could feel the cooling spray of rainfall.

The wind swirled dust from the roads, as did the hooves of the horses, and their movements took on a new sense of urgency. The swelling overhead clouds pressed the riders forward. The quicker they could reach their destination, the faster they could find shelter. It was thus they sat in saddle with even greater thanks, even as they looked behind to see the fading structures of Connel. They could never have hoped to cover so much distance in so little time. At the very least, they would reach the cover of trees in Dark Spruce before the heavy rains fell upon them. It was as Mappel and Dzeb suggested - a true blessing these horses, perhaps even a gift of Godson.

As Holli led them, she thought the reader would be the first to object to a strenuous pace. He appeared as much out of place upon horseback as did the mayor. To her surprise, he moved along without a grunt of dissatisfaction. So did they all, seemingly willing to go even faster if it would bring them to their destination before the heavy rains began.

Holli took advantage of such willingness, setting a pace faster than she could have expected but within the constraints of the horses. She would test their endurance without leading them to the brink of exhaustion. The horses that pulled Dzeb proved to be the measuring stick. As they grew tired, she slowed them all to a trot until they were again ready for a more strenuous run.

While Holli remained in the lead for the duration of the trip, it was Ryson that truly directed them. It was at this time that the delver's true skills became evident to even the most unwilling believer. On countless occasions, Ryson actually dismounted and ran off on foot. He left the reins of his horse in the hands of Holli as he set off forward, or to the right, or to the left. He moved at a speed that easily surpassed the guarded gallops of the horses. He disappeared over hilltops only to return within moments to announce what lay ahead. He would leap back upon his moving horse with casual ease to converse with Holli. He kept her advised of travelers on the road, or farmers in nearby fields. Never winded from these excursions, he spent as much time scouting as he did riding. Occasionally, he brought back a pocketful of wild fruit which he passed out to his grateful yet amazed companions.

Ryson was well acquainted with the hills in this outlying area. He knew these roads with intimacy, knew the land like a lover knows the expression of his companion. These hills were his own, with or without the newly arrived magic.

He directed the group to the northeast and over the most passable, yet isolated countryside. It was not a straight path that would lead them to Sanctum, but a cut first to the north, to avoid the neighboring towns of Burbon and Pinesway.

They stayed on the open dirt roads, though they chose turns at Ryson's direction. Most times they avoided all passer-bys. Occasionally, an encounter with a farmer by the side of the road or a traveling merchant was unavoidable. Rather than waste time trying to elude them, Holli accepted the consequences and moved onward directly past.

None of those that witnessed the party made a single comment. Most stood aghast at the sight of the cliff behemoth, standing regally in the warehouse cart. Some farmers ran off, back to their houses or barns and watched from a safe distance to ensure the group did not linger by their property. One merchant nearly drove his own cart off the road into a ditch. Only by pulling his team to a complete halt did he avert disaster. He sat on top of his cart stunned, looking back over his shoulders at the passing menagerie.

As the span of travel passed, the clouds thickened overhead. The sun was now invisible to them, hidden behind rolling purple clouds that swept across the sky faster than the wind that brushed their faces. The crisp shadows of noon disappeared with the sun, and the encompassing clouds brought the color of dusk even at this stage of midday. Sporadic raindrops carried by the wind had them all guessing when the steady rains would begin.

The passing land became more and more isolated, the road less kept. Carefully managed plots of planted wheat or corn turned into endless stretches of untouched fields where tall grass flourished. Wild flowers greeted them at first, but soon most closed their petals in anticipation of the coming rain. Weeds grew from the center of the dirt lane, rocks and holes appeared more regularly and as much in their path as upon the sides of the road. The number of travelers and roadside farmers dwindled to nothing.

The hills became steeper ahead as Ryson turned them to the southwest. They were now far enough north to avoid contact with even the outer limits of Burbon's farmland, and it allowed Ryson to draw a direct bead upon Sanctum. Its peak was not yet visible to them, but his delver senses allowed him to focus upon it as if it were right before him. They would avoid the growing inclines of the mountains ahead by cutting through the sliver of forest that separated Sanctum from these lands.

A gleam grew in each of the elves' eyes as the first true signs of Dark Spruce formed on the horizon. These were no scattered saplings set as markers for farmers. The growing clusters of trees rose tall and proud. At first sight, gaps appeared, created by the axe of the budding farm population, but soon, even these disappeared. To the south and to the west, the trees thickened, claiming this land as their own and defying all who might try to raze them.

The clouds now covered the entire sky, but other than a few droplets, the rain stayed away. The wind blew stronger and shuffled the leaves of the trees which now surrounded them. Holli followed Ryson's directions and kept the party moving through sparser sections of the forest where paths proved wide enough for the Dzeb's cart to pass. Still, enough cover of branches and leaves existed overhead to prevent a drenching if the constant rain did finally arrive.

Ryson continued his scouting activity. He did so now, however, with greater care. He no longer looked for the farmer or the merchant, but for obstacles created by the wild tainted magic. His own encounters with the undead, with goblins, and with vampire burned fresh in his mind. He finished the final leg of the journey completely on foot, allowing Holli to lead his horse. He watched, smelled and listened for any sign of danger, or of a scent he could not recognize.

He asked Holli to slow the pace to allow him to completely circle the group in order to prevent an ambush from the rear. She agreed reluctantly but the speed in which they reached this point allowed her the luxury of such care. Even if they slowed to a walk, they would reach the base of Sanctum before nightfall. With the delver's agility, they could maintain a casual trot and still allow him the chance to scout all directions before they stumbled upon something unawares.

The rest of the party remained at ease, even in the thickening forest. They found security, even comfort in Holli's careful guidance and in Ryson's unquestionable skills. As they witnessed the delver circling the party and on guard for even the slightest hint of danger, any doubts or fears simply evaporated. If there was a threat, they knew they would be warned far in advance, and that any pitfall would be avoided. It was only at the first sight of Sanctum that this calm confidence began to dissolve.

Through the trees, they could all see the peak, and soon enough, even the side of this hollow mountain. In the backdrop of a gray and purple sky, with the wind blowing steady from the west, the reality of what they yet faced stung their consciousness just as sleet falls in the dormant season.

The peak called to their attention as if a glowing beacon in a night sky. Those that would actually enter Sanctum, as well as those that accompanied them, found themselves searching their souls for inner strength and determination. Elves, dwarves, algors, and humans alike; they all knew the desperate facts of their dilemma. It wore upon their spirit as rough pine needles would scrape upon raw skin.

They were to enter a place that was constructed to defy entry. They were to pass obstacles older than the ways of life they had grown accustomed. If ever a prospect appeared out of reach, it was indeed the Sphere of Ingar. This was no simple quest, no pioneer adventure. This was history, legends, evil and magic rolled into one unyielding task. Even the delver's spirit, his desire to uncover truths long hidden, was squelched by the enormity, by the unquestionable magnitude of their final aim. Sanctum was a monument to the impossible, to what was not meant to be. Yet this handful of travelers moved onward to conquer the impossible, driven by the belief that it was theirs to overcome. This, and only this, pressed them forward and brought them all to Sanctum's base.

Holli dismounted and met Ryson on foot. She requested a full scout of the perimeter surrounding the mountain's base. If something hid on the other side, she would know of it before they ventured forward. To the others, she directed them to bring their horses to a cluster of trees. Each rider dismounted and tethered their animal to a branch or tree trunk and waited patiently as Holli quietly scanned the area. Her darting eyes covered every direction in an instant. With equal speed, she decided upon her strategy.

"It is not wise to bring the entire group up the mountain. There is little shelter from the storm. Only those that will ultimately enter Sanctum must make the climb. The others should stay here."

Mappel responded with a doubtful eye. He spoke with a quicker tongue than was his norm, and with an

agitated tone. "You would have us wait here? Is that truly wise? I think it might be more valuable for us to accompany you. We can wait at the entrance, make sure you gain entry. We would also be there to see you return. There is also the matter of Shayed. I believe she awaits us. She may have something important to offer all of us."

Holli's face held no expression. Sharp eyes continued to dart about the forest even as she replied to Mappel with a monotone voice. "I will accept whatever decision you make, but I would ask you to carefully consider why you might make such a decision. Is it truly to benefit our cause or is it to allow you a chance to see Shayed? We will not be able to use the horses in this climb. The eight algors, Matthew, and even yourself, would have to climb on foot. There is no doubt in my mind the added number would slow our ascent. Once we reach the summit and point of entry, what is it that you would hope to accomplish? Would you simply mull about in the open during this storm waiting for our return? Do we even know how long that might be?"

Mappel turned even more introspective than ever. He pondered the truth behind his desires. Realizing that there was much validity in Holli's words, he abdicated his position.

"You are correct." His voice was hollow and sorrowful. "We can do little for you now. We will stay here. With Matthew's assistance and that of the remaining algors, I shall build a shelter from branches and leaves. It is a wise decision."

Sensing the sorrow in the elder elf, Holli offered a conciliatory option. "There is no reason you can not climb Sanctum after the storm is over. Perhaps even before midnight, the sky will be clear. You could rest now and begin your climb then. You could do so at your own leisure without worrying how you might slow the progress of those that must enter. If Shayed has a message, I will ask her to repeat it to you upon your arrival. Would that be satisfactory?"

"More than satisfactory," Mappel replied with a warming smile. He appeared as if youth was returning to his frail form.

With a decision made, Holli's tone returned to that of stern caution. "I will ask that you all remain alert both here and upon Sanctum. If goblins are infesting Dark Spruce, they might attack at any time. When climbing Sanctum, take even greater care. The stone will become slick with the rain. The ropes we use, we shall leave for your climb as well. Use them and remain patient. If you fall and are injured, there will be no way for us to help you."

All ten algors responded immediately. "Do not concern yourself with possible injuries from falling. We are again blessed with the power of healing. Nearly all the knowledge is returning slowly."

Holli turned toward them with a questioning stare. "Are you all of equal ability in this matter?"

They responded separately, talking one after the other, sometimes speaking over another's words.

"No."

"Some have greater ability."

"We each have some of the knowledge."

"The delver picked us that way."

"Those that could not heal were not picked by the delver."

"I have shown the greatest power."

At that, Holli held up her hand to stop them. Their chatter ended as if Holli held their mouths shut. She nodded to the last to speak.

"You have displayed the greatest power?"

"Yes," the single algor answered.

Though it was near impossible for most to distinguish one algor from another, Holli made it a point to do so. During her escort of them from the desert to Connel, she noted the smallest differences. She examined such slight characteristics as the distance between the eyes, the length of their arms, the number of purple spots on their heads, and the hue of the yellow that colored their chests. With such an eye for detail, she was able to distinguish individuals from the ten. "You were also selected by Ryson to be one of the two to enter Sanctum." She looked back at Mappel as if to punctuate a hidden meaning in the selection.

A gleam rose in the elder elf's eye. "More providence."

The cliff behemoth's voice rolled softly over them all. "As I have said, it is the will of Godson."

Stephen and Matthew beamed, and even Holli allowed a smile to cross her lips.

It lasted but a heartbeat, for her face quickly became as stern as it would ever become. The time was near for their ascent of Sanctum, but one last preparation was required. Her eyes stopped checking for signs of danger about them as she fastened them upon Mappel. Her words held the importance of what she was about to request. "It is time you reveal what the elves placed in Sanctum and how we might overcome it."

Mappel looked at his staff and then at the ground. Strange. He had been so willing to speak of the secret, so willing to release it in hopes that others might do the same. In his heart, ending the secrets meant breaking the bonds of the separation. It would represent the key to defeating Sanctum, the sphere, and the tainted magic that spread its curse across the land. But now, now that the time had truly come, he regretted having to speak of it. His lips became tight, as if he needed to consciously force them to mouth his words.

"So it is," he spoke with a pained tongue. He could say nothing more until he guided Lief and Holli to privacy. They spoke for long moments in guarded whispers.

Lief and Holli made no reaction. They listened intently with focus and concentration. The woods themselves seemed to grow still, and even the wind appeared to silence during this moment of revelation.

Ryson returned from his mission. He immediately noted the overtones of silence. He did not disturb the conference of the elves. He remained in the midst of the others and quietly whispered that all appeared calm.

The three elves turned as Mappel ended his instruction. Lief and Holli moved with the same resolve that brought them to this point, but a thread of gloom hung ever so slightly upon their faces. Some of their spark had faded, and even Holli's eyes revealed a hint of weariness. She attempted to swallow this gloom and fatigue when she again faced the entire group. She was only marginally successful.

"We must move at once," she ordered. "We have done well to reach this point with so much light left in the day. We have been lucky the rain has held to a drizzle. I will not push this luck. Ryson, what is the situation surrounding us?"

"No sign of trouble," he announced.

"Lauren, do you sense anything in these woods?"

The young, budding sorceress cringed, stiffened herself as if she expected pain to erupt through her body. She closed her eyes and stood motionless. Her forehead wrinkled with tension. "There is nothing I sense in the woods, but something waits for us above. It isn't alive but it isn't dead either." She opened her eyes with a start. "I can't tell you what it is."

"It is probably Shayed," Lief noted.

"Probably, but not certainly," Holli said with her usual caution. "We shall remain prepared for something worse. As for those that remain here, leave guards during the night at each direction. You will not have the delver here to alert you, but a poor set of eyes is better than no sight at all."

She examined the own bag at her waist and ordered the others to do the same. "Check your supplies for water and food, we have no idea how long we will be inside." Upon completion of this check, she gave Ryson the sign to begin the climb. "Choose a wise path, Ryson. Remember those that follow do not have your skills and the stone grows slick with the rain. Lief and I carry long strands of rope as well do you. Let us use them."

"Understood."

"Do you believe we can make the top before nightfall? Keep in mind the thickening clouds will limit the light after sunset. There will be little dusk."

Ryson shot a glance up the slope. He spoke as he analyzed the mountainside. "I think so. With the extra rope, I should be able to leave a fairly easy path." He checked the sky, but the clouds blocked the true location of the sun. "I'm just not certain how much useful light we have left."

"Then let us not waste any of it," Holli stated firmly and she began moving towards the first incline ahead of them.

Ryson acknowledged the need for urgency and bounded past her. In mere moments, he was scampering far up the mountainside. He anchored his first rope roughly a quarter of the distance up. After securing one end, he unfurled it and brought the opposite end down to Holli. He relieved her of the second rope and darted back up the mountain as if running on a level plane.

At an additional third of the way towards the summit, Ryson prepared the second rope. It covered the most difficult portion of the mountain. The inclines were steepest at the center, and there were fewer footholds. The rope would allow even the humans to climb without hesitation. After obtaining the third rope from Lief, Ryson moved ahead to set the last stage of the climb. Darkness began to spread as the invisible sun drifted lower behind the clouds. The rain increased to a steady drizzle. The dark and wet ground would slow travel for all but the delver, whose eyes were even now adjusting to the dim light.

As he hastened past Holli for the final leg of the journey, she called out a warning.

"Remember Lauren's sight. Something awaits us at the top. Do not foolishly move into a trap. Wait for us before you proceed to the point where you met Shayed."

Ryson accepted the order without disagreement. He moved swiftly but alertly toward the top of the mountain. He chose a platform just below the summit. He stood quietly with a watchful eye. He unfurled the final rope and swung it down to the waiting party. Near total darkness enveloped them as the final member reached the platform where the delver waited.

"Just up that pass and right above us is the leveling where we met Shayed," Ryson whispered.

"I want you to move up first, but move swiftly," Holli requested. She then turned to the giant cliff behemoth. "If you will Dzeb, I would like you to follow the delver. You are the least vulnerable of us. The delver's speed and your size might catch any would-be attacker off guard, if indeed such an ambush awaits. I would guess it is simply Shayed's presence that Lauren senses, but I wish to take no chances."

"Understood," Dzeb said warmly. The giant's lips curled upwards, the rock hard skin softening around his mouth to form a light smile. It was a wonder to see. "I will move forward with care, but with the grace of Godson, I am sure that nothing will keep us from His will."

Holli acknowledged Dzeb's cooperation with a respectful bow of the head. "I will follow behind, but I will remain under the cover of this ledge until I can assess any threat."

Without further word, the three moved. Ryson's figure cut through the darkness of night. He scrambled up the rambling path and was soon far beyond the cliff behemoth. His eyes captured even the slightest glimmer of light as he rushed onward. He broke over the pass at full speed and darted across the leveling, taking in everything at once.

Dzeb climbed more deliberately. He handled the rocky slope with agility which seemed impossible for his size and physical structure. His powerful, thick legs moved as effortlessly over the incline as the delver's, although at a much slower pace. In truth, he was at home in these surroundings, as all cliff behemoths sought the lonely sanctuary of desolate ridges and sharp rocky terrain. It allowed them the solitude to reflect upon the teachings of their faith. It allowed them a peaceful and tranquil setting away from those that have forgotten the word and the way.

He continued moving without pause. If he worried over what might wait overhead, he showed no sign. Dzeb's height almost allowed him to see over the ledge that beckoned them. With but a few paces upon the incline, his head was over the precipice and all the flat clearing was now available to him.

Holli moved up close behind the giant. She lifted her ear to catch sounds of a skirmish. Nothing which indicated an ambush broke through the angry rushes of the blowing wind. Her elfin eyes also allowed her greater sight at night, though not to the extent of the delver's. As soon as possible, she lifted her head beyond the limit of the ledge and peered upon the summit.

Ryson caught the sight of Shayed first. Her white transparent form appeared dimmer to him. He would have expected her to glow with greater brilliance in this darkness, but he was not of the knowledge of spirits to know how they might appear in any circumstance. He said nothing to her at first. Even as the spirit's eyes fixed upon him, he continued moving about the leveled peak. He examined everything at once, looking for signs of any new danger. Aware now of such things as mountain shags and vampires, he scoured the ground and behind every boulder large enough to hide the smallest of goblins. He found nothing unusual or out of place. As he turned toward the translucent form of Shayed, he noted the upcoming presence of Dzeb as well as the top of Holli's head peaking over the ledge.

"It's safe," he called to the elf guard. "Bring everyone up."

Nothing was said further until the last of the party reached the summit. They all stood about Shayed with wondering eyes, save Ryson and Lief who had spoken with the spirit before. Like a smoldering, glowing white ember, the ghostly figure stood out from the darkness.

Lief announced their arrival in hushed respectful tones. "We have returned, Shayed, and we have brought those who must enter Sanctum." He introduced them one by one as the spiritual figure of Shayed remained

silent.

The spirit finally spoke after the last member of the party came forward.

"I have little energy to help you," the ghostly apparition began. "The magic is draining my own ability to remain with you. I have little power to speak so I will tell you but one thing. You must not destroy the sphere within the mountain. To do so would guarantee your own deaths. The mountain would surely crumble upon you and the release of so much energy within the mountain may damage the land irreparably. You must bring it back to me, here at the top of Sanctum. Only in this free space will we see to the destruction of the sphere. I wish you luck in your journey. I only wish I could have been of greater service. Time is short, you must enter in all haste."

Ryson noted her voice was harsher than their first meeting. Even her eyes lacked the warmth of when they last spoke. They seemed to burn with the hint of red fire, a glow he did not recall upon their first meeting. He could not surmise that the true eyes of Shayed watched in anguish behind an invisible prison.

The elfin sorceress stood right beside them, but though she tried mightily, all attempts to gain their attention failed. Only the human female seemed to catch a faint whisper in the wind, but the sight of the disguised spirit pulled at Lauren's attention. Shayed fought against the chains, fought against the prison, fought against the spell that hid and silenced her. No one would see her struggle, no one would hear her pleas.

It was the prince dwarf Jon Folarok that immediately took heed of the imposter's request and began to work. "The dwarf tier awaits us first, but first we must gain entry. I will handle that, if that is alright with you my brother."

"No one is better suited," Tun responded, showing a far greater degree of respect for his brother than normal. Tun was well aware of Jon's abilities in the art of tunneling and even the elder prince's own defiant will couldn't blind him to this truth.

Jon looked about the ground for a moment. "I am normally accustomed to low light, but a torch would be helpful for what I must do," he looked expectantly toward Holli.

"A torch would be of little use to us with so much rain. There is also a better solution close at hand. I would ask that you become accustomed to another source first. Ryson?" She looked to the delver as if it was truly his choice over what would be done next.

Ryson immediately understood her questioning glance. Her eyes remained upon his face and not upon the sheathed weapon at his side, but he was well aware it was the sword which she now wished to bring into use.

"Of course," he said simply as if the issue was not even in question.

His hand grasped the hilt of the sword and for a moment his head swam with confusion. His head jerked of its own doing, and he found himself staring upon the spirit form of Shayed, except at that moment the ghostly image had no form. He saw a red cloud. It swirled about, a crimson storm surge, and finally it began to take shape.

A hand on his shoulder shook him. The swirling red cloud disappeared and the form of Shayed again stood before him. It was Holli's hand upon his shoulder.

"Are you alright?" the elder elf asked.

Ryson was about to proclaim what he had seen but fog swept into his mind. He was no longer sure of what he

had witnessed or even who he was looking at. He blinked his eyes fiercely and finally even the fog cleared, but he had no recollection of what had happened.

"Yes, I'm fine," he stated simply. "I'm not against letting Jon use the sword at all." With a quick pull, he fully unsheathed the blade. A blanket of soft white light covered the entire mountain top. It was now as light as dawn, yet even the most sensitive eyes of the dwarves could look directly into the blade without causing the slightest pain. It magnified and intensified the barest light. Even with dark clouds overhead and the sun well past set, there remained light enough in the sky for the blade to supply ample illumination. Ryson carefully placed the sword upon a rock near Jon. "Move it as you need it."

"Would I have to move the sun at noon day?" the dwarf said with a tooth filled grin. "It is fine where it is. The honor of holding such a blade should be yours and yours alone."

With that said, the dwarf went quickly about his work. In the new light of the blade, he quickly measured the level precipice they stood upon. He walked back and forth mumbling to himself before honing upon one particular section of the summit. He kicked at the loose debris and quickly came upon solid granite. He dropped to his knees and glided his hands over the smooth surface. Occasionally, he knocked upon the rock. The small thuds sounded much the same to those that watched, but they revealed much to the dwarf prince. Still upon his knees, Jon fumbled through his own pack before pulling out a metal rod no longer than the span of his hand. At the end, a blue and white gem sparkled in the amplified light - a dwarf rock-cutter. He tested the gem with the tip of his forefinger before applying it to the stone.

He jabbed and scratched deftly at the smooth rock in front of him. He held the rod at slight angles as he pressed the gem downward. The gem would slide across a small section before Jon would pull it away. The longest cut was no greater than the length of Jon's pinky, and the dwarf appeared to leave long spaces of rock untouched before moving on to the next area. Intermittently, he patted the surface with his palm.

After making several marks upon the granite with the stone cutter, he retrieved another tool from his pack. It appeared as nothing more than a miniature version of the mace he carried at his belt. A thick wooden handle, shorter than the metal bar of the stone cutter, led to a compact round stone at the top. The stone appeared gritty and rough at the surface. Its black exterior was covered with gray specks.

With the stone cutter in his right hand and the rounded hammer in his left, he began working again. He pounded the mace-like tool upon the granite. Amazingly, with each impact, a tiny crack appeared in the stone. It broke through the granite as if guided by a straight edge. Jon worked with such precision, that he soon had two right angles of a square formed in the solid rock. He extended the breaks with equal precision, and the full outline of a square soon formed. Before long, the crack grew deep enough that a large section began to shift.

Jon smiled with satisfaction as he placed the two tools within his pack only to retrieve one last, a flat bar. It was longer than the other two, but it was not made of wood or metal. It glistened with greater brilliance than the gem tip of the stone cutter, for the entire bar was impossibly one long gem.

Stephen Clarin could not withhold his amazement or his curiosity at the sight of such a jewel "How is that possible?" he blurted out.

Jon's smile grew bigger, his own teeth now flashing with almost as much brilliance as the gem. He allowed a moment of pride as he held aloft his tool. "Large gems can be cut into many useful devices. It takes careful cutting, but it can be done. The gem that produced this bar was cut into four others, though this was the longest."

"It is the longest known," Tun added, allowing his brother to garner even greater awe. "Given enough time, Jon could have broken through the base of this mountain."

Jon bowed thankfully to his brother's kind remarks, but he spoke humbly to those that watched him. "I doubt I would live long enough for that, but it can lift rocks hundreds of times its weight without breaking, and I have used it to chisel through diamond clustered walls."

As if to display the power of his tool, he flashed the flattened edge down into the crack he had made in the stone. It plunged into the rock as if the granite were nothing more than warm butter.

"Normally, I would construct a pulley system to lift the rock, but since we have Dzeb with us, I doubt that is necessary. Would you honor me, cliff behemoth, by jarring the stone free?"

"The honor would be mine," Dzeb spoke freely as he moved toward the area upon where Jon worked. His powerful fingers grabbed hold of the gem tool, and he steadily pulled back. A thick square slab of rock crumbled free from the surrounding stone. Dzeb took his other hand and placed it in the opening created by the action of the lever. Jon also guided his hands under the free stone, seemingly unconcerned over crushing his own fingers. With a surprising display of strength, the dwarf assisted Dzeb in pulling the stone free. They placed it aside from the newly created opening, and Dzeb returned the crystal bar.

Holli moved toward the opening first. "Ryson, bring your sword here."

The delver followed the request. When his hand touched the handle, he felt no such reaction as previously encountered. He brought the shimmering blade to the square hole which was large enough for even Dzeb to enter. The glowing light revealed a set of stone steps that descended out of sight.

"Our entry is set," Holli stated firmly, punctuated with as much dread as determination.

"Let me and my brother go first," Tun commanded in his royal voice. "The rest of you should follow but do not step off the stone steps until I command. To do so will mean your death. It is that simple."

Not a single member of the party said another word, though they all took in one last great breath before stepping upon the stone staircase, as if it was their last gasp of fresh air. Ryson kept the blade near the opening as the two dwarves descended through the newly formed opening. He entered at the middle of the pack so as to keep the light amongst them all.

As Lief was the last to enter and disappear from the mountain top, the true Shayed watched in angry desperation. The red chains bound her tightly. She screamed in futility, for both sound and light could not escape her prison, and neither could she. She could only watch in horror as a devious smile curled upon her imposter's face.

Chapter 25

Sanctum offered little to greet the apprehensive adventurers, mostly rock and darkness, but at least the stone steps provided an easy descent. They were built by the dwarves, part of the internal construction of the tiers in this once hollow edifice. Their purpose had not been to bring invaders down to the core, but to allow a path of exit. Once a particular race had completed setting its restrictions within its own tier, they would need a means of leaving Sanctum. It would not be wise to bury and seal the designers of the barriers with their inventions. The steps were nothing more than part of the foundation to serve that end. It was hoped they would never be used again, though now they functioned as a path of entry, a purpose beyond the aspirations of Sanctum's creators.

The stone staircase cut through Sanctum Mountain at its very center. Four consecutive sections of steps, ten steps to each, led downward and broke at opposing angles. The final leg of the stairs ended directly underneath the opening which bore them entry. Thus, those that descended the stone stairway would reach a point exactly where they began, albeit forty steps lower.

Each step was carved from pure granite. Layers and layers of rock dust masked the flat footfall portions of the stone. The vertical edges, however, escaped the brown and gray powder and shined with ancient polish, a tribute to dwarf construction. Most steps passed the test of the ages without crumbling or succumbing to fissure. Only a random few suffered the scars of cracks, and these appeared recent, probably the result of the blast which freed the magic from this monumental tomb.

The steps themselves were fashioned wide enough to hold two side by side. The descending group used the great width to do just that, and they clumped together as close as possible, finding security in moving together.

Only two stood alone. Dzeb's physical stature prevented him from moving with a companion at his side. His great size filled the width of a single step and not even the slender Holli would stand comfortably in the available room.

Ryson also stepped down alone. As the bearer of the only source of light, he maintained his position at the center. Five moved behind him as four lurched on ahead. Directly in front of Dzeb, Ryson held his sword high. It glistened through the gloom, giving off the light of five or maybe ten torches combined.

Ryson, as much as others within the party, continued to marvel at the sword as it continued to defy logic. It was now known to them all that the sword was not a creator of light but an enhancer of existing light. In this place, however, illumination was meager indeed. Darkness covered the sky outside the mountain, even the brightest stars were blanketed from sight. Now, they walked within the walls of Sanctum. Only the opening created by Jon kept them from being completely consumed within the rock. To be sure, the light of the sword dimmed when Ryson passed through the opening, yet the illumination burned strong enough to light a distance of near thirty paces.

The Sword of Decree's ability to magnify such illumination was only part of its mystery. The light itself showed as an anomaly. It did not burn the eyes to look at, did not leave spots if anyone stared too long at the blade. It barely cast shadows, and certainly not sharp images. The light seemed to swerve around those objects in its path, thus even those that stood behind the cliff behemoth did not stand in his dark shadow.

The sword's illumination also failed to affect Ryson's night vision. Normally, when a delver stood within light, his sight could not penetrate darkness in the distance, but here, this was not the case. Beyond the radiance cast by the sword, his eyes cut through the darkness. The border between light and dark was near invisible to him. He could see the final section of stairs which remained in darkness with the same sharpness as those steps which basked in the light of his sword.

In that, he found another mystery yet to ponder. His sight ended at the tenth step of the fourth section. It was not the diminishing limit of his vision, but a distinct border between what he could see and what he could not. The last step was not a fading image. He saw it clearly, but whatever waited beyond it might have as well been covered in black ink. He could perceive nothing but a void, a void which remained even as they descended deeper, even as the last visible step finally came into the light of his sword.

The delver's eyes narrowed. The void defied the light. It remained as dark as when they began. It defied his night vision. There was not a single object which he could focus upon, simply nothing; not another step, not a granite platform, not even a loose stone. To his eyes, there was nothing there, nothing but empty space, nothing for the light to reflect upon and nothing for his keen eyes to grasp.

He took his eyes from the emptiness to refocus them, to bring them back to a sense of spatial reality. In his bewilderment, he noted another oddity. While the stone stair case was as visible to him as the cliff behemoth, the space beyond echoed the void. To his left and right, far ahead and far behind, the light of the sword drifted into blackness.

Such should not be. Sanctum, an extinct volcano, took the shape of an inverted cone. Ryson could see its external shape in his mind. The hollowness of Sanctum's core could not extend beyond the limits of its external crust, yet that is what he saw. Where he calculated the sides to be, there existed only the void. Where he should have seen the sloping edges of Sanctum's inner walls, he saw emptiness. Only the stairs and the rock surrounding the opening above remained visible. Every other part of Sanctum's existence was bathed in darkness.

The emptiness dizzied him, left him reaching for rail holds which did not exist. His knees nearly buckled as his keen senses could not break the grip of the void. He was a delver in a vacuum -a man of uncanny senses, but in a place where those senses were now blocked.

He needed something to focus on, something to anchor his senses and avoid sudden panic. He threw his sights to his feet. He stared at each step before him as if their existence meant his life. His nostrils flared. He breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of every one next to him. He smelled the dampness of their clothes and the mud upon their feet. He caught the faint traces of the horses they rode upon still lingering with each rider. He swallowed the air, tasted the bitter bile of his own spit. He listened to those around him, heard at least one shiver; heard them all breathing ever so lightly, as if taking in too much air would bring poison to their lungs. He turned an ear upward. He could hear the rain drops growing louder. Water that dripped through the opening onto the stone steps echoed throughout the cavern.

He took hold of the echo, and with it, he found comprehension. It was as a song to his ears. It rang in his soul like a triumphant symphony. The echo! It provided the answer. The void was immune to light, but not to sound. The simple notes of the rain pierced the void, bounced about to return to his ears, a phenomenon which could not occur without the walls of Sanctum. It proved the existence of the surrounding rock as truly as if he could reach out and touch it.

Again, he sniffed the air with near savagery. He picked up the scent beyond the party. He inhaled the stale air, and long captured dust. He could smell beyond the void, smell the age of captured air.

The answer was clear. The emptiness, the void, it was an illusion. He laughed as he exclaimed as much.

"It's a trick!" he said with glee.

Tun was in front, near the last visible step when he stopped. He twirled about abruptly as if he realized the delver had just stolen something from him.

"What did you say?!" His tone was as accusing as it was astonished.

Ryson still rejoiced in his revelation and ignored the angry tone of the dwarf. "I said it's a trick."

"What are you talking about?" Lief called from the rear.

"I'm talking about the darkness," the delver called out joyously. "Look at how the step where Tun stands is visible, but the next is not. Look around you, look for the walls of this mountain. You can't see them."

All those but Jon and Tun turned about to witness what had previously gone unnoticed. They murmured with curiosity. They looked in awe at the space beyond the very edges of each step. Everything beyond them was consumed in darkness. They could not deny the void any more than they could deny the very stone steps they stood upon.

"There's something that swallows the light," Ryson called out to them. "The walls are there, but we can't see them. That's the trick I'm talking about. It's an illusion."

Tun called out sternly. "Delves! How is it you speak of such things? What is it you know of Sanctum that you have not revealed?" His tone continued to carry more than just a hint of accusation. His hard dwarf eyes bore down upon the delver with demanding expectation.

The question surprised Ryson, ripped him from the joy of his discovery. He answered near defensively. "I'm not hiding anything. You know more than I do about what's in here."

"Yet you speak of secrets which you should know nothing about," Tun pressed.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the illusion of the void. How is it you know of the dwarf secret?" The words were louder than the dwarf normally spoke. His anger brought a tone which echoed off the walls.

The reverberation of Tun's voice was not lost upon Ryson. He used it to explain himself, though he did not understand why such an explanation was necessary. He pointed to the air as he replied. "Do you hear the echo? That's what gave it away."

"You speak in riddles," Tun defied the explanation. "How can sound explain that which is hidden to your eyes?"

"Easy," Ryson responded confidently, finally shaking off the accusing stare of the dwarf. "I can tell how far the walls are from us by the echo. We should all be able to see them. The echo is the same sound just bouncing back to us. The interior of the mountainside should stand in the light of the sword, but it doesn't. That means they have to be hidden by an illusion."

"Is this true?" Stephen Clarin asked of the dwarves. "Is this what the dwarves used to protect the first tier?"

"It is just part of the obstacle," Tun explained as if insulted. "But I do not like the delver revealing things which he should not know."

"What would you have him do?" Lief near demanded. He peered downward from his position further up the staircase. He had to arch his neck to get a clear view over Dzeb's shoulder. He continued with an accusing tone of his own. "Would you have him ignore what he senses? He is a delver. He has explained exactly how he came to his conclusion. Why must you remain as obstinate as the rocks you live under?"

"And why do you think I have to answer to you?" Tun snarled. He glared at the elf as the others stood uneasily between them.

"Hey, now hold on," Ryson called out to them both. "There's no need for this. Tun, I've told you the truth. I didn't know anything about what was in here when we entered. All I know is what I see, hear and smell right now. But that was enough to figure out the trick of the darkness. I still don't know what's causing it. I just know not to believe it."

Silence gripped the dwarf. The light of the sword illuminated his doubtful expression. In the quiet, in the hollow of Sanctum, the sound of the rain became more prevalent. Even Tun could hear it now. The faint echoes of dripping water penetrated the musty cavern air. He gritted his teeth as if to brace himself against the abrasive, repetitive sound. He might have stood there for the entire passage of the night had Stephen not spoke up.

"I want you all to listen to me." His voice was filled with passion as he was careful to cast his plea over all of them and not focus solely upon Tun. He spoke with conviction, with urgency. He spoke with a comprehension of the depth of where they were and what they needed to do. And he spoke with the vibrancy of youth. "Someone should have said this before we entered this place, that someone should have been me. I guess we wanted to get this thing over with as soon as possible. But that's no excuse. We walked into Sanctum as if we were walking into a market, as if we could put aside the past like it never occurred. But it has occurred and it's time we deal with it. Before we take another step, we must come to the true understanding of what we must do."

"We must destroy the sphere," Dzeb said softly. "It is Godson's will. We are here to carry out that will." He spoke as if the answer was so simple, and indeed to him it was. His eyes, however, betrayed the confusion he felt within him when he looked at the others. They did not carry that simple but unyielding understanding. Even Stephen Clarin, a man touched by the very powers of Godson, carried doubts and fears which were plainly evident to the cliff behemoth.

"It is that simple to you my friend." A small lump in Stephen's throat forced a pause to swallow. He continued with a glistening tear in his eye. "You possess an understanding that humbles us all. The rest of us, unfortunately, aren't as strong. We carry with us the scars of the past, the burden of mistrust. We tried to ignore it, hoped we could overlook it, but we really can't. We have to deal with it here and now."

The interpreter turned his attention back to every other member of the party. The sternness of his voice matched his expression. "When I was given the human's portion of the secret, I was told never to reveal it until it became necessary for another to carry. I was told not to trust elf, dwarf, algor, or even delver." He cast an apologizing glance at Ryson, as if he did not deserve to hear such a thing. "I accept the fact that the rest of you have been told the same, and told never to trust the humans."

"Tun's reaction is perfectly understandable. His is the first secret to reveal and he feels the most vulnerable. Once we pass this tier, he will be at our mercy, as we are now at his. Is it truly any wonder to any of you that he would become upset at Ryson's revelation?"

"I understand it. I accept it. I do both because I realize we have not joined in a true agreement. Yes, we all agree to destroy the sphere, but we have not agreed to end the mistrust. We have agreed to assault this place as I have seen in my vision, but we have not agreed to put faith in each other. We can not succeed until we do each. We must pledge loyalty not only to our mission but to each other as well."

He spoke quicker now. The sense of urgency heightened in his voice. "I tell you all, I tell you in the eyes of Godson, that I trust you. I know you shall all do your best to lead me safely through this mountain, as I will do my best. As to the delver, as to all of you, I invite, no I demand, that you remain alert and do all you can do to

protect the safety of this group. Remember, one tier remains a mystery to us and that is not the fault of anyone here. We must combine our strengths, as well as use the knowledge that is ours. Most of all, we must come together. How can we possibly hope to overcome this place if we remain isolated and mistrustful of each other?"

The words rang with passion, with truth, a truth which cut quickly to the soul of the elf. Lief immediately responded, replied with both regret and sincerity directed at the lead dwarf. "I apologize Tun Folarok. The interpreter is correct. Since your arrival, I have been more than willing to remain in conflict with you. I have taken every opportunity to question your motives as well as decisions. The truth remains that I have not accepted your willingness to cooperate. That will no longer be the case. I am an elf of quick emotions. I offer that not as an excuse, but as an explanation. If I question you in the future, it will be out of my own quick temper and not from any mistrust directed toward you. As does the interpreter, I pledge my faith to you as well as every other member of this group."

"As do we," the algors responded in unison. Their concurring voices punctuated their willingness to cooperate. It brought a smile to Stephen.

"Is there any one here that remains doubtful to anyone's intentions?" he asked with the smile still gracing his lips.

None responded, but the eyes of the party fell squarely upon Tun. Though the edges of conflict diminished from his chiseled features, the spark of opposition remained in his eyes as well as his voice. "As Lief is an elf of quick emotions, I am a dwarf with little faith in things I can not understand. It may sadden you, but I will speak the truth. What I know of the humans, I do not like. And I do not know the algors at all. I have had dealings with elves, both good and bad. The delver put his sword in my hand and I saw the need to destroy the sphere, but I saw no need to trust anyone but myself. If my words ring cold to any of you, there is nothing I can do. I barely put faith in my own brother, how can you expect me to put faith in strangers?"

Uneasiness filled the cavern. His glare made it clear that no words would cleanse him of his mistrust. He would hold to it as he would hold to his axe in battle.

The one most struck by the rebuke was Jon. His eyes dropped in obvious sorrow as grief painted his face. His beard seemed to grow grayer by the second. He did not turn his back on his brother, but he would not face him either.

Tun found no sadness in the cold response of those around him. He would, however, make one concession. He spoke it as if a peace offering to an ancient and bitter enemy. "I will make one promise to you all. While I may remain doubtful to your intentions, I have no misconceptions of what must be done with the sphere. It remains as clear to me as when I held the sword. It must be destroyed and I pledge everything within me for that cause."

Lief found the words to respond first. There was no conflict in his voice, no anger towards Tun. He spoke as if his pledge of faith and loyalty sculpted his reply. "Then that is all we will ask of you. It is the true basis of why we we're here. And no one should doubt the word of Prince Folarok."

Stephen's expression, however, remained colored with disappointment. He opened up to the dwarf, revealed his own sadness over Tun's remarks. "I won't doubt your word, Tun, but I would have hoped for more from you. If you wish to doubt the words of those that even now put the faith of their very lives in your hands, so be it. I wish there was something I could say or do to make you understand, but I see in your eyes there is nothing that will change your mind."

Tun responded, not harshly, but firmly, brittle with his own stubbornness. "What you see in my eyes is the

doubt created by years of witnessing human arrogance and frailties. Every season they astound me with their greed to steal more and more of the land, to take far more gems from the earth than they need. And it does not end with the humans. I have knowledge of the ancient times, when dwarves suffered at the whims of wizards and sorcerers, elf and human alike. While I can no longer argue with the need to destroy the sphere, you can not take from me the understanding of what will come. You have visions blessed by Godson, but I have visions based on my perceptions of what the return of magic will mean to the dwarves."

"As I said," Stephen concluded both apologetically and sadly, "I know you will hold firm to your beliefs, but I see no reason why I should hide my feelings from you. You don't have to make explanations to anyone here, it is not my position to judge you. But I will not lie to you either. If you hold to your doubts, I'll hold to my disappointment."

Both Tun and Stephen had nothing further to say. They stood quiet. The rest of the group seemed lost, standing about wondering what to say or do. The indecision mounted. They stood more like ten statues, as if they were made of the same stone which comprised the stairs that held them.

Holli found the condition intolerable. The inactivity, the indecision, and the clustered way they stood in the open; all of this left them vulnerable. Her mind, her well trained and honed instincts, screamed to her the reality of the situation. They were standing within the walls of Sanctum, perhaps the most dangerous place in all of Uton, standing there like sheep surrounded by ravenous wolves.

Each passing moment grated on her senses, forced her deeper into distress. Though her eyes darted about the cavern, the darkness kept her from piercing the mysteries of the first tier. The void forbade her from finding threats. She could not see beyond the stone steps, could not assess the size of the expanse that was the dwarf section of Sanctum. The surrounding void was as damaging to her nerves as it was to the delver's.

Though she did not wish to usurp control of the group's movements from the dwarves, she could no longer hold her tongue. "Tun? Are we in danger by simply standing here?"

His eyes washed over her, just as slight satisfaction appeared on his face. If the delver's revelation had shaken his confidence in the sanctity of his secret, the elf's question restored it. "Standing still may be the only thing which is truly safe in this place," he said almost smugly. "It is movement that is dangerous. I bid you all to remember that." He let the warning sink in before continuing. "I suppose it is time for us to pass this level, and pass it we will."

"One moment please." The uncertain voice of Lauren broke the attention upon the dwarf. The sorceress spoke meekly, as timid as a mouse with eyes upon circling owls. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I have to do something about the cold. My clothes are damp. I can feel the cold air on our backs. I won't be able to concentrate on what we're doing if I'm freezing to death."

"It is cold," Stephen stated as he also realized how damp his own clothes were. He noted his frosty breath. Until this moment, the excitement of the quest kept their minds from the cold wind of night shrilling in from the opening overhead. Without torches to exude heat, most would soon become numb. "What is it you suggest we do?"

"I think ... I'm pretty sure I can dry our clothes for us."

"A spell has come to your mind?" Holli asked perceptively.

Lauren could only nod. She did not wish to speak of how or why the knowledge became her own. She did not understand it herself. A moment before she only knew she was cold, uncomfortable in the damp clothes she wore. As if fulfilling a wish, a means of funneling the energy within in her burst into her mind. A moment of

concentration and they would be warmed.

Most called for an immediate casting, especially the algors who were perhaps the most uncomfortable in the drafty dampness of the cavern. Lauren hesitated, torn by the desire to be warmed and the fear of unleashing yet another power which she could not comprehend. She began to shiver, the cold gnawed at her, and finally forced the fear from her mind. She closed her eyes and seized a distant thought.

The air around the entire group shuddered and then became colored with a light purple hue. The cold was ripped from about them as dry hot air engulfed them all. It swirled about, ever so slightly, like a hot but gentle breeze from the desert. Their clothes dried near instantaneously and soon became warm to the touch, a warmth which would stay with them. The cold damp from above was blocked and most of the party hummed in satisfaction. Even the great cliff behemoth basked in the comforting warmth.

Lauren opened her eyes, at first she was smiling. Her burden of cold released, no longer shivering, she embraced herself. She draped her arms about her shoulders to drink in the heat. Her delight was short lived. Her realization that she was the sole creation of this phenomenon pulled any further pleasure from her. She dropped her arms in near desperation.

Her plight, however, went unnoticed as Tun called for their attention. "With our thanks to the sorceress, we can now begin." If he was truly thankful, his voice concealed it. He continued as if wanting to move beyond the use of magic as soon as possible. "It is time I reveal to you what waits for us beyond the darkness. The delver is correct, the cover of dark is an illusion. It is the first veil to discourage unwanted visitors into Sanctum. The dwarves were never able to use magic to create illusions, but we know how to use what the land gives us. Gems and crystals can bend the light, reshape it, create things which are not there and hide things which are. That is what awaits us.

"It took the preparation of hundreds of perfect gems to create the obstacles in this tier, but such was the importance of guarding the sphere. Any light, even the light of the delver's sword, will be twisted to create numerous illusions. You will see walls where no walls exist, you will see clear paths that are nothing more than dead ends, and you will see solid ground which is truly waiting doom.

"As well as creating images which do not exist, the gems also hide those things which you might wish to find. The one clear path through the maze of this tier is as disguised as the best thief in the land. As for the trap door which leads to the next level, if you look for it, you will never see it. It is bathed in the same void which surrounds us now.

"But beware, this is not simply a tier full of tricks. There are things very deadly, even to a cliff behemoth. Spiked pits, pools of acid, falling boulders, and traps of other assortments wait for a single misstep. Sometimes you will see me step directly toward a pit while safe ground appears to my side. You must remember it is the trick of the gems. You must not trust what you see, for the pit will be safe and the solid ground will hold your death.

"This entire tier was constructed so that one who walked about in the light would die as foolish as the one that stumbled about in the dark. Even a delver moving inch by painful inch with his eyes closed would never avoid every pitfall that waits. Unless you enter knowing what is safe and what is not, you would not survive this tier.

"One other thing, once we pass into the void, the steps will disappear from our sight. Just as the ground beyond this spot is invisible to us, that which can be seen here can not be seen there. When I take my next step, I will disappear from your sight as you will disappear from mine. It is a safeguard to prevent anyone from finding their way back to the steps once they make the foolish attempt to truly enter Sanctum. Only those that know the true path would be able to find the stairs again."

With the secret revealed, Tun gazed into the darkness that greeted them one and all. He watched it with growing displeasure, as if it were now nothing more than a curtain to be thrown aside. If it were vulnerable to the edge of his axe, he would have cut through it in disgust.

He knew his help was still needed. Knowing what evil lurked beyond the darkness, and knowing how to defeat it were certainly two separate entities, but the truth of what his people placed in Sanctum was now exposed. In his own eyes, the barrier itself did not live up to its long history.

The secret to Sanctum was his birthright as prince. It was something spoken of in hushed tones, a great burden. Now that he acknowledged it openly, spoke of it not only outside of royal blood but outside his race, it seemed almost feeble, almost laughable. The dwarf barrier to the unholy sphere was nothing more than a trick of light.

He and his brother knew which steps to take to gain safe passage through the tier, but the barrier did not seem as deadly now that it was truly revealed. He never felt as humbled as he did at that very moment. He spoke of what must be done with growing dissatisfaction.

"Once I pass beyond, I will ask that my brother remain here to guide you one by one to me. When you pass through the darkness, you must, without argument, step exactly where I tell you to. When we begin to cross the tier you must also do exactly as I say. No matter what it looks like I am doing, do not stray from the path I set. If you do so, you will not only cause your death, but the rest of us will probably die as well."

Such a warning limped hollow and empty from the prince, but it needed to be said for it was the truth. The path to be traveled was narrow, with no margin for error. He looked to his brother before moving forward. "I expect you will be placing light gems as we go?"

"Yes," John replied still somewhat remorseful from his brother's previous remarks. "I will place one here when everyone has past and another at the door to the next tier."

"What are light gems?" Ryson asked aloud.

Jon seemed grateful for the chance to remove his attention from his brother. "Light gems reflect light from outside, like mirrors. It is what the dwarves use to bring light to dark tunnels. I will place them at certain points of our travel to keep the light that is with us now with us as we venture forward. With your sword to amplify that light, we will never lose our current depth of illumination."

Ryson considered the explanation and held it in regard with the gems which waited beyond the darkness, as well as the void itself. "Will you be able to penetrate the darkness? And won't the gems beyond shift the light from where you direct it?"

"The gems that create this barrier of darkness do not stop light from entering," Jon explained. "They only keep it from reflecting back to our eyes. As to the other gems, they will play tricks with the light I direct, as they will with the light from your sword, but they will not stop it from reaching its destination. Let me show you." He reached into the pack which hung about his shoulder and pulled out a clear crystal gem. It appeared more like an octagonal piece of glass than a multi-faceted diamond. He took one quick glimpse of the opening above before placing it on the next-to-the-last step. Immediately, the light within the cavern doubled.

"Right now, I am directing light from our entrance back towards Ryson. His sword is now magnifying light from two different sources. Even without your sword, this reflected light would allow dwarves to see for long distances in tunnels. Even though the gems beyond this point will bend it, change it to create the illusions my brother spoke of, it will reach the door to the next level. For now, I will hold it in the open so that even when Ryson's sword passes through, those that remain on this side will still have light." He took the gem back in his

hand and waited for Tun to retake command.

The elder prince said nothing. He simply turned, faced the void, and stepped beyond it. His body moved through the curtain of black much like breaking through the surface of water, though there were no shifting waves of dispersal. It simply gave way to his shape, and then returned to its original form. The veil remained intact, unfazed by the crossing as the darkness swallowed Tun whole.

There was no visual trace of the dwarf, not an outline beyond the void, not a glimmer of form within the darkness, yet he stood only a single pace beyond the last stone step which remained visible to them all. It was only the sound of his voice which reassured the rest that he was not removed to oblivion. "Send them one at a time, Jon."

The order rang loud and clear and revealed his close proximity. Holli and Ryson stared with near disbelief at the spectacle. Her trained ears and his keen senses allowed them both to calculate the dwarf's distance. They knew he stood no more than an arm's reach from Jon, but neither could see even the faintest trace of the older prince. The light from Ryson's sword continued to bathe the steps and should have shown upon Tun, but the curtain of black consumed the glow and covered the prince as if he stood miles beneath the surface in an airtight cave.

They were not given a chance to comment, for Jon quickly moved them forward. One by one he guided them past the void. The experience was near mesmerizing. Each moved up to face the darkness. It stood within a finger's length of their noses. Their eyes could not penetrate it, not even Ryson with his ability to see in near total dark. It stood as a wall, solid and thick. As they stepped into it, they cringed as if their minds told them the wall would not give, but the veil did not hold the least resistance. It had no substance and it gave way to their movements as free as the air about them.

The first step would take a foot and an ankle through the screen. They would disappear just as Tun had vanished. Many wavered at that moment of crossing, looking down at a leg which broke through the void and was no longer visible. Uncertainty gripped them with unthinkable power as fear washed over their consciousness. Tun had warned them a single misstep could mean their doom and here they were stepping into an area they could not even see. The algors, Stephen, even Ryson were hesitant. As they stepped into the void, they felt the ground ahead, carefully probing for solid footholds. The ground was there and with the same rock solid sturdiness as any other platform.

Holli had the most difficulty with the crossing. How could she convince herself to step blindly into the void while knowing the area was laden with traps and pitfalls? Even as Jon waited patiently to guide her, she remained more than reluctant. Simply passing through a barrier with such little knowledge of what waited beyond was an action of the untrained, the foolish, or both. She tested the curtain with her hand first. The result was no different. Her fingers vanished, then the rest of her hand. It dissolved before her eyes just as everything else which passed through the void. She pulled it back rigorously and inspected it, as if she expected missing digits. Nothing, however, had affected her hand. She pressed it beyond the border of light and dark again. She let it linger there as she inspected the border on her wrist that was the limit of her vision. The darkness encircled her arm, just as something on the other side, out of her sight, took her by the hand.

She reacted near violently. She pulled, but whatever held her, gripped her tightly. Her eyes narrowed without fear but with contempt. It became a tug of war with the veil of darkness as the focal point. Instantly, she set her feet apart for greater balance and leverage. She pulled her shoulders back, as far as her gripped arm would allow. She bent at the waist and pulled rigorously and evenly against whatever held her.

With one violent tug from the opposing side, she was pulled from her feet. Against her will, she flew through the void. The mere instant of passing was something she wished never to go through again. For a split instant, during that miniscule moment that her wide open eyes surged through the darkness, nothing existed. The light

from behind her disappeared, ravenously devoured by the void.

Thankfully, gracefully, life instantly appeared before her. Where there was once no light, there was now an abundance. She saw the surprise in the faces of her comrades who stood single file, though in a somewhat twisted line in front of her. Her hand materialized before her. She saw the hand of Tun still grasping it firmly. With his help, she caught her balance before she stepped wildly past the initial platform that waited beyond the stone steps.

She appeared more than ready to scold the dwarf. Her eyes fixed upon him as he released her. Her mouth trembled, ready to release a barrage of angry remarks, but she clenched her jaw. She remained in control as she questioned the dwarf.

"Why did you do that?" Her voice was cool, but demanding.

"I know you are an elf guard," Tun replied stoically, as if he did nothing wrong. "Your reluctance was not surprising. I understood your need for care, but you must understand the need for haste. Though the safe path is set, the illusions are not fixed. They will change as the light changes. If the night darkens, or if the clouds lift, what we see now will not be what we see then. It is best to move quickly once we enter the heart of the tier."

"Then you should have told us that before we started," Holli responded with great self control. She spoke the words as advice and not as a reprimand. "As an elf guard, I react differently than others. If you prepare me for such things, I will act less defensively."

Tun shrugged. The elf's reaction was not his problem. "Stand where you are and don't move." He turned back and waited for the last few to cross.

Holli acknowledged the order. She took no steps, but she immediately scanned the area which was now more or less visible to her. It was as the dwarf warned, the stairs were gone, covered by the same void which previously hid the ground they now stood upon.

Her darting eyes passed over the rough rock walls, and the level smooth floor. Total darkness loomed overhead. A long corridor trailed off to her right while a wide open expanse waited to her left. In the open space, she counted five spiked pits. She wondered how many were real and how many were illusion. The corridor showed no sign of danger, but the way was narrow and left no option for making any turn for as far as she could see. In front of her, a path broke between two pits of still liquid. She smelled the hint of sulfur in the air and guessed both were comprised of acid and not mountain water. She could not see the conclusion of the path, for another veil of darkness blanketed it less than four steps away.

Her surveillance was cut short by Tun's unbending orders. Jon had crossed through the veil. The younger prince remained the last, waiting patiently behind Lief as Tun walked carefully by the rest to retake the lead. At present, they stood snaked about in apparent haphazard confusion. He addressed them showing little patience.

"Do not stray from this line. I have set you in this pattern because even now hazards wait all about you. You must step exactly where the one in front of you steps, even if it seems a waste of time. If I take twenty steps to circle around a single stone, the rest of you must do the same. Ignore what you see other than what the person in front of you does. Follow the path exactly."

He looked at Stephen who stood second in line. "Step as I step, move as I move. You will mirror my actions as the sorceress will mirror yours, and so on through the line."

"I understand," the interpreter attempted to speak confidently, but his response was hollow and filled with dread.

Perhaps Tun now felt the tier of the dwarves was lacking in true challenge, but others did not. It unnerved the interpreter to be in a place where a single mistake, the merest slip, would mean agonizing death. What would it be like to fall into a pool of acid? To die slowly, painfully as his skin foamed away to nothing? How much better would it feel to die by falling upon sharp, thick spikes? How many would pierce his body if he fell into such a thing? The power of the darkness which previously blocked their sight of this place added to his growing anxiety. If gems could bend the light to their will in such a way, they could hide anything. His life was now solely dependent upon following Tun, as were the lives of the others dependant upon him. If he erred, chances were those behind him would only follow his mistake. The charge weighed upon him like a cloak of lead. As Tun made his first step, Stephen wished anyone else would have been second in that march.

Tun chose the long corridor. He started without further word, and he moved far too quickly for the interpreter's liking. He marched as if moving through his own home in the tunnels of Dunop. He gave not the slightest indication of watching what was behind him. He had given his order and he expected all to follow. He would not stand over them and guide them like children through the night.

From the rear, Jon was more observant of the movements of the others. He made sure no one swayed from the original twisting path set by his brother, and he made sure they mirrored Tun's current movements as well.

Tun took five steps down the corridor before turning to his left. It appeared he faced a solid stone wall, but the illusion was revealed as he stepped through it. One by one, the others followed the apparently impossible maneuver of walking through stone, and one by one, they disappeared from the corridor.

Upon clearing the illusion of the wall, the party broke through to a clearing, an area which looked much like the expanse which appeared previously. In fact, to Holli it appeared as the same space. She noted the five spiked pits which appeared in the exact positions as the first she surveyed. She swerved her head about to gain a better perspective of where they had moved.

The wall of the corridor was not directly behind them. Instead, the corridor itself reappeared, just as the path between the two acid pools. They had made no progress. They were back at the starting point, though now facing the open expanse.

"Please watch yourself, Holli," Jon called out politely from behind.

She was about to reveal what had happened when a stern rebuke came from the head of the line.

"Ignore what you think you see," Tun commanded with a tone which revealed he did not like to repeat himself.

Exasperated, Holli turned her attention back to the algor that walked before her. Of all that marched, she would have the most difficulty in fending off the illusions. She shuddered each time it appeared as if they were stepping into pits of acid, lava, or spikes. It was difficult for her to believe the feel of her own feet even as they landed upon solid ground and she could only look down to see waiting death.

With all her might, she concentrated upon the steps of the algor, but she could not refrain from scanning the area for threats. Each time she surveyed the surroundings, her tension grew with leaps and bounds. They walked directly over the most blatant dangers, even as safe ground waited within a single step's distance. She wished to cry out at the idiocy of such movements, yet these same movements defied the very dangers that made themselves so evident.

While not with the same degree of suffering, Ryson also found the march disquieting. Though it was not his training to uncover threats before they manifested themselves, he was a delver. He relied on all his senses to explore a variety of places and things. He had traveled in caves previously, crawled through tunnels which threatened collapse or leapt over gorges with no visible bottom. In these times of exploration, all of his senses guided him away from danger. It now was his task to ignore his own honed sense of vision, or at the very least, to change his perception of what he saw.

A desire filled him to uncover the secrets behind the illusions. He began to focus upon guessing what was real and what was deception before they moved upon it. With his keen eyesight, he sought the gems which created the magic of these mirages. He struggled to perceive that which might reveal the presence of illusion by seeing beyond the actual mirage and sensing the unnatural bend of light. At times, he was actually successful. He attuned his sight to the slightest wavering of an apparent solid structure, or the blur of distortion in visible open space. Several times he would predict correctly when Tun would move away from apparent safety, walk through a solid wall, or step toward an illusion of waiting catastrophe.

These desires, however, split his concentration. He was torn between watching the steps of Lauren and searching for hidden answers to the illusions. He knew such distractions were dangerous, but as Holli scanned for threats which were invisible to her, his instincts kept him searching for answers.

The march proceeded through many corridors, past two curtains of darkness, over and around hundreds of pitfalls, all without a single incident. Tun managed each turn with unfailing memory. Countless times, they walked uncomfortably close to waiting death, but death was always avoided. The cliff behemoth's size brought him within a cat's whisker of destruction on many occasion, but he walked as calmly and as confidently as Tun, as if he knew Godson was guiding his every step.

After throngs of twists and turns, after a period of travel where time now had little meaning to any of them, they reached the center of yet another long corridor. Tun stopped, as if to step through yet another wall. He did not, however, move beyond his present position. Instead, he turned to face those that had unfailingly followed his every move.

"We have successfully crossed the first tier," he stated without emotion. No hint of sadness, relief or joy existed in his expression or voice. He looked over them all with a stone cold glance. He saw the confusion in their faces which merely served to irritate him. "I told you you would not be able to see it. The door to the next level is here." He pointed to ordinary looking ground. There was nothing which indicated a door of any kind. Shaking his head and muttering, he bent down as if to prove its existence by opening the invisible passage.

As he reached, Stephen realized what he was about to do and bid him to wait.

Chapter 26

Stephen's words did not form that of a command, the interpreter would never even consider giving orders to the heir to the throne of Dunop, but they were brisk and direct. More of a grave warning shaded his request, a sense of imminent disaster animated his features.

"Please do not open that!" Stephen bent over to be seen by Tun, whose hand remained poised to open a door which was still not visible.

Tun stopped. He pulled his hand back as if it neared acid. He took no offense at the abrupt appeal, for he understood its true intention. He had led them through a sea of hidden traps, death shrouded by the illusions of the gems. He had bluntly ordered all that followed to heed his every move. He had done so because he knew that failure waited in the form of an agonizing end, but now the journey through his maze was complete. The tier of the humans waited beyond the invisible door, and it held secrets of which he did not know.

He could not find fault with Stephen Clarin, and would not cast an angry stare in his direction. Tun bore only limited knowledge of what waited beyond this door. While the dwarves constructed the tiers, laid the foundation for Sanctum, he had no idea of what waited within them. He knew there would be a second stone staircase, for the dwarves had built such steps for all the tiers, but he could not know what horror waited within the tier to create the human obstacle to the sphere.

With this realization, came another. It was time for him to relinquish command. The moment of his authority over them had slipped away, and all too short for his liking. A passive role awaited him now. The secret of the dwarves, his secret, had been revealed. Nothing remained of the dwarves' obstacle, nothing which he might assist in overcoming. The knowledge of the remaining barriers was within the minds of others. It was now their lead which he must follow.

This understanding left him bitter, humiliated. Once this door was open, he would sink to the back of the pack and be led about like an orphan. He and his brother, princes in Dunop, dwarves of unlimited stature, would be relegated to the roles of peasants that followed mindlessly.

His pride called for him to leave Sanctum entirely; better for him to walk away as if the rest were not of his concern. He was too important to tag about like some duckling. Let the others proceed without him. An heir to the throne never need follow. The urge was strong, but two considerations kept him in place.

First, he needed to see the end of the sphere. The gift of knowledge that the Sword of Decree placed in his mind remained as crisp as if he still held its handle. The destruction of the sphere meant life to the dwarves. His acknowledgment of this need would see him through this, even if it meant crawling at the rear.

Second, there was the opportunity to learn of what the other races placed in Sanctum. He found pleasure in this. Soon, he would not be alone in revealing that which protected the most infamous talisman of all. The humans, the algors, and especially the elves; they would all have to face the sacrilege of professing their most guarded of secrets. He would not miss this. Again, he would follow as long as it meant the others would be forced into the same indignity of conceding that precious knowledge. It was now time for the humans to reveal their portion of the mystery behind Sanctum, and he waited eagerly.

Stephen began. He spoke of the human secret as openly as he might speak of the passing weather. If any emotion painted his words, it was detachment, as if he wished to distance himself from what he was about to reveal. He always failed to comprehend the underlying justification for the waiting atrocities whenever he pondered the secret.

Unlike Tun, there was never any pride for him in this secret. He held it with respect, recognized the responsibility of being its bearer, but for him, the secret itself created only apprehension over the human ability to create such horrible devices.

"The tier that waits beyond this door holds death as subtle as the traps which surround us now, but without the innovation of illusions. The barrier is as cold and as stark as the knowledge that created it. Mostly it is in the form of poison, poison which in its basic composition would not deteriorate with age no matter how long it was trapped within this rock. Poison vapors, tainted gases, invisible toxins, and dreadful contaminants; all things that could withstand time and remain deadly were placed within the human tier."

Stephen noted the curious expressions mixed with the distasteful. The mere mention of the poison struck a disquieting chord with the elves that even now were battling against the taint of the free-flowing magic. The others appeared more burdened with the extent and the number of toxins which waited within the tier. Their faces expressed reservation, and Stephen felt compelled to define the secret in greater detail, to reveal it as it was explained to him.

"More than any other race, humans have always been most concerned with science." He spoke dryly, keeping his distaste for the subject under wraps. "That is why most have chosen to ignore the legends, even ignore Godson. Humans look for definitive principles to explain mysteries. Even during the time before the sphere, we as a race surged forward in the study of natural laws such as physics, chemistry, and biology. Being so far advanced in these studies, it is no wonder they placed in Sanctum what they did. With a knowledge of poison gases and liquids, the humans used a mix of elements which would snuff out our lives even before we were aware of their existence.

"You see, the humans at that time were not quite sure which poisons would be the most effective, so they placed several within their tier. They knew that different gases would have different attributes. Apparently, they wished to contaminate the area with poisons which guaranteed the death of any intruder, no matter what race or what immunity. The tier was divided very modestly by brick walls. The walls do not present a true obstacle, they do not even stretch from side to side of the mountain. They merely create chambers, pockets to hold and separate the different gases.

"The chambers also hold pools of synthetic liquids which would not evaporate, but would constantly react to create more and more poisonous gas. Thus, as time wore on, the concentration of poison would increase, making it more deadly now than it has ever been. Some gases were designed to be heavier than the air and sink to the ground. The poison waits for an intruder to walk by, to stir it up, and to finally inhale. Others mix with the air, wait like a death cloud."

He stopped, gritted his teeth, and only continued after his sorrow became quite apparent.

"The designers of the barrier weren't satisfied with just the poison gases. They apparently wanted something with a greater dramatic effect as well, so they put in another trap to stop entry. It's set to go off when we break the seal of this door. It was made airtight before the humans handed over the last tier to the dwarves. Within are compounds which consumed and removed the trapped air with slow precision. As the chemicals aged, they also altered into a substance which would now ignite at any new inflow of fresh air. So if you opened that door now, we would all be incinerated.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't even end there. Another diabolical obstacle is present. Glowing stones wait within the far corners. They give off no traceable gas, but they will kill more terribly. Without protection we would become sick almost instantly, fall to our knees as our very skin would peel from our bodies. Our sight would grow pale. Even if we could escape before total immobility consumed us, we would not escape the slow death. It has been told to me that once contact is made with these glowing rocks, death is irreversible."

The magnitude of his last statement was punctuated by its echo through Sanctum's uppermost cavern. The telling of mysterious rocks with such power chased away any warmth that drained from their magically heated clothes.

"If such is the case," Holli questioned with a cold calculating tone, "how is it you intend for us to enter? I would expect only Dzeb is resistant to flame and these glowing rocks carry a burden which sounds heavy to face." She waited patiently for a response, but she listened with intensity, as if attending her training sessions all over again.

Stephen gestured with an open hand toward Lauren who stood behind him. A sense of pride flushed away his remorse. He spoke near exaltedly that a blessing of power bestowed upon one human might counteract the misdeeds of others. "She has the power to protect us. That is why she is needed. She has the knowledge and ability to cast a field of protection around us all. Just as such a field will protect us from the flames and the stones; it will hold within it the untainted air which surrounds us now. We will be able to breathe without facing the gas, just as we are protected from the death of the glowing rocks."

The statement bristled in Lauren's ears. The pressure became insurmountable. She burst into tears, wringing her hands at her chest. "You ask too much. I can't do it."

The outburst caught Stephen off guard. He stood stupefied as Lauren stood nearly doubled over, wailing with frustration and fear.

"I can't control it! I don't want to be here. None of this is my fault!" Her outburst grew and soon she could not muffle the thoughts which weighed upon her. She closed her eyes as tightly as possible. Her skin wrinkled above her cheeks and at the corners of her eyes. Uncontrollable moans echoed through the cavern just as her tears began falling to the ground.

They stood about her, confused and tense. They looked about at each other, not wanting to stare at the grief-stricken girl, and not knowing what to say to relieve her strain.

Finally, Stephen brought his own surprise under control, but he could not hide his confusion. "Lauren, we talked about this before, talked about it before I brought you to the church. You believed you could do it."

"I was wrong." It was all she could do to blurt out those three words.

Stephen patted her on the back lightly as she coughed out more tears. "Just calm down. Take a moment to breathe. We're not going to go forward without you, so you have all the time you need."

Lauren pulled her hands apart and clenched them into fists. She held them so tightly that her nails made indentations in the flesh of her palms. The pain in her hands allowed her to concentrate upon something other than the stone walls that surrounded them. Slowly, she brought her moans to a near stop. The corners of her eyes remained wet with tears, but they no longer streamed down her cheeks. With a few deep breaths, she opened her eyes.

"I can't protect so many," she spoke in a shakily controlled voice. It remained raspy even as she swallowed hard. "Look at how large the cliff behemoth is. How can I cast something so big to protect us all?" Her eyes beseeched all of them to understand, to realize what was being asked of her. She did not want these powers which now took hold of her. She did not want to be held responsible for protecting them all. Her head swerved about, taking in their confused expressions. She looked for compassionate understanding, but found bewilderment instead. Her head dropped and her eyes sank to the ground in depression.

Holli considered the matter with the logic of a guard. She weighed Lauren's concern and offered the first

solution to the problem. "We can reduce our numbers, if that is the only way to pass. Both Lief and I know what waits in the tier of the elves. It is not necessary for us both to go. One can remain behind, with both Jon and Tun. The dwarf tier is passed, and there is no need for them to continue forward. We can wait here for your return once you obtain the sphere. Perhaps, it is also possible for one of the algors to remain behind, and even Stephen. If it is the power of the sorceress which will lead you through, he can give instructions before you enter. If this can be done, we can cut the size of the party in half. Will this help you, sorceress?"

She barely lifted her head. Her response was inaudible.

Tun's, however, was not. "I will not remain behind!" he commanded with his usual authority. "As you have seen the revelation of the dwarf secret, I will see to yours. I will also see the destruction of the sphere to the end. I will not remain behind."

The algors spoke together and spoke as if they did not hear Tun's outburst. "Only one algor is necessary. It was your decision to send two. But another must decide who stays and who continues."

Even the mere thought of making yet another division of the algors agonized the delver. His objection, however, was covered by the protests of another.

"A separation is not necessary," Stephen stated loudly but calmly. "Lauren has the power to protect us all. I know it and she knows it."

A light sob came from the sorceress who still stood with her head bowed and her face concealed.

Stephen continued with a mix of compassion and resolve filling his speech. "I realize you are not a follower of Godson, Lauren. You don't understand the power that guided me to you. If you did, you'd lose your fears. But while you don't understand my faith, I know you understand the power within you, a power which you can control. The barrier you must create will be large, I realize that, but you can do this."

Her head jolted up. Her eyes and nose were red, her face blotched with the strain of emotion. "I don't want to do it!" she nearly screamed.

"Bah!" Tun released.

"Alright, that's enough." Ryson turned aside the cold stare from the dwarf and placed his attention upon the sorceress. He sheathed his sword so the brilliant radiance would not be centered upon her. The level of light dropped significantly as only the strategically placed light gems offered any illumination. Many of the walls which surrounded them appeared to shift in size and shape. New paths emerged. Different traps became revealed, some real, some illusion; the change all due to the shift in light.

Ryson ignored the alterations. He spoke softly to Lauren, in words that revealed his understanding. "Ignore him, and for a moment, ignore everything else. Stop worrying about what's happening to you. It's not helping you. You can wish with all your might that it would stop, but I don't think it's going to help. You're probably telling yourself over and over again that you didn't ask for this, didn't want it. All you want is to go back to the way things were, when you were no different than everybody else you knew."

A gleam of hope rose in Lauren's eyes. "You know what I'm trying to say. You see what I'm going through."

"Not completely," Ryson responded truthfully. "But I know the look you've had since I met you. Most delvers share that look. When we learn of our abilities, it fills us with as much fear as it does excitement. It is not a pleasant thought to be so different from those around you. Some try to hide their abilities, even forget them. For them, it's a better alternative than feeling isolated and alone. But that's their choice. Being a delver gives

me some understanding, but it doesn't give me all the answers to your problem. I know very little about this magic, but I think I see in you the same confusion I once saw in myself."

Lauren waited impatiently for him to reveal the secret of dealing with this dilemma. She wanted to hear the words that would lessen the tension in her stomach and remove the doubts and fears from her mind.

Ryson could only offer words which bluntly explained the truth.

"You may not want to hear this, but I'm going to tell you what I think you should do. I think you should help us proceed. Basically, it's because your problem won't matter to anyone, not even you, if we let the sphere kill us all."

He bent his head slightly to get a clear view of her face. "You're going to decide in the end whether you want to use these powers or not. You're going to decide now, and you're going to have to decide again after this is all over. You may want to return to life the way it was for you and never cast a spell again. But you know what; you can only do that if you help us now. The sphere's going to kill us, kill us all. It's going to kill everyone in Connel. There'll be no normal life for you to return to. That's why I'm telling you what I think you should do. It'll always be your choice, though, no matter what you do now. If in the future you wish to hide your power, a decision to help here won't change that. Those that are here aren't going to be revealing your secret to anyone. But a decision not to help, well, that'll make your problem meaningless because we'll all be dead, including you."

He straightened up, pulled his sword again from its sheath. The light returned to its previous state, as did the walls surrounding them. "If you want to place the responsibility of your choice upon me, go right ahead. But I don't believe any of us have a choice any longer."

Lauren stiffened at these last words. She wiped the remaining tears from her eyes as if their presence insulted her. She threw her hands down to her sides, and again, they formed tight fists. She glowered at the darkness in the distance as she swallowed the last hint of her despair.

"Fine," she remarked simply but coldly, a single word which signaled a transformation. While not taking a step, she leaned away from them all. Flinging her hands open, as if releasing the fears which previously bound her, she swept loose hairs from her face. She would not look at the delver, she turned to Stephen instead. "We can all go. Tell me when you want me to cast the damn spell."

"Ummh," he stammered at first. He looked about as everyone now watched him. "I guess we should go now."

"Very well." Her reply was just as cold, but slightly more biting. The blotches on her face were quickly disappearing, her pallor returned quickly to a healthy pink. She closed her eyes for but an instant. When they reopened, they burned with dark purple flames. She said nothing.

She focused first on the floor at her feet. Her eyes bulged ever so slightly, and the violet shadows of her pupils grew and threatened to reach out with unbounded fury. She turned and arched her neck, slowly but surely scanning the entire floor under each member. She then passed her view beyond the edges of where they stood. The air hardened with each passing glance. The shell of the barrier became visible. It was transparent, like a growing shield of glass. She turned about and the path of her sight encircled them. The shell grew with each wave of her focus and soon it surrounded them. Finally, she pressed her vision upon the area over their heads. She scanned the black open space from side to side and front to back. With these last glances the barrier was complete.

With a final pass, her eyes returned to normal and she set them back upon the interpreter. "The field is set. We are completely surrounded and shall not be harmed by any of the dangers you mentioned."

Stephen rubbed his hands together nervously. With nothing to say to Lauren, and uncomfortable with her gaze, he turned instead to Tun. "If you would, you may open the door now."

From near the back, Holli called out one last warning. "Won't his arm be singed if he passes it through the barrier?"

"The barrier will move with him as it will move with us all," Lauren stated with calculated confidence. "Any flame will no more hurt the dwarf than it would the cliff behemoth behind me."

Tun did not wait for further explanation. His hand speared downward to the ground, and indeed, the violet hardened shell stretched with his movements, revealing its own flexibility. His fingers disappeared to those that watched as he groped for the handle which remained hidden by the illusion of a gem. As he probed, the barrier expanded to encase areas where his fingers pressed upon. A grunt of satisfaction revealed he found that for which he searched. With a savage pull upon an iron ring, he hoisted a stone cover on its hinge and opened wide the passage to the next level.

Instinctively, he had shielded his eyes from the bright flare which he expected, but no such flame appeared. The opening was as quiet as church rafters. There was no ignition of the air which even now flowed freely into the next level, no sign of explosion or even the smallest spark appeared. The first barrier as explained by the interpreter had failed.

Stephen looked into the newly created hole with befuddlement. "I don't understand."

Tun returned the statement with a doubting, accusing stare, but said nothing.

Stephen felt the need to explain. "I assure you, the opening of this hole should have released a wave of flame."

"It did not," Tun stated the obvious.

"Has the passage been opened before?" Holli asked.

Tun took but a moment to inspect the rock cover which was in his hand. "No. The break in the seal is fresh. This stone has not been moved in ages."

"I don't understand." Stephen agonized over the mystery. The culmination of events was quickly taking their toll on his youthful enthusiasm. Being inside Sanctum, following Tun through the first maze, dealing with Lauren, and now the deficiency in his own explanations; all of this drained from him his normal exuberance. He was growing tired. It was late and he had not slept. The pain of riding horseback all day now sunk in his legs. He heaved a heavy breath in exhaustion. He could not decide what to do next, and the decision to move onward had to be made for him.

"Let us not question it further," Lief advised. "If the seal has not been previously broken, there is no true danger to us. It may simply be that over time, the substances placed in this tier offset each other. Let us just be thankful and move on."

"I think that's wise," Ryson echoed the sentiment.

Stephen shrugged, but accepted the directive.

Without any dissent, the group moved down a second set of steps. The protective shield moved with them just as the light filled their path. Jon set another light gem at the opening and Ryson's sword doubled and redoubled its radiance. Again, there were four segments to the stairway, each comprised of ten steps, and

square platforms of heavy granite bricks divided the sections.

Stephen took the lead, but Tun decided to stay near the front rather than drop back with his brother. The lack of fire had him questioning the words of the interpreter. It fueled his misgivings, justified his doubts, and the dwarf prince wondered what else might contradict Stephen's revelation of the human secret. He moved behind the interpreter, filled with suspicion and eager to challenge any further discrepancies.

Stephen, himself, descended with curious eyes, grasping for an explanation to the lack of flame which should have greeted them. He peered into the tier with every opportunity, affording more attention to the surrounding area than the steps which bore him. There was no void to block his vision. The open space of the tier bathed in the light from Jon's gem and Ryson's sword and it held another alteration from Stephen's description.

There was at first glance, that which was expected. The ceiling overhead remained safe and solid. It was well supported by the very walls of the mountain as well as by thick stone columns. The pillars were wider than the cliff behemoth and stood the test of time far better than the brick walls constructed by the humans.

Here waited more of the unexpected for the interpreter. There were no sections in this room, no division of space. Most of the walls which divided the room into chambers were reduced to rubble, or even clay dust. Only two or three remained partially standing, and they were crumbling and unsteady. With the decay of the brick, the tier now took on the shape of a wide open expanse rather than a space divided by separate chambers.

There could, however, be no denying the previous existence of the brick walls. If not, Tun would have been more than willing to challenge the interpreter's truthfulness, but even the stubborn dwarf could not ignore the crumbled remains. Their remnants verified the existence of chambers in an earlier time and served to confirm Stephen's knowledge of the waiting obstacle.

Other evidence existed as well. Vapors rose unsteadily from puddles of dark liquid. The air shimmered in several places with hazy clouds. The floor was hidden, encrusted with a thick fog which crystallized in many areas. And to everyone's dread, each corner radiated a light from its own source. Collections of small pebbles, no larger than fingernails, gleamed with a greenish orange glow. It reminded them all that the absence of the flame did not constitute the end of all dangers. Most of what the interpreter warned indeed waited within these walls, and it remained as deadly as he explained.

Still, the absence of the walls, the removal of the chambers, constituted a shift from the original obstacle. Lief offered the change a possible explanation for the flames which did not materialize.

"If the walls which separated the gasses collapsed, could this not have caused changes which might explain the absence of the flames?"

"I guess it's possible," Stephen muttered. He had stopped at the bottom of the stair case and surveyed the now open space from an even level. "I'm not a scientist. I'm not sure what would happen if some of these gases mixed with each other."

The thought troubled the elf guard. "Does that mean you are not sure if we are safe where we stand? Is it possible the barrier will not protect us?"

Stephen frowned, but shook his head. "No, I didn't mean that. I honestly believe we are safe. As long as the barrier remains air tight, I can't believe anything will hurt us. It's just that I wonder if any of the dangers exist anymore. The air may be as clean to breathe as the air outside. All the different gases might have neutralized each other, just as it did to the gas which was supposed to ignite on our entry."

Ryson looked nervously toward the glowing stones in the far corners of the tier. He spoke with urgency. "It looks like there's at least one thing that's still dangerous here. The rocks you spoke of still glow. So unless anyone really wants to poke their head out to see if the air is free of poison, I suggest we keep moving."

"You're right," Stephen allowed as he shrugged yet again.

Before they started, Ryson questioned Lauren. "How are you holding up?"

"Do not fear the rocks, delver" the sorceress replied almost laughingly. While she did not wish to respond to the delver, she found his apprehension somewhat fulfilling. "The barrier will hold, and though I am tiring, I will last."

"Alright." He dismissed the strangeness of her reply as he urged the rest to move without delay. "If she's getting tired, we should move as quickly as possible."

It was Holli who called out one last question. "Stephen, do you know of any traps which we must avoid?"

"There was no need for traps," Stephen conceded. "The gas and the stones would be enough to stop anyone."

Holli addressed the entire group with a stern warning. "Still, there are liquids which might prove deadly if we touch them, and the brick walls that still stand remain in danger of collapsing. I suggest you steer us clear of such obstacles. Do not become careless in haste to reach the next level."

"Very well," he approved. "I'll take us down a center path. The door waits at the far end, over there." He pointed off in front of him.

The faint outline of the door was visible at that point only to the delver and the elves. Their keen eye sight allowed them to cover the great distance. While Lief and Holli could make out only a meager trace of the stone door, Ryson obtained far greater detail, and with it an answer.

"There's where your flame went," he announced suddenly.

Stephen, about to take weary steps forward, stopped himself as he shot a confused look at the delver. Indeed, all eyes were now on Ryson, and all waited for an explanation.

He spoke without hesitation. "The door's damaged. It's shifted off its hinges and there are scorch marks all around it."

"Has it been opened?" Holli questioned in a near demanding tone.

"I don't think so. It looks like something pounded upon it from the other side."

Holli looked toward Lief. "That is the delver tier."

Lief responded with equal grimness. "We still have no idea what waits for us there."

Again, Holli questioned the delver before they proceeded. "What do you think happened, Ryson?"

"It's hard to say from here. Some kind of force hit the rock door, damaged it, and shoved it from its original position. I guess when that happened, it broke the seal. The flame we expected when we opened this door already occurred around that one. There's scorch marks all around the cracks."

Tun became frustrated in listening to this babble and being unable to see that which the delver described. "Let us move forward and we can all take a look," he demanded. "If there is damage to the rock, it is fitting that my brother and I inspect it as well."

"That's a good idea," Ryson agreed. "I'd like to get a closer look myself."

They moved forward over the flat rock floor. Stephen led, but there was no true need for his direction. A path through the center of the tier led directly to the door. It contained no obstacles as the gas emitting liquids and the crumbling walls remained off to the sides. They remained grouped together, but not out of fear of a misstep. They wished only to refrain from stretching the limits of the shield that protected them from unseen hazards. They formed more of a haphazard cluster within Lauren's magical field and abandoned the long snaking line which brought them through the dwarf tier.

The broken stone door called to them as well, both as a mystery and a path of freedom from the stones. As they passed pillar after pillar, and beyond several pools of foaming liquids, it became visible to even the weakest eyed traveler among them. The scorch marks were clearly present and the cracks near the hinges verified Ryson's earlier report. The last few steps were taken in near trot as all wished to examine the door as well as put this tier behind them.

Tun took an authoritative step forward to examine the damage in the rock. At his grunting request, Jon joined him.

Jon took greater care in feeling the rock and examining the cracks, and he announced his observations to them all. "The force which broke the stone came from the other side. It did not press upon the door directly. It was also not a hammering effect. Whatever it was, it came in the form of a steady stream of great power. The force broke the seal and allowed air to rush through the cracks. Air continues to flow through even now."

"How long ago?" Holli requested with a calculating expression.

"Recently," Jon explained. "Within this season."

Holli nodded her head with approval. She swerved about on her heels assessing their location within the tier. Her eyes cast first to the stone stairway across the rock floor and finally upon the ceiling.

Lief noted her reaction. "You are aware of something?"

"I believe so," she said firmly, but remained unsatisfied with her visual inspections. "It would be clearer if I knew which direction we faced."

"We face south," Jon replied quickly.

"Are you sure? How can you tell from within? With all the tricks played upon us in the tier overhead, it was impossible for me to keep a lock on our direction."

"I know the path as well as my brother," Jon answered simply. "I always knew what direction we were headed. I also know the general construction of Sanctum. Even though this door was sealed by the humans, its foundation was built by the dwarves. Trust me, we face south."

"Then I know the cause of the break in that door," Holli responded with hard edged certainty. "It is the result of the tunnel which the sphere created to funnel the tainted magic to the free air."

Ryson's eyes shot open wide with enlightenment. "She's right! The breach in Sanctum's wall was on the

southern slope. If the break in the wall went straight to the core it would have to break through the tiers at some point. It must be right beyond this door."

"That would coincide with my findings," Jon stated in agreement.

"There is only one way to be certain," Tun stated almost belligerently and with definite impatience. "Let us open the door and see for ourselves."

"Wait! That might tell us what we need to know, but we don't know what else waits for us beyond this door," Stephen reminded him.

Holli repeated the need for care over haste. "The interpreter is correct. The delver tier awaits us now. We can not be certain of what dangers it holds."

"And we won't find out by standing here," Tun answered obstinately.

It was Ryson that ended the short debate, ended it as he realized the new danger they faced. He took a deep breath, and held it. He waited, as if sampling the air in his lungs. "We can't stand around here much longer no matter what," he said with a new sense of urgency. "We're running out of air."

Focus came away from the broken door and upon the very air that surrounded them. Many sniffed the air. They sensed nothing different, but they could not deny the logic of the danger. The barrier was airtight. It surrounded them all, ten of them breathing the same trapped air. It would certainly not last indefinitely.

The glow of rocks in a far corner called to them. What they faced became as clear as the greenish orange glow. If they remained within the barrier too long, one by one they would pass out. When the sorceress lost consciousness, the barrier would fade, leaving them open to the dreadful death the rocks offered. If she dropped the barrier to refresh their air, the possibility of poisonous gas overtaking them remained prevalent. And of course, the deadly power of the rocks might wash over them in that single instant.

"We don't have much choice," Ryson admitted what they all now knew. "We can't just stay here. And we can't take too much time waiting around to figure out what might be waiting for us. We have to open this door and move on."

"But what if a trap waits just beyond this door?" Stephen offered the dreadful possibility with reluctance, but it needed to be addressed. "Simply plunging forward may be as deadly as waiting."

Holli took command with a cold, determined expression. "We have no choice. We know death waits for us here, which means we can't stay. Turning back will not bring us any closer to the sphere, so that is also not a choice. We must move ahead and that means going through this door. We knew we'd have to face the delver tier eventually, and now we must do so. But we will do so with the option that offers us the greatest chance of succeeding. I doubt simply opening the door will cause us danger. It has already been shifted by the passage of force and the seal has been broken. Tun, I want you to open the door while I stand ready at the opening. The rest of you, I want you to move as far back as the force field will permit."

Nearly everyone submitted, even Tun showed no reluctance at remaining in harm's way. Ryson, however, protested.

"It shouldn't be you," he demanded of Holli. "You should go back with the others. This is my responsibility."

"I will not argue with you on this, delver," she scolded him. "You are still needed. If there is an unknown threat at this point. I am best suited to deal with it."

"That's not true."

Tun glared at Ryson. "This is no time for heroes, delver. Do as you're told."

With a cold stare of his own, Ryson was ready and willing to respond to the dwarf, but another angry stare from Holli left him reeling with the realization he could not win. He stepped back with disgust.

As Holli took the bow from her shoulder and loaded an arrow, Ryson took hold of the sword's hilt with both hands. He steadied himself for the unknown, focused on what might wait beyond. He could not see the tier below them, but a clear wind of comprehension cleared the doubts and fears from his mind. In an instant, he understood the Delver secret.

"There's no danger," he muttered nearly unintelligibly.

Holli swerved her head about to meet the delver's gaze with a demanding stare of her own. "What?"

"There's no danger," he repeated.

Holli tried to reassess her position. She looked again at the stone door and then back to Ryson. "We can open the door without danger to us?" She attempted to confirm.

"Yes," he nodded, but with no explanation as to how this knowledge came to him.

Holli's jaw tightened. She turned back to the door. Her eyes bore down upon it as she called to Tun. "Open it."

With a sudden heave, the dwarf pulled upon the handle. The stone door broke free from its hinges. It cracked under its own weight, and a large piece fell with a thud to the ground.

With the door pulled away, Holli thrust her attention through the hole. She pulled back on the bow string as her eyes darted over everything which was in the path of her vision. The bow string remained in her grip, but the arrow would not fly. She stepped closer to the opening, and again her darting eyes scanned that which waited. Slowly, carefully, she released her tension on the bow string, returned the arrow to its quiver, and the bow to her shoulder.

"You were right," she exclaimed to Ryson. "There is no visible danger, but there is an obstacle. It is as I expected, the tunnel created by the sphere passes through the wall just beyond the door. The energy which created the breach also destroyed the stairs to the next tier."

Ryson's mind quickly calculated the situation. He stepped up to take a look for himself. His sword brought a shower of light upon the rubble beneath the hole. There was little of the stone steps remaining other than broken rocks. The distance to the floor was great, but the comprehension that still no danger existed within this tier brought him vast hope. He turned back to the others as he again sampled the air with a deep breath.

"We don't have much time, but I think we can make it. I have a short rope that will help us down. I'll go first and help catch you for the last distance you have to jump. The only one I'm worried about is Dzeb. My rope probably won't hold him and I know I can't catch him."

The cliff behemoth strolled calmly to the opening. He glanced down to the next level. The distance measured well over twice his own great height.

"I will jump," he stated as casually as if he were about to do nothing more than jump over a blade of grass.

"You can make it without injury?" Ryson questioned.

"I will not be harmed," Dzeb countered.

Ryson accepted the option. He doubted the cliff behemoth could have lied if he wanted to. "Then we'll have no problem at all. If you hold the rope, you can lower us down and I can take it from there."

"It will be as you say," Dzeb agreed.

Ryson dug quickly into his pouch and pulled out a short rope. It would not cover the full distance of the fall, but it would handle most of it. He gave one end to the cliff behemoth and turned to face the opening. He made his descent with a flash of speed, moving before Holli could issue another warning or perhaps request that she go first. He shimmied down the rope in the blink of an eye. He did so with the sword still in one hand. He jumped the last span, a distance which was nearly as long as he was tall. He leapt with no fear of injury and no fear as to what might wait within this tier. As he hit the ground, he remained certain that no danger would befall him.

He leaned the sword against a pile of rubble to free his two hands. The light increased in this tier, a result of the breach. With the tunnel so near, the sword was now reflecting more than just the light directed by Jon's gems.

The light sparkled off the hardened shell of Lauren's magically created shield. The spell barrier moved with him, expanded to cover the distance, but it appeared to weaken as it stretched. It remained enclosed as it extended up to the opening where Dzeb waited with the other end of the rope. Worried that the spell might fade, he called up for them to move quickly.

One by one they descended the rope. Ryson supported them the last small distance as they jumped into his guiding arms. As Dzeb stood alone, he dropped the rope. The others cleared aside as he prepared to jump. An awe-inspiring sight to be sure. The mammoth being plunged through the air and landed with the force of a giant boulder. The ground shook, but Dzeb kept his feet. He approached them as if nothing had happened.

With all again on one level, the force field constricted to cover a smaller area. The air, however, was truly becoming thin, and they could now all recognize the threat of the enclosed space.

Holli spoke quickly of their slim options. "We must be free of the barrier. Even now our time is growing short."

Lief pointed to the hole above their heads. "What of the tier above us. It still holds gas and the glowing rocks."

"The gas should remain within the tier," Stephen responded to the concern. "And the danger of the rocks can not affect us here; it will not pass through the heavy stone that surrounds us."

"But the passage remains open," Lief persisted.

"The rocks remain in the corners. As long as we do not walk in their direct path, we will remain safe."

"The tunnel will also offer ventilation to disburse the gas," Holli offered. "We have but one concern. We still do not know what waits on this tier, and we are running out of air."

"I tell you, no danger exists," Ryson reaffirmed his earlier remark.

Holli was about to question him, but Lief called to their attention once more. "Look there!" He pointed to a

rock wall to his left. The word "Beware" was carved deep into the stone. There was nothing else.

"Then what do you make of that?" Holli asked of Ryson.

"It's as much an illusion as the walls we walked through in the dwarf tier. There is no danger here." Ryson replied with such certainty that the elf guard did not know how to respond. The delver pointed his attention to Lauren. "You can drop the barrier now."

A wave of relief swept across her face. Maintaining the field constantly pulled upon her. It felt almost as if her very life was draining from her. She turned her focus upon the hardened shell of air with immediacy. The shadow of purple rose again in her eyes. As her sight drifted over the very edges of the barrier, the field dissolved.

With the first break in the shell, the surrounding air burst in with a loud pop. A musty breeze brushed against their waiting faces. Those that inhaled first did so almost reluctantly, fearing a lingering cloud of poisonous vapor. Small guarded breaths brought in the most meager mouthfuls. They stood silent, waiting, as if expecting one among them to fall to the ground. And one did.

It was Lauren. She collapsed as the last fragment of the barrier disappeared, but it was not poison which brought her downfall. The air held no toxin, only the faint mustiness of time and even that was being cleansed by the recent opening in the side of the mountain. Lauren fell unconscious out of fatigue.

Ryson caught her before she hit the ground. He pulled her to a far wall and leaned her shoulders against it.

"What's happened to her?" Stephen called out as he rushed to her side.

"It is the use of magic," the two algors answered in unison.

"Such long powerful spells exhaust the soul," one continued solo.

"She will need rest," followed the second algor.

"We can revive her with our healing," they finished in chorus.

They moved to Lauren with steady assurance and motioned for Ryson and Stephen to give them room. Each placed a hand on her shoulder and on her forehead. They were careful not to scratch Lauren's skin with their long, sharp claws. A thick green membrane slid over their bulging black eyes. They whispered something, again in unison, and Lauren's eyes fluttered open.

"What happened?" she asked with a raspy voice and hollow breath. She rubbed her eyes, trying to bring her vision back into focus. She barely recognized the fact that the two algors were now at her side.

The algors stood and stepped away as if they did nothing special while Stephen responded to the Rachael's question.

"You fainted," he replied as he knelt back down next to her. "The algors revived you."

"You will need to rest for a while before you are ready to walk, but you will not need sleep now," the algors stated together.

Lauren looked with confusion to Stephen. She ignored the delver who was also now back by her side.

The interpreter did his best to clear the confused look from her face. "The algors apparently have the power to revive as well as heal. They said using the magic exhausted you."

Lauren turned her attention upon her own hands. She rubbed them together lightly in front of her face. She felt the slight ache in her muscles, felt weariness in her back, but another sensation was much more prevalent. She tried to speak, but a long yawn interrupted her momentarily. After her lungs filled with the free air of the delver tier, she spoke with a stronger voice.

"It's more than that," she described. "I feel empty inside. Not just weak, but like I've lost something."

It was Lief who responded to this statement. "You've expended most of the magical energies which your body has stored over these past few days. That is the absence which you feel. Do not fear, though. Based on what I've seen, I would guess you will collect the energy quickly. The emptiness you now notice will dissolve."

Lauren stared at the elf with a mixed set of emotions, not knowing quite how to respond. Was it not so long ago that she would have given anything to be free of the magic power that filled her? Was it so hard to remember the moments when she despised her new found abilities? As for now, the reassurance that the power would return brought her more comfort than misery. She broke her gaze from the elf to return her stare to her hands. She mumbled something about needing to rest as she felt the energies pouring back into the core of her being. This time, she indeed welcomed the magic.

"Ryson!" It was Holli who called. She stood tensely. Her eyes darted about the open space they stood upon. She stood like a coil ready to spring. Her hand again held her bow and again an arrow rested in the string. "Explain to me why we stand carelessly about within Sanctum upon a tier we know nothing about. This is foolishness." Her words were strong, but she would not fix a stare upon him. She continued to scan every direction, waiting for a threat which she was sure would materialize in any moment.

"There is no threat here," Ryson responded as he reluctantly left Lauren's side. He knew he was as much responsible for her exhaustion as anyone else. He recommended, urged her, to help them forward. As well, he could not deny the animosity she now held toward him. He would have liked to extinguish the aversion she cast upon him, but he realized Lauren would not even acknowledge his presence. He sullenly approached Holli as he made his explanation. "You can relax. The only thing that was placed in this tier was that carving." He nodded to the warning which now stood upon the stone as more of a puzzle than a threat.

"There is nothing here?" Tun questioned with anger as well as doubt. "No secret? How can you expect us to believe that?"

"I didn't say there wasn't a secret," Ryson stated, flipping an annoyed response to the hostile dwarf. "The secret is that the delvers saw no reason to put anything in Sanctum as an obstacle." Ryson turned back to Holli as he continued his explanation. "I guess they didn't see a point to it. I can only assume they figured that with two tiers above and two tiers below this one, there was no need for another trap or a barrier. I guess they took the time to carve out the warning just to make it seem like something was being placed within, but there really isn't anything else here."

"How is it you know of this now?" Holli asked without accusation, but certainly with curiosity, and perhaps even doubt.

"It was the sword again," Ryson admitted, feeling somewhat foolish talking about a magic sword. "When you moved me back from the door, I concentrated on being prepared for anything that might wait for us here. As I held the sword, it all suddenly became clear to me. I just knew that this tier held no danger. In all honesty, I didn't know about the carving until I saw it, but when I did, I understood that as well. 'Beware', it's just a trick, a trick to make someone think that there's something more horrible in here than nothing. It's like when I knew

how to deal with the vampire, I just know."

"I see," Holli immediately stood down from her ready position. The bow went back over her shoulder as she placed her focus on the surrounding rock.

The tier was only slightly larger than the one above. It contained the same stone pillars, and the same rock floor. There were, thankfully, no glowing rocks and no pools of liquid exuding poisonous vapors. The door to the next tier was located upon the floor nearer to the center of the cavern. It was within sight of them all, and it was closed tight.

The only true spectacle was the breach which burst through the mountainside. It also broke through the floor of this tier, creating another entry to the level below.

Holli stepped carefully up to the gaping hole. She tested the strength of the rock with a probing foot before placing any true weight upon it. Satisfied it would hold her, she stood at the very edge. The break in the floor was the same size as the tunnel which was carved through the wall. Its circular border was at least as tall and as wide as Dzeb.

Ryson moved to her side and joined the inspection. His eyes followed the trail of the newly formed tunnel which jutted upward at a steep angle. Its edges were much like those he inspected at Sanctum's exterior, and just as he noted when standing at the tunnel's conclusion, he saw the curve in the burrow. For some reason, the blast did not break an arrow's path through the rock wall. Instead, it bent enough so that there was no straight visual path. He concluded that the curve was as much a defense mechanism as the magical force field which sealed this tunnel.

His considerations and inspections were interrupted by the soft whisper from one behind.

"I may be too quick to draw a conclusion from this, but I believe I might see an advantage here for us to take hold." It was Lief who spoke quietly, guardedly, and only to the elf and the delver. "This may offer us a great opportunity," he pressed a finger to his chin as he considered his own proposal. "If the fissure in Sanctum creates a path directly to the sphere, we will no longer have to move as dictated by the construction of the tiers."

Holli raised an eyebrow, pondering the proposal with interest. Lief, however, was not able to continue unabated.

"What are you speaking of over there?" Tun fumed with rage over the attempt at a private conference. "What is it you wish to exclude the rest of us from?"

Lief almost exploded with rage. He turned about with fiery purpose. His brow knitted as his jaw tightened. The words of frustrated intolerance came to his tongue, but he bit them back. He remembered his previous vow of trust before going off on a tirade of his own. He took long moments to swallow his anger before finally responding. "My apologies, Tun. I have struck on an idea which might assist us and I wished to discuss it with my fellow elf."

"But the delver stands with you, too," Tun retorted. "The delver who even now states that we should believe him about no danger existing within this tier."

"My thoughts did not address this tier," Lief admitted. "My idea involves the very breach which the sphere uses to emit its energy to the land above. I wonder if we might be able to use it as a shortcut to the sphere itself."

Silence greeted the elf's announcement. All eyes, save Lauren's, were upon him, and they all waited for further clarification.

Lief continued his explanation to the group as a whole. "There are but two tiers left which separate us from the sphere, the algors', and finally the elves'. Rather than stay within the confines of the tiers, we can use the breach as a more direct path."

"Do you mean by that you would not reveal what the elves have hidden in Sanctum?" Tun questioned severely.

"No. We will still have to deal with that obstacle, but not to the same degree. If we stay to the stone steps and original doors, we will have to transverse the entire elf tier. If we use the breach, we cut our time upon the tier and thus reduce our risk." He paused, but could not refrain from casting the slightest rejoinder upon the dwarf prince. "I will still have to reveal to you what the obstacle is. When I do, you will be happy to use any such short cut."

Tun fumed, but it was Ryson who stated the first reluctance. "If we use the tunnel, that will place you and Holli directly in the path of the magic. The last time that happened, you didn't do so well. It still contains poison to the elves, remember?"

"You do not have to remind me of that," Lief acknowledged. "I am aware of the danger, I can feel it even now, but I am also aware of the danger that waits below. Trust me, I will be safer in direct contact with the magic."

"I don't know," Ryson said as he shook his head. "We were only in the tunnel for a few moments and you had to find open air."

"That is because I was probing for the magic," Lief countered. "If you also remember, at that same time I was still in search of answers. I did not know where the sphere was and thus I opened myself to the energy. I will not do so again. I will admit that I can not keep the taint of poison from me completely, but I can guard against it. It is our best option."

"Well, what about the drop?" Ryson pointed to the hole in the floor. "We'll have to get down the same as before, by climbing and jumping. Won't it be safer to use the stairs?"

"Easier, but not safer," Lief noted. "In the elf tier, the sphere is located far from the steps. We would have to walk a great distance to reach it. The deterrent that waits is one that we would do best to shorten our path."

Ryson scratched his head. "Well, that's the elf tier. What about the tier below us, the algor tier?"

"It does not matter which entrance we use." It was the algors that responded. "We can control the danger."

Both algors pulled hand-carved wooden flutes from their packs. They held them up for all to see, as if they were as powerful as Ryson's sword.

Chapter 27

Before midnight, the storm outside Sanctum broke. The rain lessened, reduced from a constant drizzle to a flickering wave of showers and mist. It finally ceased all together, leaving behind soaked trees and small puddles within the rock of Sanctum's crust. The wind died down from northwestern gusts to a warm southerly breeze, and the clouds rolled clear to the east giving way to the shining multitude of stars.

Matthew marveled at the sight. The white hot specks filled the sky in a way he had never witnessed before. As the storm clouds passed away, the heavens seemed nearly painted solid with their fiery glow. Away from the lights and smoking chimneys of Connel, even the faintest of stars pierced their impression upon the jet black sky. The wet grass, pine needles, and leaves, mirrored the sparkle from above. To the reader's delight, the starlight, both original and reflected, chased away the dark gloom that had preceded their arrival.

Matthew stepped clear of the shelter in the trees that had kept him, Mappel and the eight remaining algors dry through the storm. He stepped into the open at the base of Sanctum. Away from the leafy coverage of the surrounding trees, he peered upward beyond the mountain's peak to the heavens where the stars greeted him.

He thought of his faith, thought of the ten that sought the sphere. He prayed silently for the safety of those within the rock before him. He prayed for the success of the mission, prayed as he had prayed many times that evening, but that was during the gloom of the storm, when the clouds served as a partition between him and the heavens. Now, the skies were clear. The sparkling light that now surrounded him convinced him that these prayers would not be ignored.

With the end of the rain, the sounds of the forest multiplied. The patter of falling water drops continued as the trapped rain water began to drop from soaked tree leaves. The dripping rhythm was now accompanied by the music of insects, birds and animals that relinquished their shelters. The harmony of crickets foreshadowed the lyrical whistles of the night birds. Twittering raccoons and squeaking bats joined in the chorus. The stars above twinkled to the symphony as if content spectators during a late night concert.

The natural music was disturbed only by the din of mumbled voices and shuffling from the shelter behind him. Matthew knew Mappel was conferring with the algors, but he let them be. If his voice was needed, they would call for him. If not, better he take this time to appreciate the true glory of Godson.

He stood quietly appreciating the view of the stars hanging over Sanctum. To him, the heavens shined with greater glory over this bold rock, making the mountain less massive, less daunting. He smiled as he compared the vastness of the star covered sky against this now pitiful looking stone edifice. He recalled his feeling of dread when he first saw the mountain's gnarled rock sides looming through the forest. He remembered wondering how they might overcome such a monument, but the stars defied Sanctum's size. They hung high above it, filling the sky, filling space far more encompassing than that which was seized by this single mountain. They served as a reminder that man's triumphs, man's constructions, even the symbol of Sanctum as ageless as it was, could be easily matched and conquered by the true powers that shaped the land, the seas, and the heavens.

His moments of reflection were brought to an end by Mappel's approach from behind. He took one last glimpse of the view before turning to face the elder elf.

"What were you discussing?" he asked rather aloofly.

"I wish to start my climb," Mappel responded with an edge to his voice. His desires were as clear as the stars. He wished to reach Sanctum's summit as soon as possible. With the rain stopped and the stars producing sufficient light, he would wait no longer. "I hope you will accompany me. The algors wish to stay. They say they will tend to the horses. They don't believe they should be left alone in the night. They worry that goblins

might strike and steal them or even kill them."

"That's good of them, and of course, I will accompany you," Matthew responded, but he turned to inspect Sanctum's unwelcoming visage. The wetness of its slopes was evident in its reflection of the starlight. "But should we not wait? We could rest and begin our climb at daybreak. It will be less dangerous for us both."

Mappel shook his head sternly. "I doubt either of us could sleep knowing what we know. Rest will do us no good. As for waiting for the sun, I am hopeful that it will not take that long for our friends to complete their quest. They reached the summit just beyond nightfall. Though I only know what waits for them in the elf tier, I can't imagine their journey would take the entire night. I truly believe if they are successful they will return before daybreak. I wish to be there to greet them when they emerge."

"What of the climb?" Matthew nodded to Sanctum. "The rock is wet from the rain. Can we make such an ascent with the ground revealed only by starlight?"

"I am willing to try," Mappel replied steadfast to his decision. "Holli stated she would leave ropes for us at the most treacherous parts."

"Very well," Matthew conceded. "I won't let you go alone. If one of us gets hurt the other will need to bring the algors for help."

"Then let us begin," Mappel eyed the closest mountain path. He took one committed step forward before Matthew requested he hold his unbridled eagerness to start the climb.

"At least, let me retrieve my pack," the reader pointed to the shelter. "I would like for us to at least have food and water up there, just in case our wait becomes longer than you anticipate."

Matthew retrieved his pack and wished luck to the algors that would guard the horses. He had to trot to catch up to Mappel, who would not wait even for a moment. The elf had stepped lively to Sanctum's base, all the while eyeing its flat peak. His desire to reach it pressed him with impatience, but the rocky slopes quickly devoured such zeal.

The two struggled to ascend Sanctum. Neither was truly fit nor able for such a climb. Neither had the algors claws, or a delver's ability, and neither had the strength of youth. Unlike the group of ten that preceded them, Matthew and Mappel moved slowly, clumsily up the mountain. With each step their breath became heavier and more labored. The wet rock increased the strain on their aching calf muscles as they both slipped numerous times. Even with Mappel's hard-edged resolution to reach the summit, they both requested breaks at several intervals.

Finally, joyously, they reached the end of the third rope and stood just below the ledge of Sanctum's flattened peak. A clear path rounded upward and over the last of rock that blocked their view of the top. Mappel struck upon the path with steady, but pained steps. The climb had taken much longer than he hoped, and he would delay no longer. He stepped clear of the last angle of slope and onto level ground. His labored breath, the trembling ache in his legs and palms, all vanished as there he found what he had hoped to see.

Glowing pale white, but dimmer than the stars, Mappel betook the view of a spirit, the form of an elf, the form of Shayed. The ghostly apparition did not face him, did not even appear aware of his approach. It faced a dark hole in the center of the peak's platform. Mappel called to the spirit's back.

"Shayed?" he called just above a whisper.

Ingarr, still in masquerade, nearly turned with swift anger at the approach of an intruder, nearly turned with red

glowing embers for eyes to smite the invader. His attention had been placed fully upon the ten within Sanctum. He knew their progress, knew they stood upon the middle tier. Mappel's call startled him.

In a split second of self-control, he caught himself in mid-turn, saving his charade. He forced the red glow from his eyes, and carried the true visage of the spirit he portrayed. He finished his turn slowly and cautiously, to face the newly arrived spectators of Mappel and Matthew with calm demeanor.

They were not unknown to him. He had seen them when they were with the ten, had seen them as the true Shayed had envisioned them in the basement at the Church of Godson. He recognized the elder elf who had taken the reins of leadership during that time, and he felt the presence of Godson in the reader.

He so desired to scoff at them both, to laugh in their faces as he revealed his true identity. To smite them into gray ashes with a bolt of red lightning, but he kept his restraint. He continued the masquerade as he bid them welcome.

"It is good to see you weary travelers. I see you wait as I wait." His words were masked with kindness and sincerity, while what was left of his soul wished to pull their hearts from their bodies.

"It is an honor to meet you, Shayed." Mappel bowed. "I am Mappel and this is Matthew."

"You are both known to me. Those that have passed alerted me to your presence."

"We would have made the climb with the others but we were afraid we might slow their ascent. That fear would have proven correct. It was not an easy climb for us."

"Nothing is easy in these times." Ingar nearly lost himself. The charade was becoming amusing. It was beyond simplicity to fool these dolts, to engage in idle banter. He almost laughed out loud as he bubbled with these false trite sayings, but he continued with an even tone. "Even now the gravest of tasks becomes necessary to those within."

"You can sense what they do even now? Do you know of their progress?" Growing hope painted Mappel's words.

Ingar paused, considered how he should answer the question. It might bring him greater amusement to keep the senile elf in complete darkness. He decided, however, to reveal the truth, to raise the fool's hopes only to dash them in the end. How fulfilling it would be to watch all of their faces fill with agony when they finally realized the true purpose they served.

"They have successfully passed the dwarf tier as well as the human's. They have reached the delver's tier," the false Shayed revealed.

Both Matthew and Mappel reveled in the news. Smiles blanketed their mouths as the elf pressed for further information. "That is the tier which holds a mystery for them. How do they fare?"

"The delver obstacle has been overcome." Again, Ingar had to steady himself to keep from laughing in the face of these simpletons. How willingly they held to their false hopes.

"Have any of them suffered any injury?" Matthew asked trying to guard his optimism.

"They all remain unharmed," Ingar revealed, joyously fanning their enthusiasm.

Mappel turned to Matthew with great delight. "Do you hear reader? They are well and they have overcome the

obstacle for which they held no answer. They need but pass only two tiers now, the algors' and the elve's. I believe we might yet succeed."

Those words ended Ingar's amusement. Contempt replaced it. He eyed the human and the elf with renewed disdain. He saw something beyond relief and joy in their faces. He saw confidence, a dangerous thing, a thing which bred courage. If these pathetic creatures believed they could overcome Sanctum, they might believe in anything.

At that moment, he considered a possible folly in his plans. What would happen when they exited Sanctum with the sphere in hand? They would surely give it to him upon his command, but what would occur next? He would be forced to reveal his intentions, his charade would be over. Undoubtedly, they would challenge him. Surely his power would increase while in contact with the sphere, but would it be enough? Confident in themselves and brought together by their victory over Sanctum, they might attempt to overcome him. Even with the sphere in his hands, he might be defeated by their newfound courage.

Worse yet, what if they held to the sphere? What if they denied him the power that was rightfully his? Might they some how find a way to destroy the sphere before he was able to drink of its power? He doubted the plausibility of such a contingency, but as he probed the spirits of the ten within Sanctum, he sensed a growing boldness. Even now they plotted a way to reach the sphere which would reduce their own risk. Each success was bringing them closer together, and feeding their will to succeed.

He played out the image of their success in his deranged mind. They would exit free of Sanctum together. Without distraction, their focus would be placed squarely upon the sphere and their intention of destroying it. That would indeed be very dangerous to his plans.

Perhaps it was time to place a burden upon them, to let them know just how vulnerable their lives truly were. It was now his desire to let those within Sanctum taste defeat. He wished not to end their quest, but to shake their confidence, to give them a distraction that would break their thoughts from their ultimate goal.

He linked his own deranged thoughts to the awareness of the sphere, a strange coupling. The sphere's consciousness was incomplete, less than infantile, and his was demented. Together, their twisted and incomplete minds gave birth to a single deranged idea.

Chapter 28

Ryson stood uneasily below the dangling rope. His feet were now planted upon the fourth tier and he stood ready to assist the others that ventured to join him. He made every effort to keep his attention focused on those that climbed down to his waiting arms, but the unmoving sand giant to his left made that effort futile.

What seemed only moments ago, the sorceress Lauren had fully recovered from her fatigue and progress was to continue. To pass to the next level, the algor tier, they had decided to use the opening created by the sphere rather than the stone steps. Even though it meant another descent by rope, it stood as a direct path to the sphere itself. They all agreed, even Tun, that this was the fastest route, and therefore, the wisest decision.

Again, Ryson went first with Dzeb holding the rope. He had moved as a blur, forewarned by the algors as to what served as the obstacle. They assured him they had the power to protect the party, but only when they were safely upon the ground with both hands free. Danger existed to the delver while he stood alone and while the algors climbed down the rope to join him.

Upon Ryson's plunge, the area below remained clear. The guardians of this tier waited elsewhere at that moment. It was thus Ryson moved with all of his speed and agility. He had located a section of ground within the algor tier that was strong enough to support them, away from yet another hole which led to the final resting place of the sphere. He had leapt the final distance and turned to bolster the descent of the algors that were so crucial to his safety. It was there he had ventured, and there where he now stood.

The algors had followed immediately after. They descended one right after another, climbing downward with the same harmonic movements that brought them out from their caves in the Lacobian desert. Each left arm moved then each right. The two shimmied downward in total unison.

It was when the algors still clung to the rope that Ryson had caught the first glimpse of movement. A stalking presence moving with more resolve than stealth approached from the broad open end of the tier. Crunching, thudding footsteps resounded through the algor tier, and announced the approach of a powerful threat.

The delver's acute hearing picked up two distinct marching footfalls. It was just as the algors had warned. Two giant guardians prowled this tier, one within sight, the other hidden; two sand giants created to protect the sanctuary of the sphere.

Ryson lacked the time to peer through the darkness to locate the second sentinel, but the first's presence could not be denied. It had moved full into the light of Ryson's sword, even as the algors were only half through their descent. It remained a safe distance for the moment, but it moved forward with casual persistence.

Ryson could not keep his eyes from the forward marching sand sentinel. It appeared much like Dzeb, not as tall, but large and powerful. A statue carved of sandstone brought to life an eon ago by the magic of the algors, it was solid and massive. Its movements defied the nature of its being. The rough sandstone formed every bit of its substance, from the outer most layer to its inner most core. Ryson could feel the vibration of its movements course through the floor. Under his breath, he had urged the algors to hurry. In ten paces, the giant would have been upon him.

Thankfully, it had not run. Instead, when it moved, it stepped with a pounding steadiness. Time was not an issue for this guardian. It had waited for intruders for the passing of thousands of seasons, never growing bored, never growing tired. It held no emotions, not anger and not impatience. It would move based on its single-minded purpose, to block the path to the lower tier. Yet it was this slow, sure pace that had allowed the algors to finish their climb before the giant became a true threat to Ryson's position.

With the algors free of the rope, they produced the wooden flutes they revealed earlier. They began playing instantly. Soft, high pitched notes flowed gently from their instruments. Such was the elegance of their playing that it created no echo. The waves of music filled the cavern with soothing gentleness, not to overcome it with blasting power. But indeed, great power existed within these notes, power to halt the movements of the sand giants. The echoing footfalls had vanished into silence.

So now Ryson stood with the frozen giants caught in a spell of the algor music. One of which remained well in his sights. Even as he waited for the last members of the group to descend, he could not help glancing at the giant with watchful wariness.

According to the algors, a sand giant did not need a continuous flow of magic to survive, only an initial blast for its birth. Upon that, it would serve its purpose. Whatever its instruction, it would remain forever, attacking all that ventured near that did not know the song.

The song, however, was played true by the algors and the giants remained as still as the stone they were made of. Their stillness led to the entry of even more, for Ryson and the algors were joined by the elves and the dwarves. Only Stephen, Lauren, and Dzeb remained upon the delver tier. Ryson signaled for the interpreter to begin his descent. As Stephen took hold of the rope, it appeared as if they would pass the fourth tier without great difficulty and move within but one obstacle of Ingar's talisman.

Such hope was shattered immediately and senselessly with a low toned groan that hummed up from the depths of Sanctum. It came with a burst, this howling guttural tone, and it filled the inside of Sanctum with raging ferocity. Everyone within Sanctum jumped at the impact of the sound. Even the docile cliff behemoth nearly lost hold of the rope which Stephen clung to. The algors, knowing the need for their music, continued to play, but they could not overcome the noise which now stormed Sanctum's internal core.

The sand giants stirred.

The algors closed their eyes, filled their lungs and blew into their flutes with all of their might, but the melody was crashed upon like the surf pounds the sand. Not a single note broke free.

The closest giant began to move forward once more.

The delver spied the giant first.

"They're moving!" he screamed to be heard. His eyes shifted from the stalking sentinel to the algors. They continued to play but even he could not hear their music. He glanced upwards to Stephen who remained helpless in the air. "Climb back up!" he shouted.

Stephen looked down with confusion. He could not hear above the din of the roar.

Ryson pointed back up to the hole fiercely, illustrating his words with signals. Stephen understood and finally reversed his climb. Ryson remained below the rope to ensure Stephen's escape even as the sand giant moved unhesitatingly toward him.

Holli pulled her bow clear of her shoulder and yelled orders, but the droning hum made her words inaudible to all. She screamed them again, but only Lief who stood beside her could understand. With the sand giant moving dangerously close to Ryson, she strung an arrow and let it fly. It found its mark at the sentinel's round forehead, but it only scratched the stone before bouncing away. Lief joined her in a second attempt, but again both arrows failed to even slow the giant.

Ryson turned his attention back and forth from the closing guardian to Stephen, who dangled from the rope

overhead. The delver's head twitched like a pendulum on a grandfather clock. He would not move from his spot until Stephen was safely back with Dzeb and Lauren.

He snatched up the sword from the ground at his feet, the blade washed all directions with light, but the point jutted out squarely in the sand sentinel's direction. Ryson did not know what to expect if a clash occurred. He knew the Sword of Decree held a power beyond the sharpness of its blade. He recalled how it burned the hide of the spider-crab near the Lacobian desert. He hoped it would have the same effect now, for he could not fathom how else the blade might stop a creature composed purely of stone.

Stephen remained a full arm's length from the ledge above as the stone giant approached within danger limits. Only the length of the sword divided Ryson from the guardian, and it seemed oblivious to the weapon. It began to raise its arms past the blade and toward Ryson's head. Three round, thick fingers and one massive thumb extended threateningly forward.

The three fingered shadow broke across Ryson's face. He could smell the mustiness of age covering the sandstone digits. With the interpreter still hanging from the rope, the delver remained unwilling to attempt escape. He prepared for attack, to keep the giant away from the rope. He turned his shoulders slightly and planted his feet. He pulled the blade back swiftly and prepared to strike at the center of its thick arm.

Just as the delver resigned himself to swinging his blade, the circumstances changed. In the conscious flash of comprehending movement above, Ryson held his attack. He withdrew the blade and with swiftness to make even the fastest rabbit envious, he darted clear of the sand giant.

With one mighty tug on the rope, Dzeb had pulled Stephen up and onto the ledge above. The interpreter was safely upon solid ground and in no danger of falling. It was this which Ryson had seen and understood. With Stephen clear of danger, flight was now an acceptable option.

The giant was left to grasp empty air, but it displayed not the slightest displeasure. Without delay, it washed a glance over all that now stood upon the algor tier. It moved forward with its single purpose, not dwelling upon the minor setback. It was a being of one desire, one mission, to stop all intruders. It did not experience frustration or anger. It did not comprehend defeat. The sentinel refocused its attack upon the delver and altered its path to intercept.

Ryson noted the adjustments and again stood ready to dodge an assault. He kept a watchful glance on all that was around him, marking in his mind the positions of everyone else. He noticed Holli barking commands again, but her voice still would not overcome the blaring hum.

Unable to discern her wishes, he set upon his own motives. He would keep the giant occupied and away from the others. He would serve as the decoy, remaining close enough to keep the giant's attention, but far enough to guarantee his own safety.

With but a few movements, he noted the most important aspects of the giant's tactics. Its steady patience assured it would follow the delver without turning upon another. Its purpose to stop progress down the tier guaranteed it would follow Ryson as long as he was perceived as the one most willing to move. He would continue to tempt the giant, occupy it and influence it, until someone discovered a way to end the sand giant's threat.

Moving carefully toward more open space, away from the others, away from the rent in the floor, he stepped carefully down toward the center of the tier. He kept his sword in hand, bringing light to more of the chamber as he traveled. The area offered no other hindrance. The ground was level, and except for support pillars, it remained clear of obstacles and debris, perfect for a delver to outmaneuver any creature. The guard followed obediently. It ignored the others, especially as they made no attempt to follow, but its aggression toward

Ryson amplified. Its movements increased in speed and dexterity as if aware that the further Ryson moved down the tier the more he threatened the guardian's objective. While it could not match the delver in agility, it would not rest until the invader was neutralized.

Even as Ryson dodged numerous attacks, he had not forgotten the second giant that loomed somewhere further off in the distance. With the raucous buzz still filling the cavern, he could no longer hear footsteps. It was thus necessary to visually pinpoint the second guardian's position. When the moment allowed, he took a long glance and spotted the second giant waiting at the opposite end of the tier. It stood directly between Ryson and the door to the next level as if a final obstacle, a security measure in case the intruder outmaneuvered the first giant. It made no attempt to join the fray, thus Ryson remained content with circling about his current position and keeping the first guardian safely away from the others.

Utilizing the respite afforded to her by the delver's actions, Holli pulled upon the sleeves of the dwarves as well as Lief. Tun pulled his arm away as if insulted, but followed her intentions. She brought them along side the algors, circling close together.

She shouted hoarsely over the continuing disturbance. "Ryson will occupy the sand giant, but we move no closer to the sphere." She strained to be heard as she held up two fingers. "We have but two options - remove the noise or remove the giants."

"The sound comes from below," Lief responded, his neck bulging from the pressure of his shouts.

"The sphere?" Holli questioned keeping her phrases short and mouthing her words firmly to help convey them.

"Yes," Lief nodded strongly. "It must know we're here. A defensive move."

Holli shifted her darting eyes about the cave seeking an answer. She looked down the hole in the floor to the next tier. A direct path existed to the sphere of Ingar, but one obstacle remained, the elfin obstacle. Darkness covered that which waited, but she knew what stood between them and the talisman.

"To reach the sphere, we need the delver, but he is best suited to keep the guardians at bay."

Lief shook his head. "What?"

"We can not get the sphere without Ryson," Holli repeated.

"What chance have we of that?" Lief questioned.

"Either someone else must occupy the giant or we must destroy it," Holli yelled.

Lief turned to the algors. "Is there anyway to stop them?"

"Only the music," the algors responded together.

Lief and Holli barely heard the answer. They acknowledged it with a shrug. "It seems we must destroy them," Lief yelled hastily back at the algors. "Can you take away the power that brought them to life?"

The algors did not hear the full question and the elf was forced to shout it in repetition. Upon finally understanding, the algors simply shook their heads in denial.

Holli took a long moment to size up their new adversary. She sought weaknesses to be exploited, but found

only the lack of true speed. Otherwise, the sand giant appeared invulnerable. Her analysis was cut short by the swift turn of the elder dwarf.

"Bah, this is madness," Tun mumbled in an ordinary voice and was thus not heard by those that stood about him. He set off toward the sand giant with haste in his step.

His sudden decision caught the others off guard. They watched first in confusion, then in dismay as the prince stormed forward down the tier.

Holli, Lief and Jon called for Tun to stop. If he heard them, he ignored them. His intentions became clear as he unhitched the maul from his belt.

"No!" Jon screamed and broke into a charge to halt his brother.

Holli and Lief followed almost immediately. Their great speed pressed them quickly beyond Jon, but as if in response, Tun fell into a gallop of his own. It became all too evident that they would not reach him in time.

Tun's eyes narrowed, his brow knitted. He brought his arms back, both hands tightly gripping the handle of his maul. The sharpened edge pointed at the giant. His mouth opened wide with a yell that actually surpassed the volume of the sphere's hum.

The war cry surprised Ryson, who leapt clear of the onrushing dwarf. It was too late for him to intervene as he identified Tun's body leaping through the air. He stood well out of reach as the metal blade of the dwarf weapon swung violently through the air. It crashed into the sand giant with enough force to crumble a brick wall, with enough power to actually cause a fissure in the giant's chest, but not with enough might to vanquish the sentinel.

The weapon embedded itself in the very center of the giant and Tun held to it with the same ferocity in which he swung. His feet dangled from the ground, levitated by his hold on the axe and the sand giant's height. He pulled to free his weapon, but with no footholds, he lacked the leverage. He swung both legs forward and upward and actually drove the soles of his boots into the chest of the sentinel. He crouched into a ball, planted firmly upon the midsection of the sand giant. He pressed down hard with his feet as he pulled upon the weapon. Slowly, grudgingly, it loosened. He rocked back and forth, pushing and pulling, pressing and yanking. The blade moved back and forth, more of the blade worked free, but still it remained embedded in the sandstone.

The giant suffered no pain, not from the strike and not from Tun's efforts to rock the blade free. Its blank eyes fell upon the dwarf as if Tun were nothing more than a fly buzzing around its head. Almost defying the dwarf's existence, the giant remained more watchful of the delver. Its focus quickly left the dwarf and again seized Ryson. The delver did not move.

Others, however, were rushing forward. The sand giant swerved about to meet them. More intruders were progressing down the tier and threatening to pass. The sentinel could not have this and it moved to intercept. It took a path which would set itself to meet the onrushing pack while maintaining a presence between the delver and the far end of the tier. It ignored Tun even as the dwarf continued his attempt to free his blade.

With the sand giant's altered movements, the elves came to a halt. They held their bows, though they knew the weapon was useless. Further, with Tun still attached to its chest, it made the use of arrows more dangerous than beneficial. Holli yelled over the continuing crescendo for Lief to spread apart. They sidestepped in opposite directions just as Jon reached them.

The younger dwarf pulled to a halt, his mace still in his belt. He stared at the spectacle of Tun upon the giant's

chest. He could not withhold his alarm and for one of the very few times in his life, he yelled an order to his older brother. "Tun, let go of the maul!"

Tun simply growled a refusal.

"Don't be a fool!" Jon persisted.

The remark brought Tun's wrath. He yelled with enough anger to be heard by all. "The giant must be destroyed! It breaks beneath the blade. It will crumble upon my next swing. I will use the sledge."

As if to exclaim his point, the blade broke free of the giant's hide. With the weapon clear and nothing to hold his weight, Tun tumbled backward to the ground. The momentum of his fall sent him several paces away from the giant. He hit the ground in a tangled, uncoordinated heap, but struck to his feet as the tumble caused him no harm or injury.

He twirled the maul in his hands and now allowed the blunt end to face menacingly toward the giant. He would not repeat his mistake. The back end of the maul, shaped like a sledge hammer, would not embed itself into the giant like the axe head. It would pulverize the sentinel.

Again, the dwarf charged the sand giant. Again, he pulled back his arms ready to lend a powerful swing to the momentum of his onslaught. The heavy head of the maul crashed upon the giant's hip, sending fragments of sandstone in every direction. The sledge broke clear of the giant, leaving a gash the size of Tun's head behind, just above the sentinel's left leg.

The giant shook from the blow. Its feet stayed firmly planted, but the loss of so much of its form left it somewhat off balance. The injury caused it no pain. It did not even examine the crater left in its hip. There was no loss of blood, no damage to the muscle, for the giant had neither. It was comprised entirely of stone, and the gash proved that point.

The blow, other than weakening the sentinel's equilibrium, caused one other significant reaction. The sand giant reassessed its evaluation of the dwarf as a threat. While it had no concept of self-preservation, it understood if it was destroyed, it could not protect the passage to the next tier. Such was its awareness that it decided to end the life of the dwarf.

With swiftness diametrically opposed to its makeup of stone, it plucked Tun from the ground. The dwarf still held his weapon, even managed to haul his arms back for another strike, but such was no concern of the sentinel's. With both of its hands firmly holding the dwarf just above the waist, it squeezed as it brought its hands together. Tun would not scream, but a nauseating pop echoed through the tier and signaled his end. The giant discarded the dwarf like a sack of rotten fruit.

Tun was tossed several paces and hit the ground with rolling momentum. The rattle of his bones could not overcome the sound of the low groan emitted by the sphere, but those that watched witnessed the crumpled, disjointed gyrations of his body. Tun never felt the snapping of his bones, the breaking of his legs and arms, for he was already dead.

Jon, and now even the algors, rushed to the fallen dwarf. As Jon checked for signs of life, the algors attempted to spread their healing power over their fallen comrade. To no avail, the power of the algor was to heal not to restore life.

Holli, Lief and Ryson found no time to check upon Tun's condition. The attack upon the dwarf filled each with rage. Holli and Lief again fired arrows, choosing the eyes of the giant as their aim. Each struck the intended target, but the eyes were made of stone just as the rest of it. The arrows bounced away leaving no

damage.

Ryson held tightly to the handle of his sword. He rushed forward, zigzagging in a swarm of motion and speed. He drove around the sentinel, quickly darting about with twists and turns. The giant attempted to seize the delver as well, but each time it reached out, it obtained nothing but the breeze left behind by Ryson's movements. As the delver circled, he stabbed and swung the blade of his sword at the guardian. The blade cut through the air like a hundred daggers. It struck upon the giant with precision, but there was no effect.

Ryson lacked the strength of the dwarf and could not break the stone as Tun had accomplished. More disturbing, however, was the lack of the flame from this magical sword. Ryson expected the blade to light with the same fire which destroyed the spider-crab. It did not. Each time it struck the sentinel, it impacted with no more power than an ordinary blade.

The lack of effect brought an end to the delver's attack. He broke off the encounter, ran to Holli's side for an explanation. Just as he reached her, a soul wrenching wail exploded over the droning hum. It tore his attention away from the elf, away from the sword, and placed it upon the cry's origin.

Jon knelt beside his brother, Tun's head in his lap. Jon was still wailing as the algors rose and turned away. The scene struck at Ryson, tore at his soul.

#

Outside Sanctum, at its peak, Ingar laughed to himself. He kept his glee hidden from Matthew and Mappel but he drank in the desperation, the anguish which now rose from the inner depths.

The party within Sanctum now knew despair. They knew failure, and they knew death.

#

Only Holli managed to force the image from her mind. With a watchful eye upon the sand giant, she moved clear of the delver and began leading the sentinel away. She would not allow the sand giant the opportunity to catch any of them unaware. She even ignored the entrance of the cliff behemoth.

A loud thud announced Dzeb's arrival. He leapt to the algor tier the instant after Jon released his cry of sorrow. The ground shook as he landed, but he took no notice. He scanned the scene before him and his eyes set upon Tun and Jon. All that could see him saw the grief in his face.

Strange, so very strange for all to witness. The cliff behemoth held such indistinguishing features. Everything about the face was so simple, as if a clay model constructed by a child of three. The nearly invisible mouth, the small pudgy nose, the simple roundness of his head; a perfect rendering could have been drawn by the most novice of artists. There was such simplicity it seemed as if powerful expression was nearly impossible. Yet, that was so far from the truth, a truth that became undeniable, for to look in that face was to see true pain, true sorrow.

Dzeb turned that look of sorrow into a look of unyielding vengeance as he turned his gaze upon the sentinel that caused the dwarf's death. Like a crusader filled with resolve to smite the heretics, Dzeb marched forcibly forward. His eyes held the sand giant with indignity. This thing was an abomination to Dzeb, a cheap replication of life, an insult to Godson. He set upon it with but one purpose of his own.

The sand giant met Dzeb with its own single-mindedness. It did not care that this new intruder was larger than it. It stepped up to block and intercept just as it had done with all the others. It reached out with the same intention as when it grabbed Tun, but not with the same result.

Dzeb brushed away the arms of the sand giant as if they were made of nothing more than tissue paper. The cliff behemoth's own powerful fingers thrust into the fissure left behind by Tun's axe. Dzeb forced both of his hands deeper and deeper into the crevice. Suddenly, furiously, Dzeb pulled his hands apart, ripping the sentinel in two.

Pieces of sandstone exploded into the air as the sand giant broke first into two separate distinct pieces and then crumbled. An orange glow of magical residue fizzled in the rubble, and then disappeared.

Dzeb paid no mind to the magic or the fragments. His angry stare shot further down the tier and seized upon the second sentinel. He marched forward with the same fitful determination. His thunderous steps could still be heard over the rankled hum.

Ryson followed, giving a wide berth and maintaining a large buffer of space. The light of his sword filled the chamber where the second sentinel stood. This guardian also moved up to halt the progress of the cliff behemoth, as if the destruction of its partner meant nothing.

Again, Dzeb handled the sand giant as if it were nothing more than a rag doll. He pushed aside all advances and took hold of the sentinel at the waist. He picked it up clear off the ground and held it high over his head. Dzeb threw the sand giant down with enough force to shake the very walls of this tier. As it hit, much of it broke apart, but enough of its form remained to hold the magic. That was ended with one mighty stomp of Dzeb's foot. The sandstone became dust and again orange magic fizzled away into the air.

In the same instant, the wild drone which eclipsed the algors' music ceased, ending as abruptly as it began. The only sound to fill the cavern was Jon's moans of despair.

Dzeb turned away from the dust, stepped back toward Ryson as if the sand giant never existed. The two moved with care towards the two dwarves. Holli and Lief also gathered around. None need ask, for Tun's fatal wounds were as obvious as Jon's grief, but Ryson posed a question to the algors.

"You can't help him?"

"We can heal great wounds," they answered in unison, "but we can not revive the dead."

The statement brought a wince of pain to more than one. They stood uneasily, searching for words of comfort, searching for wisdom to explain the mysteries of life and death.

Lief mumbled something. He appeared uncomfortable with his thoughts, not sure of how to word a proposal growing in his own mind. He spoke guardedly.

"Maybe Shayed can help." He paused, attempted to organize his proposal into its simplest terms. He continued quickly, almost babbling. "Shayed has returned from the dead. I know she's only a spirit, but we have Tun's body. Do you think it may be possible that she might know of a way to revive him?"

The algors responded first. "Healing is difficult enough. The replenishing of life seems impossible."

"We've already accomplished much of what was thought impossible," Holli countered.

"Only Godson can give life," Dzeb said earnestly. He spoke not with hostility, but with the belief of his own convictions.

"It's only a thought," Lief offered nearly defensively.

"But it is a chance we should consider," Ryson added.

They stood about their fallen comrade uneasily, indecisively. Holli forced the issue forward. "The decision is Jon's to make. He is your brother, Jon. I can not tell you what is right. I can only state he died proudly, sacrificing himself to save others."

"He died foolishly," Jon erupted with bitterness edging his words. "If there is a chance to revive him, it should be attempted."

"Very well." Holli took complete command and issued the most practical solution. "If it is to be attempted, time may be critical. Jon you must take your brother back to the summit. I will accompany you, as will one of the algors and one of the humans. The rest will go on to recover the sphere."

"We will both go," the algors stated firmly. "If the dwarf can be revived, it will take both of our power to heal the injuries he sustained."

"If you wish. I only thought one of you might wish to see the mission to its conclusion."

"We are of no more use to you," the two replied. "The threat of the algor tier is passed."

"It may be a good idea to have both Stephen and Lauren leave now as well," Lief proposed. "You know what waits for us below, Holli. They are not suited with the strength or the speed to handle it."

"You are right, but it is their decision. I will speak with them of it."

"Wait a moment," Ryson interceded. "I'm not against giving Tun this chance, but we still have to bring the sphere out of here. How can we get back to the top if we don't have Lauren to protect us from the poison in the human tier or Jon to lead us through the traps in the dwarf level?"

"We no longer have to pass those tiers," Holli stated resolutely. "The tunnel carved through the side of Sanctum will provide our exit. It passes through at the tier overhead, the delver tier. As you have told us, there is no danger there."

"But the barrier at the end of the tunnel ..."

Lief interrupted the delver. "The barrier only serves to keep us out. It will not keep us in. Magical fields must be like that, otherwise they would trap those they were meant to protect. If wizards could not send their spells, whether material or immaterial, through the field, they would serve no purpose."

"It is decided," Holli stated firmly. "Jon, do you need help in carrying your brother?"

The dwarf did not speak through his grief. He simply stood and pulled the corpse of his brother up on his shoulder.

Ryson, Dzeb and Lief first watched silently as the others took to the stone steps which led to the original entrance of this tier in order to climb back to the level above. As they disappeared through the door, the three moved back to the opening blasted by the sphere.

Ryson considered the recent events with the inherent analysis of a delver. He puzzled over Tun's attack upon the sand giant which led to the dwarf's death. He wondered why this doubting, disagreeable individual would take it upon himself to clear a path for others which he claimed to mistrust.

Another's actions also puzzled Ryson. He remembered the uncaring stare of the cliff behemoth as he marched upon the first sentinel. He recalled the ferocity in which Dzeb stamped out the life of the second sand giant, as well. The viciousness of both attacks seemed so out of character for this docile being and the following lack of remorse reinforced the mystery. The cliff behemoth's actions served to create questions in the delver's mind, questions he was compelled to ask.

"Dzeb? Why did you kill them, the sand giants I mean? I thought you would be against something like that?"

Dzeb's expression softened. He even found a smile as he looked into the inquisitive eyes of the delver. "I am against killing, but I did not take a life today. The sand giants are not a creation of Godson. They were given life falsely."

"But they moved they seemed to be aware of us. Doesn't that constitute some form of life?"

"It is nothing more than animation," Dzeb insisted. "The guardians were made of stone, nothing more, nothing less. Magic animated the rock, gave them the appearance of life, but they were never alive."

"Just like the corpse that attacked me when this all started," Ryson said.

Dzeb made no comment of the undead.

"Never alive," Ryson repeated introspectively. "That might explain why my sword failed to affect the creatures."

"I can give little explanation as to the workings of your sword. Magic is a difficult thing to explain. Is it a blessing of Godson, is it a force of its own? The debate will rage until Godson sees fit to give us the answer."

The conversation was brought to a halt by Holli's call from above. She squatted at the blast opening which broke through to the delver tier. She stuck her head out so as to be seen by those below.

"Both Lauren and Stephen have decided to exit now. I have told them of the obstacle of the last tier and they agree they would only serve to hamper your efforts. Stephen also believes it is time for the group to separate. It was not quite a vision, more of a feeling that only you three should proceed. I have inspected the tunnel that breaches Sanctum's wall from this tier. It will not be a difficult climb. The rest of us will exit that way and await your return at the summit. There we shall see if Shayed may assist Tun."

"Good luck," Ryson yelled out.

"To you, too. To all of you."

Her words carried more than a passing gesture of farewell. She spoke as if they needed the luck she wished upon them, as if only providence might see them through this last tier. The last visage of her expression held a mourning glance, as if she believed she might never seem them again.

Ryson turned to Lief for an explanation. "She sounded almost as if she doesn't expect us to make it."

"She expects us to succeed," Lief corrected. "Though she is aware that what we must pass will probably haunt us forever."

Ryson turned and faced the shattered hole in the floor. He peered into the opening for the first time, but saw nothing other than different shades of black. It was not like the void at the outset of the dwarf tier. This darkness was not whole or complete. It was not a single pure curtain of dark, but a mixture of shadow upon

shadow. Nothing reflected the light of his sword, though the glow appeared to lighten the area closest to him. Still, even that which stood directly in the path of his sword's light remained hollow of illumination. His night vision was also useless. He could discern nothing within the darkness other than the shifting shades of black.

"What's down there?" He wondered aloud. "I don't see anything but shadows."

"That is what waits," Lief said with a cold chill running through his voice. "Shadow trees."

Chapter 29

Lief's voice, his expression, the emotion in his words carried the true dread of what lay in wait. His eyes drooped hollow, not from fatigue but from anticipation of the last leg of the journey. He peered through the rent upon the shifting shadows. He knew of the shadow trees, the horror connected with them. He, as most elves, knew his people still controlled the seeds, though he never believed they would ever use them again. They were beyond evil. They represented utter destruction, a weapon that its very existence bred fear as well as doom. He shook his head, as for the first time in his own lifetime, he witnessed the elves' most abominable legacy.

Shame filled him as he spoke of the shadow trees. "The elves have always viewed the trees with great respect, but I won't deny the truth when it comes to the history of our wars. We can be as cruel as any others. So cruel as to forcibly alter the trees themselves into the most horrible of weapons. It was a war with the dwarves that led to the creation of the shadow trees, a war my people were determined to win no matter what the consequence."

Lief's mind swelled with images of the legends, of what he knew from elflore. He thought of the ancient war with the dwarves. He found the need to explain it to both Dzeb and Ryson, a precursor to the confession of the sin of his race.

"Before the sphere, before Ingar, a conflict arose which even now will breed tension between allies. I am not aware of the cause of the conflict. That is apparently as much a secret as were the barriers placed within Sanctum. The actual war occurred so long ago that not even an elf remains alive that remembers the cause. The legend of the fighting, however, will live on forever.

"At the onset of the war, the dwarves were merciless. This by no means justifies the elves later actions, but it might help you understand them. The dwarves held a great advantage over the elves with their ability to use the ground in battle tactics. They would tunnel beneath elf camps and break through the surface at night, killing all. Elves would send war parties into the tunnels to extract revenge only to be trapped by cave-ins.

"It was this tunneling tactic which led to the elves making use of the trees in their daily lives. Traveling through the trees offered safety from the ground and from a dwarf warrior who might break through in a mere instant. The dwarves could not climb with any proficiency, so if the elves remained off the ground they remained relatively safe.

"Infuriated by this tactic, the dwarves began attacking the roots of the trees. They believed if they destroyed the forests around the elf camps, the elves would be forced back to the ground. Their scouts would locate camps, and their workers would immediately set upon destroying the roots of the trees. The elves watched in horror as the trees began to fall over with no root system to hold them in place. Elves began dying again, killed from terrible falls, crushed or impaled by breaking branches.

"This treachery stirred such hate in the elves it pressed them to devise a way to not only end the war, but to punish the dwarves. Elf generals would not be satisfied until they found a way to bring utter fear to every living dwarf. If the dwarves would attack elf homes, then the elf guard would find a way to destroy the dwarf underground cities. By no means do I wish to excuse or understate their actions. Every elf must accept the truth. It was the elf intention to create a weapon that would bring nightmares to the dwarves. Their anger pushed them to such lengths as to create the shadow trees.

"Remember, this war occurred before Ingar and his sphere. Magic still resided over the land. The magic was used with the elves' great knowledge of nature to produce the end result. Elf sorcerers and elf naturalists worked together on cross breeding and magically altering the seeds of different trees. Their efforts proved quite successful.

"They developed a tree which did not feed upon the light, but upon darkness. That is all it needed. It did not need water and did not produce roots. It stood upon a flat solid base, but not attached to the ground. Thus, it could move. It would grow like a weed, suffocating out all other life. The darker the surroundings, the faster it would grow. A single seed would grow to maturity in less than half a season within a dark cave. If it was chopped down, its remains would produce more trees. It would spread like wild ivy, filling all open space. It was this dreadful creation that the elves used upon the dwarves."

He stopped to consider the vast differences between the trees he loved, and the atrocities which waited below. He would have given near anything at that moment to see the streaming vines of a willow, or the proud leaves of an oak, but such a whim was not possible within the dark confines of Sanctum's core. He continued, speaking through tight lips.

"Hundreds of the seeds were dropped down air vents into the dwarf capital of Kendren. Reports from dwarves that were lucky enough to escape revealed the power of this new weapon. In the meager light of the underground city, the trees grew quickly. The dwarves attacked them with their axes, but as I said, that only brought them more trees. Other facets of the trees became clear as they seized the city. As they began to consume all of the available space, they began to consume living creatures around them as well. The thick dark limbs would wrap around the captured dwarves, turning and shifting until the dwarf disappeared into the depths of its shadows.

"The trees also began feeding upon themselves. Yes, apparently inherently cannibalistic, the trees would consume each other. Size meant nothing. Small trees would devour large trees, large trees would consume small. What it did mean was more food.

"The increase in consumption led to an increase in growth rate as well as reproduction. One tree might have eaten another, but nearly instantly it would drop a dozen more seeds that would germinate that same day. The trees were also reaching maturity in days.

"The only known weakness of the shadow trees was direct light. Not manufactured light, not firelight, but natural light from the sun and stars. The underground cities, however, lacked such light. There was some. Sunlight was reflected through air holes and tunnels through the use of gemstones such as those used this night by Jon, but it was not enough. The city was too far underground, the light too weak. The reflected beams would only spare small areas from the onslaught of the shadow trees. The rest of the city could not be saved.

"Unable to stop the growth of the shadow trees, the dwarves sealed all points of entry to Kendren, including the smallest of air holes. Apparently many dwarves were buried alive, but there was no way to get to them to save them."

Lief's voice turned colder, revealing he found no pride in the war's conclusion.

"The dwarves were forced to sue for peace. They could not fight the trees, and continued use of them would end their existence. The elves won the war, but even today we realize there was no honor in that victory."

Lief stared into the hole before them, into the shifting shadows that waited below. "To this day, we still have seeds remaining from that war. We argue constantly over what to do with them. Most say they are too dangerous to hold onto. Others argue they maintain peace between the dwarves and the elves. Without them, they say the dwarves would consider renewing their attacks. Even as elves and dwarves continue to trade, make treaties, and share resources this day, I doubt either will ever truly trust the other.

"In any event, it has been revealed to me this night that the elves placed shadow trees as their defense of the elfin tier. This is the secret which Mappel held to, the secret he revealed to me and Holli on this night. I can only explain as it was explained to me.

"When Sanctum was constructed and the elves were asked to put the first barrier about the sphere, the shadow trees seemed to be the perfect solution." Lief stuck out a long thin finger and pointed into the heart of the opening, into the depths of the darkness. "That is not only the last tier, it is the resting place of the sphere. There are no more levels below. The elves were given the greatest responsibility of Sanctum, the last line of defense.

"The elves in charge, however, were concerned with one other concern. They had to consider the threat of tunneling to get to the sphere. Only the dwarves had the power to tunnel through the granite rock beneath Sanctum and break through the diamond sheets that protect the floor and walls. Though the dwarves appeared most enthusiastic over entombing the sphere, the mistrust between elf and dwarf again resurfaced. The shadow trees would be used as a guarantee that no dwarf would ever enter the final tier. As I said, it seemed the perfect solution."

Ryson peered long and hard into the reaches of the shadows in the tier below. He let his eyes adjust slowly to the shifting blackness. He let his ears tune to the nearly inaudible shuffling. As his senses bore down upon the shadows, he began to see the nightmare as it was explained to him.

The attributes of individual trees slowly became distinguishable. The deviant shades of the darkness were but the opposing distances between different trees. He could isolate thick black trunks as well as discern stunted jagged branches. The branches were filled at their tips by what appeared to be thick, dark sludge. It dripped off as the trees shifted. There appeared to be constant movement directly below. The trees closest to the opening, the ones now bathed in Ryson's light, seemed determined to escape the illumination.

The delver witnessed more than one being seized upon by another tree waiting further off in the darkness. Thick but pliable branches of the attacker wrapped around the intended victim. Expanding as they encircled about the trunk of the captured tree, the branches exhibited a consistency more like that of soft rubber than of natural wood. The attacking tree pulled the ensnared tree closer and closer to its center. As the two trunks met, they merged into one. The remaining tree stood somewhat taller and slightly thicker as it dropped a clump of seeds from its outer most branches to the ground.

The sight did little to encourage Ryson of their chances. "How are we supposed to get through that?"

"The way is in your hand," Lief said nodding to the sword. "The sword's ability to reflect natural light allows the carrier to fend off the advance of any shadow tree. Apparently, the Sword of Decree was created when the decision was made to place the seeds of shadow trees into Sanctum. Though not every elf is a magic caster, every elf has the ability to store magical energies. Even when the sphere sucked pure magic from the world, it could not take that which each elf stored in his body. This stored energy, the last vestige of magic for the elves that worked in Sanctum, was used to create the Sword of Decree.

"The sword was given the power to reflect the light no matter how meager, to magnify natural light in such a way as to keep the shadow trees at bay. In the process, it carried the power to be more than a sword, but a flaming weapon with the power to burn truly living creatures.

"That is how I have known it, a weapon with no equal in its power to defend. That is why Mappel wished you to take it with you in your search for the algors."

"That's also why he wanted me to safeguard it," Ryson added. "He wanted to protect me in the hills and the desert, but he knew the sword would be needed for the final assault on Sanctum. No wonder he made me vow to take such care of it."

"Indeed, its purpose was clear to him at the time," Lief admitted. "I can only assume he balanced the need of you reaching the algors safely with the need of the sword for this moment."

Ryson examined the length of his sword as he asked yet another question. "How was it that your camp came in possession of the sword?"

"That I cannot answer. Again, until this night, I lacked the knowledge of what was in Sanctum and the sword's true origin. If I had to guess, I might reply that it has much to do with my camp's proximity to Sanctum."

"You know, a lot of this doesn't make sense," Ryson questioned as he attempted to place an order upon this sequence of events. "Why would the elves create something which could defeat the shadow trees if they were using them to protect the sphere? I mean, the sphere was a great threat to the elves. Why would they create an object which might one day be used to overcome their own obstacle?"

Lief revealed his own confusion over the matter. "It is difficult for me to understand. I knew of the sword's power, but I did not know its true origin because I did not know the secret of Sanctum."

Dzeb strangely announced a thought in the form of a parable. "If a man locks a jewel in a vault, does he do so without memorizing the combination?"

Lief seemed to struggle with the near whimsical assertion.

Ryson verbalized his own questions over the cliff behemoth's statement. "You think the elves wanted to have a key to get back in, even back then?"

"We are in need of that key now," Dzeb replied simply.

Lief responded with conviction. "I must disagree with that thought. I can't believe any of the elves wanted to see the sphere removed."

"You wish to see the sphere removed now, do you not?" Dzeb looked to Lief expectantly, knowingly.

"But now we have no choice."

"You find it so impossible that the power of Godson could not foresee this eventual need."

"I don't know," Lief conceded. "I no longer know what to make of any of this. There were no prophecies of the sphere's return, not in the Book of Godson and not in elflore, yet here I stand in Sanctum near the end of our quest. I don't even wish to try and consider what might be guiding us. I only know we have but one tier left."

"Then let us be finished with that one as well," Dzeb remarked evenly. "How is it you recommend we proceed?"

Lief exhaled as he swallowed the memories of the elf-dwarf war. He focused upon the rent in the floor. "We can descend from here into the tier. The trees will give way to the light as even now they struggle to move back into the darkness. As long as the light remains with us, they will not attack. Ryson can climb down first. I will follow. Then, Dzeb can jump down to join us.

"The true burden must be carried by the one who holds the sword," Lief said as he placed his eyes squarely upon the delver. "Your weapon is the only thing that will keep us alive down there. It is the only thing which will force the trees to part from our path. I must ask you to keep your attention upon one most important task. You must always keep the point of the sword toward the opening where the light enters. You must never slip in your concentration of this single duty. The sword was forged so that the light reflected from the point would fashion a tightly concentrated beam. This beam is the life-line between the sword and the light source.

If it is broken by a careless swing or a drop in concentration, the shadow trees will have the opportunity to block out the light. As you now know, the sword does not create light, it simply reflects it. If the trees are successful in completely surrounding us, sealing us off from the light, the illumination from the sword will end. We will have no defense against the trees. They will eventually overpower us all, even Dzeb."

"That doesn't make me feel too comfortable," Ryson admitted. "Once we jump down into the tier, we have to move forward to reach the sphere. As we move, we'll be walking away from the hole."

"It will not cause a problem as long as you keep the point of the sword directed toward the opening. No matter how far we stray, the beam will remain intact. That in itself will guarantee a path, no matter how far, back to the opening."

"One last question," Ryson required. "How will we exit? I can probably make it back up here, especially if Dzeb gives me a lift. I can throw down the rope to get you up, but what about Dzeb? I'm not really sure my rope will hold his weight. And, if I go first, the sword will go with me. What will be left to protect you from the trees?"

Lief placed a hand to his chin in obvious discomfort with the thought. He gritted his teeth as he shook his head. The longer he stood silent, the more obvious his anger became. "Fire upon my own foolishness!" he exclaimed with disgust to his own short-sightedness. "I did not consider our exit."

"What if we use the original entry?" Ryson proposed quickly, hoping to ease Lief's irritation and give them an immediate alternative.

A spark of hope lit in Lief's eyes. "That might hold the answer," he allowed as he deeply considered the potential solution. He spoke as he mulled over the change in plans. "The sword would still have a light source once we break the seal and open the passageway. We would be able to use the stone steps, and would have an exit as well as an entry. It would, however, increase the distance of our travel within the tier. This opening leads very near to the center. We would have spent little time walking through the shadow trees. The original entrance is at the far end of this tier. We would have to cross a longer distance to reach the sphere."

"But if it offers a way out, then it's our only choice." Ryson redirected his gaze back down the tier toward its far end. His eyes quickly grasped the outline of the last door. It waited near a hundred paces beyond the crumbled remains of the second sand giant, but it waited with no other obstacles before it.

Just as he was about to step away from the hole, the cliff behemoth called for him to stand his ground.

"We do not need to take such actions," Dzeb stated calmly. "This opening is still the fastest path to the sphere. We will use it."

Ryson stared dumbfounded at the gentle giant. He saw no madness in Dzeb's eyes, but could not conclude why he would make such a statement. He found his voice to pose the question. "Didn't you hear what we were talking about? If we just jump down there, we won't be able to get back out, at least I can't see how you would. You're not talking about sacrificing yourself, are you?"

"Do you so easily forget my height, Ryson Acumen?" Dzeb questioned with a light hearted laugh. "Do you think my arms so short I might not reach the ledge of this opening with but a short leap? Do you think them so weak I would not be able to pull myself up? No, delver, I will not need your rope. It will be a small accomplishment to make this climb. I have made similar ascents. I live in the cliffs, remember? And if you are worried about this floor holding my weight as I pull myself back up, I suggest you do not. This floor is of solid dwarf construction. It has held under the duress of my leaps down, it will hold as I pull myself back up."

The good-natured laugh brought a welcome break in the tension. Lief lost the anger in himself as both he and Ryson stared up into the giant's beaming face. Even the dreary darkness of the shadow trees seemed somewhat less threatening.

If ever Ryson comprehended the true blessing of having the cliff behemoth with them, it was at this moment. He nearly laughed himself, but questioned the giant to make certain of his claim. "You're sure you can get back up here without a rope?"

Dzeb laughed again. He took no insult in the question, but instead, saw it for what it was, genuine concern. "I am certain. If you wish, I will demonstrate for you by leaping back up to the delver tier now. It is probably of the same distance."

"No, no. That's alright." Ryson held up his hands with a broad smile. "I know I should believe you. I just wanted to make sure."

"I understand, Ryson. Your concern for me, for all of us, is appreciated." The smile remained upon Dzeb's innocuous lips for but a moment. It fled as he turned his own attention back to the broken gorge in the floor. "I suggest we take no further time in accomplishing our task."

"He's right," Lief accented. "If the sphere is now aware of our presence as shown by our recent tragedy, we must not give it a chance to establish another means with which to deal with us."

"Alright."

It was all Ryson could get from his mouth. He swallowed hard. His next step was as obvious as the sun at noon day in a clear sky. The abstract shadows, the teeming jungle of black branches and dark trunks now waited for his descent. He needed but take hold of his rope, turn and glide downward, simplicity to a delver of his abilities.

Yet, descending into this abyss defied the elementary nature of the physical requirements. It was much more like willingly entering a nightmare of colossal horror, a nightmare that was reality and not dream. To look into this pit was to understand a child's inexplicable fear of the dark, for this was the dark come to life. Here, shadows were more than tricks of light. The darkness had the ability to do more than instill fear, but actually attack, actually kill.

Ryson fought to suppress this comprehension of the shadow trees. His hand wrung the handle of his sword with all his might as if he hoped to coax some last inspiration of knowledge from the magical artifact. No such enlightenment manifested itself. He knew all there was to know of the trees, of the last obstacle to the sphere of Ingar. There were no other secrets to coax from the enchanted weapon. The simple truth was plainly clear, the light was his grace, the shadows held his death.

Biting hard upon his lip, he grasped his rope as Dzeb took secure hold of one end. He flung the opposite end through the aperture. There was no sense in standing about, staring into the abyss of horrors. He nodded to Lief and took a long view of the cliff behemoth's simple compassionate eyes for strength. Holding the sword steady, he dropped his legs through the opening to the last tier.

Fighting to block out the images that now swarmed about him, he kept his eyes as well as the sword's point locked upon the center of the hole which was now overhead. He could not, however, completely ignore the sights brought to him by his own keen peripheral vision. Branches darted out toward him, but retracted as they hit the glowing pulse of light from his sword. As this radiance filled more and more of the last tier, the shadow trees closest to him moved with desperation to escape the glow. Sludge covered sticks parted like breaking waves as he lowered himself down.

He moved with less swiftness in this descent. He held to the rope as if it represented the life-line to which Lief referred. When he came to its end, he actually tasted his own reluctance to let go.

He kept the sword point steady upward, but for the first time, he allowed himself a glance at the space below. He was still a full body's length from the floor, but it was now visible. The shadow trees in his path had either moved aside or had been consumed by those waiting clear of the light. A portion of the diamond crusted sheets which safeguarded the floor was now visible. It glistened from the sword's radiance and the reflected light helped to clear a path for his final leap.

Holding his breath, he released his grip on the rope. He hit the floor with balance and precision. His knees bent to absorb the impact just as his arm held the sword true. The intense light from his sword continued to cleanse the immediate area of shadow trees. Free, unthreatening space formed four to five paces all about him and continued upward right to the break in the ceiling.

Within this new formed tunnel among the breadth of the shadow trees, Ryson turned his attention to his immediate surroundings. With a twist of his neck, he made one quick reconnaissance. He scanned for landmarks of the tier. He attempted to gauge his position. He searched for the sphere.

He saw nothing beyond the twisting, shifting darkness of the shadows that surrounded him. His vision was restricted to the tightly wound area which the trees allowed. Though the trees relinquished space in his immediate vicinity, they completely filled the rest of the expanse. There was nothing to see but an endless wake of dark trunks and black branches filled with thick sludge.

Constant motion and upheaval surrounded the delver. Those trees closest to him, in the direct path of the light, struggled to pass back into the darkness of the swarm. Most were consumed before they could make their departure. The trees that replaced them, filled the space touched by the light, then faced the same dilemma.

Though the trees constantly attacked each other, they would not venture within the modest area cleansed by the sword's light. Ryson could hear, and even sometimes see, branches further back reaching toward him, but they dared not pass beyond this border. Even with all the shifting and rustling of the closest trees, not a single one ventured close enough to represent a true threat, thus he motioned for Lief to follow.

Lief answered the signal with a nod and scrambled down the rope furiously. A lifetime of traveling through the trees, walking upon thin branches, clinging to meager vines, enabled the elf for such an endeavor. He descended with his mind bent on speed and not upon elegance. He let his weight pull him straight down, holding to the rope with just enough tension to refrain from free falling. Like an anchor dropping from a ship, he descended without swinging to and fro. Such a direct plunge kept him safely within the tunnel among the trees created by Ryson's light, but it also left the elf with little control. He reached the end of the rope a body length away from the ground, but he could not stop his downward drive. He released his hold and landed hard upon the ground. He groaned as a sharp pain erupted in his ankle.

Ryson, with a great surge of will, maintained the sword's direction toward the ceiling, but pressed one hand upon Lief's back to steady the elf.

"Are you alright?!" Ryson's attention shot back and forth between the elf and the point of his sword.

Lief grunted as he brought a hand to his injured ankle. "I landed poorly!" he growled with obvious disgust at his own actions. His hands simultaneously caressed the throbbing area as they tested the integrity of the bone. With a pained expression, he forced his foot to bend in nearly every direction possible. He revealed his findings with obvious annoyance at his own carelessness. "It is not broken, merely sprained. I'll live, though it was pure stupidity."

"As long as you're alright."

Again, Lief grunted in disgust. "Alright? I have proven my fear of the shadow trees is no smaller than the dwarves."

Ryson glanced about; checking the distance maintained by the massive trunks and gnarled branches. He admonished the elf for his harsh self-criticism. "You think there's something wrong with that? These things scare me to death."

The elf did not respond with anything more than a noncommittal shrug. He placed his foot upon the gleaming floor and tested its ability to hold his weight. He was hobbled, but he would be able to move.

Dzeb interrupted Lief's trials as the cliff behemoth called out the warning for his imminent arrival into their midst.

"I am going to join you. Please do not move. I promise I will not land on you, but you must stand where you are. The area is small for one of my size."

Ryson understood just how much of an understatement that was as the cliff behemoth took his leap. As Dzeb plummeted through the gap, it appeared as if he would crush both Lief and himself. Ryson's eyes grew as Dzeb's giant form filled the space overhead. Every instinct within him cried for him to run, to move free of the falling colossus, but the need to maintain the positioning of his sword held him in place. It was like watching a giant boulder falling from the sky, threatening to land upon his head, yet he was forced to remain frozen.

Miraculously, Dzeb dropped with exact precision. His form glided free of the surrounding trees with room to spare on all sides. He landed with great force, force enough to shake even the diamond encrusted floor and blow back the hair of Ryson and Lief, but that was all which befell these two onlookers. Dzeb landed clear of them both, and now all three stood upon the final tier.

"And so we are now here," Dzeb said simply. "We need but obtain the sphere and leave. Where can we find it?"

Lief spun about with purpose, but found only confusion. "According to Mappel," he exclaimed still peering about in every direction. "It is in the center of the tier. It is upon a small pedestal surrounded by silver lined reflectors. The problem is I don't know where the center is. The trees block my perspective."

"I think I know how to find it," Ryson offered. While keeping his sword to the gap in the ceiling, he nodded to it. "The sphere created that hole as a means to send the magic out of Sanctum. If we line that hole up with the hole above it, and finally with the tunnel through the mountainside, we should be very near the sphere. Now, it may not be exact, for some reason the tunnel through the wall curves, but we should be close."

"That is as good a start as any," Dzeb noted.

Ryson pointed with his free hand to his left. "Then, we have to go that way. I have to keep my attention on the opening up there. I need you two to watch around me. Make sure I don't bump into a pillar or something. And make sure I don't get too close to those trees."

Without waiting for an answer, the delver began shuffling slowly off to his left. His movements created a bizarre dance. As he moved, the shadow trees moved with him. Those in his path scurried to be free of the light. None would stay to challenge his progress. Those he moved away from kept pace with him, maintaining the same distance and keeping the size of the borders constant. Thus, the tubular section of space offered up by the shadow trees shifted with Ryson's every move.

As the clearing shifted, so did its shape. The opening overhead began to angle with the point of Ryson's sword. The light continued to cleanse the area above them, but not all the way to the ceiling. Reaching branches began to defy the light, stretching into the spaces far over their heads. They did not pose a threat, for even Dzeb's lofty stature did not pass beyond the border of safety, but they signified the limits of the sword's power. It could not clear a wide area, only a direct path. As they moved further from their point of entry, the angle of this path steepened as it stretched to greater lengths, yet it remained intact right through to the opening.

Lief and Dzeb matched Ryson step for step. The two stayed at the delver's side, keeping clear of the sword while maintaining their distance from the surrounding horror. They maintained constant awareness of the shadow trees and the ever shifting area of decontaminated space. With their hands on Ryson's shoulders and back, they helped guide the delver, though nothing but open ground arose from the parting black shadows.

All three plodded slowly. Ryson with his eyes toward the source of light, Lief upon his injured ankle, and Dzeb with his great size, each stepped with care and concentration. They barely blinked, and they said not a word, though silence was not their reward.

The true bane to their focus was the sounds from the very trees which encircled them. Crunching, shuffling, even grinding; these noises erupted about them with maddening intensity. Like a jungle with its constant barrage of tumultuous clamor, the shadow trees exuded a resonance of their own design. Branch pushed against branch, trunk grated against trunk. The thick sludge oozed to the floor with sickening dribbles. Each vibration, each echo, etched itself in the ears of the three.

The delver swept the discord from his thoughts. His eyes peered through the gap in the trees, furiously grasping the jagged opening to the upper level. He looked beyond the rough edges of the fissure, up and out in search of the second blast hole. His keen eyesight caught the lip of another fracture. He arched his neck to gauge its location. To line up the two holes, he would have to take several steps backwards.

He took the first, then a second and third step. More of the second blast hole came into his view. The cylinder shaped tunnel through the shadow trees soon formed a direct line, which if continued, would connect the two openings. He stopped to peer even further through the expanse, beyond both openings and toward Sanctum's wall, as far up as the delver tier. He noted broken, scarred rock, and the very edges of the tunnel which led through Sanctum's side to open air. Just a few more steps back and his line of sight would pierce the center of all the openings.

He only took one small backward shuffle when the hand of the cliff behemoth held him resolutely.

"We are here," Dzeb announced with gentle firmness.

Ryson nearly turned about with unbridled anticipation, nearly swerved from his point of focus with both hand and eye. He wished to view the object of their quest, to see the talisman that represented a legion of myths and legends. His desire was such that for a brief moment he forgot his sword and its purpose. Had the grip of the cliff behemoth not held him so staunchly, the point of his sword would have lost contact with the blast hole above. He would have broken the beam which kept the waiting nightmares at bay, leaving them at the mercy of the shadow trees, creations which had no mercy.

To their fortune, braced by Dzeb's powerful hands, Ryson was unable to turn. In an instant, he realized the folly of his intentions, and the consequence of the sword intensified in his mind. His arm stiffened as if trying to reinforce the invisible beam. His eyes followed the length of the blade to ensure the direction of its point. With the sword's importance reaffirmed in his consciousness, he stretched his arm out toward the light source with the same tenacity in which he gritted his teeth. He silently thanked everything about him for Dzeb's presence.

With renewed focus to keep the sword steady, Ryson carefully turned only his head to gaze at the sight which spurred Dzeb's remark. His path had led them true, and the shadow trees now parted to reveal the final resting place of Ingar's sphere. Peering over his shoulder, his eyes fell upon the vessel which held the talisman for the passing of so many cycles. The cleansing light had freed a section of the reflectors from the grip of the trees. The metal sheets lined with silver which encapsulated the sphere were now visible for all to see.

The reflectors had weathered the test of time, but not the power of the sphere's intentions. The metal sheets showed no sign of rust, the visible silver linings remained intact, but the enclosure had been penetrated with the same fury which bore a tunnel through the side of Sanctum. Jagged, broken edges of thick metal testified to the power of the blast which the sphere hurled outward to breach its tomb. Scorched, melted shards of silver attested to the heat which accompanied the blast of force.

With this fracture in the surrounding reflectors, there was nothing to hide the pedestal within or its mount. The sphere rested seemingly innocently upon the small stone platform. It neither glowed nor pulsated. It simply waited upon its column of support as if it expected the three visitors.

From his unmoving stance, Ryson sized up the talisman. He remembered its origin as told to him by Lief, recalled that it was forged from the skins of each of the races. Its structure, however, lacked such characteristics. To him, it appeared constructed more of marble than of flesh. He had expected it to be brown and leathery, perhaps spotty and rough, but it was grayish white and it appeared smooth. It was perfectly round like a child's ball without the slightest hint of imperfection to its spherical shape. It was also large. He wondered if his own arms had the length to wrap completely around it. He could only wonder as to its weight. He assumed it was hollow, a shell to hold the compacted magical energies of the past, but even from a distance it appeared solid, and again, like a chiseled piece of pure marble.

His examination was cut short by Lief's sudden directive.

"I must ask that we move quickly." The elf coughed before he could continue. Dark circles began to form under his eyes with bizarre suddenness. He grunted as the pain of his ankle injury became more severe. "I am afraid. I can not remain this close to the sphere for much longer. We must seize it and press on."

Urgency swept over the delver. He gave one quick glance at the end of his sword to ensure its direction, and then took a more discerning look at the space within the reflectors. The area immediately surrounding the sphere was clear of shadow trees. Ryson could only attribute this to the sphere's great power. Its reason was not as important as its existence, for it allowed a clear path to the sphere, if the cliff behemoth would take it.

"Dzeb?" Ryson began with respect, but not hiding his urgency. "I need you to get the sphere. I can't ask Lief to do it. It's making him sick. I have to hold the sword. Can you reach it?"

"I believe it is why I am here," Dzeb replied in his normal demeanor, as calm as if standing beside a deep blue mountain lake.

He moved forward with no outward expression of fear for his own safety. He completed the first part of his task with such ease, Ryson could only marvel at the spectacle.

The cliff behemoth grabbed the ragged edges of the metal sheets and tore them aside. The screeching whine of the yielding metal attested to the strength inherent in the reflectors, but they could not withstand Dzeb's power. As if opening a door upon a hinge, Dzeb expanded the opening, leaving him plenty of room to march through. He stepped up to the pedestal, his movements still relaxed, his expression still without fear. Without so much as a hint of reluctance, he reached out and plucked the sphere from its support.

Ryson did not know exactly what to expect at that moment. He was relieved to see nothing. The sphere

accepted Dzeb's hold without struggle. It left its home of countless ages without the slightest reaction.

As Dzeb carried the sphere free from the broken casing, Lief stepped as far back from him as the shadow trees would allow. He nearly allowed his shoulders to brush against the closest of the branches. He could only wonder as to which death would be more painful, being consumed by the shadow trees or the slow decay from the poison which even now was sapping most of his strength.

"We need to move quickly," the elf urged through a wheeze. "I need to put more space between myself and the sphere. That will not be possible while we remain in this tier."

Ryson acknowledged the request with actions. He retraced his path with greater speed and quickly guided them to a point directly below the opening overhead. He looked to Dzeb expectantly.

"Can you still make it with the sphere?"

Dzeb seeing the pain in the elf's face did not take the time to answer. He placed the sphere securely under one arm, bent his legs, and leapt upward with power unmatched by any other living creature. He sailed through the air, through the open space between the trees. His momentum carried him nearly completely through the opening. His ascent ceased as half his massive body was already through the aperture. With his free hand, he grasped the ledge of the upper tier. With one mighty pull, he forced himself up the remainder of the way.

As he disappeared out of sight, Lief sighed with relief. He took several deep breaths, but only appeared slightly stronger. "I believe the poison has taken a great hold within me." He revealed with sadness filling his expression as opposed to disgust or anger.

"Can you make the climb out of here?" Ryson spoke with an edge, hoping to urge the elf onward.

"I believe so, though I don't know what good it will do."

"It will give you a chance," Ryson pressed. "Free air may help. Who knows what will happen when the sphere is destroyed? And there are still the algors. They might help revive you."

The elf replied with great fatigue hanging upon his every word. "Do not worry, Ryson. I will move forward, if only to see the end of the sphere which threatens my people."

As if to punctuate his statement, Dzeb reared his colossal head into view of those below.

"I have placed the sphere a distance away from here. I will keep it away from Lief as long as we are within this mountain, but our exit is clear and it is time for us all to leave Sanctum."

Chapter 30

Lief broke through to the open air alone. He extracted himself from the fissure in Sanctum's side to walk upon the inclined slope with labored, fatigued steps. Free of the cavern, with no stone overhead, he turned his head first to the night sky. The storm had ceased and any trace of clouds had all but vanished. The stars hung proudly overhead, but they faded to the east as the sky in that direction began to glow with an orange hue. The sun would rise soon, another day would dawn. If the poison were not cleansed from his body, he knew it would be his last day.

He waited at the side of the breach, waited for Ryson and Dzeb. They had sent him through the tunnel first, to keep him as far from the sphere as possible. They wished not to confine him in the long cramped enclosure with Ingar's sphere. Not that it did much good. What would it save him? A few extra moments of pain? The poison already coursed fully through his body. Keeping him away from the sphere now was like keeping the cat from the canary cage after the bird had already been eaten. He was, however, too weak and too tired to argue.

He found the mountain air mildly invigorating. He inhaled deeply. The fresh crisp night filled his body with a refreshing chill. He was free of the stale air of Sanctum, and free of the shadow trees. If he could not cleanse himself of the poison, at least he could forget the terrors within the mountain. Though darkness still clung to the land, the twinkling stars and the eastern glow chased away his fear of the dark.

He sat heavily upon a large rock and crouched down to rub his ankle. It swelled slightly, pulsed with slight pain, but thankfully, it was not a severe sprain. The fatigue within him, the poison adhering to his every organ, this was the true threat to his health. He would collapse out of weakness long before this minor injury would force him to submit.

Within the fissure, Dzeb and Ryson began their ascent only after allowing Lief sufficient time to exit. They stepped quickly, each with his own certainty. The delver moved with his own inherent grace, while Dzeb stepped with the experience of living among the cliffs of the highest mountains. Dzeb held tightly to the sphere as Ryson lifted his sword to light their final passage.

As the trail curved, the last leg of the tunnel came into their sights. With the breach's opening to the outside clearly in view, Ryson recalled his very first experience in this cavern. With powerful recollection, he gauged the exact space where the invisible barrier blocked his passage. As they closed upon it, he considered calling for a halt, but he did not. With his delver ear, he could hear Lief's labored breathing outside the tunnel. He had made it through. He also noted the scratch marks upon the ground of the algors' claws, as well as the lesser tracks of Jon, Stephen, Lauren and Holli. They led unimpeded through the tunnel as well. The invisible barrier that had prevented his earlier entry had not prohibited their exit. It stood that he and Dzeb should be equally successful.

Still, he took a small lead upon the cliff behemoth to be the first through the barrier. He stiffened as he took the step which would carry him through the point where he knew it existed. As he surmised, he passed without restriction. The only true question remaining involved the effect of the sphere's passing of the force field. With that question feeding his curiosity, Ryson turned to witness Dzeb's crossing.

The cliff behemoth was also not stopped, but his passing of the barrier was not without incident. Ryson's assessment of the barrier's location had been precise. It reaffirmed its existence for but a slight moment as Dzeb carried the sphere through. No longer needed to protect the path to the orb, the field crackled with a bluish purple charge. It then fizzled away, leaving only a reminiscent scent which Ryson found similar to that of striking lightning.

Ryson threw out his hand to test the space. It passed through without hindrance, the barrier had dissolved. The tunnel now formed an unimpeded path both to and from the mountain's core. The way to the sphere's long guarded resting place was now clear, but no longer important. With but a few more steps of the cliff behemoth, Ingar's sphere would be free of Sanctum all together.

Ryson turned and stepped lively over the last few paces. He sensed the magnitude of their deed as he moved out of the tunnel. His thoughts turned on the legends, on the mystique of Sanctum and all it represented. Now, with a cliff behemoth at his side, he would see the culmination of a quest which matched the most extravagant of these myths. Sanctum had been entered, the obstacles overcome, and the sphere removed from the most guarded of places.

Yet, there was more, more than simply overcoming the five tiers. They had passed through deeper, stronger barriers, barriers borne of fear, doubt, even intolerance. They had not simply defeated Sanctum; they had overcome the mistrust of ages. The sphere's existence outside of this monument was testament to that. Such a feat would never have been completed without the assistance of all the races; the elves, algors, humans, and even the dwarves. They would not have succeeded without the Sword of Decree or without Mappel's knowledge of the shadow trees. They would not have survived the human tier without Lauren's protection. And this moment certainly would not have been possible without the contribution of the dwarves. Tun might have held to his doubts but he led them safely through the first tier, paved the way to ultimate success. Now, a cliff behemoth and a delver saw to the last act of removal.

In that moment of acknowledging the importance of their accomplishment, full comprehension followed. The thought of Tun dampened Ryson's exhilaration. There was a cost to be born for their success and even as Dzeb brought the talisman fully free from Sanctum, the delver began to feel as much sadness as joy.

The remainder of his delight was shattered by the cough of his elf friend. The deep hack spurred the delver's attention away from the sphere, and as he looked upon Lief again, he wondered if they had finished paying the toll.

Lief was becoming a hollow shell of the elf he met not so long ago. The dark circles around his eyes were forming heavy bags, while the rest of his face seemed to thin with every blink of the eye. Even as he sat upon a large stone, his legs trembled and Ryson knew it was not from the pain of the ankle sprain. The elf was gaunt now to the point much beyond the lean Mappel, so much more than when he had first entered Sanctum. The long bow across his shoulder seemed more of a heavy burden than that of a weapon which Lief might use with any conviction. Ryson wondered if Lief could even pull back upon the taught string, a conjecture which was augmented as the elf struggled weakly to his feet.

Ryson, filled with compassion for Lief's haggard state, called for the elf to cease his struggle. "Don't get up. You need the rest."

Lief ignored the request with his last ounce of stubbornness. "I will not rest until the sphere is destroyed. To see to that, we must reach the peak."

"Maybe you should stay here. Let Dzeb and I go up ahead. There's no need for you to remain close to the sphere."

"The sphere has already done its damage to me," Lief admitted with a heavy breath. "Remaining with you during this short climb will not make a difference."

"Are you sure?" Ryson was more than slightly reluctant to let the elf accompany them. He honestly thought the climb might take the rest of Lief's strength.

"I am sure," Lief grunted with one final burst of resolve. "I am weakened, but not over. I will see this to its end. Besides, if the poison can be washed from me, I will need the healing power of the algors."

Ryson started to offer the alternative of letting the algors come to the elf. Lief, however, ignored the proposal.

"Let us just hurry to the top," Lief requested with a weary voice. "The sooner it is destroyed, the better my chances of survival. Let me get on ahead of you. I need but a small distance from the sphere. After that, it makes no difference whether I stand a league or a hair from it. The poison remains in the air regardless."

With a surprising burst of strength, Lief darted forward and up Sanctum's slope. Ryson watched with dismay as he knew this was the last ounce of power the elf would muster. He gave Lief ample time before nodding to Dzeb for them to follow.

Ryson kept a pace which allowed Lief to maintain his distance. Only when the elf disappeared over the final ledge did Ryson increase his speed to utilize his own climbing abilities, as well as those of Dzeb. The last few paces were covered with the speed of a near sprint and the accompanying light which surrounded them announced their arrival. The radiance from his sword, increasing with the extending glow to the east, matched clear daylight upon the top of the mountain. It chased away the darkness as the weapon in his hand appeared more like a flaming torch than a finely polished sword. It brought light to all those who now stood upon Sanctum's peak and it revealed for all to see that the sphere was in Dzeb's hands.

Most stared at the sphere in wonder, save Holli who was tending to Lief. He had crumpled to the ground in final exhaustion.

Matthew broke the silence with a near shout of exhilaration. "Bless you, bless you both delver and cliff behemoth! And bless the powers that guided us!"

His outburst was cut short by the angry ranting of Jon who stood over the still form of his brother. "Let us waste no more time! Give the sphere to the spirit, let her open the sphere and use the power to save my brother!"

"Then there is hope?" Ryson turned a heartened glance toward Mappel.

"Shayed has stated she might be able to revive the dwarf once the magic is free," Mappel replied. To this point, he remained guarded, but he could not completely restrain his growing enthusiasm. "With the sphere free of Sanctum, I now believe anything is possible."

"Life and death is the province of Godson," Dzeb remarked unshakably. His expression revealed his doubts over the matter and he made no move forward as he maintained possession of the sphere.

While Dzeb's statement stirred reflection within the elder elf, it infuriated the younger dwarf. Jon, agitated and disturbed by Dzeb's lack of movement, darted ferociously to the cliff behemoth. He leapt in the air as he plucked it from Dzeb's hands. The dwarf struggled awkwardly with the sphere's size, but not with his intentions. He bore a direct path to the ghostly form of Shayed.

As the apparition threw open its hands in gleeful anticipation, Ryson was nearly knocked from his feet by the staggering revelation which presented itself. The power of the sword surged through him. The very air seemed to unravel. He could not focus upon another, not even Mappel who stood by him. His attention was thrust toward the spirit that took Shayed's shape. The ghostly form turned blood red, at first with no characteristics, but soon its shape came true to him. The shaven head, wicked eyes, gnarled hands, all contrasted sharply with the soft benevolent image of Shayed. He saw clearly through the disguise and beheld the hungry visage of a maddened wizard.

"No!" Ryson screamed. The single word echoed over and over in his mind. Despair and fear ran through him like a cold river. He watched helplessly, painfully, as Jon's movements seemed to slow to a snail's pace, but did not falter. The dwarf never hesitated, never heeded the delver's anguished cry.

Ryson erupted in fury as he witnessed the dwarf holding out the sphere to Ingar's greedily curling hands. The delver bolted forward, but even his tremendous speed could not erase the distance in time. He dove the last few paces, stretched out to grab the dwarf's waist, but before impact, the sphere had been passed.

Jon was solid, sturdy with a low center of gravity, but Ryson's momentum sent him flying. The two rolled over on the wet ground of Sanctum's peak, Jon with angry confusion, Ryson with growing alarm. The delver gracefully completed the roll and let the spinning motion carry him back to his feet. Jon remained in a bewildered heap, but bore a furious stare upon Ryson.

"Are you mad?!" the dwarf roared. "Do you not want to see my brother restored to me?"

Ryson could not answer, did not have to. The maniacal laugh of another offered a much clearer answer. Jon saw the shocked, near incoherent stare of the delver as the first clue to the scene behind his back. He turned only to witness the others staring in much the same fashion. All watched blankly at the terrifying spectacle. With a final twist of his neck, Jon finally placed his sights upon the source of the depraved exuberance and knew there was no hope for his brother, perhaps no hope for any of them.

Ingar's disguise had vanished, no longer needed as he possessed the talisman of his own creation, the sphere of ultimate power. He stood revealed; the feigned whiteness of his spirit dissolved and was now stained by his true blood red appearance. The soft kind features of his previous mask eroded away into the deranged face of a madman. His bald head glowed hot. He laughed deeper with delight in his own malice as he now soaked in the power to carry out his twisted nightmares.

The sphere remained beside him, a willing accomplice or perhaps dictator of these same horrific desires. He did not hold the weight of the orb. Instead, he let it levitate within his reach. While his hands remained free, a bond much like a crimson rope tied the two together. A magical union between the sphere and the baneful spirit opened the vast power to Ingar, allowed him to carry out his desires, desires which were indeed spurred by the sphere.

If there was ever a question as to which was truly in control, whether wizard or talisman, it no longer mattered. The two were now one, linked by the bond. The sphere proved as the source of unimaginable power, the wizard was the tool.

As if to punctuate this undeniable fact, Ingar raised his hands and unleashed the power which was now his to control. With focus on his perceived greatest threat, chains of energy five times the length and width of those he used to capture Shayed materialized. They knifed through the air with frightening speed and accuracy. They crashed upon Dzeb with an eruption of power. An explosion shook the ground, knocked many to their knees, including the cliff behemoth. The chains entwined themselves around the giant, holding him to his knees as they bound his arms and legs and anchored him to the ground.

Ingar found such delight in his achievement, at watching Dzeb kneel before him, he grinned with boastful taunts. "I might not have been able to hold you before, cliff behemoth, but now I possess nearly all the magic in the land. Your strength is now meaningless to me. You speak of Godson's great power. There is no power greater than mine. That is why you kneel before me."

Dzeb's gentle nature washed from him with these words. His expression turned hateful, and the calm blue of his eyes dissolved into cold hostility. He roared, and his scream filled the air like a clap of thunder, and again, the ground shook. He pulled with all his might, but he could not break the chains.

His display merely brought more laughter from the wizard, and another wave of a crimson hand. The chains obeyed the command and lengthened as they wrapped about Dzeb's mouth.

"We'll have no more shouts from you," Ingar said through a malicious giggle.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Mappel was the first to respond to the confusion. He broke his sight from the captured cliff behemoth and turned it upon the depraved spirit.

Ingar turned a spiteful glance to the elder elf. "Do you not recognize me? You, oh great and wise elf. You who are so arrogant that you believe you can explain things beyond your knowledge. If you are so wise in the way of the legends, how is it you were unable to tell the difference between a weak sorceress and the mighty Ingar?"

Mappel blinked as he repeated the name in a whisper. He could not be certain of this, he had never witnessed Ingar and there were only meager descriptions. He could only speculate. What was before him appeared as a spirit mad with power. There was little else in the way of an explanation, yet it was not possible.

Ingar found only more joy in Mappel's reaction. He sought to add to the elf's despair. "You have doubts, but you had no doubts as to Shayed's return. You believed her capable of returning, why not Ingar? Do you truly think her superior to me? You have spoke so highly of Shayed, climbed all the way up to meet her as if she was some goddess. She is nothing."

Another wave of a hand and Shayed now stood revealed. Ingar removed the power that blocked her from the sight of the others but did not remove the bonds that held her. She floated helplessly, unable to lift her arms, unable to escape from the scarlet prison which surrounded her.

"Look upon the sorceress you believed so powerful. She was nothing to me before. She is even less than that now. Let your doubts fade, pathetic creature. I am Ingar, and I have returned to claim what is rightfully mine."

Nearly every set of eyes fell upon the captured spirit of Shayed. Only Holli ignored the spectacle. The elf guard's mind raced with devising alternatives of attack. She found little hope to cling to. She had no experience in dealing with magical foes, and no idea of how to attack the ghost of an insane wizard. She immediately discounted all standard forms of defense. He was not of material form and her arrows would pass through him. Only one plausible course of action came to mind. If she could not attack the wizard directly, perhaps she could distract him.

She crouched low and moved with stealth and silence to the ledge of the platform behind her. Sinking low to the ground, she kicked at a pile of loose rocks. The debris scattered and tumbled over the ledge. As the tumbling rocks fell upon other loose dirt, the small commotion soon turned into a minor avalanche. With the resounding crash of rocks calling for attention, she leapt behind another set of boulders behind Ingar and away from everyone else.

The avalanche failed to achieve its desired effect. While it called for attention, added to the disorientation of the passing events, it did not faze the wizard. Ingar scoffed as he addressed the rocks where Holli hid.

"Do you truly believe I do not sense your useless attempts, elf?" Ingar bore a harsh glance towards Holli as he ignored the rumbling of falling rocks. "If you believe such mundane tricks are of any value, then you must be taught a lesson."

Again, Holli considered the situation. Her foe was aware of her tactics and sounded ready to strike. She stepped confidently out from behind the rock and faced Ingar defiantly. If she must die to give the rest a chance, so be it. It was simply what she was trained for. Her bravery, however, was lost upon the magic

caster.

"You insult me," Ingar snarled. "You are an insignificant ant. Destroying you is a waste of even the most miniscule portion of my power, but I do wish to hurt you." He paused, and a devious grin curled upon his transparent lips. "I know you, elf, I know what it is that drives you. Your own death would mean nothing to you, but what of the death of another, the death of one you are supposed to protect."

He kept his blood red eyes fixed upon the elf guard, but his hand waved toward Mappel. This time there was no bolt of power, no explosion or clap of thunder, no fanfare at all for the deed which would eradicate Mappel. The elder elf simply disintegrated into gray dust.

For Holli, for Ryson, for them all; the very air seemed to quiver. Reality unraveled, scattered through the air like pollen on a windy day. No one could speak, no one could cry. Denial ruled. What they saw was not possible. Mappel was gone, destroyed with the mere wave of one hand. As the elder elf formed the anchor which held them together, those that remained upon Sanctum, aghast and dispirited, were now all cut loose to the wild insanity they faced. Vacant stares filled their faces. Their trials, their successes, their promises to each other; everything fell into the dust of Mappel's remains.

Ingar spoke slowly, viciously adding to their disorientation. His words hummed with mesmerizing effect, eating at their very wills. He spoke directly at Holli, but his voice tore at them all. "He is dead. I have taken everything he was from you. And you, you that were supposed to protect him could do nothing to stop me. I could do the same to your brother elf that lies upon the ground, but I will let the poison in his veins kill him slowly. I will let you watch. Besides, there are others here you have vowed to protect."

A shout filled with vengeance finally erupted in the air. It broke the stunned stupor bought upon by Mappel's end. The words held strength as well as anger, but they came not from the elf guard.

"Coward! Pathetic coward! Craven, misguided bully. What have you proved, that you can catch goldfish trapped in a small bowl?"

"Eh?" Ingar turned to the source of the insults. His eyes filled with interest as he beheld the staunch expression of Lauren. "Might this be a true challenge?"

"I challenge nothing but your arrogance. Any cat can catch a mouse, that is all you prove on this day."

"And what of you? Are you also a cat, sorceress?"

"I claim nothing other than your cowardice."

"Then I shall prove my power against you." With more of a dramatic flair, Ingar threw his arms out and up over his head. A ring of red power encircled his hands. It swirled swiftly, tumultuously, in the shape of a perfect circle. His eyes widened with insane exultation. He opened his mouth wide to laugh with the intoxication of power. In a fit of glee, he clamped his hands together and pressed his arms outwards toward the human sorceress.

The fiery ring flew through the air. It continued to spin as it jettisoned itself free of Ingar. It sped with deadly intentions towards its predefined victim.

In a surge of defiance, Lauren welcomed the controlled surge of magical energy. She raised her own hands, her palms pressed outward and like magnets they drew in the glowing red fire. She absorbed every ounce. Her fingers crackled with the power which changed from red to orange, then to blue and finally to deep purple. She refocused the force. It soon encompassed her own hands. For her, though, it formed the four points of a

diamond. As Ingar had cast it at her, she hurled it back at him.

The diamond maintained its shape. It sliced forward with one point fixed upon Ingar's chest. It impacted before he could block and opened a rent within the apparition's center. A clear undiluted hole shone free within Ingar's midst. He winced with pain and then roared with anger.

"So be it!" he snarled, seemingly accepting Lauren's newfound abilities. With his palm atop the sphere, he pointed two fingers at Lauren. Lost was his desire to destroy her with flare. He only wished to remove her presence, to eradicate her as he dismissed the elder elf. He became a simple conduit, nothing more than directional device to siphon the power from the talisman and focus it upon a single target.

A narrow beam of bright force split the night, gleamed nearly as bright as Ryson's sword. Lauren attempted again to collect and refocus the power, but the beam defied capture. It passed through her palms as if they were not there. It found its mark at the middle of her forehead, and she collapsed with a groan.

Even as she hit the hard rock ground, Ingar maintained the presence of the beam. It slowly drove her beyond unconsciousness and closer to coma.

The sight was more than painful to watch. Each and every individual that remained upon Sanctum broke from their own hypnotic trance, shunned the shock which held them in place for so long. Holli fired an arrow, not at Ingar but at the sphere, an object which was solid and perhaps vulnerable to such an attack. The two algors followed suit, piercing the air with hard stones from their slings. Jon freed the mace from his belt and attempted a direct assault.

These attempts failed, however, as Ingar's free hand threw a wave of force that dropped them and their projectiles to the ground. Not an arrow, not a stone, and not Jon's mace ever got close to the orb.

Only one tactic met with success. Ryson had not attempted an assault, but had moved between Ingar and Lauren. With delver precision, he held the blade of his sword forward to block the deadly beam.

To Ingar's dismay and anger, the Sword of Decree absorbed the beam, halted its path as easily as a man's hand would hold a feather. The wizard moved his arm hoping to reestablish the attack upon the sorceress, but Ryson's speed proved too much for him. Each time Ingar would redirect his finger, Ryson's sword would counter easily.

Ingar's expression turned more and more violent. He bared his red teeth like a mad wolf. He flung his arm wildly in frustration. His own anger began to consume him, and he turned his aggression toward the delver. He no longer focused upon Lauren, but attempted to fix the beam at Ryson's heart.

It would not matter. Ryson's hand remained too quick, matching Ingar move for move. The sword stalemated the beam, and it fed Ingar's frustration.

The wizard's own grip on his distorted plans began to unravel. The desire to kill the delver seized his every thought. The pulsating hunger to watch his ray of power burn Ryson's heart became an obsession. Such was the intensity of his wish, he would have ignored almost anything at that moment, but even this burning craving could not blind him to the awe-inspiring sight to come.

They came without sound. Only the blazing glow of their very existence announced their presence. Dzeb saw them first, then Stephen, and Matthew soon after. High overhead, lights sailed flawlessly through the remnants of the night. Like stars dropping from the sky, they plunged downward to Sanctum's peak. Ten in number, matching the number that entered the citadel to retrieve the sphere, they set upon the level platform of the summit. They spread themselves in a large circle with Ingar at the center. They lacked any true

definition, any true form or characteristic. Unlike Shayed, and even Ingar, whose spirit forms simulated their previous mortal appearance, these apparitions remained anonymous. They appeared only as glowing oblong shapes, but to Dzeb their identity was no mystery, and their appearance gave him the strength to bite through the mystic chain which held his mouth closed.

"Angels!" he murmured with emotion cracking his soft voice.

"Angels of Godson!" Stephen and Matthew repeated.

The spirits made no move, but their appearance broke Ingar's single-minded attack upon Ryson. The wizard removed his hand from the sphere, and the beam ceased.

Only at that moment did Ryson allow himself the opportunity to gaze at the surrounding spirits. He kept his sword at the ready, in case Ingar renewed his attack, but Ingar now became preoccupied with what he viewed as an invading force.

The wizard turned his seething frustration upon the spirits. "What are you doing here? You have no business here!"

As Ingar raved and threatened, Stephen quietly moved to Ryson's side. He moved with calm steps as if guided by the will of some great power. His eyes glistened with joyful tears. He could not hold back a wide smile. An expression of pure enlightenment filled not only his face, but his entire being. His words were strong and true, but they held the captivation of an emotional plea.

"This was never beyond Godson's will," he said to Ryson with such conviction the delver nearly dropped his guard. "What was to happen here was never meant to be prophesied, was never meant to be understood by elf or human, or anyone else. That is why it was not in the Book of Godson, why it was not a part of elflore. And that is why I saw two visions. This moment was for you and you alone."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Ryson questioned trying to look beyond Stephen's enlightened expression and attempting to understand his words.

Stephen spoke quicker as if time had become a crucial factor. "The will of Godson is paved first by the actions of great individuals. That is what waits for you now. The choice is yours to make. The power rests within you to stop Ingar, but the responsibility does not rest solely upon your shoulders. The angels are here to save the land regardless of your decision. You have been the centerpiece through this all, the channel through which Godson has painted his will, but what you do now is within your own hands."

Suddenly, violently, Ingar turned back upon Ryson as if he had heard the words of the interpreter. He disregarded the shapeless spirits and turned his anger into a crimson ball of fire. He hurled it, not at Ryson, but at Stephen Clarin.

The delver leapt forward, his sword ready to absorb the screaming attack. It cleaved the clump of power in half, but did not stop it. The two halves of red flame sailed harmlessly past Ryson. It reformed to single ball and found its mark at Stephen's chest.

The interpreter collapsed to the ground upon impact. He neither screamed nor cried. His shirt seared away, his chest boiled with severe burns as scarlet smoke drifted up from the smoldering wound.

Ryson twisted as he regrouped. He had seen the impact, and now smelled the nauseating scent of burning flesh. He did not know how much life could remain within the interpreter, if any. He could only guess as to the staggering pain if Stephen remained at all conscious. He dove to his side only to find him still smiling.

Stephen's eyes reflected an absence of pain. His entire face retained the bliss of the moment before the attack.

"Do not blame yourself," Stephen coughed a reply, his face still strangely glowing with peace and fulfillment. "This was meant to be. My responsibilities here, in every way, are finished. I shall leave with them." He gave a fading glance toward the closest angel before he died.

Ryson grimaced with sorrow. First Mappel, and now Stephen, both gone. The pain tore at him, pulled from him the awareness of where he was, what he was doing. He ground his teeth together. He could not scream, though he wanted to.

"Remember his words. Honor your memory of him and remember his words." Though Dzeb remained chained and the sphere still within Ingar's possession, he spoke as if the land had already been saved, the threat removed. His soft, serene voice cut through Ryson's pain, brought him back to the here and now.

Ryson rose slowly. He stood looking down at the interpreter, not caring for whom or what surrounded him. He broke his stare upon Stephen to glance over at the remains of Mappel. He cast sights upon Tun's corpse and Lief's fallen form. His eyes then glanced down the still glowing blade of his sword, and finally at Ingar.

The wizard matched his stare with a sneer. Ingar would not completely forget the angels, he stole a glance at them at quick intervals, but Ryson remained the true point of his attention. He did not raise an immediate hand to smite the delver. Instead, he waited, watching Ryson's every move, and edging ever closer to the sphere as if grasping for the security of its power.

Ryson's grip on the sword tightened. He opened himself, not to the weapon, but to the power which used it as a conduit for knowledge. He waited silently, patiently, but most of all unwaveringly. He opened himself up to true faith.

The necessary course of action implanted itself in his thoughts with razor sharp clarity. He now had the power, the knowledge and the will to defeat Ingar and his talisman. He stepped toward the glaring wizard as if he represented no more threat than a yearling rabbit.

Insanity gave way to fear in Ingar's eyes, fear that drove him to strike. Both hands formed tight fists and he struck them together. A burst of red flame speared out toward Ryson. Crimson flames licked the air, so hot they singed patches of sparse wild grass growing within the rock, but they would not so much as warm a single hair on the delver's head.

Ryson saw the absolute truth of what he faced. He was not fighting magic, he was fighting Ingar. A spirit, yes, but still the culmination of consciousness, experiences, and emotions of a once mortal human wizard. Even as a ghost, Ingar was limited by his own unique character, by his judgments and the encounters which shaped that character. His own insanity born by his thirst for power blinded him as a mortal and it bound him as a spirit. Even with a near limitless source of power at his command, Ingar could not break the bonds which shaped his own sense of reality. That reality dictated he would attack not as a spirit, but as the mortal human wizard he once was, and no match for the speed and agility of a purebred delver.

Ryson had leapt clear of the flames, expending little effort or energy. He jumped forward, closer to Ingar, and he watched the wizard's fear grow. He planted his feet firmly upon solid ground and bent his knees for balance. He stood prepared for the next attack which came quickly.

Ingar threw his arms apart, fingers extended. A surge of force exploded from his outstretched hands. Unlike his previous assaults which were limited in scope, this burst of power covered a wide breadth of space. The wizard flung it all around him, in every direction, leaving nowhere to run or hide.

The crackling wave of energy formed a ring which stretched outward. It expanded as it rolled away. As Holli, Jon, and the algors were still struggling to their feet from a previous attack, it bowled them over, sent them rolling to the edges of Sanctum's flat peak.

As the energy wave bore down upon the surrounding angels, they floated motionlessly in their circle about the wizard. Their faceless forms could give no indication of emotion, but their lack of movement served to reveal their disregard for the assault. It passed harmlessly through them, but they were not its target. The main thrust of its force was directed at the delver, but he defied it as well.

He held the flat of his blade before him, held it vertically in front of his chest and face. He stood perfectly balanced upon the balls of his feet, stood with absolute certainty in his actions.

The ripple of energy hit his sword first. The blade sucked power like a hungry calf. The wave weakened dramatically, diminishing instantly to the strength of a strong wind. Ryson leaned into it as it struck his person. The gust threw dust and debris into the air, it held nearly all his weight as he leaned forward. It ruffled his hair and his clothes, but did little else.

Ryson said nothing. He showed little delight or enthusiasm in overcoming Ingar's assault. He eyed the wizard carefully, attempting to predict the next attack.

Uncertainty fed Ingar's fears. He brought incorporeal hands to his ghostly forehead as if to massage temples which truly did not exist. In a fit of fear born despair, he thrust both arms about the sphere. While his immaterial hands could have passed through pure granite, they seemed to take hold of the talisman which radiated with energy. His red form pulsed with power, beating fitfully like the heart of a running horse. The red hue of his spirit deepened to a point he appeared almost solid. A cry of rage spurred by the hope of victory erupted from his core.

His arms remained about the sphere as he called his own final order. "Drop your weapon, delver! Drop it or I shall destroy this mountain top. I will send everyone about us tumbling down its broken slopes in an avalanche of rock and dirt. Drop it now!"

The delver released his hold on the sword with a blur of motion. His arm had cocked back and flew forward before Ingar finished his last word. The sword point sliced through the air, the weapon becoming a flying spear. Such was the speed with which Ryson made his throw, the glowing blade formed a streak like lightning from his hand to the center of the sphere. It skewered the talisman, the sharp point slicing through one side and crashing through the other.

The sphere split open like a cracked egg, falling apart in Ingar's very arms. A surge of power, composed of every color, exploded into the air, an eruption which matched a hundred volcanoes. The once captured magic rose high in the sky, only to spread out, scattered in every direction as if blown by winds from all points of the compass.

If the wizard made one final cry, it was not heard. He was caught in the surge and could not pull free from the current. The waves of released energy pulled him apart, washed his remnants away. It erased every spiritual fiber of the wizard Ingar.

With Ingar destroyed, the chains that held both Shayed and Dzeb disappeared. The cliff behemoth struggled to his feet as the elf spirit looked to the quickly dispersing cloud of colorful energy.

The land was being reborn before their very eyes. Changes erupted in a heartbeat as magic buried for countless seasons spread with fury. Changes, both good and evil, both dark and light, encompassed the sky and the ground. Subtle alterations which would not be noticed in the life of an elf took root in the hills and in

the flatlands. Obvious transformations, more striking than the sight of a cliff behemoth, took hold in the far corners of the deserts and the seas. What could not have been possible was now likely. The normal lives of every creature in Uton were now irrevocably altered.

"The magic is free," Shayed stated just above a whisper. "Free and pure. The taint of poison has been removed." There was no emptiness for the sorceress in this moment, and there would be none to follow. Only now, at the sphere's final destruction, did she realize that Ingar's talisman was not a source of purpose for her consciousness, but a shackle. It was not the sphere that etched her place in the legends, but her own deeds. In this revelation, she found everlasting fulfillment. With these words, she faded from sight.

As if her departure signaled the end of their own mysterious mission, the ten shapeless spirits which had encircled Ingar took flight. Each circled the mountain top once before taking leave to the heavens.

Dzeb watched their exit serenely.

Ryson followed suit. He sheathed his sword to let their light glisten more proudly in the fading dark. He silently counted the gleaming lights as they disappeared. Though, only ten had taken flight from Sanctum's peak, eleven had circled overhead. He bowed his head to the last as it followed the others to the heavens.

In but scant moments, the glow from the east soon expanded. The light of day encompassed everything. The rainbow of magical energy dispersed completely as the stars were blocked from sight and the sky turned a deep blue. Ryson turned to the east, turned to welcome the sun as it rose above the horizon.

Chapter 31

"She faded away just before the other spirits took off." Ryson made his explanation to Lief as the elf sat up on the drying ground in the sunlight. The algors sat beside him, using their healing powers to chase away the exhaustion, to repair his injured ankle. Holli stood watch over them all, never convinced that the danger had simply ceased to exist. Her eyes darted about the summit as well as down the slopes while the delver continued his retelling of Shayed's departure.

Ryson was torn with emotions and his words betrayed the swirling confusion within him. There was joy, as much as he tried to deny it. There was also much pain. Ingar had been vanquished, the sphere destroyed, but the death of two more brought guilt to any sense of triumph. He found it difficult to retell the story to Lief, could not look in his eyes when he spoke of Mappel's death, but the elf had urged him to continue. He could do so only with hollow words, proclaiming victory as if it were equal to defeat. He now spoke of Shayed's last words with but a hint of comfort.

"She said the magic was pure and the taint of poison gone. I can sense she's right. Something about the air feels different. Not the way it was before the quake, but less threatening."

"The taint of poison has been removed, do not doubt that." Lief stretched to test his rejuvenated muscles and to illustrate his returning strength. "I would not have lasted this day if it had remained, but the poison is gone from my body as well." The elf paused, scanned the mountain top as if to confirm an assumption. "What about Dzeb?"

Ryson shrugged, indicating he understood so little about the cliff behemoth. His tone carried the same uncertainty. "He left just as the sun rose, started climbing down the mountain like nothing ever happened. He told me to say good-bye to everyone for him. That was it. I don't..."

Dust kicked up from Lauren's heels choked off his words. She looked upon the delver blankly, ignoring the elves and the algors.

The delver noticed many things in that moment. Her nervous actions disappeared as her arms hung steadily at her sides. Her eyes, though void of emotion, could focus without distraction upon her objective. The confusion, the denial of what she had become, had washed away. There remained hundreds of decisions to make, decisions only a magic caster faced and foreign to a delver, but the acceptance of her own abilities now seemed anchored in this changing reality.

When she spoke, any uncertainty focused not upon what she was, but where it would lead her. Her words carried conviction, if not true direction.

"You were wrong, Ryson Acumen," she began bluntly but without anger. "I did make my decision within Sanctum. I can no longer turn back. I am a magic caster, a sorceress. I don't know where that will lead me, but I know you had a hand in my decision. I am also aware you saved me from Ingar. I hope you understand it is difficult to be grateful when you can't be sure if living will be a blessing or a curse. I can only guess that someday I will know that answer. If we meet again, I will either thank you or kill you."

She read his mind before he could respond. "The reason for your actions doesn't matter. I know you didn't mean to curse me, if that is what you've done. Again, it doesn't matter. Do you really think I will care about your intentions if the magic corrupts me? I only give this to you as a warning. I now take the name of Tabris. If in the future that name becomes infamous, I suggest you sleep lightly. Do not bother to escort me down the mountain. I will find my own way."

She turned about, leaving him with the same blank face. Ryson could only stare into her back as she slowly walked off to a path down Sanctum's slope. He put a hand to his head and rubbed his eyes. As his fingers rode up his forehead and brushed his hair back, he looked toward Lief with his own growing fatigue.

"Do not fret," Lief said almost cheerily. "She has a long path to travel. Even the greatest wizards do not become powerful within a few seasons. She has much to learn, and without other magic casters to teach her, she will indeed have to find her own way. It will be a very long time before she becomes a true threat, and she may never become a threat at all. She may use her powers for the service of the land. If not, she might cause her own undoing while researching a spell. It is not that I wish that, it is only that we can not say what direction she will take. It is not worth your worry."

"Easy to say," Ryson sighed. "With all that's happened I don't need something else to worry about." He looked down at the ground and kicked at the dusty rock with the toe of his boot. "You have to remember, this is not going to be an easy time for me as it is. The magic is going to turn Uton upside down. The people I know, the place I call home, neither are going to adjust well to what's going to happen now. I really don't need to hear her tell me that someday she might want to kill me."

"You speak as if the magic will bring nothing but harm to the land. That is not the case." Lief spoke with more authority now. The algors had completed their work and now stepped aside to let the elf stand. "Look at me. I was near dead, the algors have used the magic to heal me."

"It was the magic that almost killed you," Ryson reminded.

"True, but it was not the magic which injured my ankle, yet that is healed as well."

"What about Tun, and Stephen?" Ryson looked over toward the two fallen forms where Matthew and Jon prepared them for burial. He then looked to the clump of ash which was all that remained of Mappel. He spoke of the elder elf in a pained whisper. "What about Mappel?"

The cheer left Lief's lips, but not his resolve. "Mappel died to save the elves, to save the land of Uton. He will be missed, but his memory will not be lost on useless sorrow. I can not change the things that have happened here. I do not wish to. The sphere is destroyed. The threat to us all is ended. Mappel is now as much a part of the legends as Shayed herself. I can not, will not deny him that."

"I wish I could see it that easily," Ryson confessed. "But right now, I see friends that have died and a great deal of uncertainty."

It was Holli who seized upon this statement. "Uncertainty leads to questions, and questions need answers. Is that not what a delver lives for?"

Lief nodded. "Those are words you should cling to. True enough, the land is changing. You will live a life to see things you might never have dreamed of. What you have grown to expect is vanishing even faster than before. Pure magic is a powerful thing. It can be used in so many ways. No one truly knows what the magic will bring, but I would think it is a wonderful time to be a delver."

Ryson was not given a chance to respond as Lief turned his attention to the approaching Jon and Matthew.

The reader spoke in quiet somber tones. "Jon and I have decided to let Sanctum serve as the final resting place for Stephen and Tun. We will carry them inside through the breach and into the delver tier. Jon has told me there is no danger for us there. Upon our exit, Jon will see to the destruction of the tiers, collapsing the entire internal structure. He will then seal all points of entry. Sanctum will no longer hold secrets of danger, but serve as a monument for those who gave their lives to overcome it. We hope that you will consider joining us

and allowing it to be Mappel's monument as well."

Lief turned to Holli who nodded her head. He bowed his own head in deep consideration before giving his answer. "It seems only fitting. Let human, dwarf, and elf rest together in a place which once symbolized their mistrust for one another."

Saying nothing else, Lief walked somberly to Mappel's remains. He emptied his arrows to the ground and used his quiver as an urn for the ashes.

Matthew watched silently as Holli stepped respectfully to Lief's side. Jon returned to the still form of his brother, and the reader was left beside the delver with only the algors looking on.

"And what about you, Ryson? What will you do now?"

The delver choked back his growing anguish. "I'd like to stay to see the mountain sealed for good," the delver expressed. "I remember when Lief told me how representatives from all the races gathered up here during the first seal, when the sphere was first entombed. I've thought about that image a lot since then. It looks like we're about to seal the mountain again, but for different reasons. Back then, they were moving apart, I think now we're moving together. I'd like to be a part of that."

"You have earned that right, as have all that are here now," Matthew remarked respectfully, "but what of after Sanctum is sealed? What then?"

Ryson scanned the landscape from high atop Sanctum. He could see for leagues. The land was open to him, inviting. "I guess I'll start by taking the algors back home. I want them all to make it back safely. We've had enough death. After that, I have to keep a promise and return to Burbon. I have to tell someone about what happened here, about everything. After that, I don't know. It's like Lief said, the land is changing. I'm going to have to help explain things. People may not believe what I have to say, but they won't be able to dismiss what they've already seen." He stopped to consider his own proposals, stopped to contemplate just how many options were open to him. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, he let a smile cross his lips. "You know, I'm not happy with how things ended here. We're going to bury people I've come to know and respect, but Lief may be right about something else. It may just be a wonderful time to be a delver."

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