

Delver Magic II: Throne of Vengeance

Delver Magic Book II

Throne of Vengeance

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For everyone that believes in Magic,

and for Joan, because you believed in me!

I wish to thank Christine Bell for continuing to review my work in the Delver Magic series. Her generous contributions serve as an inspiration and confirmation that goodwill and thoughtfulness are not as rare as I might otherwise believe. Once more, I would also like to thank you for continuing to read the Delver Magic series.

Chapter 1

King Bol Folarok rigidly kept his back to his son. He stared vacantly at the stone wall before him.

“I am leaving Dunop,” he said. The tone rang hollow, his emotions encased in a vacuum. He spoke as if it were some well-rehearsed line he had already repeated a thousand times. The announcement, though cold, remained firm, and it indicated more than just a temporary absence. The finality of the statement slowly took substance, and it lingered in the dimly lit chamber.

The words fell upon Prince Jon Folarok’s senses like a lead weight. He looked upon Bol’s back, impatiently waiting for further explanation. He was offered nothing. He stared breathlessly into the dark space between him and his father.

This was no time for the king to leave. What could be more pressing than the current and growing unrest? Bol was needed here, needed now. He couldn’t leave. Jon wanted answers, but the back of his father wouldn’t reply. Face me! But Bol would not turn. The dwarf prince squinted as if hoping to see clearly through a dense fog.

“Where are you going?” Jon stammered.

“Does it truly matter?”

The temperature seemed to drop several degrees.

“When are you coming back?”

“I’m not coming back,” King Bol replied with the same sterile tone as before. If he had sympathy for his son’s confusion, he would not show it. His words remained as brittle as frozen twigs. “Not ever.”

“What?” Jon felt his innards tighten, a familiar attack of anxiety. He was not a dwarf that dealt well with conflict or adversity. During the past few days, much of that was heaped upon him. Now, he faced a climax of catastrophe, and the accompanying nervous tension boiled over in his midsection. “What do you mean not ever?”

“I’m leaving Dunop and I will not be returning,” Bol repeated, still not turning to face his only surviving son.

Jon dropped his head and stared at the floor. He could not look at his father’s back for another moment as it only served to tighten the knot in his belly. The pain in his stomach was making it hard to think. His mind nearly went blank. He fought to seize upon something to say, words which might end this absurdity and set everything right. He could find nothing. He blurted out his confusion.

“I don’t understand!”

“It is simple.” Bol extended a hand to the wall in front of him. He patted the polished stone as if hoping to pull conviction from the intrinsic strength of the rock. “I can no longer stay in this place. It reminds me too much of” He held his tongue just before his voice cracked. He paused for long moments until his hollow tone returned. “I have made grave mistakes, mistakes I can not simply forget or erase. I can do nothing but leave.”

Jon knew instantly what his father could not say, knew that the king was referring to the decision that had sent him and his older brother, Tun, to Sanctum Mountain. They were sent to assist the elves, to destroy Ingar’s sphere which held all the magic in the land, but Tun was killed at the hands of a sand giant. That was the moment Jon first felt a hole open in his soul. An empty hollow pain was his from that day on. It now felt as if that hole was expanding.

To Jon, this was madness. He shook his head as if to scatter cobwebs from his face. “You just can’t leave. You’re the king here.”

“Am I?” A note of sarcasm edged Bol’s tone. This time, the king did not swallow his emotion. He let his bitterness spill out with his words. “Will the dwarves here even listen to me anymore? I doubt it. The separatists gain power every day. They grow in numbers even faster. They hate the monarchy and they want me out. They say I’m responsible for freeing the magic and putting them all at the mercy of the spell casters that are sure to follow. They say I have made dark alliances with the elves, and even the humans. They call me the king who murdered his own son.”

“No ...” Jon cried out, but the anguish in his stomach tightened his lips.

Though Bol would still not face his son, he held up his arm to silence any further

outburst. “That is what they say, and far too many believe. I can no longer be king, and I can no longer live with the memories of this place.”

The past which Bol spoke of now exerted its force upon Jon. The memories came crashing down upon the prince. An image of Sanctum’s outline pierced his mind. It once held the sphere, but now it served as a tomb for his dead brother. It seemed, however, that Sanctum’s toll had not yet been fully collected, and it now threatened to take Bol from Jon as well.

In truth, this should not have surprised the prince. He should have almost expected it. He had witnessed his father’s spirit sag since the day he had returned from Sanctum with bittersweet news. Yes, Ingar’s sphere had been destroyed, but Tun had died in the effort. Jon could still remember how the very life began to drain from Bol’s face when he reported the loss.

The entire town of Dunop wept for the death of its heir prince, but none endured as much torment as the royal family. Bol was inconsolable in his grief. From the moment Jon returned to the throne room alone, without his brother, Bol’s collapse spiraled out of control. He walked alone through empty corridors of the palace, muttering to himself. He sought no one, and what remained of his family left him to grieve.

Jon wrapped himself in his own guilt. He struggled to return to his duties, to return to the work he loved in the tunnels. Yet each cave and each dark corridor reminded him of the bowels of Sanctum, the grave of his older brother.

Bol’s wife, Queen Yave, proved even less supportive. She seemed consumed with an inextinguishable anger. She found it more fitting to blame her husband than console him. She was against assisting the elves at Sanctum from the start. To lose the son that was always willing to defend her, support her even against Bol himself, it moved her beyond grief. She burned with fury.

As Yave would make no attempt to comfort her husband, Bol slipped further into his downward spiral. With this came the end of his desire to lead. He allowed rumors to abound and did little to reaffirm his rule. The cry of the separatists was not a whisper. They had called out their near treasonous desires with frequency and fervor. Bol did nothing to quell them, as if he himself believed their venomous lies. And now it seemed, at the very least, he would give them what they wanted. He announced as much as he declared his intentions to Jon.

“I am relinquishing my right to the throne. I have already called for a scribe to prepare the notification. When he returns with the scroll, I will sign it. I, thus, banish myself from Dunop. You, being the only surviving heir, shall become king.”

No other words could have brought greater fear to Jon’s heart. His knees almost buckled at the prospect. An image came to his mind, an image of himself on the throne; weak, indecisive, and confused.

I do not want to be king!

Jon grasped at anything which might change this edict. “If the dwarves would not have you as their king, why will they accept me?”

“They do not blame you,” Bol replied sullenly, almost as if he scorned such unfairness. “I have heard nothing from the crowds against you. Perhaps they think I wished you dead as well, and it was only by luck that you survived.”

Bol steadied himself in a moment of silence. He turned and finally faced his son. His face appeared as hollow as his words. The thick skin under his eyes sank low with dark circles. His beard, ruffled and unkempt, curled unevenly in every direction. The wrinkles on his forehead appeared as if gouged with diamond-headed stone cutters. Though he looked at Jon, his focus seemed haphazard and distant.

“This is how it must be. There is nothing else I can do.”

Bol’s haggard appearance dropped Jon further into despair. He needed a moment to gather himself, but his father’s wary glance and the tightening pain in his stomach gave him no reprieve. He spoke out desperately.

“What of the queen? What about her? Are you abandoning her as well?”

Bol’s reply remained absent of any emotion. “She abandoned me long ago.”

“And what am I to do with her? What do I say? If I am king, she can no longer be queen.”

“She will have to accept this,” Bol replied almost as if he found some satisfaction in this thought. “It should be of no surprise to her, or to anyone. If I

had died, such would be the case. Though it might have been better had I actually died, the result of my leaving is the same. I would not fret over it. She no longer seems content as queen. Just as I have been powerless, she has neglected her duties as well. She may actually be relieved.”

Bol was interrupted by the entrance of the scribe. Four guards and several ministers of the court accompanied him.

“Forgive me sire,” the scribe said with a shaky, uncertain tone. “but I thought it necessary to gather witnesses. In the history of Dunop, no king has ever relinquished the throne. I wanted to make sure no one would doubt your true intentions.”

“No one will question this,” the king responded. “If anything, they will question why it took me so long.”

“Are you sure you wish to do this?” the scribe pressed, wishing to make it clear to the witnesses that it was the king’s true intention and no one else’s. “Perhaps you should wait, take time to consider the proposal?”

“Nothing will change my mind. Let me have the scroll.”

For the first time in his life, the scribe delayed acting upon an order of his king. He stiffened as he opened the scroll, ignoring the king’s open hand. He began to read every word upon the parchment.

Before Tun’s death, Bol would have angrily snatched the scroll from the hand of the scribe, making it clear his orders were to be obeyed without hesitation. Now, however, Bol waited meekly as the scribe read the declaration.

The scribe’s hands shook visibly as he read the words on the parchment. His own voice cracked as he spoke of Bol’s self-proclaimed banishment, the last order of Bol Folarok before he would relinquish his own throne.

The words stung at Jon like a thousand angry bees. He wanted to shout out for the scribe to stop, but he did not. He wanted to flee from the room, but he remained. He even wished to strike out at his father, but his hands remained at his sides.

The witnesses failed to notice the pain of the prince. They watched instead the

expression of their king. They looked for signs of opposition to the shocking declaration, but there was none. They saw only acceptance in his eyes, and his hands, when he eagerly signed the document.

The king, now a king no more, inhaled deeply. He turned his back one last time on his son, and he moved quietly out the door.

Near shock, those gathered in the room turned their attention from the exiting king to Jon.

Jon rubbed his face in despair. In this one moment, he appeared to age many cycles in an instant. As he dropped his hands away from his face, wrinkles etched new lines around his cheeks and forehead. His eyes sank further back into their sockets. His skin, normally pale from the lack of light in the tunnels, now hung from his bones with the shadows of even more pasty whiteness.

He looked to those before him with pleading eyes, and with despair on his lips. “What do I do?”

At first, no one spoke. Finally, Hern Grottman, the minister of construction and a close friend of Jon’s, spoke the only true options. “You must announce the proclamation. You must inform the queen of the edict, and then you must post it for every dwarf to see. You must take the throne.”

Jon groaned. The wail filled the chamber. He looked toward Hern with pleading eyes as the thought of becoming king crushed his very soul. “Is there nothing else I can do?”

Hern paused as he grimaced. He considered what he believed to be the only other option, an alternative which held dire consequences. “You can relinquish your right to the throne,” the minister said guardedly, as if he really did not wish to speak of such a proposal. He saw a gleam of hope rise in Jon’s eyes, but he quenched it almost immediately. “This holds no real hope for you, Jon. You do not have an heir. There is no one else to take your place. If you had an uncle or even a cousin, it might do, but that is not the case. If you do not take the throne, you invite anarchy. We might be able to find someone not far removed from the Folarok bloodline, but I seriously doubt our people will accept such an appointment. The separatists have grown strong in these passing days. They will see such action as an opportunity. I am certain they will rise and appoint their own leader. Do you really wish to risk this? If they take the throne, they will

certainly execute every loyal member currently in your service.”

Jon was unwilling to give up his hope in avoiding the throne. “What about my mother? What about the queen? She can maintain the throne and rule as queen? It has been done before. I would not have to become king and there would be no question as to her authority.”

“But there would,” Hern replied swiftly. “The queen is not of Folarok blood. By marrying Bol she became queen, not from her own heritage.”

“Does that really matter?”

“It has in the past,” Hern noted. “If you had a sister, you could easily relinquish to her, but sadly, such is not the case.”

“This is madness!” Jon argued. “You are basically telling me I have no choice. There has to be another alternative. What if I died in Sanctum along with..., what if I were dead? What then?”

“But you are not dead. And hopefully, you are not thinking of anything so foolish.” Hern bore into Jon’s face with concerned eyes. “Suicide is not the answer.”

“I’m not talking about suicide. I’m just asking what would have happened if Bol left and I was not here to take the throne. What would you do?”

Hern rubbed his thick beard with his own powerful hand. His short stout fingers broke spaces through the flowing hair before he tightened his hand into a fist.

“I suppose we would be forced to choose a new ruling family.”

“Then do that now,” Jon implored.

“We can not, for you are not dead.”

“I could leave.”

Hern clenched his teeth. He wished not to speak in such a manner to his friend, but he was given no alternative. He inhaled and let the full width of his body face Jon with unrelenting resolution. “Is that what you wish? Has the image of

your father walking out of this room, turning his back on you, has this so quickly vanished from your mind? Would you now do the same to the people that depend on you?"

The dwarf guards and the other ministers held their breath in surprise at such words. They stared with fixed astonishment upon Hern's icy features.

Hern ignored the gasps of those around him. He continued with his gaze locked upon the prince who now had to be king.

"Yes, the dwarves of Dunop will survive without you. We will find a solution if that's what you force us to do, but that is not how it should be. I've known you for some time, Jon Folarok, and you are a Folarok. I know you don't wish to be king. You've never wanted the throne, but it is yours now. I truly feel for you, my friend. I see that you are aging before your time. I know this will only exact an even greater toll, but unfortunately, this is not the time for you to simply withdraw. I will say this with no regard for my own well-being; your father has done you and all of Dunop a disservice. He chose to run rather than face his true responsibility. I will hope that you do not do the same."

Hern exhaled heavily before continuing. "I can offer you but one point of solace. If you truly wish to relinquish the throne, wait until the time is proper. First you must quell the fears of our people, you must bring calm back to Dunop. Then, and only then, will it be advisable for us to search for a successor outside the Folarok name. But for now, I see but two choices for you - accept your fate, or leave Dunop as your father has left, with his back turned upon his people."

Hern finished his piece. He withdrew himself a pace from Jon and looked to the ground. He closed his eyes as he waited for Jon's response.

The space which Hern allowed now isolated the prince. Jon felt as if a moat now surrounded him. His shoulders went limp. He spoke, not with resolve, but with grudging acceptance. "It shall be as you say. I will take the throne."

Hern, though grateful for these words, spoke now with a soft and unchallenging voice, a proper tone for a subordinate addressing a king. "Dunop thanks you, and I thank you."

"I need your help, not your thanks," Jon responded sorrowfully.

“I will do all that I can. I will stand by you, I will advise you, if you allow.”

“I need advice. I don’t know what to do.”

Again Hern stroked his beard. “There is much to do. The work shall be in deciding how to do it. The people of Dunop will be advised of the change. I am sure word will spread quickly. As to any formal announcements, let me suggest that as you take the throne you do it as unceremoniously as possible. Without insult to you, I do not believe this is a time for celebration.”

Feeling as if being led to slaughter, Jon could only agree. “No, absolutely no celebration. This is no time of joy, not for anyone.”

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Yave said not a word to her son when he entered her chambers. Her stare bore holes through him. To those that accompanied the new king, she looked at him not as a son, but as more of a shadow. When he announced Bol’s proclamation, her anger rose.

“So, the bastard has left,” the queen sneered. “And now you think you can walk in here and cast me aside as if I don’t count.”

“I am not casting you aside.”

Yave’s face, now crimson with fury, swelled with distorted proportions. “You are as much responsible for Tun’s death as was your father, as were those filthy algors! And now you profit from his death.”

Like a spear thrown through the air, this barb drilled Jon to the core. Though not taking a step back, he slouched after flinching from the pain. “I didn’t want Tun dead. I wish it were me instead.”

“Will that bring him back?” Yave pressed.

“No,” Jon replied meekly. “Nothing will bring him back.”

Yave sneered. She folded stocky arms across her wide chest. She gathered in her anger, and in long silent moments, she sized up the situation before her. Bol was gone, Bol who refused to do what she asked. But would Jon refuse? Her eyes

narrowed under her fairly thick eyebrows.

“So what do you intend to do now?”

Jon straightened as best he could. He spoke in low tones, trying to keep his voice from cracking. “I will have the proclamation posted, but there will be no ceremony. Word will spread of the change. Hopefully, it will quell the angry calls that seem to have been growing.”

“And how will you approach the other matters?” Yave questioned expectantly.

“What other matters?” Jon replied almost defensively.

“If you are to be king, you now dictate policy. What will you do about our dealings with the elves?!” Yave punctuated this with hostility. “Will you continue to have relations with them, even though it was the elves that made the request that brought your brother to Sanctum?”

“We need the elves,” Jon stated with apprehension to his mother’s response. He babbled on, hoping to quell the rising objections which were apparent in his mother’s expression. “The elves provide us with wood for our fires and with food.”

“We can get both ourselves,” Yave declared defiantly.

“You would have me send dwarves to the surface?”

“It has been done before.”

“Not for such constant needs. We are not prepared for such a monumental change, perhaps over time...”

Yave bit down on her lip. She wanted to press the issue, but instead, she pursued another topic which obviously consumed her with greater ferocity. “Will you at least demand their assistance when we deal with the algors?”

Jon blinked. He was not sure what the queen meant, not sure he wanted to know.

His dumbfounded demeanor irritated Yave. Her angry stare narrowed on a point between his eyes. Her voice was as cold as mountain snow. “You do intend to

deal with the algors, don't you? You were at Sanctum. You saw your brother die at the hands of their creation. You can't just let this deed go unpunished."

"It was not the fault of the algors," Jon protested. "It was the sphere ..."

Yave would not let him continue. "It was the algors! They created the sand giants. They failed to control them! Did an algor die in the tier of the dwarves? No! But a dwarf, Tun, died in their tier. They are responsible for the death of a dwarf prince! You can not allow this to go unpunished. We must exact justice."

"There would be no justice in that."

"So you intend to do nothing about this?" Yave questioned in near disbelief.

"What can be done? Nothing will bring Tun back to us."

"But something can be done that will show them all that we still honor his memory!" Yave shouted. "It will show every race that the dwarves will not allow their own to be slaughtered and butchered!"

Jon shook his head in despair. "I can not give you what you ask. A war with the algors will accomplish nothing."

Again, Yave exploded. "And you think you can be king?! I will not allow this! If you don't do what is right, I will not support you. I won't step down."

"You don't have a choice," Jon said sadly. "None of us do."

Yave screamed with vehemence. "Give your orders, post your decrees! And then, see who follows them. You think you can just take over, do you think any one will listen to you?"

Hern, who stood beside Jon, could take the harangue no longer. For the past many days, he had heard the whispers of revolt grow into near shouts. He held his tongue, waiting for Bol to quell the tide of rebellion, an action never taken. Now, with Bol gone and his friend facing the heavy duties of healing Dunop, he would remain silent no longer.

"Enough of this!" Hern demanded. "You are no longer the queen. And you speak to the king with words of treason. I will no longer permit this."

Yave threw a glance of utter poison toward the minister. “You dare...”

“No, you dare!” Hern cut her off angrily, defiantly. “And you dare too much. As I have said, you are no longer queen. Your service is to the new king. If you can not hold your emotions, then do as Bol. Leave Dunop. Leave now, before we face yet another embarrassment.”

It took great determination, but Yave broke her glare from Hern and turned it with impatience towards Jon. “Is this what you want as well?”

Jon did not know what he wanted at this point, only that he did not want to be king. He could only shrug with a pained expression.

Yave would not accept the response. “I will give you one more chance. Will you restore honor to Tun’s name? Will you attack the algors?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then leave me. We have nothing left to talk about.”

Jon simply nodded. He turned from Yave and beckoned Hern to follow.

Though the minister found the situation unresolved, the queen’s intentions still unknown, he would not question the king. Hern turned and followed obediently.

As the two exited and turned up a long corridor, their departure was followed by Yave’s angry shouts

“Tun should be taking the throne, not you! Tun should be king! Do you hear me?! Do you hear me?”

Her screams faded behind Jon as he nearly ran down the corridor and away from Yave.

#

Two days after Bol’s departure, it seemed as if little had been accomplished by his leaving. Word had spread of the change in monarchs, but the shouts of the separatists continued to thrive. The growing mobs in the caverns of Dunop seemed as discontent with Jon as they were with his father. Worse, word of the

queen's defiance had also spread. The separatist leaders took this news to heart and rumors of overthrow were now actually being heard in neighboring cities.

Jon made weary but forthright efforts to bring stability back to the palace. He gathered his ministers. He dismissed those who might doubt his leadership and replaced them with dwarves with long allegiance to the Folarok family. He promoted Hern to Chief Adviser and listened well to all his proposals. He left Yave to herself in the palace, hoping she might eventually swallow her bitterness, but he revoked most of her authority by retiring her staff, except for her personal servants.

As for the separatists, he offered a number of proclamations which he felt might pacify them, or at least take the bite out of their contentions. He announced a desire to hire and train dwarves to venture above ground and collect wood from Dark Spruce Forest. Once dwarves were proficient in doing so, he would reduce trade, and thereby contact, with the elves. He also stated his intentions to prevent any humans from mining within the hills over their heads. Without revealing the location or even existence of their underground city, they would discourage any such attempts. Any exploratory mine-shafts begun by the humans would be blocked with reinforced dwarf construction, and any resources the humans might deem valuable would be removed before they could be found.

These decisions were announced with the hope of bringing a greater feeling of independence and security to the dwarves of Dunop. Unfortunately, they fell short of the separatists ultimate desires. These dwarves wanted complete independence from every other race. They believed that only by gaining the grudging respect for their superiority would the elves and humans truly leave them in peace. They did not want to hide from the humans, they wanted the humans to hide from them. They did not want to rely on the elves for anything, they wanted the elves to come begging to them for gems and metals.

None of Jon's new proposals would accomplish this. Trade with the elves would still be necessary for food. The humans would be tricked into leaving rather than forced into running in fear.

The one aspect, however, that truly allowed the separatists to grow in power was fear, fear of the magic that spilled out of the sphere and now flooded the land. The dwarves could never utilize this power as the other races. Its reappearance was not welcome. The return of the magic truly allowed the separatists to fuel

the fears of the other dwarves, and those fears grew despite Jon's pledge to further Dunop's independence.

Hern recognized this with increasing alarm. Had Bol made these proclamations, they might have sufficed. They might have actually ended the separatist movement. But Bol had left, ran away without dignity, and this was the dagger strike to the heart of the throne. Jon was looked upon as a weak king or not a king at all. The spreading word of Yave's own defiance did much to encourage the scorn heaped upon the new monarch.

Worse yet, Hern was now receiving intelligence that Yave was actually courting the allegiance of the separatist leaders. Mother of the king or not, this could not be tolerated. It had to be stopped, even if it meant her execution. Hern addressed Jon with respect and care over such a delicate matter, but with no less resolve.

They spoke in a small chamber away from guards and other ministers.

"We have a problem," Hern said gravely.

Jon slouched as if another weight was cast upon his shoulders. "What is it now?" His voice carried the fatigue of the past few days.

"I am receiving news involving Yave." The adviser chose his next words very carefully. "Word has already spread of her unwillingness to accept you as king."

"It doesn't matter what she accepts," Jon interrupted. His tone made it clear he did not wish to discuss the situation with his mother. Hern, however, persisted.

"I'm afraid that's not the problem." Hern spoke faster now, trying to speak the full point of his concerns before Jon stopped him again. "The fact is that she does not accept your authority, and others now follow her lead. There is even talk of an alliance between Yave and the separatist leaders. Such an alliance could have only one purpose, to remove you from the throne."

At first, Jon wondered if such a prospect was truly such a misfortune. However, he bit back his desire to escape his new responsibilities and attempted to focus on the validity of Hern's distress.

"How much of this is rumor and how much is truth?"

“My sources are reliable.”

Jon rubbed his wide wrinkled forehead. “What is the extent of the alliance, how far has it progressed?”

“As of now, not very far. I doubt they’ve even met. To my knowledge, Yave has not left the palace. Contact must have been made through couriers, possibly one of her servants.”

“We could question them, dismiss them without telling her.” Jon offered as an easy solution.

“She’d know, and it wouldn’t stop her,” Hern replied stoically. “It would just make her that much more determined to advance the alliance. And it wouldn’t stop the efforts of the separatists to use her against you.”

“Then what should we do?” Jon questioned in near exasperation.

“The only way to stop this and bring authority back to the throne is to have her acknowledge your right to rule.”

“She won’t do that.”

“Then you will have to force her.”

Jon’s face filled with horror. “I can’t do that.”

“Then banish her from Dunop.”

“I can’t do that, either.”

“You’re not leaving us with any other options.”

“There must be something else we could do.”

As he had done many times before this meeting, Hern contemplated the problem and searched for clear solutions. He spoke openly to his king of his own interpretations. “We face two threats. The first is Yave’s unwillingness to accept your authority. The second is a possible move of the separatists using your mother as the means to remove you from the throne. You are obviously against

dealing with Yave to rectify the first problem. The second, however, can not be as easily ignored. I would have preferred that you would have addressed both, but it is as you will. If we are to stop the separatists, and the anarchy that would follow, we must keep Yave from making any deals with them. I can only suggest that you have Yave watched and her servants followed. If we round up those that show involvement in this conspiracy, we might yet end this rebellion without forcing a showdown with Yave.”

As if to immediately oppose this proposition, a shrill scream echoed through the halls. Groans erupted, foreshadowed with the clash of steel. Shuffling footsteps broke softly beneath the wooden door which separated Hern and Jon from the palace corridors. Hern moved for his axe, but he was not a warrior. He fumbled with the handle just as the source of the conflict exploded into the chamber.

The door crashed open. A handful of dwarves broke into the dimly lit room with weapons drawn. Blood stained more than one of the razor sharp axe heads. They took hold of Hern roughly and relieved him of his weapon.

“It seems she has moved quicker than I could have guessed.” Hern grunted.

The rebels shook him and demanded silence.

Initially, Jon watched as if he was but nothing more than some distant spectator. His demeanor changed drastically, however, as four rebel dwarves surrounded him with axe and mace drawn. The new king stood his ground. He stood firm; angry. The burdens of responsibility which burdened his shoulders dissolved with a sneer of his own fury. He glared with defiance, and for the first time since Bol left, he stood with the aura of authority. Finally, he appeared as a king.

He folded his hands across his chest, making no move for his own weapon. His head turned upon his neck as his feet remained firm, cemented in place by concrete will. He looked to each dwarf that confronted him. His tongue was silent as his eyes dared any of them to commit the crime of regicide. Finally, he grew impatient. He wished not to dignify the event by addressing these pawns, but he wished to move this encounter to its conclusion.

“Well?”

The rebels hesitated. They looked among themselves. None answered.

Jon grunted with disgust. “I am going to the throne room. I assume one of your leaders, hopefully more articulate than you, will be waiting there to give his demands.”

Without an eye or a care to the rebels, Jon’s hands dropped to his belt and unhitched his mace. He threw it to the ground, thereby disarming himself. The weapon made a lonely thud against the stone floor.

Jon stepped up to the lone dwarf that blocked his way to the door. “If you intend to stop me, I suggest you swing that axe now. No? Then step aside.” He turned his head back to the others. “And unhand my advisor. He will accompany me. Follow if you will. Your presence means nothing. It’s your leaders I wish to address.”

At first, those holding Hern did not comply, but a hard sneer from the king and his defiance to move without his minister forced their submission. Hern stepped free and moved along side his king. The rebels followed closely behind.

As Jon stepped past slain palace guards, rage filled his brain. He cursed heavily as dwarves well-known to him lay in crumpled heaps near the wide doors of the throne room. The sight of Yave sitting smugly on the throne, surrounded by dwarves unknown to him, did little to ease his anger. He had to bite his lip in order to avoid a heated explosion, but he would no longer cower before his mother. He faced her with shoulders squared and back straight. He looked into her face with unblinking eyes. When he spoke, his voice would not crack. It carried the weight of authority Yave would not recognize.

“What you have done here is criminal.”

Yave was caught off guard. She expected Jon to whimper, not this.

The king disregarded her surprise. “Those that stand with you now also share this crime. And none of this can be forgotten or overlooked. I will make no plea to you, no demand for reason or request for mercy. I know you well enough that such words would be useless. You are stubborn enough and filled with enough hatred to have your way regardless of the means. It seems you have taken the throne. What is your will now? How will you further divide the dwarves of Dunop?”

Yave stared into Jon’s face as if she did not recognize him. “I am once again

queen. I will not divide the dwarves, but bring them together. I will bring them together by seeking justice against those that have dared to wrong us.”

“You are no longer the queen!” Hern shouted. “This is treason.”

The queen placed an apathetic glance upon the advisor, but she would not be insulted by him again. She mouthed an order as if calling for dinner.

“Kill him.”

A rebel by her side drew a broad sword, and with deft precision, pierced Hern through the heart. Hern doubled over and folded into a quickly growing pool of his own blood.

“No!” Jon cried and he attempted to rush to his minister. Several rebels took hold of him and kept him in place. Tears filled his eyes. As he could no longer look at the lifeless body of his true friend, he slammed his eyelids shut and the tears rolled down his cheeks, disappearing into his gray beard.

Yave ignored the anguish of her son as did the remaining dwarves in the throne room. He was powerless, he was no longer king.

The transference of power was illustrated in Yave’s own transformation. Her expression of anger and fury quickly mutated into determination fueled by newfound power. She felt the approval of the rebels that surrounded her, and she chose to feed it. “Let it be known that the rightful ruler of Dunop has retrieved her throne. Let it also be known that all treaties and alliances are null and void. The dwarves of Dunop no longer need to depend on the elves. We will begin collecting all food and wood for ourselves. There will be no more trade with the elves. We will also no longer live with the threat of the humans. Any human mine shafts begun near our city will be destroyed. Any humans found near the entrances to our home will be summarily executed. It is also time we amend the greatest grievance cast upon us. I declare war upon the algors, the ones responsible for the death of Tun Folarok, the true heir to my throne.”

Nodding approvals came from those rebels that surrounded Yave. They had their victory. The dwarves would become self-sufficient and more. They would reaffirm their superiority; they would teach a lesson to any that dared to oppose them. They would no longer hide from the humans, and they would no longer rely on the elves. They truly did not care if Tun’s death was avenged, but they

were more than happy to assert their superiority over the algors as well. They welcomed the war.

A lone voice called out objection.

“What you’re doing is wrong!” Jon heaved.

“Is it? Is it wrong to extract justice? Tun was killed by sand giants created by the algors. You yourself brought that news back from Sanctum. The sand giants were merely the weapons, the algors were the murderers. I will not let this crime go unpunished.”

“What about your crimes?” Jon wailed. The knowledge of what had happened tormented his soul. “Good dwarves lie dead because of your deeds. Who will bring justice to their families that grieve for them?”

The queen remained unfazed. “People that protect or defend murderers create their own grief. They do not require justice.”

“That’s ludicrous,” the dethroned king cried. It was more of a moan than a statement.

Yave grew tired of this talk. “Take him away. We need not kill him. We will imprison him and use him as an example that justice will always be served.”

The rebels pulled at Jon and dragged him from the throne room.

Yave addressed her separatist followers. “This is a dangerous time. Magic is free in the land and a threat to every living dwarf. Magic casters from every race will grow strong with the energy that fills the air. They will wish to attack us. We must show we are not weak, that we are unwilling to allow any race to commit crimes against us. The algors will prove an example for the rest of the land. It is time for us to plan our attack.”

Chapter 2

Before the magic, before the breach in Sanctum, a delver could seek out the wilderness for untold days. There was little to fear. The challenge was in uncovering the secrets of the land, not in avoiding danger. The greatest threat was the weather, or an occasional wild animal, perhaps a bear or a wolf. No real challenge for a delver. But that was then, and things were different since the destruction of the sphere.

Ryson Acumen, the delver responsible for saving the land from Ingar and his talisman, and just as responsible for the subsequent release of the magic, faced these changes every day. The danger of dealing with the unknown, of dealing with dark creatures, and of dealing with magical mutations was now his to assume. He could not ignore these things, and he could certainly not avoid them. His instincts, his desires, forced him into the wilderness, forced him into the peril. He would not disregard his feelings. He could not; he was a delver.

The call was indeed strong, so many shifts in the land. He thirsted to uncover them all, all of the new secrets created by the magic. With each exploration, he was never disappointed. He found subtle alterations in the ground, in the brush, even in the wind. The magical energy that had spilled out of the sphere seemed determined to make its mark upon every inch of Uton, and though these changes offered much for an exploring delver, they also created new evil.

The signs of bizarre and deadly threats manifested themselves in different ways. Each time he scouted the land, each time he explored territory he thought he knew, he found signs of creatures difficult to imagine. Dark creatures long absent from Uton and unable to exist without the free flowing magic were now returning. These were creatures out of nightmares. Monsters. Their descriptions would have been considered the delusions of the insane had the creatures themselves not made their presence so notable. Shags, goblins, and river rogues felt no inhibition in attacking and killing the other inhabitants of the land. Though these creatures had returned to Uton less than a full cycle ago, they already made their mark in the form of hundreds of victims.

On this day, late in the season of harvest, Ryson continued a scout of the hills surrounding his newly adopted home town of Burbon. He surveyed the crest of a small rolling hill. He looked upon the ground with dismay as markings within

the soil revealed unpleasant news.

“Shag tracks,” he noted to himself. “They get closer to the wall every day.”

His hand tested the depth of a single foot print and the hardness of the ground. “He’s a big boy,” he grimaced as he looked around for fresher signs. He calculated these tracks to be made the previous night, but there was nothing around which signaled immediate danger. The hill grass was growing tall. It could hide a large shag if it stayed belly to the ground, but not if it stood to move, certainly not one this large.

“I wonder what it was doing up here?” Ryson questioned. He carefully followed the trail, and mimicked the motions he attributed to each track.

“Small steps. A kneel here at the edge. It must have been hunting. But what was it after?”

The delver stretched his neck as he stood on tiptoes and surveyed the rolling hillsides. His eyes immediately focused upon depressions in the grass.

Without hesitation, he glided down the hillside toward the markings. His own legs left barely a trace in the tall thicket. Light steps lifted and dropped among the tall strands with careful grace, moving them aside with the same gentle precision of a warm southern breeze. When he reached his objective, the true wind shuffled the field back to its natural order. The best of trackers would not have found his path.

Ryson remained alert with both ear and nose as his eyes traced across the older depressions in the grass. Tall strands were pushed out of the way carelessly. They even showed cuts, signs of short swords being used to hack through the thick brush. Ryson had seen these signs before as well.

“Goblins again,” he whispered.

The signs were unmistakable, including small footprints of several clustered together. The tracks clearly indicated movement in a defensive formation, but the winding swath through the field pointed toward scouting activity. It appeared as if Burbon was attracting yet another goblin raiding party.

He followed the trail carefully, hoping to avoid an ambush. His nose could

distinguish no scent fresher than that which lingered from the depressions, but the wind was at his back, any scent ahead of him would be difficult to seize.

He looked back to the top of the hill where he had found the shag prints. A question came to his lips that he whispered with confusion.

“Why didn’t the shag attack? There were only six goblins. He could have had at least two of them for dinner.”

He continued for a few steps more, crouched over with his head and back below the top of the grass that encompassed him. He stepped lightly, making not a sound. It saved his life.

The grass in front of him rustled in opposition to the breeze. Ryson froze. He caught the scent of approaching goblins, heard their guttural whispers. With teeth clenched, he waited for another rustle. When it came, he rolled to his side, moved out of the open swath and into thicker cover.

The noise of his own movements was hidden by the clamorous shuffling of those he hoped to evade. He kneeled as quiet and as motionless as a wary rabbit. His hand found the hilt of the Sword of Decree.

A half-dozen goblins slowly moved into his sight, they were not alone. A single serp walked with them. The sight angered Ryson.

Serps were the malevolent brains behind the goblin raids. Tactical and strategic specialists, they cared little for actual combat. They used the easily manipulated goblins to carry out their blood plans.

According to the legends, serps were an offshoot of the algor race, a tribe which had dabbled in the dark recesses of the magical energy. They wished to break their struggle between individualistic desires and group belonging that made the algors such an unpredictable breed. They had succeeded in that province but left themselves reliant upon the magic. When the magic was swallowed by Ingar’s sphere, their presence faded as well. Now, just like the magic, they were back.

Serps displayed greater characteristics of a snake than the algors, especially about the head and neck. They had arms and legs, and walked upright, but the serps were shorter than the algors, closer in fact, to the stature of a goblin. Serps also had tails, long thin extensions of their back bones that slithered behind them

as they walked.

Ryson now knew why the shag didn't attack. Serps were the most cunning of the dark creatures. It was believed they could actually hypnotize the less intelligent monsters. The legends included stories of packs of shags and river rogues banding together to attack in force. Such behavior among territorial creatures and natural rivals would be impossible without the driving force of a sorcerer's magic or the depraved treachery of a serp's tongue.

Ryson leapt to his feet. The sudden movement caught the goblins off guard. They could not load and fire their crossbows fast enough. The delver drew his sword and the magical blade magnified the light all around them.

Shocked and bewildered, stunned by the glowing blade, the goblins scattered. The six ran off in different direction. They spat as they grumbled words unintelligible to all but their own kind.

The delver knew the battle was not over. He had seen this maneuver before. Goblins would appear to flee in opposing directions only to regroup with crossbows ready. They would form a perimeter around the enemy within range of their arrows. Anyone that stood and watched, thinking the goblins defeated, would be caught in the center of a multi-pointed crossfire.

Ryson did not remain still. He took only a moment to issue a notice to the serp that recoiled in front of him.

"I'll be back. I'm not finished with you."

With his last word echoing behind him, he sprinted off to the east. He sheathed his sword as he ran so as not to carry a beacon for the other goblins to take aim. A blur through the grass, he easily caught the first goblin that struggled through the tall thicket. He relieved the snarling creature of its crossbow and its short sword. Since he did not need another goblin prisoner, he had caught many in the past season, he simply turned away from the spitting, hissing creature. He tossed the crossbow and the sword far off into the grass as he pressed upon the next closest goblin. Again, he disarmed the creature only to ignore it. He was forced to do this only once more as the final three realized their plight and ran off out of range.

With the goblin threat removed, Ryson deftly moved back to the original spot of

confrontation. Though he had no desire to capture a goblin, the serp was another matter. He had not yet gained a serp prisoner, and it would do him well to earn one now. Unfortunately, the serp was gone.

Ryson felt no distress, for he knew the creature was not far off. Serps were not known for their physical prowess. While they were mentally superior to almost every other dark creature, they could do little in the way of fighting, or even simply running away.

Almost instantly, he spotted the retreating tracks of the serp. His eyes followed the path to a nearby patch of tall grass. He nearly laughed at the futile attempt to hide or perhaps even ambush. Ryson bent down and picked up a small rock. He threw it gracefully at the tall brush. The result was not as he expected.

One of the largest shags he had ever seen rose from the thicket and it showed an eagerness to engage the delver. It stood over twice Ryson's own height and carried the bulk of an ox. It snarled as its hands flexed with a desire to crush the delver's skull.

Ryson was more than surprised, he was confused. How could he have missed the presence of such a monster? The question, however, answered itself as Ryson noticed thick layers of grass clinging to the matted fur. In places, the monster looked more like a walking pile of hill grass than a shag. Beyond that, he could almost smell the lingering magic that seemed to surround the beast. The serp's sorcery had helped camouflage the shag from both Ryson's eyes and nose. The delver made a mental note to be more careful for such tricks in the future, but for now, the shag was closer than Ryson felt comfortable. It roared in anger. Behind it, Ryson could hear the snicker of the serp.

Again, the delver found anger. This time, unfortunately, he could do nothing. He was no match for a shag, especially one of this size. The hope of capturing the serp faded with another roar from the shag's drooling mouth. Ryson grimaced, but would not accept total defeat. If a serp was out scouting the hills around Burbon, it was obviously interested in a raid. He decided to put a damper on such plans as he yelled a warning before retreating.

"I know why you're here, serp. This shag might protect you from me, but it won't help you attack Burbon. I'll have the guard doubled, and I'll be watching for any signs of goblin movements. You won't get close to Burbon's wall, let

alone past it.”

It sounded an empty threat as Ryson backpedaled away from the slowly encroaching shag, but he knew it would more than suffice. The serp would certainly call off any plans of an immediate raid. They didn't like being outmaneuvered, and they didn't like losing their pawns because they had forfeited the element of surprise. Since Burbon would now be tipped off to a possible strike, the serp would simply have to redesign its plans.

Ryson could not see the serp for it remained hidden behind the shag, but he knew it had heard him. With that, he turned his back on the monster, and retreated in a blur.

After putting a good distance between him and the shag, the delver pulled to a halt as he reached a lonely winding road which cut through these hills. The path wasn't used much anymore, not by normal citizens, not while shags and goblins waited in the surrounding area. It existed now only for patrols on horseback.

Ryson stood at the road's center, away from the tall grass which crept up to its sides. He first checked all about him for immediate threats. He found none.

Feeling secure, he placed his concentration on what the serp and goblins might have been after. To the northeast, his keen eyesight picked up a trace outline of the newly constructed wall which surrounded Burbon. He was now thankful it was built so fast. He looked to the gate towers which rose higher than the hills. He gauged the distance from where he stood to the southern tower platform, and then factored in the last position of the serp and the goblins.

“They were probably checking for blind spots,” he noted to himself.

His eyes scanned the hills that rolled directly south of Burbon. He paced about as his focus fell upon a ridge that might offer what the serp desired.

“They'd be able to get awfully close if they approached from that angle. We'll have to build another tower.”

The need for more construction forced him to consider the amount of work already completed since he had moved to Burbon; a fortress wall and five towers. Now they would need a sixth. He knew the people wouldn't complain. They accepted, even invited, the rigid requirements that would keep them safe.

Burbon was one of the last outposts before Dark Spruce Forest, and nothing separated it from the wilderness which seemed to generate the existence of so many threats. If another tower was needed, what else could they do?

He thought of the previous town he called home, Connel, and how different it was from Burbon. Most of it was simply due to size. Connel probably housed thirty times the amount of people as Burbon, and it included farmland that stretched out beyond the safety of walls or towers. Connel didn't even bother with defensive construction. They simply forged an army. Platoons would protect the rims of the farmlands as delvers would scout the perimeter on an ongoing basis. Hundreds of men stood armed and ready at any one moment within the city to repel any goblin raid.

Such a thing was just not possible for Burbon, there were too few people. They had to make the most of their small force of guards. That's why they all accepted the new wall and the towers, and it was why they accepted him, the only delver to live in their midst. They needed him more than Connel needed him. His explorations gave them warning, probably saved them from being overrun completely. There were just simply too many breeding grounds nearby for anyone in Burbon to dismiss the need for scouts. The Fuge River, the hills, especially the forest; all held danger.

The delver took off for Burbon's main gate. He paused only at the entrance to warn the guards of the serp's presence in the field. They tensed at the warning, but he bid them to be at ease. He assured them the serp wouldn't attack now. It was too early in the day and the serp had been uncovered. Still, he would pass the news to Sy, the captain of the guard, before night fall.

First, he wished to see Linda, the true reason he now made Burbon his home. He went immediately to the Borderline Inn. He expected to find her behind the bar, but he found only her substitute who said Linda had left to find him.

A twinge of anxiety took a nibble at the delver. She never went looking for him at midday, when he was normally out on patrol. She knew he would be impossible to find. If she needed to see him, it must have been for something of great importance. His curiosity pressed upon his thoughts. He left for his house, thinking she would try there after she found he was not with Sy.

He moved quickly up to the small cottage door, but he paused before entering.

His ears picked up a conversation. Low tones. Seriousness. His vast memory allowed him to recognize the second voice immediately. He threw open the door with unbridled enthusiasm. He saw Linda sitting across from more than just an old friend. The guest looked just the same as when Ryson left him on Sanctum's peak.

"Lief!" the delver nearly shouted. "Lief Woodson."

With a huge smile, Ryson nearly leapt toward his guest. He wanted to say so much, he couldn't get any words out of his mouth. He took Lief's hand with a joyous shake.

Linda stood up to meet her fianc❖. She took his free hand and quickly explained.

"He came to the bar first. He was looking for you. Apparently when you last saw him, you told him there was someone special at the Borderline. I only hope you were talking about me. I wanted to help him find you and I didn't want an elf looking around on his own. We went to see if you were with Sy, but some of the guards said you were still out on a scout. I figured this was the best place to wait for you."

Ryson would not have been able to hide his happiness had he wanted to. "It's great to see you, Lief. Godson, it seems like only yesterday, but then again it seems like forever. I never would have believed to see you here. I remember how much you hated being in Connel. I can't imagine this place is any better for you. They didn't give you any trouble at the gate, did they?"

Lief shook his head. "No, they thought I was just another human."

"Another human? Not likely." He turned to Linda. "This is the first elf I ever met. I didn't even know elves existed, and he just dropped out of a tree."

"I know," she replied with a smile. "You've told me a hundred times."

Ryson swerved his attention back to Lief. The delver wore an excited grin. Here before him was a friend, but also an elf. Indeed, he had tried to explain it to Linda a hundred times before, but he never believed words would do it justice. Now, he had a much better way. "Hey, do me a favor. Show Linda your ears. She's never seen an elf before."

Lief sighed, but acquiesced. He pulled the long brown hair away from his ears, revealing their pointed tips.

Ryson looked to Linda. “Amazing?”

“Not for me. You’ve told me enough about elves and dwarves. I never doubted you. You can’t expect me to be as shocked as you were. I’ve already been through things like goblin raids.” She looked towards Lief. “You’ll have to forgive him. Since we’re getting married, he wants me to know everything he knows. Some people might get excited at the sight of an elf, but I know how much you helped keep him alive. I’m more grateful to you than anything else.”

“Married?” Lief offered a wide smile to the couple. “Congratulations to you both.”

Linda returned the smile. She gave Ryson a slight hug as her hand slipped around his waist. “Thank you. We don’t have a date yet. Everyone, even me, is having a hard time adjusting to the changes. We thought it would be better if we gave it some time for everyone to adjust to what’s happening. There’s so much going on right now.”

“More than you know,” Lief added

Ryson immediately caught the tone of this grave announcement. For the first time, he truly examined the elf’s expression. There was joy to be sure, joy in seeing a friend, but there was also concern, attention on a not so distant problem. He also considered what would make the elf leave Dark Spruce. What would make Lief willingly enter the walls of Burbon?

“You’re not here to just say hello, are you? What’s going on?”


Lief cleared his throat, as if reluctant to state the true purpose of his visit. “I’m afraid there is a great problem arising.”

“Again?”

Lief acknowledged the reference to their last problem; the trek through Sanctum’s core, the battle with Ingar, and the final destruction of the sphere. “No, this is not quite the same. In truth, this does not even really affect the humans, and only to a slight degree the elves. But it does involve us. You and

me. It involves all who stood together within Sanctum to save the land. It has much to do with the dwarves and what happened to Tun.”

Ryson grimaced at the memory.

Linda’s focus shifted from the elf to her fianc. She felt a tenseness growing in his body. She knew the pain he felt when he recalled those who died to save the land from the sphere. Tun was one of three to give their lives at Sanctum, and it was a memory that would always haunt Ryson. She turned back to Lief and spoke up to prevent a lingering silence. “Ryson told me of what happened in the mountain. Tun died while helping to destroy the sphere. Why is that causing a problem?”

Not knowing how much Linda knew of the events, Lief recounted the most important highlights. “Tun was a prince, the son of King Bol and Queen Yave, rulers of Dunop. Tun was killed by a sand giant, a creation of the algors. Jon, Tun’s brother who was also with us in Sanctum, reported the event upon his return to Dunop. Things spiraled out of control after that moment.

“Things were hard enough in Dunop as it was. The dwarves were split about helping destroy the sphere at the very start. Many of them are afraid of the magic. When Jon returned with the sad story, the magic was already loose, and the dwarves were ready to blame anyone for their fears. The king became an easy target. It seems Bol could not live with the guilt of sending his son to his death. He relinquished the throne to Jon and banished himself from Dunop.”

“So Jon’s now the king?” Ryson interrupted. His delver instincts kicked in as he attempted to imagine the circumstances in the underground city. He openly wondered of the sequence of events and Jon’s ability to lead. “That has to be tough, facing the death of his brother and now his father leaves. How’s he doing?”

“He is no longer the king,” Lief replied gravely. “Queen Yave would not support her younger son. I am told she blames him as much as she blames the algors.”

At first, Ryson appeared dumbfounded. Nothing could be further from the truth. He shook his head as if to get the words from his mouth. “That’s ridiculous. Jon had nothing to do with it, and neither did the algors. The sphere prevented the algors from controlling the giants. Tun attacked on his own. That’s why he died.”

“I am afraid that is not how Yave sees it.”

“What has she done?”

“She made a deal with the separatists, a group of dwarves that want to end all ties with every other race. That is why I said it affects the elves only slightly and the humans not at all. The humans have no working relation with the dwarves. You would probably not even notice the change. As for the elves, we will see an end to trade with Dunop. It is not such a major concern. A setback to our relations, yes, but we will certainly survive without their assistance. If it all stopped there, I might not even be here now, but breaking ties will apparently not satisfy Yave’s anger. She has declared war against the algors.”

Ryson rubbed his chin. He had known of wars between humans, but until this moment, he never truly considered a war involving the other races. He had difficulty envisioning what it might mean, a war between algor and dwarf, but what he could imagine did not sit well with him.

“You said Jon was no longer the king. What happened, and why can’t he stop this?”

“Rebellion, I’m afraid,” Lief replied. “Yave’s deal with the separatists included a violent overthrow of Jon. Apparently, separatist warriors stormed the palace, killing many dwarf guards loyal to the Folarok name. Jon has been imprisoned by his own mother. As far as the reports go, he is still alive, but it is difficult to confirm. If he is a prisoner, he would be kept in a palace cell. The separatists are careful, and they are making sure there is no challenge to Yave’s power. She retains her throne as queen and now rules without much resistance. This is no true surprise, she was the queen under Bol’s reign and many dwarves still recognize her as the true leader. Those loyal to Jon and the Folarok name are too few in number to provide any true threat. As long as Yave appeases the separatists, she will remain in power.”

“You’re certain of all this?”

“Very certain. Through the period of Bol’s departure to Yave’s rebellion, we continued to trade with dwarves who still saw elves as their allies. We received reports. We are still receiving reports now, though not as many. Some dwarves see Yave’s plans in their true light, as nothing more than a thirst for irrational revenge. They see a pointless loss of life and wish to do anything to stop it.

Some are acting as spies and are calling for whatever we can do. They must remain careful, however, for if they are caught reporting to elves, they will surely be executed.”

Ryson sorted quickly through the new information. He tapped his fingers together lightly as he tried to place things in a logical order. “What is it the loyal dwarves have in mind? If the separatists are entrenched in Dunop and the majority of dwarves accept Yave’s rule, I see little that can be done. I mean, what could we do? Send a war party of humans and elves into Dunop to free Jon and restore him to power? I doubt we’d be successful. We’d be fighting in their environment, upon their home ground. They’d probably slaughter us. And even if we did succeed in sending a raiding party to free Jon, what would that truly accomplish? Do you think any dwarf would trust him again if they see humans helping him? No, this is a civil war. The dwarves have to call for Jon’s return. We can’t force it on them.”

“I agree, as do the elves of my camp. We feel for Jon and those dwarves that remain our allies, but we should not try to exercise our will upon Dunop. In the long run, it will bring no good. Those dwarves that call for our help also grudgingly agree, but they do seek another option. One that I might have undertaken anyway.”

“And what’s that?”

“To warn the algors before the war begins,” Lief stated firmly. “They believe that if the algors have been forewarned, they can prepare for the inevitable battle. If a dwarf assault is unsuccessful, it might create an embarrassment for Yave. The dwarves are stubbornly proud. A loss to the less physically capable algors would certainly cause such an embarrassment. Yave might be forced to relinquish.”

Ryson eyed Lief dubiously. “You don’t really believe that, do you? You don’t really think a dwarf would give up if she was beaten in one battle?”

Lief shook his head. “No. It will only fan her anger. She will rage with the desire to attack with a greater force.”

“Then why do you want to do this?”

“For the same reason you would, to warn the algors. Tell me truthfully, now that

you know what is happening, do you not feel honor bound to help the algors that stood with us at Sanctum?”

Ryson did not hesitate in answering. “Of course I do, but how will that solve what’s happening in Dunop?”

“It won’t, but as you say, that is as much a civil matter as anything else. We may not be able to solve the dwarves’ problem, but at least we can save the algors from a slaughter. When we removed the sphere from Sanctum, we overcame the mistrust of every race. That was a proud moment. Now Yave threatens to soil that moment. She wishes to use Tun’s death as a battle cry, to undo what we truly accomplished that night within Sanctum. That is something we can not allow. If there must be a battle between the dwarves and algors, let it be over the truth. Let it be over Yave’s madness and her thirst for revenge, not over her delusions of what happened in Sanctum. They are not the same thing.”

“I can’t argue with you,” Ryson admitted. “I just wish there was a way to stop the whole thing.”

“For now, let us be content with warning the algors. That should be the first step in any case.”

Again, Ryson pieced together the information given to him along with Lief’s very presence within his house. “So you want me to help you find the algors?”

“You know the way. I would suggest we go to the sandstone edifice you described as their meeting place. The word can be spread there the fastest. I expect you still remember exactly how to get there.”

“Of course I do, but maybe I should go alone. I’ll move faster that way.”

Lief’s jaw tightened. “Are we going to have this argument again? Why do you insist on wasting our time with this? I owe as much to the algors as you. Why do you think you always have to go alone?”

“It’s what I do,” Ryson responded firmly. “Besides, the desert isn’t a kind place for elves. Ask Holli. She’ll tell you.”

“She has told me,” Lief responded indignantly. “And she will also accompany us.”

The thought of Holli Brances broke Ryson's tension. He recalled his encounters with the elf guard. Above all, he imagined her stoic preparedness, her ability and willingness to deal with nearly any calamity. With Lief and Holli at his side before, they performed the impossible. They had removed the sphere from Sanctum and defeated Ingar. How much harder would it be to warn the algors and prevent a war? He thought he might share his own relief with his elf friend, and he considered a tactic which might remind them both of times when they overcame the truly insurmountable.

"I see. Well I know there's no point in arguing it any further. I know how stubborn you both can be. You never took my advice, even when you knew I was right. I might as well save my breath." Ryson paused. He hid a grin as he waited to see Lief's reaction. It had been a long time since he had spoken with the elf, and he wondered if Lief still swayed with the same emotional outbursts.

Lief surprised the delver. The elf seemed ready to give him a tongue lashing, but instead he held himself. He grunted as he swallowed his annoyance. He looked to Linda. "If you are truly going to marry this delver, I assume you want him safe?"

"Sometimes I wonder," Linda responded playfully. She remembered how Ryson spoke of Lief's outbursts. She had known her fianc❖ well enough to see that he was only trying to goad the elf into one of these flare-ups. She decided to help their guest instead.

Lief nodded to the delver. "Then I suggest you order him to have two elves escort him."

"So ordered," Linda laughed.

Lief eyed Ryson with a smug expression of victory. "There, you are now truly outnumbered."

Ryson surrendered. "I'm always outnumbered. You surprise me, Lief. You handled that almost diplomatically. What happened to your quick temper?"

"I have learned to control it, but only when I want to."

Ryson smiled broadly. "You know, it really is good to see you. You remind me of the good that came out of the sphere."

Lief bowed slightly. “Thank you. And you remind me that even the stubborn can be swayed.”

Ryson grinned. “How about Holli? Where is she now?”

“She’s waiting outside the wall.”

“Really? Why didn’t you bring her with you?”

“She would not feel comfortable enclosed within the walls. She would also find it difficult to hide her elf guard training. What do you think would happen if your human guards at the gate saw her constantly searching for hidden threats?”

“They’d get nervous.”

Lief nodded in agreement. “And they would probably keep us. No, it was better to leave her where she is. She is scouting the perimeter.”

Ryson brought a hand to his forehead. “Godson, I forgot about the serp. It was checking the walls with a group of goblins.”

“If you’re worried about Holli, there is no need...” Lief began.

Ryson raised a hand to interrupt the elf’s words. “I’m not worried about Holli. I was with her in the Lacobian desert. I know she can take care of herself. It’s here, Burbon, that’s the problem. You see, I’m the only delver here. After seeing that serp, I should be spending the next several days scouting for goblin movements.”

Lief shook his head as if to emphasize that this was not truly possible. “But we must leave now, and we can not leave without you. We may not be able to find the algors. Holli believes she might find the way, if absolutely necessary, but she’s not a delver scout. There is a distinct possibility we might get lost.”

“I can’t let you go alone,” Ryson exclaimed. “Getting the algors involved is as much my responsibility as anybody’s. And I wouldn’t want to live with the thought of you getting lost out there.”

“I wish I could give you some advice in this matter,” Lief stated sincerely. “but the truth is the algors must be warned, and I can not risk losing even a day in

waiting. I really don't know how quickly the dwarves plan to mobilize."

"I know, I know."

"Let Bourbon's guard handle the goblins," Linda announced suddenly. It held the edge of an order.

Ryson looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

She did not back down from her statement.

"You can't handle everything yourself. If you're needed to warn the algors, then you have to go. You can't keep trying to do everything at once."

"I'm not trying to do everything at once," Ryson protested. "This is just a bad time. If I hadn't seen the serp, I probably wouldn't worry about leaving."

"Yes, you would. It's only been a couple of seasons, but I already know you too well. You think the safety of this town is your sole responsibility. Don't deny it."

"It is my responsibility," Ryson stated without hostility. He was not trying to argue the point, only stating a fact.

Linda remarked on truths of her own. "But not yours alone. There are others here that can protect Bourbon. Sy, Enin, the guard. Sy can come up with scouts of his own. They won't find everything you could, but they'll let the goblins know we're waiting for them. I've learned enough about them from what you've told me that they won't attack."

Ryson could not argue the point. He looked to Lief. "She's probably right."

"Then is it settled?" the elf asked. "You will lead us to the edifice in the desert and together we will warn the algors?"

"I guess so."

"The sooner we leave the better," Lief nudged anxiously.

"I can leave now. I just have to make one stop at command and let Sy know what's going on."

Ryson looked to Linda with a somber smile, trying to mask his sadness in saying goodbye. "I'll be gone for at least five days, but you better count on seven or eight, maybe longer. I guess you're getting used to this by now."

"I'll never get used to it, but I'm learning to accept it." She grabbed him around the neck and embraced him tightly. "You take care of yourself."

"I will," he whispered and grudgingly moved away from her to the door. "I'll tell Sy to keep an eye on the house and the tavern."

Reluctantly, he turned from Linda and stepped out the door. He walked briskly down the path to the road, trying not to look back, trying to curb the growing emptiness which assaulted his being. His unease in leaving was a recently discovered sensation.

Before he committed himself to Linda, he found it so easy to simply up and leave, to go off into the wilderness without a care. Now, it was never easy. Now, an anchor existed. Leaving Linda caused him pain. A hole opened in his center, a hole which would not be filled as long as he was away from her.

Still, he remained a purebred delver, and the need to explore would always call to him. As he looked to the open skies to the southwest, he thought of the waiting desert and the algors. Surely, this would fill his craving for exploration. His steps carried him away from the front of his home, and he considered the contradiction of his predicament. Even as something called for him to stay, the gnawing desire to explore beckoned him to leave. Like a dog that pulled on the leash held by its beloved master, Ryson felt opposing forces exert themselves upon his soul. He wished to run free, but he did not want to leave that which he loved. In days to come, he would learn to appreciate this, see it as more of a blessing than a curse. Even now he began to understand the true triumph in his mixed feelings. Upon leaving this day, his delver soul would sing, but that part of himself which he gave to Linda would bring him back to Burbon. He finally had a true home.

He was silent in his thoughts for but a moment. He walked with the glide of his delver heritage, Lief at his side. He turned to his companion with the curiosity that was his nature. He wished to consider something else, something other than his leaving. He unleashed a general question in order to discover news from a friend he had not seen in over a season.

“So what’s been happening with you? I’ve scouted some portions of Dark Spruce, the sections closest to here. I’ve met up with some elf guards. They seem to know who I am, but they don’t like to talk about their camps. Security, I guess.”

“Changes, good or bad, abound everywhere,” Lief responded mysteriously. “My camp is no exception. The elves are learning to live with these changes. We face new threats, mostly in the way of river rogues and goblins.”

“How are you getting on without Mappel?” Ryson did not want to stir any sadness with the memory of the loss, but he imagined the death of a camp’s elder had to cause significant shifts.

Lief remained tight-lipped. “Mappel will always be remembered proudly. We learn to live with each loss.”

He was less than convincing. There was something behind his words which perked the delver’s curiosity. It was not sadness over Mappel’s death, but something else, and Ryson pressed for the information.

“Does that mean the camp is more or less reacting normally to all this? I mean, whatever you might consider normal with the return of the magic and now this crisis with the dwarves?”

Lief side-stepped the issue by pointing out his own observations since entering Burbon. “With the events of Sanctum, we all had to expect that life in this land would never be the same. I look about this human town and see the proof for myself. The wall that surrounds this dwelling area is of new construction, as are the towers.”

“That reminds me,” Ryson interrupted. “I have to tell Sy of the need for a new tower. We seem to have a blind spot the goblins will be more than willing to utilize for their own advantage.”

“That is exactly what I mean.” Lief played upon the issue. “We must now concern ourselves with matters previously unimportant. I doubt there was a need for towers before the sphere was destroyed. Humans never had to deal with goblin raids. It is almost impossible to remember what things were like before the sphere breached its tomb. But it is like this all over. Every inhabitant of the land must learn the new way.”

Lief stopped and bid Ryson to do the same. The elf turned about to make sure they were far from Linda and the delver's home. Seeing that no one was in ear shot, he spoke somberly. "I did not wish to bring this up in front of your betrothed. No need for her to worry, but you should be warned of the potential threat. Our objective is simple, but our path is not. As you know, to reach the algors we must cross the Lacobian. The desert is now a very dangerous place, very different from when you last crossed it to escort the algors home. It has become a place for novice sorcerers and wizards to practice their new found skill. As elves, we are more sensitive to the use of magic than perhaps any other race. Many have felt the surge of power in the direction of the Lacobian. We have sent scouts to the rim of the desert. They have all reported back with little information, but they remain certain that farther in the desolation, magic casters are honing their skills."

"Do you think they pose a threat to us?"

"Who knows for sure? They may ignore us. They may hide from us. Or, they may use us to further practice their powers. I would doubt any have had time enough to learn the arts to be truly dangerous, but there are always exceptions."

"I guess we'll just have to stay away from them."

"That is exactly why I have told you this. You must remain alert to this possibility, and although reaching the algors is our primary concern, I do not wish to stumble across a bold magic caster."

"I'll do my best to steer us clear."

"I know you shall."

The two moved on under Ryson's direction. They came to a square brick building with no sign. It was the command post and Ryson guided Lief inside.

Chapter 3

At the guard headquarters, Ryson moved past two soldiers with Lief at his side. The guards let them pass into Sy's office, each nodding in recognition at Ryson and taking long glances at the tall, thin stranger that walked with him.

Sy Fenden, captain of the guard, just dismissed a subordinate with new duties. He looked toward Ryson with an expression of welcome, unlike the first time he met the delver. But he, like everyone else in Burbon, had gained a new appreciation for Ryson now that the magic seeped through the land.

"Good day, Ryson." He made a quick nod to the stranger. "Friend of yours?"

The tone was pleasant and accommodating, but also somewhat demanding. Sy had maintained the duties of mayor and chief officer ever since the first goblin attack on Burbon. When the people no longer trusted the duly elected officials, they had turned to the town guard for protection, as well as leadership. This newcomer was unknown to him, and it was his duty to check all strangers.

"Hey, Sy!" Ryson greeted the captain as he stepped in the office, allowed Lief to move past, and then shut the door. "Yes, this is definitely a friend."

Friend or not, Lief immediately struggled with the environment. It was hard enough for an elf that lived in the wilderness of Dark Spruce to be surrounded by the fortified wall and the myriad of buildings of Burbon. Now, he stood in a room with no windows and only one door, which was now closed. He could deal with the caves of the dwarves easier than he could deal with this. This environment was manufactured, unnatural. Straight even lines, squared corners, perfectly aligned patterns of bricks; it was so different from the creative, nearly whimsical pattern of the intertwined branches of his true home. When the trees grew together, they did so with a strange balance between confusion and harmony. The construction of the humans tossed aside this balance and accented the straight, level and organized. It was disorienting to the elf.

Ryson sensed Lief's displeasure. One glance at the elf revealed the taut muscles, the eyes searching for an opening to the sky. If Ryson yelled out suddenly, he imagined Lief might jump to the ceiling. The delver took no pleasure in this and spoke quickly to hasten to the point of the meeting. He made introductions first.

“This is Lief Woodson. Lief, this is Sy Fenden.”

Lief bowed in greeting.

Sy’s eyes fell upon the elf with great interest. “Lief Woodson? The elf? The one from Sanctum?”

“The same,” Ryson acknowledged.

Sy immediately threw out a firm hand. He was meeting an elf, a member of a race he never knew existed until a few seasons ago, but he was also meeting what he considered a soldier, a good soldier. Ryson reported every event which occurred within Sanctum, Lief performed beyond the call of duty, acted heroically in the face of true danger. That kind of bravery immediately earned Sy’s respect, and he felt no hesitation in offering his praises.

“Ryson told us what happened in Sanctum. I can’t say that I understand it all, but I’ve learned to trust what he says. You were one of the first to recognize the danger. You knew something had to be done. Everyone here is in your debt.”

Again, Lief bowed. “Thank you, but there are no debts.”

Sy would not allow his praise to be revoked. “Be that as it may, I know I want to thank you.”

Once more, Ryson spoke quickly. “There are some new problems. It seems there are repercussions from our endeavor at Sanctum.” Ryson searched for the words to explain. They were not easy to find. “It’s difficult to explain, but it seems the dwarves ..., remember what I told you about Tun, the dwarf who died? Well, the dwarves aren’t happy with the algors. They’re apparently going to start a war.”

To his credit, Sy showed no sign of doubt and did not ask for lengthy explanations. He immediately focused on his primary responsibility.

“What threat does it have upon Burbon?”

Ryson shrugged. “As far as I can tell, none.”

“Wars often spread,” Sy said with a knowing tone.

“But the dwarves live underground and the algors live in the desert. I think, at least for now, it’s not a threat to us. Not to you anyway.”

Sy picked up on the reference. “But it is to you?”

Ryson grudgingly nodded acceptance. “Lief and I are going to warn the algors. We’ll be gone for a few days.”

Now it was clear, clear why the delver was so uneasy. Sy considered the thought of defending Burbon without the delver’s services. He knew there would be times when the delver wouldn’t be available, but he was as wary of the coming dormant season as anyone else. At first, he grasped for options.

“Is this something that can wait?”

“No, the algors have to be warned as soon as possible.”

“I was hoping that you might be able to wait until I get another delver from Connel.”

“Too long,” Ryson replied sadly.

Like a true strategist, a true commander, a true soldier, Sy accepted the situation. He nodded his head, punctuating his acceptance. “We’ll be fine. We’ll put men on horseback, send them out in patrols of four, armed to the teeth. I’ll have to assume the goblins will know you’re gone. They’ll look to take advantage, I’ll make sure there isn’t any. I can put lookouts on the walls as well as the towers.”

Ryson was about to explain the presence of the goblins in the hills when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Sy did not even glance toward the entrance. “Come on in, Enin.” And Enin opened the door and stepped through.

Sy felt the need to explain his apparent supersensory perception to the elf. “I know his knock.”

“He has very good hearing,” Ryson added. “Almost as good as mine.”

Before Ryson could make an introduction, Enin’s attention centered directly

upon Lief. “This is an elf. Am I correct, am I correct?”

“Yes, Enin. You’re correct. This is Lief Woodson, an elf.”

Enin was delighted, not at meeting an elf for the first time, but for his own perceptions. “I knew I felt something strange. You came in earlier, right? Around noon time, right?”

Lief looked to Ryson with confusion.

“He’s a practicing wizard,” Ryson answered the unasked question. “He’s been focusing on sensing races other than humans, kind of acting like an alarm system. He’s been experimenting with spells so we can be prepared for goblin raids.”

“It’s not really a spell, not really,” Enin interjected. “More of an aura I allow to surround myself. The magic seems to bend differently around different races, especially the ones that need the magic to walk on the land. You didn’t bend the magic like that, but you were different, different like our delver friend, not the same as humans.”

“He’s like a spider. If something other than a human walks in his web, he’ll know.” Ryson then turned to Enin. “By the way, I came across a serp in the hills today. He was with six goblins and a shag. Did you sense any of that?”

Enin displayed unhappiness. “No, not at all.”

“They probably didn’t come close enough to the wall, but they were out there.”

“Missed them, huh?” Enin rubbed his chin as his concentration seemed to fade out of the very room. He began to chatter, talking to Ryson at first but then only to himself, ignoring everyone around him. “I don’t seem to have great range. I know when they get close to the wall, and certainly when they’re inside, but not too far beyond. I wonder why? I guess I couldn’t sense things forever. I’d go crazy. I’d sense every creature in the land, and then what good would I be? I’d just be confused. But I’d like to increase my range. I should be able to sense the hills. I wonder if I could come up with a spell which would energize me, give my senses a boost. No, that wouldn’t be any good. Spells take energy. I would only be able to boost it for short periods. That might be helpful if we had an idea when they were coming, but it wouldn’t be any good for general surveillance.

Still, I should consider this, a spell which would increase the range of my senses. Even for a brief period, that might be a very useful spell. How would it go? Wind and earth? Air might even be better. Mix of a sight spell, expansion, and energy? I don't know. I better be careful with this one. I might accidentally send out a force wave."

"That would be helpful," Sy said sarcastically.

Enin heard Sy's voice but not his words. He snapped back to the here and now with a confused expression.

Ryson noted the scrutinizing stare of the elf upon the wizard. "You'll have to excuse him. He does that sometimes. He starts thinking of spells, and he just goes off into space."

"He should be careful," Lief replied with an edge. "Speaking out loud of possible spells, spells with power, is a dangerous thing."

Enin looked quizzically at the elf. Lief was tense. Was he tense at the presence of a wizard? No. He was tense at being in such a small room. Still, the elf was wary of him, Enin could sense that much. The elf apparently didn't like wizards, certainly not human wizards. Perhaps 'like' was too strong a word, but the elf certainly didn't trust Enin.

Enin faced a good deal of that from his human neighbors within Burbon, at least at first. Now, after he proved to be helpful, he earned their trust. But this was an elf. In Enin's studies, he learned that the elf was the most capable of seizing the magical energy. Why would an elf mistrust him? It hurt him, and he spoke openly of it.

"You don't trust me." A simple statement that revealed a hint of pain.

Lief frowned, irritated at being exposed by a novice magic caster. He responded sullenly. "The magic is new to you. It is dangerous to stumble about blindly trying to find new uses."

Enin felt no insult. Instead, he considered the possibility. Again, his attention slipped from the room. He spoke to himself, not to Lief, or anyone else. "Am I stumbling about? I don't think so, not really. I build from spell to spell. Each new one is a key to another and another. There is knowledge in that. Taking

small steps on what is known. But what if I simply threw the keys away, or ignored them for once, simply began to alter the magic in some new untried way? That would be stumbling. I might make a major breakthrough. Then again, I might destroy myself or the entire town. I guess that's what they're doing in the desert, away from everyone else."

Sy shook his head. He allowed Enin's attention to remain on his personal questions as he spoke to Ryson of a more immediate danger. "You came across a serp in the hills? With goblins and a shag?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Scouting out the wall?" Sy demanded.

"Probably."

Sy grumbled, almost like the light growl of a panther.

Ryson tried to ease his worries. "I scattered the goblins. Disarmed a few and sent them running."

"They'll be back."

"Maybe, maybe not. I called out a warning to the serp before I left. I told him we'd double the guard and be ready for any raid."

"And we will," Sy accented. "What happened with the shag?"

"I can't take out a shag on my own," Ryson admitted slightly embarrassed.

"I never expected you to, but I still need to know what it was up to."

"It was with the serp."

"Not attacking?"

"Only me."

Sy folded his hands behind his back as he scanned the maps of the surrounding hills. "So the serp's got a shag on its side now."

“It seems.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“It’s a big one though. It’ll be easy to spot in the clearing.”

“Well, if Enin didn’t sense them, they didn’t get too close. I still don’t like it.”

Ryson finally struck on the true point of his visit. “I think they were looking for a blind spot. And I think they might have found one. One of the reasons I came here was to warn you to build another tower.”

“Where?” Sy asked firmly.

“Southeast corner of town.”

“Really? I can’t remember them ever coming from the east?”

“The blind spot is more to the south. We need the angle to cover it.”

Sy rubbed his chin, considered the whole of the news brought by the delver. “I’ll have to take a look at that. I don’t think there’ll be a problem with building another tower, especially if it helps keep the goblins away, but what bothers me is that shag. What’s a shag doing with a serp and a pack of goblins? I thought shags ate goblins. And even if we build a sixth tower, a shag might not care if we see it coming or not. If it wants to attack, it may run right up to the gate.”

“I don’t think it was there to attack. It looked like it was just guarding the serp.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Dealing with goblins is one thing; dealing with a hoard of shags is another.”

“I only saw one.” Ryson countered.

Sy remained wary. “That may just be the first of many. The serp may be tired of being beaten back from the wall. It may have decided it’s time to bring in a bigger weapon. I want to take a look. If you’re not going to be here the next few days, I need to be extra careful. You don’t mind do you? You can point out where they were, and you can tell me anything else I need to know about this dwarf-algor war.”

These words seemed to snap Enin to attention. “A war? Between the algors and the dwarves?”

“That’s what Ryson tells me,” Sy answered then turned his attention back to the delver. “You have a quick moment before you leave? I just want to go up on a tower and you can point out where they were.”

Ryson looked to Lief. “It’s the least I should do. I’m not going to be able to scout for them for the next few days. Do you mind?”

Lief showed no reservation. In fact, the thought of leaving the room for a tower appealed to him. It would not be exactly like climbing the trees of Dark Spruce, but it would be close.

The four quickly exited the office and the command post all together. Lief breathed deeply the open air. The buildings that lined the streets they walked still seemed to close upon him, but he was at last free of the tiny enclosed room.

They spoke of the algors and the dwarves as they walked briskly to the southwestern tower. Sy allowed the guard to remain as the four made the climb to the elevated platform. He did not always openly offer information to his soldiers, but he never deliberately hid things from them, either. He spoke of the dilemmas forthrightly, unconcerned that the lookout would overhear.

“Where did you come across the serp?”

Ryson pointed deep into to the hills. “There, just beyond the third hilltop from the clearing.”

It was a good distance away. Sy nodded to the budding wizard. “That’s why you didn’t sense them Enin.”

“Yes, that is rather far.”

Sy gazed out over the rolling hills.

“And the shag was with the serp?”

“Not the whole time,” Ryson admitted. “I found shag tracks on the top of that third hill. I believe it was acting like a lookout.”

“So the serp is using some of our own methods.”

“It would seem. Anyway, when I first spotted the serp, the goblins were with it, but not the shag. I chased the goblins away. When I came back to get the serp, the shag was ready to defend.”

“It does sound like a personal guard. And you saw no signs of another shag?”

“None.”

“That makes me feel a little better. Now, where’s this blind spot?”

Ryson pointed to the edge of the clearing directly south of Burbon. “See the base of that hill, the one that extends furthest into the clearing? What if they crouched below it? At what point would they be visible to this tower?”

“They wouldn’t, but the tower over the south gate would have a direct view of them.”

Ryson shook his head. “It’s too high. The lookout would have to lean out over the railing to see below him at that close range.”

“And if he did, he’d take an arrow between the eyes,” Sy acknowledged.

“Exactly.”

Sy tapped his fingers together. “They’d get right to the gate. It’s surprising it took so long for them to find it.”

“Maybe this is a new serp. I haven’t seen one with a shag guard before.”

“Not a good time for you to be leaving.”

“I can’t do much about that.”

“I know, I’m just reminding myself of what I’m up against.” Sy looked over to the southeast corner of the wall. “You’re right about the new tower. That’ll cutoff the blind spot, but it’s going to take a few days to build. I’m going to have to keep guards outside the gate until then. I don’t like it, but I have no choice.”

“A spider!” Enin blurted out.

The rest of the men upon the tower gazed at him questioningly. Enin ignored them, whispered confusing words, until Sy called for his attention.

“Enin? Enin!”

“Huh? Oh sorry, I was just thinking out loud.”

“I know. What were you thinking?”

“Ryson compared me to a big spider. That’s the answer.”

Sy shook his head. “Your senses are always helpful, but it won’t be enough in this case. You won’t feel them until they get close to the wall, by then it’ll be too late. I have to be warned when they get close to the clearing, not the wall.”

“They won’t get to the wall,” Enin asserted. He stopped his explanation and again stared out to the edge of the clearing. He spoke as if he were alone on the tower platform. “Spider’s web, spider’s trap, spider’s warning. It’s all the same. Make the trap where the flies are, or where the flies can be caught. A binding spell, like a force field. I’ve done that before. I need to alter it slightly, not a shield but a trap, a web. Think of a spider. How to focus the energy? Yes, that’s it, that’s definitely it.”

Without another word, Enin raised his hands. He looked first to the sky then to the blind spot as defined by Ryson. His fingers curled, pulling in the magical energies that flowed freely in the very air that surrounded them all. He tapped into his inner power as well, the energy he allowed to fill his core. He became a siphon and a conduit, mixing the power of himself with the free flowing magic. Two intertwining circles of a pale white hue formed around his wrists.

Ryson watched with great interest. He had seen wizards cast spells before; after all he had battled Ingar upon Sanctum. Still, this scene filled him with wonder. A seemingly normal human was pulling power from the very air. When he was young, he thought of magicians as entertainers that shuffled cards with extraordinary skill. Now, now they were powerful men and women with the ability to control energy of an unknown magnitude.

The sight was awe-inspiring, perhaps even more so for the elf that noted the scene with guarded amazement. The white light and the spheres indicated a skill he could not have expected. He said nothing, but the significance of such power

was not lost upon him.

Enin kept his attention focused upon his spell. He ignored those that watched even as he could sense their growing amazement. As the circles of energy swirled, he redirected his hands at the base of the hill to the south. The rings of power flew from him, flipping over and over as they danced through the sky. They hit the ground at the point of the blind spot. Hundreds of long strands exploded from the circles, forming a giant web of glowing white. It remained visible as its whiteness clashed with the green and brown hill grass.

Enin nodded in approval. “It’s visible in the day, maybe even at night. I don’t know how much it will glow. It won’t matter. If they see it, they’ll know their blind spot is no longer feasible. If they don’t, we’ll have a few more prisoners.”

“They won’t be able to break through it?” Sy questioned.

“They could. It’s not the strongest spell in the land. They’d be able to cut through it with their short swords, but not while crouching down and hiding from this tower. It will take a little more effort than that.”

“What about the shag? If a goblin can cut through it, it won’t stop a shag for a moment.”

Ryson offered his own understanding. “A shag won’t be able to hide behind the slope of that hill. It’s too big.”

Sy nodded. A shag would be too big to utilize the blind spot. The lookout from this tower would spot it. Only the slight goblin could truly use the edge of the hill for cover. The web would work. He reveled in the victory. It was not always the actual physical struggle which turned the advantage. More often, it was the battle of strategy, the deployment of forces, obstacles, and resources. Confident in the overall approach of the web, Sy focused on the details.

“How long will it last?”

Enin closed his eyes. He could feel the web; it was still part of him. “Half a day. I can cast another spell tonight and again tomorrow morning.”

“It won’t tire you out?”

“It doesn’t require a great deal of energy to cast.”

Sy turned to Ryson with a greater sense of comfort. “It appears as if we have solved our blind spot problem. They might even see the web if they make another scout of the wall. Actually, I hope they do. It’ll let them know we’re aware of their plans. If they had just seen us constructing the tower, they might have attacked to press their advantage. Now, they’ll find out they’ve lost that edge.”

“You’ll still send out scouts?” Ryson questioned, but he already knew the answer. Sy was too careful, too attentive to subtle changes to rest upon a single solution.

“Absolutely. I’m not worried about the blind spot anymore, but there’s still a serp out there with a shag doing its bidding. That still makes me nervous. I’ll send out scouts at random intervals.”

“Tell them to scatter their formation if they go in the high grass,” Ryson advised. “The shag was covered with grass to blend in. I didn’t see it until it stood up. If your scouts cluster together, it might surprise them all at once. They’ve got to leave room so they can cover each other. And it was hard to gain its scent, the serp’s own sorcery I think.”

“Amazing. Camouflage magic,” Sy gave his adversary its due credit. “We’re going to have to come up with a way to defeat that.”

“I’ll learn to smell them,” Ryson stated with determination. “But for now, tell them to look for thicker than usual clumps in the grass. That’s what I’ll be doing.”

Lief ignored the continued conversation of strategy. After the wizard’s display, such considerations seemed irrelevant. The glowing white light from Enin’s web consumed his thoughts. Such power. If used properly, it would be enough to stop an army of goblins. If underestimated, it could wipe out the town as well as the landscape before him.

From the tower platform, the elf could also see over the rolling hills to the south and beyond the Fuge River. Dark Spruce Forest was clear in his sights. He felt the trees call to him, but he also remembered the pressing need of the algors. He would have to serve them before returning to the forest.

“Ryson? It is time for us to go,” the elf professed lightly.

The delver nodded grimly. A pang of guilt bit at his core. From the tower he could see the roof of his home, as well as the peaked second story of the Borderline Inn. Was Linda back at work, worrying about when he’d return? He was already worrying about her. He made a final request of Sy.

“Keep an eye on Linda for me, would you Sy? I know she can take care of herself, but it’d make me feel better. Thinking about that shag has me as worried as you.”

“Not a problem. I’ll see to it, but you keep your mind on yourself. If you’re going out into the desert, you need to stay alert. I can spare you for a few days, but this town needs you back.”

“You needn’t fear too much,” Lief replied with almost too much confidence for Sy’s liking, but then again the captain of the guard had never met Holli Brances. Lief explained. “Another elf will be accompanying Ryson and myself, an elf guard. There are few that can match her talents.”

“That’s no boast,” Ryson echoed. “Holli’s going with us.”

“Another that was with you at Sanctum?” Sy now understood Lief’s confidence. “Very well. Then all I can say is hurry back.”

Chapter 4

Once beyond Burbon's wall, Lief took the lead. He and the delver moved on foot, remaining on the lonely road that passed through the south gate. They passed several hills before Lief let out a shrill whistle. A similar response came from his left.

Ryson's eyes immediately honed in upon the source. His sharp vision detected trace hints of Holli's presence while she remained crouched in the tall grass. Upon his sighting, she stood erect, though carefully and slowly. She checked each direction before stepping lively but gracefully toward the open road. She met Ryson with a smile.

"Good day to you, delver!"

The near carefree ease in her welcome surprised him. He was prepared for a more stoic greeting, a greeting that suited a cautious elf guard. Instead, she appeared more than simply good-humored to see the delver. She seemed almost at peace, and this contrasted sharply with Ryson's memory of her. Though surprised, he managed to return the hello. "And a good day to you, Holli. You look well."

And she did, well and happy, and also content with her surroundings, and that also contrasted with his memories of her. As an elf guard, she had always seemed far from at ease; always watchful, always preparing for some unseen and unknown threat. But now, she appeared much more relaxed. Her eyes still darted about, still surveyed the land in all directions, but not with the same diligence that Ryson remembered.

To the delver, this change was beyond out of character, it was unwarranted, especially considering the influx of new dangers. Since the release of the magic, he himself was far more careful. Whenever he was outside the walls of Burbon, his senses jumped to high alert. He became as zealous in uncovering danger as he remembered the elf guards that protected their camps in Dark Spruce.

The guard that epitomized this behavior, Holli Brances, was now, however, nothing like the cautious fox he remembered. He could not guess as to what might have caused this transformation in her behavior. Ryson's curiosity got the

better of him and he blurted out the question.

“Are you still an elf guard?”

“Of course,” she replied simply. She found the question almost humorous. She waited expectantly for an explanation.

Ryson remained confused. “But you’re different... I don’t know, less alert I guess?”

Holli tilted her head. “I still remain concerned with possible threats, if that’s what you mean. I always will.” As if to accent this point, her eyes darted about the landscape.

The quick glance, however, did little to alleviate Ryson’s suspicions. Something was different about the guard and his delver curiosity pushed him to know more. “I don’t know. You seem much more at ease than I remember.”

“Right now, I am at ease. I believe that all serious threats have left this area.”

Ryson recalled that he encountered the serp and the shag several hilltops to the west. Could she know of them, were they still about?

“What threats?”

Holli responded with certainty. “A serp, a shag, and some goblins.”

“So you know about them?”

“They were within shouting distance a short while ago.”

“I know,” Ryson admitted. “I broke up the goblins, but the shag and serp forced me away.”

“They have left.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“How do you know?” Of course, he suspected. He felt a presence around her that

was akin to the aura which surrounded Enin.

“The magic has opened many secrets to those who know how to use it. I can now sense the presence of such creatures as they approach.”

It was as he thought. Holli was much like Enin in her ability to touch the magic. He wondered how far she had gone with this new power. “So you’re casting spells now?”

Holli shook her head, almost defensively. “I am not a magic caster. I am an elf guard, and my duties prevent me from conducting such activities. Casting spells is a dangerous activity and requires time for study. I have no such time, and my responsibility to the safety of those I protect remains paramount. Still, there are other ways to use the magic other than simply casting spells. It remains an energy that can be harnessed in many ways.”

She appeared certain of this to the extent of knowledgeable. Ryson had little understanding in the matter of magic, and being a delver, he pressed for answers.

“How so?”

Holli chuckled harmlessly. She understood all too well the delver’s curiosity. She endeavored to quench it for him. “Think of fire. It can be used for heat or for light. Lamps surround your human town to ward off threats even as pots of stew boil over stoves and hearths. Magic is no different. It all depends on your need. I don’t use spells, but the magic within me heightens what I can sense. It’s not sight or smell, it’s beyond that.”

Ryson nodded. He made it clear to the guard that he understood her explanation. “I know. There’s a human wizard I’ve become associated with. He’s also learned to sense the presence of creatures that use magic.”

“He casts white magic, with spheres,” Lief acknowledged with a nod to Holli.

The elf guard looked back at the walls of Burbon.

Ryson missed the underlying importance of such matters. Instead, he focused on the use of magic itself. “He’s been able to warn us of goblins that sneak through our first line of defense. It has become quite helpful.”

“It will be even more helpful when we cross through the Lacobian desert,” Lief stated with an impatient edge. “The algors await us and need warning. We should not delay.”

He began to move southward along the desolate dirt road as Ryson and Holli turned to follow. A bridge over the Fuge River was in sight as were a few trees of Dark Spruce. Lief stepped at a quick pace, a near trot for humans. He contemplated the distance to the forest. Before long they would be able to move among the trees, but only for a while. The section of forest which separated these grassy hills from the rocky terrain which preceded the desert was not at all wide. He frowned at the thought of trekking through the rock canyons and even worse, the Lacobian desert. He grumbled a complaint out loud.

“We should have brought horses.”

Ryson corrected him. “It wouldn’t have helped. I’m sure you want to climb through the trees when we reach the forest. What would we do with the horses?”

“I was thinking more of the canyons and the desert.”

“They’d help in the canyons, I can’t argue that, but not in the desert. I can get enough water for us, but not for three horses as well. We’d have to bring a great supply of water for them and that would weigh them down. No, we’ll be better off on foot.”

Lief’s impatience to move on was but a temporary distraction from Ryson’s questions for the elf guard. The delver’s thoughts focused back on Holli’s words about the magic. If she could sense creatures that used the energy, she would be as useful as Enin in uncovering threats. He looked to the river and thought of the river rogues, dangerous creatures, but creatures that apparently needed magic to walk this land. Again, as they moved toward the bridge, he voiced his questions.

“Do you sense anything from the river? Any river rogues?”

“No, the path is clear.”

“And you sure of this?”

“Absolutely.”

This was interesting. If elf guards could indeed detect the presence of other creatures, it changed battle tactics. He mulled over the possible effects as he voiced yet another question.

“If you can now sense threats well in advance, doesn’t that change everything? I mean, it sounds like surprise attacks are a thing of the past. Take us moving over this bridge as an example. If you could sense a river rogue before it gets near us, we could never be surprised.”

“That is exactly why I am more relaxed with our journey at this moment. Do you think I would allow Lief to walk so carelessly forward if I thought he might be walking into an ambush?”

Lief grumbled under his breath.

Holli smiled at Ryson. “He is not as attuned to the magic as I am, that is why he is so irritable.”

“So it’s different for each elf?”

“Some can not sense anything,” Holli replied.

Ryson pondered how that might change things. If some elves were less sensitive than others, then there was still a chance for surprise. Then again, the proper utilization of sensitive elves would eliminate this problem. He spoke openly of his theories over such tactics. “Still, if I understand this correctly, it would remain possible to completely eliminate surprise attacks. If elves sensitive to magic are used as scouts and guards and escorts, it would be near impossible for an elf party to fall victim to a raid. To me, that seems to change things drastically. I mean, why would I rely on stealth if I knew that it was impossible to move in without being detected. As far as battles go, it almost comes down now to a point of pure force. Whatever army is the biggest and strongest will win. Isn’t that right?”

“Not exactly.” Holli walked with ease in her step, but she still made intermittent surveys of their surroundings. Her eyes would dart about the hills and across the river as if she only trusted her new perception to a marked degree. Even as she stepped over the wooden bridge, she glanced at possible hiding spots for river rogues. No threats existed but she explained both her actions and her statement. “First, there is a limit to the range. Yes, I can sense things close by, but an army

of goblins may still use stealth to amass great numbers for an attack. I might sense them before we stumble upon them, but then again, it may be too late.”

“I can understand that,” Ryson allowed. “It’s the same for the human wizard I told you about. He can’t sense the hills, but he can sense goblins before they reach the wall, so it isn’t a total surprise.”

“That may be true,” Holli countered, “but there are some threats which can not be sensed through the magic. Most of these are threats which existed before you destroyed the sphere. While it’s easy to detect the presence of a creature which needs the magic to exist in the land, like a shag or a serp, it is much more difficult to detect the presence of others. The dwarves, for example, are the most resistant to magic, thus I would have no warning of their presence if I simply relied on the perception of magic. It is nearly the same for the algors. Unlike elves and many humans, the algors don’t constantly store magical energy within themselves. When they cast spells, they must either take it directly from the air, or spend much time and energy in absorbing the power. Thus, it is difficult to detect the presence of dwarves and algors based solely on this method. As for humans and delvers, some are potent with magic while some are resistant. I sense that you would have the ability to hold much energy within you. You could probably learn to cast many spells.”

“I don’t think I want to.” Ryson responded almost too quickly.

Holli saw sense in that answer. “Right now, that is probably wise. Casting spells remains a dangerous activity.”

As Ryson considered the point, Lief stepped up to the welcoming cluster of trees that formed the outer boundary of Dark Spruce Forest. Without reservation, he nimbly jumped to a branch and waited for Holli and Ryson to join him. The elf guard also took to the trees, but slightly off to the left so as to spread their formation. Ryson did not join them.

“Will you not travel the trees with us, delver?” Lief asked. “I recall you handled this form of travel quite well.”

“Thank you, but I think I’ll stick to the ground,” Ryson responded. He looked about with grave uncertainty. “I know the forest is home to you, but I’ve learned it hides many things now. I’ll feel a lot more comfortable on the ground. Besides, I can scout from down here while Holli uses the advantage of height.”

“He’s right,” Holli stated in agreement. “It’s better if we stay spread out.”

“As you both wish, I just want to reach the algors as quickly as possible.”

Indeed, the three moved quickly through this section of Dark Spruce. The trees were not clustered or woven tightly together here. They spread themselves apart. They remained close enough for the elves to step or leap from one to another, but far enough apart to allow a good deal of sunshine to break through the overhead branches. The shifting sunbeams bathed the ground with warmth and the forest seemed to welcome them all. The elves embraced this part of their journey, happy to be leaving the human town behind.

Their progress slowed only once, to avoid a small party of goblins. Ryson caught their scent just as Holli sensed the disturbance in the magical aura that surrounded her. It was a small party, not even enough for a suitable raid, a handful out scavenging for food. The three virtually ignored the foul fiends with a wave of disgust. A slight detour served to avoid hostilities, and elf and delver were soon passing out of Dark Spruce. Much sooner, in fact, than Lief would have wished, the elves had to give up the trees to step over the rock hard ground of the sloping canyons.

Here, away from the trees, Holli’s regiment of awareness increased. She returned to a state of wariness which typified the elf guard. The terrain, hilly and rocky, offered cover for shags and other potential monsters. She looked carefully for such hazards, but the true threat of this place stemmed from its proximity to the Lacobian desert.

The Lacobian had become the training ground for the most ambitious wizards and sorcerers, and there was no telling what terrors might have been created. Throughout elflore, stories existed of sorcerers summoning terrible creatures. If such creatures were again brought to this land, they would find this rocky place a welcome hunting ground and sanctuary. Rumors abounded of both dark and light magic, of spell casting pushed to the limit, and of monsters not even recorded in the legends or in elflore.

The return of magic and its current use by power hungry novices, brought hard reality to the land. Had there not been such a span of ages between the disappearance of the magic and its unavoidable return, perhaps there would remain knowledge of how to use it. But no such knowledge seemed to exist, and

burgeoning wizards were left to depend on trial and error. Rumors might have spread out of fear and misunderstanding, but they were born out of disheartening truth, a truth which Holli could not afford to ignore.

With such awareness, the elf guard turned her focus on uncovering all possible dangers. Uncertain of how the ambitious use of magic might affect her own ability, she began to divide her reliance over all her senses. Her eyes began to dart along the rugged rocks with greater diligence. She inspected the ground, searching for the smallest indication of danger. She listened to the wind with near constant attention, and she began to rely upon other resources as well. She knew the delver's senses far exceeded her own, and she called for him to use them.

“Ryson. This place is dangerous. I must ask you to use all your skill to detect anything which seems out of the ordinary. If you sense anything at all, please advise me.”

“Of course.”

The coolness of the harvest forest gave way to a harsh, biting southern wind. The temperature rose as the sight of the Lacobian grew closer. The rocky hills sucked in the heat like a hungry infant. As their footsteps began to fall on sandy rock and the last traces of Dark Spruce had long faded behind them, it felt more like the height of the dry season, as if the coming dormant season was nothing but a distant thought. A wavering haze formed in the distance, compromising his long range surveillance.

To both his relief and his disappointment, he found nothing in these canyons, only the day old tracks of a shag. He pointed the tracks out to Holli and she nearly dismissed them completely. At Ryson's urgings, they circumvented a bluff he believed might hold its lair, but the elf guard appeared more concerned with distant, uncovered threats than the existence of a shag.

Ryson knew exactly where he needed to lead them; the sandstone mountain that the algors used as a meeting place. He had made this trek before, and once a delver discovered a path, it was never forgotten. He could have led them to the sandstone edifice blindfolded, moving solely on memory of a trip taken over a season ago, but instead, he remained watchful.

In his travels, the delver had hoped he might find signs of a few wayward algors.

He recalled how individuals would break from the community and set off in the desert alone, isolating themselves in order to find their individual identity. All algors needed to be warned of the impending attack of the dwarves, and Ryson was well aware of the way they freely shared information. If he could find a straggler here and there, it would only help their cause. With each algor told, the warning would spread that much more quickly. He looked for tracks of such algors, solitary travelers hoping in some mad fashion to find their own individualism in the lonely desert, but he found nothing. Not unexpected. The algors lived at the heart of the desert, surrounded completely by the hot, shifting sand. It would probably take time to reach a point where they might actually find signs of a single traveler.

Ryson looked to the sky. The sun was low in the western horizon and there was still a great distance to travel. He considered their surroundings and their circumstances. He knew enough of the desert not to be fooled by the current warmth. When the sun dropped beyond the horizon, the air would grow cold. There would be a need for shelter, probably even a fire. The rocky canyons, unfortunately, were now almost completely out of sight. If they were to camp now, they would have to do so among a group of cacti in the sand, not the best shelter in the land, but it would have to do.

As he scoured the landscape for the best site available, he wondered if Lief and Holli would even allow making camp. They might urge him to move onward through the night. If such was their wish, he would certainly be able to continue. The desert was taking a greater toll upon the elves than it was upon him. In fact, he would have rather kept moving. Still, he had to offer the proposal.

He was about to make his proposition when slightly shifting sand stole his attention. He looked to his companions to call out a warning. Holli's attention was also fixed upon the disturbance. Lief, for the moment, was not yet aware, but the delver's call brought him to the ready.

"The sand's moving."

"I see it," Holli whispered. "Spread out!"

Both Lief and Ryson obeyed. They formed three points of a triangle around the section of disturbed sand. All movement stopped. Even the sand settled back into place. Holli stood motionless, closest to the point of their focus.

Ryson whispered another warning. “There’s still movement down there. I can feel it.”

“What kind of movement?”

“Hard to say. Tunneling maybe. But whatever it is, there’s more than one. I think maybe a dozen different sources.”

“How close to the surface?”

“Not very. Do you think it’s goblins?”

“Doubtful.”

Ryson thought of the magic, how when it was first released from the sphere it mutated and created terrible monsters. Anything at all could be waiting down there preparing to attack. He posed the possibility in one word to Holli.

“Magic?”

“I sense nothing.”

“Wait, I hear something. Voices. They’re coming up.”

“Swords!” Holli ordered and all three drew their weapons.

Ryson’s sword, the Sword of Decree, revealed its enchantment as it magnified the dying sunlight. The glow drenched the sand before them. The white sand sparkled as it again began to shift, this time with far greater force, and the increased light served to magnify the disturbance. Large amounts of sand swirled downward, as if falling through an hour glass. A crater formed as more and more of the sand began to fall away into some unseen hole.

Ryson looked deep into the heart of the gyrating disorder. Like a swirling whirlpool, the sand churned faster as it neared the center of the crater. The delver could only wonder as to how much sand would disappear into this ever-widening chasm.

In a mere instant, Ryson saw that it was not natural forces that had opened the hole, but the greatest miners in all the land. The whirlpool effect was broken as a

growling dwarf shattered the surface.

Sand sailed in every direction even as it continued to spill downward into an ever widening expanse. The first dwarf jumped clear, then another, and another. They bustled up from the sand like angry ants ready for war. Armored chest plates sparkled as richly as the desert sand. Reinforced with jewels, this armor could not be cut by elf swords. Though prepared to strike, for their axes were in their stout, firm hands, the first dwarves to appear revealed surprise in seeing the elves and the delver.

Other dwarves surfaced. Ten in number now stood upon the surface of the sand. They wore goggles made of tinted gems to protect their vision from the desert light, but their eyes widened at the unexpected sight of the elves.

The shock spread. Lief fumbled with his words. "What is going on here?"

The dwarves said nothing. They had expected to attack algors. They crouched in battle readiness, but they held their position.

Holli saw the situation clearly. She held tight to her sword, but dropped it from its ready position. "They thought we were algors. Isn't that true?"

The dwarves did not feel the need to explain such things to an elf. They might have simply retreated back down their tunnel, had one not voiced a single suspicion.

"Spies."

"Nonsense," Holli responded firmly.

The accusing dwarf did not think so. "Why else would they be out here? An alliance with the algors."

Nothing more was needed. The situation quickly boiled over. The dwarves advanced, considering the three as enemies.

"Fire upon you fools!" Lief admonished the attackers. "You have no cause for this."

The dwarves ignored him. They broke into three separate groups, each to deal

with an individual enemy. Two groups of three set upon Holli and Ryson while a foursome moved to surround Lief. They moved laboriously, struggling with the shifting sand at their feet. They plodded forward without speed or dexterity. Each step was forced, as if each movement had to be considered separately.

Lief and Holli also grappled with the terrain, but not to the same degree. Their bodies were slight, lean and long. They remained able to leap and sidestep, whereas the dwarves sank deep into the soft footing like lead weights. Still, the elves were at ground level and in close quarters, not an enviable position when battling dwarves.

The dwarves took this to heart and believed that their superior numbers and strength would lead them to easy victory despite the shifting sand beneath them. They swung their axes almost wildly. Their short arms allowed only a limited reach and they were unable to connect, but they could see the elves tiring quickly under the heat of the desert. Those that focused on Holli and Lief became near ferocious in their attacks.

For those that attacked the delver, they found quick frustration. The delver moved with ease over the sand, moved with such speed and precision the dwarves were left swinging and grasping at open air. Ryson dodged each attack as if he were a dry leaf in the heart of a tornado. The dwarves soon lost all perspective of direction, and then, all hope.

Ryson would not use his sword upon the dwarves, but he would not let them callously attack him or his friends. He focused his attack on the dwarves' goggles. In a blur of motion, his agile hand speared toward the face of each attacker. He ripped the protective glasses away and exposed the dwarf eyes to the bright desert sun. With each assault, a dwarf was rendered near helpless as they jammed their eyelids shut to block the burning light that was magnified by his sword.

After blinding those that attacked him, he turned his attention on assisting the elves. He darted across the sand like a hurricane, his gleaming sword a streak of lightning. He continued his assault, relieving each dwarf of his goggles.

The dwarves could not fight him. With or without their glasses, they could not see him. They could not stop him. Their axe blades sliced harmlessly through the air. In the end, the lot of them were left shielding their eyes with their hands and

unable to strike.

In frustration, humiliation, one called for an immediate retreat. None argued. They dove for the darkness of the hole without hesitation.

Lief appeared willing to stop them or to follow, but Holli's command held him.

"Let them go. We can't stop all of them and prisoners will only slow us."

Lief's anger burned. He yelled into the entrance of the tunnel. "Attack us will you? You had no cause. Fire upon you! Fire upon Yave!" He kicked sand into the opening as if to lash out with one last insult.

Ryson looked to Holli. "They've already started their attacks," he stated grimly.

"Hard to know the extent," she responded simply as if measuring the weight of the dwarf battle party.

"I noticed traces of blood on their axes. They must have already inflicted casualties," Ryson pointed out.

"Yes, but we do not know how many."

"One is too many."

Holli voiced simple logic. "We can't undo what has already occurred."

"But we can do all we can to prevent more," Ryson pressed.

"That's why we're here."

"I was going to ask if you wanted to make camp, but I can't recommend that now," Ryson stated almost harshly. "We have to reach the sandstone mountain as soon as possible."

"I agree."

Nothing more was said.

Lief gave one last angry glance into the dwarf tunnel. Even now the opening was fading from sight, the sand shifting to cover the hole. It turned first into a

depression, then the wind swept away even this last trace. Ryson ignored the change. He moved forward, leading the two elves as quickly as possible to the place where he knew he would find the algors.

Chapter 5

Two goblins perched themselves high upon a hilltop due west of Burbon. They watched two figures exit the south gate of the human outpost, two which were quickly joined by a third. One they recognized immediately; the delver. The newcomers were unknown to them. The diminutive monsters waited near breathless, standing motionless in the high grass. They knew of the great senses of the cursed delver. And though he remained a great distance away from their position, they feared the scout might spot them if they made the slightest disturbance. Their interest grew as the delver and his companions crossed the Fuge River. As the range between the two groups increased, one of the goblins found the courage to speak, though in a whisper so as not to alert those they watched.

“They cross the river.”

“I see,” the second muttered in a low guttural voice.

“They move to the trees.”

The second did not respond. It merely watched carefully, its eyes widening. The thick, puffy skin that surrounded its face appeared to bulge. When it saw Lief and Holli leap to the trees, it spat, and finally spoke with even greater harshness.

“He is with elves! We must report this.”

The two goblins turned and descended the hill, trounced through the tall grass with vehemence. The two small creatures cursed as they despised the thick hill brush for its very existence. They moved northwest, away from the river, away from Burbon.

One moaned an unintelligible sound as they moved upon the base of an indistinguishable hill. They stepped up to a hidden path that led to a cave entrance. They moved forward, past a goblin guard, and began descending a long tunnel.

Again, the eyes of the goblins widened. The thick rubbery skin that swelled at their cheeks and around their eyes sagged. The thin wispy gray hair that topped

their heads shuddered in the breeze of the tunnel, typifying their own feelings of dread as they entered this godless place.

Lunacy. For two goblins to enter this den willingly, it bordered on something beyond insanity. This was a shag's lair, the tunnel carved out by the massive, powerful paws of a monster that consumed goblins as appetizers. However, this shag, a giant shag, was now supposedly on their side, an ally under the same commander, and the master now used this sanctuary as its own home.

Each goblin tried to ignore the claw marks on the sides of the tunnel, but their apprehensive glances were impossible to deny. Their steps, labored at first, faltered as they closed upon a hollowed area large enough to fit a small goblin platoon. The smell of death was overpowering as the shag came into view. The monster glared at the goblins, but made no move.

The goblins froze.

The leader of both reclined upon the skin of a river rogue, a testament to the shag's strength and hunting prowess. A shag that was large enough to prey upon river rogues was indeed a powerful and dangerous creature, a threat to all except the serp that could control it.

The serp stirred from his rest. He had named himself Sazar, after an ancient leader, a chieftain from the legends. Sazar ignored the shag. The goblins could never discern if this was confidence in his own ability to control the monster, or brazen stupidity. He focused upon the goblins. He took long moments to analyze the impish monsters. He looked beyond their fear of the shag, beyond their panic of standing in its lair. He saw their confusion. They had left their post. They would not do so unless they had something important to report. He looked deep into their chaotic, twisted minds. He could almost see what they had seen. One word became very clear to him.

"Elves." The word sprung from the serp in a soft, soothing tone.

The goblins would not dare to question their master, but they stood in awe at the revelation. Both began to speak almost simultaneously about the incident.

"Yes, elves. They left with the delver, the one that attacked us," one clamored.

The other continued. "They crossed the river together. They entered the forest."

Sazar held up a hand ordering silence. The goblins obeyed without dissent and Sazar began to ask quick, pointed questions without interruption.

“Did they appear to explore the lands as they traveled?”

“No.” Both goblins responded instantly.

“Did the elves take to the trees?”

“Yes, that is how we knew they were elves.”

“Was anyone else with them, did any humans follow?”

“Not that we saw. No one came through the gates.”

The serp again searched the minds of the goblins, reached in to find any shred of doubt in their own answers. There was none.

“So they were not on a scouting mission, and they were obviously ready to travel deep into the forest. Unless they planned to meet more elves in the trees, they planned to go alone. No human could keep up with elves or a delver in Dark Spruce. Hmmmm...two elves and the only delver in Burbon making a trip into Dark Spruce. Interesting.”

The serp looked into the small fire that provided the only light in this cave. His snake-like eyes followed the smoke that drifted up through the air vent above it. The smoke would never be seen from the outside, for the serp used thick handfuls of shag hair to act as filters throughout the vent, a vent which twisted and turned and opened upon the backside of the hill. His thoughts danced with the flames. He spoke openly of them. The bitter cold of his dark soul was hidden by the warm soothing tone of his voice.

“So the delver has left, left with two elves. Why would he leave? He is the only delver in Burbon, and he knows we are here. It must be important for him, otherwise he would wait. And why would he leave with elves? Elves and humans remain apart. These are the first elves to come to Burbon since the release of the magic. What would the elves want with humans? Ah, but I forget myself. They did not leave with humans, they left with a delver. The very same delver that was at Sanctum. That is fact. There were elves at Sanctum. There must be a connection, an important connection if this delver would leave while a

threat exists.”

“Will we attack tonight?” one of the goblins blurted out. It did not understand the serp’s questions, it only knew the importance of Ryson’s departure. “If the delver is gone, it is an opportunity.”

Sazar turned his curiosity on the goblin. He almost laughed. “What kind of opportunity?” he pressed with mischievous delight.

The goblin immediately wished it had remained silent. Goblins found it difficult to talk to serps, they stood like hypnotized birds before a king cobra. It stuttered as it tried to explain. “The delver will not be able to scout, there will be no warning.”

“He has already uncovered us. Don’t you think he has informed the human guard? Don’t you think the guard will be that much more careful while he is gone?”

The goblin uneasily looked at the ground.

Again, the serp laughed. “Do you really think we could just walk through the gates because the delver has left? The delver has already done his job, of that I’m sure. The humans have been warned. To attack now would be nothing less than stupidity.”

The goblin’s shoulder’s drooped as it shied from the serp’s words.

Sazar remained good-humored, though sharp-tongued. His tone heightened with giddiness as it swept an ever-widening hold upon the goblin’s will. “See what happens when you think for yourself? You would walk into an open pit in broad daylight if it wasn’t for my guidance. The time to attack is not when the delver is away, but when the delver first returns. That may be an opportune time. The humans will drop their own guard, thinking the delver’s return would add to their safety. That is a time of vulnerability. However, that is certainly not our main concern at this time. We must first understand what is actually happening.”

Sazar turned away from the goblins and again looked into the fire. “If those are elves from Sanctum, why would they come back for the delver? Ingar was defeated, the sphere destroyed. According to what I know, representatives from each of the five races entered Sanctum, so it may not end with the delver and the

elves. Dwarves were at Sanctum, algors were there, even a cliff behemoth. Why would they want or need to meet again? Maybe an alliance, but then why would they not bring a human with them?”

The serp shook his head. His long tail drifted gently across the river rogues skin. Again, he asked the most perplexing question aloud. “What could be so important to make the only delver of Burbon leave so quickly after uncovering us? That is what I need to know. That is very important information.”

He first eyed the shag with the thought of having it follow the threesome. He quickly reconsidered. Even a shag would not keep pace with a delver and two elves through the forest, and they already had a head start. He turned his attention to the goblins.

“Return to your posts for now. Watch the forest as well as the walls of Burbon. I wish to be alerted if and when the delver returns. I will send you relief before the sun sets.”

The goblins gladly turned and near galloped free from the tunnel, leaving the serp alone with the shag. Sazar folded his hands against his scaly chest. His sharp claws tapped a rhythmic beat against his own thick hide.

The shag fell into a daze, mesmerized by the gentle clicking which echoed through its lair.

Chapter 6

“There’s something going on up there,” Ryson stated with an edge of concern to his voice.

They had traveled far into the Lacobian. The sun was already climbing high in the sky. The desert heat returned quickly, just as the sight of the sandstone mountain came into their view. Though it stood a distance away, shimmering above the desert sand, they would reach the algor meeting place before noon time.

Just past dawn, Ryson had wondered, even voiced the possibility to his companions, if they might find any algors within the monument. He had not found a trace of a single algor through their entire journey. He had believed he would find many trails once they closed upon the sandstone ridge with its many cave entrances. Yet, first to his disappointment, then to his dismay, he found nothing but the wind blown sand. The possibility that the edifice was now abandoned grew stronger with every step, grew until he tasted the blowing grit of sand in the air.

Holli tensed with preparedness for any calamity as she demanded a more detailed explanation.

“What is it you sense?”

“There’s a lot of sand in the air, more than there should be given the amount of wind.”

“What could be the source?”

“I’m not sure, but I can tell you what it’s not. It’s not just a few algors stepping off into the desert. There’s just too much sand in the air.” Ryson ceased speaking as he stopped all forward movement. His eyes narrowed, focusing upon a point distant on the horizon. His arm jutted forward, his finger pointed out like a dagger. “Over there. Just to the right of the cliff face. Between those two dunes. There’s a cloud of sand spreading in the air.”

Holli and Lief peered into the distance. They found the spot defined by the

delver, but saw nothing. The sand was too fine in the shimmering heat for them to discern it from the surrounding dunes.

The delver, however, was quite sure of what he saw. “The disturbance isn’t recent, but it was definitely caused this morning.”

“It is beyond my sight,” Holli admitted without shame. Elf eyes were sharp but could not compare to those of a purebred delver. “What do you make of it?”

“A slowly spreading cloud of settling sand. There’s not much of it left in the air, only a trace really.” He bent down and grabbed a handful of sand from the desert at his feet. He threw it into the air and watched carefully. The majority of the abrasive substance fell to the ground. Smaller grains were gently swept away by the hot breeze. The dust, however, floated lazily in the air. At the beginning, it was well concentrated, a tightly defined cloud of minute sand particles. It spread slowly, altered by wind and gravity, but it remained in the air and visible even after several moments.

“That was just a handful,” Ryson stated as his eyes shot back and forth from the cloud in front of him to the one in the distance. “Whatever caused the one by the cliff, it had to be big.”

Holli wanted greater detail. “Big like what?”

“Maybe like fifty galloping horses, maybe a hundred,” Ryson stated flatly.

“A galloping horse would not last very long in this heat,” Holli noted.

“That’s true, but for the algors to have caused this, there would have to have been a lot of them, and dancing around or something.”

“What about a battle?”

Ryson remembered their own encounter with the dwarves. “You think maybe the dwarves have already attacked?”

Holli nodded. “It is a possibility.”

“It would have had to have been a large skirmish.”

Lief looked to Holli. “Jon knew about their meeting place. If he revealed that to Yave when he explained the circumstance surrounding Tun’s death, she would know about it as well. That would definitely be her first target. She would probably send a great force of dwarves to attack.”

Ryson gulped back a growing sense of dread that manifested itself as a lump in his throat. He struggled to remain optimistic. “Now, hold on. Why would such a battle between the dwarves and the algors take place so far from the monument? Don’t you think the algors would have stayed in the mountain, protected their home? It doesn’t make sense that they would go off into the open sand to fight the dwarves.”

“The algors are better suited to fight in the open upon the sand,” Holli reminded the delver. “They fight with slings. They are used to the shifting sand, where the dwarves are not. If I had an army of algors, I would certainly prefer to fight in the open than in the caves of their sandstone mountain. Especially if they were attacked by dwarves. The dwarves would hold a great advantage in the caves, fighting in an element they would consider home.”

Ryson still would not accept the theory. “But how would the algors have known that the dwarves meant to attack? How would they have had a chance to get to the clearing? We haven’t warned them yet.”

“Word spreads quickly from algor to algor,” Holli allowed.

Ryson again thought of their own encounter with the dwarves. The war party jumped through the sand. Perhaps the dwarves did not know of the meeting place, perhaps they attacked a few stragglers just outside of the cliff face and the algors dashed out to meet the antagonists. It held merit, but he would not know for sure until he could better inspect the actual area of disturbance.

“We won’t know what happened until I get a closer look at that area of sand,” he stated. “I want to get over there as quickly as possible, but I don’t want to fall upon an ambush or alarm any algors that may be around. How do we handle this?”

Holli looked directly at the sandstone edifice. “We go to the mountain first. We call to the algors and give our warning. That is why we’re here. I hope that we will find an algor, or several algors, that might help with an explanation. We will tend to the disturbance after we carry out our primary mission.”

Lief and Ryson did not argue. The delver began a quick trot in the direction of the edifice, and the two elves followed briskly. As he glided over the sandy dunes, Ryson kept a careful eye upon the ground in front of him. He watched diligently for any signs of a dwarf ambush. He also took quick glimpses of the slowly dispersing sand cloud to his right. There was no sign of any further movement. If a battle had been fought there, it was long since over.

The three quickly closed upon the cliff face of the sandstone mountain. As the cave entrances grew more defined with their proximity, Ryson's distress leaped. Immediately, he noticed the fresh trails of hundreds of algors. He said nothing to his companions, but his quickened pace spoke volumes of his anxiety.

The elves struggled to keep up. Just as Holli was about to call for the delver to slow, Ryson came to an abrupt halt. Each elf breathed heavily the hot, dry air as they waited impatiently for an explanation.

Ryson said nothing at first, his attention squarely fixed upon the sand in front of him. His eyes scanned the trails which moved away from the rock and over the dunes. He counted under his breath, staggered by the signs of so many.

He dropped to his knees as he inspected several sets of algor footprints. The claw marks and the wide-spread sole imprints were easily distinguishable in the soft sand. Ryson measured the depth of several prints.

"They were carrying something. Something heavy." He got to his feet and looked directly toward Holli. "The trails lead directly to the sand cloud over there. There aren't any fresh trails coming back."

"Any other markings?"

"If you mean dwarf trails, no. The only thing around is algor prints." Ryson paused to look up at the edifice before him. He shook his head. "I don't think there's anybody left up there."

"Can you be certain?"

"No."

"Should we call to them?" Lief asked tensely.

“I don’t know if we should,” Ryson responded with caution. “If there are any of them left up there, they’re probably going to be cautious about strangers. We don’t know what happened here.”

Holli’s grim expression revealed much of her own dread, expressed more than her simple reply. “Our priorities have now changed. Let us answer what has happened here first. Follow the trails.”

Ryson did so eagerly. He moved carefully toward the lingering dust cloud. He said little, only enough to instruct Holli on what he found.

“The trails form stringent lines, they marched in rigid formation. It’s hard to tell exactly how many of them were marching this way. At least over two hundred, but maybe five times that much.”

Holli looked back to the sandstone ridge. “How many do you think the mountain could hold?”

“Impossible to say. I know very little about how they live, how many per cave, what they might consider cramped. It’s also difficult to say how deep the caves go into the rock. If you forced me to guess, I’d say ... wait a minute!”

The elves stopped, stood dead still.

The delver sniffed the air, put an ear to the wind. “They’re still there.” But his voice was a mixture of confusion and certainty. “I can hear them. There’s no battle, they’re alive, but they’re crying, wailing. What’s going on?”

The delver wanted an answer, and he wanted it now. He took off in a dash, quickly outdistancing the two elves.

Lief cursed under his breath as he and Holli sprinted to catch up. They followed in his wake, fighting the heat and the shifting sand. They lost sight of him over the first dune. As they topped it, they caught his blurred movement quickly passing over the next. Again, Lief cursed.

“Why does he do this?”

“It is what he is,” Holli responded without slowing.

As the elves reached the top of the second dune, they did not expect to see the delver, only his trail in the sand which he did not bother to hide. To their surprise, Ryson stood in their view, stopped upon the peak of a third dune and looking down upon a valley of sand before him.

The elves fought against the desert slopes that separated them from their friend. They plunged forward, saying nothing, their feet slipping over loose granules. They reached the side of the delver only to join him in viewing a sorrowful sight.

Thousands of algors circled a large open pit, stood hand in hand grieving. Well over another thousand algor bodies rested lifeless and still at the bottom of the pit. The dead were not covered, and large jagged wounds were grossly apparent. No blood dripped from the gashes, only a thick ooze glistened in the sun. The three stared down upon the sight with marked sadness as well as disbelief etching their expressions.

Ryson's voice cracked with emotion. "So many, so many dead! Look at the wounds! They were attacked, slaughtered."

Lief spoke with gray gloom. "The dwarves. They must have found the meeting place. Fire upon them all." The last was spoken without angry emotion, but with grievous regret.

Holli, though moved by the sight, called upon her guard training. She placed the facts together, ordered the events in likely fashion.

"They are indeed axe and mace wounds. I doubt the algors even knew what hit them. They were attacked in their mountain, not in the open. I'm sure that's where we'll find the signs of battle. The sand cloud that you saw was the result of excavating the burial site. They carried the bodies from the mountain. The lines you spoke of were a funeral march."

"The bodies. That's what weighed them down." Ryson could stand the sight no longer. He swung his head away, took a few steps, and dropped to the seat of his pants.

"Should we let them know we're here?" Lief asked of Holli.

"They already know," Ryson mumbled. "They saw me when I climbed up here. They didn't move. They just stood there wailing, ignoring me."

Holli frowned. “We came here to tell them the dwarves wished to attack them. That, they now know. But I wouldn’t suggest we leave until we get a chance to tell them of all we understand. They must be told of Yave’s actions. They must be told why so many were killed. I doubt it will help ease their grief. I have no idea how long their ceremony will last. I can only suggest we go back to their caves and wait for them to return to the mountain. Hopefully, they will hear what we have to say.”

Holli walked slowly back in the direction of the sandstone mountain. Lief followed, but Ryson ignored them both. Still sitting in the sand, his senses fought for reason in the scene he had witnessed. The wailing of the algors streamed into his ears, bit into his skin. His fingers clenched about handfuls of sand. Confusion, grief, anger; all of it flooded his consciousness. The sight of the pit haunted him, remained clear in his mind no matter how hard he fought off the image. Death, not of one or even a handful, but death in grand design as if the reaper himself had swooned down and his black spirit engulfed them like a low cloud, that was the image of his horror. Three comrades had died in his presence at Sanctum, but never, never before had he witnessed death on such an immense scale. He couldn’t just walk away.

He staggered to his feet. He turned to face the algors, looked into the heart of the burial pit. Though the algors were not his own; not his family, not even his race; he hurt. Pain exploded in his chest. A thickness filled his head, beyond tragedy, beyond horror. It was not the twisted mutilated shape of the dead. It was the loss, a loss he felt as deeply as any algor. How could the soul feel so empty, yet hurt so much at the same time? He wished to release his pain. Ryson did not even consider if the algors would have him. He simply trudged down the side of the dune to the edge of the pit. He stepped up to the ring of algors that stood hand-in-hand.

Without a word, without any other acknowledgment of his presence, the circle opened for him, opened as if he was simply another algor. Two algors broke hands and stepped aside, offered a space for the Ryson to enter, an invitation for the delver to join the circle.

Ryson took a small step forward, took the hands of the algors, and completed the circle once more. At that moment, he was both one with the algors, as well as separated from them. He felt the sense of belonging to their community, just as he felt that which made him different. In that same instant, he understood what it

was like to be an algor, a race that constantly struggled to seek individualism in a community bound as a whole. He looked into the pit and saw the loss in a new light, the loss to the community. The pressure in his head doubled, tripled, and forced the unyielding release of tears. He wailed with the algors. Screamed until his voice was nothing more than a grumble and his throat was raw.

For one of the few times in his life, the delver lost track of both his surroundings and of time. No pressing desire to explore the land tempted his spirit. He simply stood with the algors crying, exhausting his grief. He held nothing back, he released it all.

The algors began pushing sand from piles into the pit. They worked in a fashion which typified their struggle between acting together and acting alone. At times they moved in orchestrated flows, moving like a single arm directed by one mind. Other times, their coordination broke down. They appeared more like angry bees flying in every direction.

As the algors finished the burial, Ryson realized that they had not yet released all their emotion. Though they had discharged their grief, they held to their anger, anger out of their community being viciously attacked. And though they welcomed the delver into their ceremony, they now ignored him. The algors filed away, passing the delver with disregard.

Ryson looked to the sand, looked upon the burial site. There were no markers left behind, no list of names of the dead. The desert had swallowed the bodies and soon a hot wind would remove all traces, all signs of the burial. It was not the algor way to leave remembrances for their fallen, for their dead, but Ryson could not bring himself to simply walk away from the empty sand.

He reached into his pouch and pulled out his dagger. He plunged it into the sand. It looked out of place, a weapon on top of a burial mound for hundreds. He thought of picking it up. He knew the desert would swallow this as well before the end of the day, it would fail as a marker. He bent over, but his hand stopped before his fingers could clasp the handle. He would leave it behind, a marker for his own memories, a marker that a delver had stood with the algors and understood their grief.

Ryson quickly returned to the sandstone mountain, only to find the algors circling the elves with angry shouts. They were not listening to Holli's call for

calm or even Lief's curses. Most were not even listening to themselves. They simply shouted out threats, insults, and accusations.

"The elves are allied with the dwarves!"

"These are but more spies!"

"Send them away!"

"Take them prisoner."

Ryson tried to make his way through the mass of algors to the elves, but they blocked his path. Otherwise, the algors ignored him. They heaped their fury upon the elves. The delver meant nothing to them. He was able to use his speed and agility to pass through much of the mob, but there were so many. The circles of algors grew tighter as he closed upon the elves and it became near impossible to pass unless he climbed over them. He considered it.

The algors continued their harangue.

"Elves have no business here."

"We have work to do, the magic must be collected."

"The dwarves will pay, as will all those that help them."

Ryson could hear Holli try to speak over the crowd.

"We do not help the dwarves, we came to warn you." Her emotions remained in control even as the algors completely dismissed her statement.

"It is too late for warnings."

"Warn the dwarves. Let them know they will pay."

Ryson was not sure what that meant, but one thing was perfectly clear, the algors were not in the mood for listening. The group consensus was fed out of anger and hostility and it seemed each algor fed on the passion.

In the face of such angry disarray, Ryson opted for the dramatic. With a swift pull, he unsheathed his sword. It burned like the sun. The light bathed over the

algors, covered them like sheets of rain. He made no threatening gestures. He simply held the blade well over his head, pointing straight to the heavens.

The algors ceased their din. They turned away from the elves as their voices spoke in unison. A thousand algors speaking with one voice, speaking the name of a delver that had joined those of the legends.

“Ryson Acumen.”

The name crashed out over the desert as it was spoken with reverence and intimacy.

A single algor voice followed the chorus. “It is indeed the delver Acumen.”

Ryson turned upon the voice as the speaker stepped through the intertwined mass. It was an algor the delver recognized.

“You were one of the ten,” Ryson stated with certainty. “You traveled to Sanctum with us. You didn’t enter the mountain. You were one of the eight that waited outside.”

“You did not select me,” the algor said plainly.

A twinge of guilt bit into Ryson. “I didn’t know who to pick. I just picked two at random.”

“You picked on faith,” the algor corrected. “Why are you here?”

The need for the sword was gone, and Ryson returned it to its sheath. The algors listened intently to his response.

The purpose of Ryson’s journey was now nearly irrelevant. Still, he spoke with open honesty over his intentions. “We came to warn you the dwarves wanted to attack. In truth, it was the elves that came to me. They pointed out that you needed to be warned. I realize that we are late, and you don’t know how sorry I am.”

The single algor spoke eloquently. “We would never doubt the word of Ryson Acumen. If the elves wished to do us this service, we shall not repay them with hostility.”

Holli and Lief made their way through the crowd of algors. They stood at Ryson's side. The elf guard desired more information.

“What exactly happened here? I realize the dwarves attacked you, but how? How did the battle progress? Why were your casualties so great?”

“The dwarves attacked viciously,” the algor responded. “They tunneled into our mountain from below. We were not armed, we were not ready. They moved from one tunnel to another, killing everything in their path. There were no warnings, only confusion. Those of us that survived did so only because we slept in tunnels the dwarves did not locate or because we were out of the mountain entirely. The dwarves appeared ready to destroy the mountain completely, but the large number of tunnels forced them to separate. Their troops were disjointed and unorganized. They had to regroup back underground. We have not seen them again. We don't know if they'll be back because we don't know why we were attacked.”

Lief turned his attention to all the algors, giving sweeping glances across the crowd. “What has happened here is an injustice, a misguided act of revenge. It seems Yave Folarok of Dunop blames the algors for the death of her son, Tun. King Bol has banished himself from Dunop and Yave has taken control. I know this does not ease your loss, but this is why you were attacked. I'm sorry.”

The algors erupted, the silence blasted away by their calls.

“Be sorry for the dwarves.”

“The dwarves shall be sorry.”

“Sorry they dared to attack us.”

More shouts rang out, but many of the algors began to climb the sandstone cliff face and disappear into the many caves. The numbers around the elves and Ryson dwindled, but their resolution was no less evident.

Ryson's eyes bore into the algor in front of him. “What are you going to do?”

“War has been declared,” the algor said simply. “We shall respond. We will create an army of sand giants and send them to Dunop. The sand giants will use the very tunnels dug by the dwarves that attacked us. The tunnels will lead them

directly to Dunop. If the dwarves try to collapse them, the giants will break through. The sand giants will destroy Dunop and every dwarf that comes in their path.”

The algor said nothing more, simply walked past Ryson and followed the others back to the caves. Within moments, the two elves and the delver were left alone, standing in front of the sandstone edifice with even greater dread than when they had begun their trip.

Chapter 7

“They were only a support party, ten commandos setting up a listening post. They noted movement on the surface. They thought they might have come across some wayward algors. When they broke through the surface, they came upon two elves and what they believe was a delver. He moved too quickly to be a human.”

Strog Grandhammer, the newly appointed War Com - military strategist of the separatist dwarves now in command of the dwarf army - continued his unsettling report to Queen Yave.

“Our troops were not prepared for battle, at least not with a delver. He moved quickly enough in the open to remove their protective goggles. The desert sand impaired their vision. They retreated.”

“Retreat?” Yave’s question shot from her lips like a poison dart.

Strog replied firmly. “A tactical decision I completely agree with. Blind dwarves can not fight successfully against a delver and two elves, especially in the open sand. We suffered no casualties in this skirmish and we have learned much.”

“What have you learned?” Yave scoffed at Strog’s embrace of such incompetence. Her question sounded more of a dare than a request.

“The delver had a glowing sword,” Strog sneered. Her venomous stare was not lost upon the War Com. How dare she question his tactical appraisal? How long would he have to put up with her ignorance, her incompetence? She was important to the separatists for now. The dwarves of Dunop accepted her as royalty. But soon, very soon, the separatists would do away with that need as well, just as they had done away with the need for the elves. Strog spoke with a challenging tone, a tone which revealed his growing impatience. “I guess I don’t have to tell you of the importance of this. And before you even think to ask, there is no doubt. The sword magnified the light of the desert. There is no doubt of its enchantment, and no doubt as to who holds it.”

“The delver from Sanctum?” Yave’s expression revealed equal portions of shock and anger.

The War Com needled her emotions. “I know of no other delver with a glowing sword. It must be Ryson Acumen. The very same delver that accompanied Tun and Jon into Sanctum, the delver that destroyed Ingar’s sphere and released the magic.”

Yave seethed. She stamped her feet as her anger prohibited her from answering.

Strog pressed on, taking enjoyment from Yave’s outburst of temper. “Based on the report, it is likely the elves were also the very same elves that entered Sanctum as well. They fit the description of Lief Woodson and Holli Brances. What other elves would be accompanying Ryson Acumen into the desert?”

Yave managed to spit out one word. “Where?”

Strog pulled a roughly drawn map off a stone table. He examined it slowly, for no other reason than to make Yave wait. He feigned expressions of concentration as he glanced across several portions of the parchment. He knew exactly where the skirmish took place, but he knew the extended pause would agitate Yave even further. Finally, he folded the map over once, then again. He handed the squared parchment to the queen, pointing to the exact location of the minor battle.

“There,” he pronounced. “In the desert, far from Dark Spruce, far from any human town. They must have passed through the rock canyons as they were forging further into the desert. In truth, my troops only chanced upon them. In order to track algor movements, it is essential I have tunnel sentries spread in a perimeter around possible algor travel routes. To the algors, the entire desert is a potential access way. I ordered many listening posts in many places. We were lucky to find them.”

“Lucky?! Your troops were defeated.” Yave was unimpressed with his strategies, only incensed at his failure.

The War Com curled his lip. He stared silently at the queen.

Yave saw the challenge of his gaze. She exploded. “Did your warriors kill the elves or the delver?! Did they take them prisoner? No! They scurried away like scared mice.”

Strog’s eyes narrowed, but still he said nothing.

Yave threw a goblet across the room. Clear liquid, mountain water that was funneled underground through falls and aqueducts filtered by tons of shale and rock, splashed across the wall. The goblet, made of gold and nickel, suffered a dent as it clanked noisily against the wall and then the floor. The metallic clang echoed throughout the throne room, yet Yave's voice overcame the vibration.

“Just don't stand there! Say something.”

Strog did not speak up immediately, making it clear he would not jump to her orders. He rubbed his hands, looked over his armor, stroked his beard; all with careful deliberation. Finally, after completing this silent ritual, he addressed the queen with near contempt.

“My forces have yet to be defeated. I took this castle from Jon without the loss of a single soldier. My army crushed the algors in their own stronghold, killed over a thousand of their kind. I now have the desert covered with a well defined spread of listening posts. The algors in the Lacobian won't be able to take a stroll without me knowing about it. I have succeeded in exercising every advantage over the algors and leaving them decimated. As for the delver and the elves, capturing or killing them was never one of my military objectives. Retreat does not mean defeat, especially when in retreat I gain yet another advantage...”

“Advantage? In retreat?”

Strog continued despite the interruption, “... and another source of information. I now know that a delver and two elves were venturing into the desert in the direction of the algor stronghold. That raises many questions. If my commandos had been captured I would not have that information.”

Yave bit down on her fury. His meaning reached her. “What do you think they were doing out there?”

“It seems obvious. Two elves and the delver from Sanctum moving towards the algors at the same moment we were about to attack. That is too much for simple coincidence. The elves must have found out about our plans. That in itself is important. It means that there are still dwarves in Dunop that have not accepted our ideas. There must be some that decided to betray their own and reveal our plans to the elves. These elves took it upon themselves to join with the delver to warn the algors.”

“No, not just warn. They were going to offer an alliance against us,” Yave bellowed.

Strog showed surprise. Yave did not contradict his theory. In fact, she furthered it to a point beyond his own contentions. He reacted with reluctance. “I have heard nothing of a possible alliance. But as I said, at the very least they were surely prepared to warn the algors of our attack. If they had succeeded in that, the results may have been disastrous. Based on this information, we have uncovered a great threat, a threat which now must be silenced. It is now imperative that we find the disloyal dwarves that betrayed our cause. We can not allow them to hamper our efforts.”

Yave barely heard Strog’s words. The thought of more enemies burned her thoughts, not the disloyal dwarves but the delver and the elves. Ryson Acumen, Lief Woodson, Holli Brances; all of them were with Tun when he died. None of them did anything to save her son. They were as guilty as the algors, as guilty as Jon. Now, they moved to join forces against her.

“Is there no end to this injustice?” she ranted. “They kill my son, the true heir to my throne, but they are not satisfied. Now, they wish to help those most responsible. They will all pay.” Again she wished to hurl something across the room, but her hand was empty. The innocent object that suffered at her last tirade, the goblet, rested too far away to retrieve. Her fist pounded down upon the arm of her throne.

“They failed in their attempt,” Strog stated victoriously, as if the queen had nothing to rave about. “My forces crushed the algors before they could be warned. There is little left of the algors in the Lacobian, certainly too few and too disorganized to mount a successful response attack. I need only send my army on another offensive tonight, and the algors will be vanquished completely. We will then destroy their stronghold. Though there are still many wandering about the desert, they are isolated. They will not be allowed to regroup, and without their stronghold, they will have no place to coordinate any counter-offensive. Those that are left will be forced to wander the desert, and we will pick them off one by one.”

“Fool!” Yave cursed. “You spout as if you have won. You have won nothing. The elves have shown they are willing to ally with the algors. The humans as well, the delver will convince them. When you send our army back into the

desert, we will be open to attack. The elves are from Dark Spruce, they know the entrance to our city. This is exactly the opportunity they will be looking for.”

The War Com stared at the queen in total bewilderment. “What are you talking about?”

Yave ranted with hostility. Her voice shifted in volume and tone, exemplifying the twisted path of her thoughts. “Holli Brances and Lief Woodson! They come from Dark Spruce. They are angry with us for cutting off trade. They are looking for an excuse to attack us. They don’t trust us. That is why they were going to offer their assistance to the algors. Just as they saw that Tun was killed, they will see the rest of us dead as well. The delver, all delvers, they live with humans. They can not be trusted. Ryson Acumen will see that the humans side with the elves and the algors. His sympathy is with them, that is why he was in the desert!”

Strog did not know how to deal with Yave’s madness. He spoke with uncertainty, his own confidence faltering, his voice was halting. “My spies say nothing of coordinated elf movements. My reports say they are preparing for the dormant season, nothing more.”

“Your spies did not tell you of the delver and the two elves going into the Lacobian.”

“I can not keep track of each individual elf.”

“But you admit the elves must have found out about our plans to attack the algors. You spoke of dwarves who were informing the elves. Your spies did not uncover this either.”

“But there is nothing to indicate the elves are preparing to attack.”

“What do you need to see? The elves and humans banded together with swords drawn in this very room? I tell you the signs are there. They are allied with the algors.”

Strog threw open his hands. His features curled into a grotesque frown. “So what is it you think we should do?”

“We must attack,” she hissed like a cobra about to strike.

“That is what I said,” Strog groaned with frustration. Yave’s madness was unyielding, it drove him to astonishment. “We will attack the algors tonight. Finish them off.”

Yave slapped him across his face. His beard muffled the clap of her palm against his cheek. Still, the quick smack resonated through the throne room, served as a precursor for yet another tirade by the queen.

“You fool! You damned fool! Not the algors. We can deal with them later. The elves are the threat, the elves and the humans. We must attack them now. Attack them before they can attack us.”

Strog was too shocked to react. No dwarf had ever dared strike him. He was powerful, able to pull stone apart with his bare hands. He could have yanked Yave’s head from her neck with but a simple tug. The slap, however, meant less than the fact that she was actually challenging his tactics, his battle strategy. She, who had no network of intelligence, no soldiers to command, no experience in battle, she was telling him who to attack and when. Ludicrous.

“Attack the elves?” His face twisted with mystification. The plan had no military merit whatsoever. Open a second front, another battle enemy when the first was not yet destroyed, the concept was ridiculous.

Yave scorned his shock. “You would have them attack us while your army is in the Lacobian desert? No. Recall our forces at once. Divide them into separate divisions. One to handle the humans, the other to attack the elves in Dark Spruce.”

The outrageousness of her suggestion made him forget her physical attack upon his face. The possible redeployment of his army to handle a threat which did not exist defied all reason. Strog shook his head vehemently. “No! No! That is not sound. We have two important objectives that must be fulfilled right now! We must ferret out disloyal dwarves in Dunop and we must finish off the algors. We must not attack the elves while the algors remain a threat. And we can not even conceive of another attack plan until we know which dwarves are revealing our secrets to the elves.”

“Which is even more reason to attack the elves now!” Yave shouted over him. “If they have set up a network of spies, does that not convince you of their ill-will? Consider the pure, simple facts. If the elves knew we were to attack the

algors, they also know the extent of our forces to protect our own city.”

Strog stammered. Yave’s distortion of the obvious forced him to consider irrelevant factors. For a moment, he began to question his own tactics, second-guess the very actions which so far had led to overwhelming victory.

“It is true the city is ill prepared to fight off an attack,” he conceded. “I used the core of our forces to attack the algors. I wanted to make our attack complete. I needed warriors to fill the algor stronghold. I also need sentries in the desert to track movement.”

Strog caught himself. What was he doing? Why was he even entertaining these thoughts? His strategies were sound. Why listen to the delusions of a deranged, vengeful queen? His objection spilled from his lips like water over a dam. “No! This is madness. I have deployed my forces with reason. As I said before, there is no sound military tactic in redeploying our forces. We must see to the end of the algors before we consider a threat that does not exist. The elves will not attack us.”

Yave glared. She throttled her fury, her madness. She embraced the power and the authority that was hers as queen and shoved it in Strog’s face. “I am not asking you, I am telling you. You will hold your attack on the algors. You will recall your army and you will attack the elves and humans.”

Strog stood at the edge, but a hair’s width from crossing the dangerous threshold of refusing the queen’s authority, of perhaps even committing regicide. Why not? They had overthrown Jon. Yave was their puppet. Why continue the charade?

The answer held his hands from violence. There were still dwarves who resisted the separatists, spies revealing secrets to the elves. They were small in number, probably only a handful, but they underscored the continued need for a puppet leader. Yave would keep the masses of Dunop pacified, while the separatists fought for greater control. They would remove her, eventually, but not now. Now, they could ill-afford a civil war.

Strog scowled, decided to maintain his cloak of service to the queen. It took long moments and the self-control of a seasoned warrior and general, but he answered with veiled respect to her authority.

“Of course it is your decision, but it is my duty to inform you of the great risks

involved in such an undertaking.” His words were cold and they sickened him as he spoke. “It is your will, but attacking the elves and humans at this moment entails factors you may not have considered. First, there is the fact that dwarves within Dunop must still be communicating with the elves in Dark Spruce. Otherwise, how would they have known to warn the algors? What good would it do to develop battle strategies against the elves if those same plans will be revealed to the enemy?”

Yave shrugged with contempt at the need for strategy. “What plans do you need? They are elves, we are dwarves. We know where their camp is. Strike and attack at night.”

Strog bit down on his lip before continuing with other objections. “And what of the humans? Where do I center my attack? Burbon? Pinesway? Connel? Even farther? The humans outnumber us. They have towns spread across the land. To attack even a quarter of their known villages, I would have to divide my army into nothing more than raiding parties that would make goblins laugh and would be decimated in seconds.”

Yave folded her arms. She rose from her chair and stomped across the room. Her foot reached the goblet and kicked it back against the wall. Another dent bent the rim. She turned away, whirled about and paced heavily back to her throne. She grumbled about the humans multiplying like rodents, filling the far corners of the land. She threw her gaze back at Strog as an idea developed in her angry tormented mind.

“Then we’ll have to increase the size of our army.”

Strog shook his head. “Every available dwarf in Dunop is already within our service.”

“Then look beyond Dunop.”

“You can’t be serious,” Strog responded sternly. “Do you really think other cities will join us? They remain under the rule of long standing royalty. I doubt royal leaders will be willing to ally with us. They view us as renegades, a threat to their own rule. Until our movement spreads, we must rely on our own strength.”

The queen again turned and paced the room. This time she allowed the mangled goblet a reprieve. She left it alone.

Strog settled in a sense of relief. He had talked the queen out of these senseless judgments. He was once more in control of tactical decisions. There would be no foolishness, no absurd attacks upon the elves and the humans, at least not until the algors were destroyed, or so he believed.

Yave barked a single command as she strode toward the door. "Follow me!"

Strog obeyed, not out of respect for her authority, but out of curiosity. What did she want of him now? What foolish ideas would her madness lead them upon? The metal soles of Strog's war boots clicked first against the stone hallway, and then against the descending steps of a granite staircase. After but a few moments, Yave's destination was obvious, the cell where Jon was imprisoned. Further and further they descended the dark, spiraling staircase that led to the bowels of the castle. The meager but steady light which bathed most of the underground city drifted away. Haphazardly placed torches spotted the walls. The trapped smoke swayed lazily with a sickening mildew smell which drenched the air. Cracks, bordering on fissures, decorated the tubular paths of this dungeon.

Yave stepped away from the stairway, not quite at the bottom tier. She moved along a platform to a side tunnel. She passed silently by two dwarf guards that appeared enamored by the silence and the darkness of their post. They took little notice of the queen, their attention fixed on Strog. They would follow his orders, not hers. In truth, they wondered if the queen was going to join her son as prisoner.

Strog made a sideways glance to them, and motioned for them to stay at their posts. He unenthusiastically grabbed a set of keys from a lonely hook embedded in the wall. He knew where the queen wanted to go, but still had no idea why.

Yave stopped in front of a thick, wooden door. The rot decried its age, revealed its origin. Ancient wood had been collected by the elves, traded to the dwarves in return for stone and gems. Its very existence repulsed her. It reminded her of the elves and how they were willing to betray her, just as they betrayed Tun. She shuddered with anger, almost lost sight of her true purpose.

Strog watched her carefully, did not move to open the door until she so directed. He would not assume anything beyond this point. Her purpose remained hidden, and so, he would wait.

“Open it!” Yave snarled.

He complied. His thick fingers found it difficult to apply the key into its hole. After some deliberation, he finally turned the latch. He pressed open the heavy, thick door. Stone hinges grated in angry upheaval as the door swung into the cell.

Jon did not look up. He sat alone, unchained upon a squared stone block, a bunk for the damned. The cell opened up into a large oval expanse. There were no corners. Rubble littered the floor. Streams of dirty underground water washed down over long sections of the walls. Not a fitting place for the only remaining blood-true Folarok in Dunop.

Jon ignored his guests. Unresponsive, he sat with his face in his hands. Removed of all armor, weapons, and any garment which rendered him as royalty, he appeared more like a beggar in tattered clothes than a prince or a king. His hair disheveled, his beard unruly; his figure appeared at home in these dark, forbidding surroundings.

Yave felt nothing for her son, no sympathy, no regret over her own actions that led to his downfall. Her thoughts so scrambled with the boiling desire for revenge, she did not even recognize him as her son. He was a traitor, and her voice revealed these feelings with the black clarity of a winter night sky.

“I want to talk to you. You have information I need.”

Jon’s face remained buried in his palms. Her voice held nothing that he would recognize. Even if it did, he had spiraled so far into his own personal abyss that his own recollections of reality were muddled into twisted nightmares. He coughed.

Strog measured the reactions of both Jon and Yave. He found delight in Jon’s despondency. He was broken, no longer a threat to the separatist movement. They could release him this moment and he would do no harm. He would probably wander helplessly through the darkest tunnel ways of Dunop until he perished from hunger.

Yave’s indifference, however, left him cold. How could a mother have distanced herself so far from her own son? It puzzled him beyond the considerations of family relations. He had spent a lifetime studying all aspects of war, including

emotional responses which may sway the tide of battle. He had learned that those fighting for home and family normally fought beyond their normal capacities, while foreign invaders usually suffered morale difficulties due to a longing to be back with loved ones. Here, however, was a mother so distanced from her only surviving family member, she considered him an enemy.

This simple aspect made Yave a dangerous individual. Whether it is madness, vengeance, or simple blood lust, Strog realized it would have to be considered in each of his future dealings with Yave. After all, the queen would be removed from power eventually. It was best if Strog remembered her apathy as well as her emotional tirades.

In this instance, Yave remained as cold as a north wind blowing off snow capped mountains, and her accusations rang as frigid.

“The elves are allying with our enemies, but then you probably already knew that.”

Her decree made no sense to Jon. He remained silent.

“Denying it will not help you. You were against breaking ties with the elves when you took the throne. You probably know much about the spies that even now are probably working to betray your own people.”

Jon did not stir, did not care. Elves? Spies? Who cared of elves and spies? His life was ruined. He had lost everything. But then, he had also realized his wish. He was relieved of his responsibilities. Yes, the crown was taken from him, but it was something he never wanted in the first place. Being thrown into this prison was a small price to pay for being freed of such responsibility.

Yave remained undeterred by Jon’s passivity. “You will tell me of what you know. You will tell me what alliances were made upon Sanctum. You will tell me why the elves wish to warn the algors. You will tell me why Ryson Acumen is now interfering in our business and you will tell me where I can find him.”

Whereas Yave’s voice could not inspire a reaction from Jon, the mention of the delver’s name brought him to life. His hands dropped to his lap, then to his side as he lifted himself from his rock bed. His eyes lit upon the queen, but there was no true recognition. Only the face of the delver danced in his thoughts.

“Ryson?” he whispered.

Strog watched intently. The delver’s name had almost hypnotized the imprisoned dwarf and prisoners often spoke freely under such delusions, giving away important intelligence.

“Yes, Ryson Acumen. The one who helped you kill Tun.” Yave sneered with contempt at having to repeat the name. She faced her son with growing emotion, not love or sympathy, but anger and condemnation.

Strog gripped her arm. He wanted her to remain silent - let the prisoner spout important information, leave him in his trance. To interrupt with aggressive, hostile remarks was plain foolishness, and he would not have it.

She tried to yank her arm free in a fit of unbridled fury, but Strog’s grip tightened. She went to slap him again, but his other arm blocked the blow. She reached to claw out his eyes. Her fingers were seized in mid-air. As Strog bent them back with force, she gulped down a moan of pain.

“What are you doing?”

“If you remain silent, we will have the information you obviously came down here for.”

Jon slanted his head in confusion. He heard their voices, saw their struggle, but didn’t understand it. Still failing to show recognition to his mother the queen, his focus drifted off. Whatever had stirred him from his resignation was drifting away, a dying echo of a name he thought he knew. His eyes fell to the floor. The dull grey slate welcomed him. The blank environment held his desires. In this cell he had no responsibilities, no decisions to make. He was not king, he was not prince. His stomach did not ache, did not tie into knots with the worries of matters beyond his control. He was safe. His shoulders slouched, not with the weight of a heavy burden, but with the freedom of near nonexistence.

Yave still struggled with Strog. She snarled with anger as he pulled her from the cell. When Strog released her to shut the cell door, she leapt upon him. Pounding furiously upon his head.

“You dare touch me!” she growled. “I will have you killed. I will hang your fingers around my neck!”

Strog threw her off him. He did not draw the heavy double-bladed axe which hung from his belt, though he surely felt the desire. He pulled just enough diplomacy from his words to slowly calm the enraged queen.

“I am simply following your own direction. Though you have not spoken the order, I see why you have brought me here. You wish to obtain information from Jon as to the identity of spies and the whereabouts of the delver. It is obvious that this is paramount to your wishes to defeat the algors as well as the elves. Jon was about to reveal much, he does not recognize you. The name of the delver stirred him into a susceptible state. If, however, he realized you meant to do the delver harm, he would have ceased. I did not wish to assault your person, but you were about to unknowingly hinder your own objectives. If we do not contradict or intimidate the prisoner, he will reveal much to us. But we must remain in control. Forgive me your majesty.” These last words pained the War Com, but they were needed to assuage the queen of her growing resentment.

Yave heaved an unforgiving grunt of dissatisfaction. “You are never to touch me again!”

Strog bit down on his lip. In his mind, he imagined the day when he would strangle her, or behead her with several chops of a dull axe. The vivid image made his next words almost palatable. “Again, I am sorry. It is my wish only to serve you and your cause.”

The queen brushed his apparent apology aside. Her eyes set upon the cell door like a hungry jackal eyeing a sickly rabbit. “If you think you can get information, then do so. I want to know where the delver lives. Delvers make their homes in human towns. Find the town he comes from and we will know what humans to target. That is the reason I brought you here. Once we know where to strike the humans, you will have no further excuses. We can move forth with my plans and soon every race in Uton will learn of dwarf justice.”

One look at Yave made it obvious that debate was useless. Revenge was her only motive. It did not matter to her that the algors were still a threat, and their decimation should be the foremost military objective. Her fury had pushed her to paranoia. It was not enough to attack the algors, she wished to extract revenge from all she blamed, and that included the elves, humans, and delvers. Strog’s cautions would not stop her. She was not concerned with judicial strategy. Once she narrowed her sights upon one human village, she would order him to move

against the elves as well as the humans.

Strog fumed. His command over battle strategies was being ripped from him by the delusions of a mad woman who was now queen. He bristled at the prospect of having to divide his army as well as leave an injured and angry enemy at his flank before finishing the job. He would open a second and third front by attacking the elves and the humans. He saw no signs the elves were allied with the algors, but an unprovoked attack would certainly lead to such an alliance. The algors would be given time to regroup while humans and elves offered their assistance, all of this while he could not obtain the assistance of neighboring dwarf cities. The forces of Dunop would stand alone.

Yet, he abandoned all hope of making Yave see this point. There was little he could do or say to convince her. If he resisted her orders, she would call for his execution. He would be forced to remove her from power. Subsequent events became clear. Royalists that accepted the separatists because of the queen would revolt. They would be embroiled in a civil war. Neighboring dwarf cities may then interfere, but not on the side of the separatists. They would seize the opportunity to restore pure monarchy to Dunop. The separatists would surely be defeated and their cause destroyed forever.

There was but one hope Strog could seize upon. If Yave could be pacified with a small strike upon the elves of Dark Spruce and one human village, he may yet keep his army intact without inviting major reprisals. The humans will not know where to attack and the elves may be too confused to understand what is actually happening. If he was lucky, he could regroup his army and send them to finish off the algors before they truly allied in force against him. It was thus now to his advantage to uncover the very knowledge Yave desired. He needed to narrow the possible human target sites as well as uncover any information as to possible dwarf traitors that might warn the elves.

Strog turned from Yave, exasperated but intent on obtaining what he needed to know. He swung the cell door back open and again stepped back inside. He pulled the door shut before Yave could accompany him. Best to leave her outside where her tirades would not deter the success of the interrogation.

Jon remained standing. He stared contentedly at the floor. He showed no response to the opening of his cell door and made no acknowledgment of Strog's return.

The War Com considered how to bring Jon back to a susceptible state, to place the dethroned king into the trance that made questioning more permissive. Strog whispered words and phrases that he hoped would recall the trance.

“Sanctum. Ryson Acumen. The elves, Lief Woodson and Holli Brances. They wish to be with you again.”

“Sanctum?” Jon closed his eyes in anguish. He thought of the dark hollow mountain, how it claimed the life of his brother. The pain began to clear his mind.

Strog cursed under his breath at his own error. He struggled to correct it. “The delver, Ryson Acumen. He saved the land. Do you not wish to see him?”

Jon opened his eyes. He looked to the War Com. There was no trance. He recognized Strog immediately, a leader of the separatists, an enemy to the throne. He recalled the last few moments. He knew his mother was in his cell, guessed she was now waiting outside. The ex-king bristled with animosity.

“What is it you really want? What is it your queen wants?”

Yave threw open the cell door. The resoluteness of Jon’s voice disturbed the War Com, but it enraged the queen.

“I want to know everything about the delver Ryson Acumen.”

“Why?”

“You will tell me what I want to know!”

“Why?” Jon repeated. He stood straight and defiant. For only the second time since Bol left, he appeared as a king.

His resolve enraged the queen. Yave shrieked. “Because I command it.”

Jon almost laughed. “You? You command me? I am either a king or I’m a condemned dwarf. No matter which way you look at it, I do not have to take your orders. Since my removal from the throne was illegal and immoral, I will not recognize your rule, and I do not take commands.”

Jon turned his back on his mother. He thought of Bol, how he turned his back on all of Dunop. He almost smiled at the irony.

“You will tell me!” Yave bellowed.

Jon’s back responded the same as his front. “Why?”

Strog interrupted strongly. “The delver has made an attempt to interfere with us. We wish to know why.”

“What has he done?”

Strog grumbled. He was supposed to be asking the questions, not answering them. Still, he needed the information.

“He was in the desert, heading toward the algors. He was going to warn them of our attack. You believed he was a friend of yours. If he is a friend, why would he take the algors’ side over ours?”

“Probably because he knows your cause is unjust.”

Strog saw an opening, a way to trick Jon into saying more than he should. He moved carefully. “The delver would not take sides otherwise?”

“Of course not.”

“You know him that well?”

“Well enough.”

“So he would wish to help the algors against the dwarves only because, as you put it, we are being unjust.”

Jon nodded.

“Why would he think our cause is unjust?”

“Because he knows the algors had nothing to do with...” He could not say his brother’s name. “The algors did nothing to invite an attack against them.”

Jon became tired. He had not had to think much over the past few days. If

anything, he avoided contemplation while he embraced the welcome oblivion of his cell. Strog was forcing him to recall painful memories. He did not wish to continue the conversation.

Strog, however, pressed the weakness of his opponent. “You might hold the algors blameless, but you can not deny that they had much to do with your brother’s death. After all, they created the sand giant that killed him.”

Jon did not answer. He walked back to his stone bed. He threw himself down upon it heavily, his back still to the queen and the War Com.

Yave was about to demand answers, but Strog held his hand up for her to remain quiet. Amazingly, she obeyed. She watched curiously as Strog continued to build the web that would ensnare the answers he desired.

“So, the delver may agree with you that the algors were not at fault. He would argue your cause?”

Ryson’s face etched itself in Jon’s thoughts. Yes, the delver would argue for him, would argue for the algors. That was the answer. With a spark of hope, Jon turned to face Yave. He spoke to her, not to Strog.

“You blame me, you blame the algors, but you are wrong. Ryson would know that. Ask him.”

“He would lie.” Yave spat out before Strog could stop her.

“No, he wouldn’t. He did everything he could to save the land, to save everyone, including the dwarves. You would have to believe him.”

“We can not talk to him,” Strog interrupted and then quickly pressed a question for information he wanted. “We do not know where to find him. We do not even know where to look. Do you?”

“But you said you knew he was in the desert hoping to warn the algors.”

“The delver forced a small party of dwarves at a listening post to retreat. He did not stop to explain his actions or tell us where he would be. I imagine he has returned to his home. I do not know where that is.”

Jon searched his memory. It caused him pain, but he recalled such facts which he unwittingly revealed to his captor. “He lived in Connel. That’s where we met before we went to Sanctum. He also said something about Burbon. He said he had to go there to explain things to some humans.”

Strog nodded appreciatively. Two targets, not dozens. Connel was large, fitted with a human army according to his own information, but Burbon was small and relatively unprotected.

Jon clung to his hope. He turned his attention back to Yave. “You will talk to Ryson. He will tell you, tell you it was the sphere, not the algors, and not me.”

Strog placed himself in between Jon and the queen. He still needed more information. He could not afford to have the queen force an end to this conversation. He spoke quickly before Yave could respond on her own.

“He may do that, then again he may not. As I said, the last we saw of this delver friend of yours, he was attempting to help the algors against us. I still don’t know why he would do that.”

“Because he knows what you’re doing is wrong?”

“How would he know exactly what we’re doing or why? He has not been to Dunop. How can you say he knows our intentions or our reasons?”

“He would hear of it. He is a delver. He thirsts for information.”

“But how would he come about information like that? It doesn’t make any sense to me. Unless of course you think he was spying on us? And if he was, why would he?”

“He wouldn’t spy,” Jon insisted. “He probably heard rumors.”

Strog spoke quickly, pressing the matter to a head. “But this is not a rumor. He knew of a fact, he knew of our plans to attack. You ask us to speak to him, to allow him to convince us the algors deserve no blame. But how can we trust him, if it seems as if he has knowledge of secret plans? What if he had warned the algors? Many dwarves would have died. You have to explain how he knew this before we can trust any of his own explanations.”

“I don’t know how he found out. There were probably dwarves who told the elves.”

“Why would dwarves tell elves of our plans?”

“Because it’s wrong to attack the algors.” Jon was going in circles. He was confused, exasperated.

“Do you know how far-fetched that sounds? Dwarves warning elves about our plans involving algors? I would never believe it. The delver must have been spying on us, thus he is an unreliable source of information.”

“It’s not far-fetched.”

“It is! What dwarf would do such a thing as reveal secrets to the elves? Name one?”

The question hung in the air. It went unanswered. Again, only for a moment, Jon’s mind lost its confusion and Strog’s desire was clear to Jon. He wanted names, names of dwarves he could list as traitors and publicly execute. Jon thought of Hern, his friend, his advisor, pierced through the heart because he condemned the actions of the true traitors. Jon knew, knew if he spoke a single name, he would condemn that dwarf to death. For the first time since being thrown in this cell, he felt that familiar twinge in his stomach. He felt the burden of knowing too much. He shook his head at Strog.

“No. I won’t give you what you want. If you want to hang traitors, look no further than a mirror. And hang those that helped you.” He looked to Yave. “Hang her as well.”

Strog saw the conviction in Jon’s expression. He would say no more. It didn’t matter. He had gained enough. He had learned of the delver’s territory. He would not have to spread his army thin to meet Yave’s cravings for vengeance. He led the queen out of the cell and relocked the door.

Jon was left to his emptiness; an emptiness he wished had remained unbroken.

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At Yave’s order, Strog assembled his generals, and the queen addressed them

with unyielding demands.

“The algors are not alone in their assault against us,” she declared wild-eyed and snarling. “We have been targeted by others. It seems as if the elves of Dark Spruce are not happy with our arrangements. Perhaps they believe if we won’t trade with them, they will simply steal from us. If you doubt me, know this; two elves were found trying to warn the algors of our plans. The only reason for this is obvious. They wish to gain allies in hopes of restoring their power over us. We will not allow this. Their interference is as much a declaration of war.”

The dwarf generals murmured. They needed little encouragement to despise and distrust the elves. They were all from the separatist movement, and all believed in dwarf independence and superiority. Not one had ever felt comfortable with the trade arrangements made with the elves. Relying on them for food for their tables and wood for their fires made them as dependent as infants. It struck at their pride as well as their desire for independence. Now that they were in control, they had seen to the end of such dependence, but they would always remember the smugness of the elves, their arrogance. It did not surprise these generals that the elves would wish to continue their subjugation of the dwarves, and they would not question the validity of Yave’s accusations.

Yave spoke on, unrelenting in her charges. “We have identified the elves, and they are indeed from Dark Spruce. It appears that our former trading partners will not allow us to simply end our dependence upon them. They have their reasons for wanting us to lose to the algors. These same elves now are left without a source of gems, gold, or iron. They are incapable of mining for themselves. Is it any wonder they would seek to sabotage our efforts? If they weaken us, they force us to renew our trade with them. If they attack us while our forces are occupied, they could march on Dunop and take whatever they desire.”

The grumbles of the generals turned to outright denunciations of the elves.

“Never!”

“Over our corpses.”

Yave nodded with a smirk. “That is my feeling exactly. That is why I have already ordered Strog to recall his army this day. We will not be unprepared for these unprovoked attacks against our independence. In fact, since the elves have

made the first move of aggression in trying to ally with our enemies, we have no choice but to respond in kind. If we allow this action to go unpunished, the elves will still believe they can dictate their own rules upon us. Consider what might have happened if the elves' ploy was successful. According to the War Com, if the algors had been warned, hundreds of dwarf warriors would have been slain at their hands. This can only be what the elves wanted, why else would they seek to warn our enemies?"

Strog wished to speak out, to clarify the strategies, but the generals were filled with anger. They had no more love for the queen than he, but they hated the elves. Their emotions now blinded them. He remained silent, contemplating his true alternatives. He could only hope that Yave would agree to a single quick strike against the two human towns and the elves of Dark Spruce, then allow him to return to the algors. The thought of marching his army back and forth through the tunnels under the Lacobian desert disgusted him, but he had little choice. Yave was forcing this upon him, and all he could do was develop the best plans to deal with a now growing war.

He played over several strategies in his mind involving the deployment of his forces. He would send the bulk of his army and his finest men against Connel. The town was large, and though defended by a full garrison, the humans would be unprepared for the assault. The dwarves could pick their targets and would probably face little casualties. They would do great damage, but remain prepared to return to the Lacobian to finish off the algors. He could send a much smaller party against the town of Burbon and also do significant damage. As for the elves, it was also best to send a smaller band of warriors, make it look like a group of renegades as opposed to an organized force. This might keep the elves guessing as to the reasons behind the attack and stall any concerted offensive on their part against Dunop.

As Strog mulled over these strategies, Yave had continued with her harangue against the elves. The generals were now calling for the blood of the elves, just as Yave added another enemy to their list.

"I am afraid it does not end there," she growled. "The elves did not act alone. A delver was with them to warn the algors. I need not remind you that delvers live with humans. But I ask you why would a delver concern himself with our dealings? Could it be he knows of our reserves of gold and gems? We all know of the humans' greed. If they see an opportunity to steal from us, they will seize

it. Thus, we are alone and face many enemies. There is but one thing we can do. We must fight.”

The generals agreed with shouts and war cries, all save Strog. His silence did not go unnoticed. Yave brought the attention of the others down upon him.

“As I have said, I have asked the War Com to recall our army. It is now time he profess his strategies to deal with our many enemies.”

Strog spoke evenly, but with a low grumbling voice. He mapped out his strategies and the deployment of his forces. His plans involving the humans were well received. The small force against the elves, however, was questioned vigorously by both Yave and the lower ranking generals. He defended his points with crisp strategy; tactics the queen scoffed at, but the generals embraced. They could not deny his basic assumptions and in the face of their agreement, even Yave was forced to submit.

The queen, however, remained intent upon having the last word. “So what do my generals say? Which of you will lead an attack against the elves of Dark Spruce?”

Each general volunteered save Strog. Yave picked one, then set her sights upon the War Com.

“You withheld. I can only surmise that means you wish to lead your troops against the humans. I shall allow you to lead the large force against Connel.”

It was a calculated move, a direct affront against him. There was little to gain in leading this assault and much to lose. Since the strength of the army would be under his command, Strog would be expected to win and win easily. There would be little honor or glory won in even the most convincing of victories. Any sufficient dwarf casualties or failures to impose severe damage to the human city would be viewed in total disgrace. Strog saw this for what it was, but refused to react. He accepted the command with a nod.

Chapter 8

Twilight in Burbon. The moon would be in quarter phase, but it had not yet risen above the horizon. A full harvest moon would have given enough light to read by, but that was still several days away. Fading light in the west left the sky a deep dark blue, not quite the black of night. Most stars remained blanketed out of sight, only a few bright ones in the east were visible. The air was dry but cold, even for dusk in the harvest season, the wind absent. The scent of many fires from a host of chimneys filled the streets. The plumes of smoke drifted lazily about rooftops, wafting in the air with no particular place to go.

The dwarves broke through the surface in a dirt alley between a private residence and a shoemaker's shop. Covered in dirt from digging their access tunnel and dressed in black battle dress, they faded easily into the shadows. Dark chest plates protected their stout bodies, horned battle helmets covered their wide heads. They appeared like small, dirty tanks moving silently through this dark passage of Burbon. Broad shouldered and armed with axe, broadsword, and mace, they spilled upwards from the hole in the ground. They took to several diamond shaped formations and remained silent and unmoving until each was in ready position.

They were not seen, not by citizens and not by Burbon's guard. The soldiers were busy watching for goblins at the clearing outside the wall. The human troops stood in the towers and at the gates. They remained alert, but their patrols were designed to catch threats before they reached the wall. The guard could not have guessed an enemy was already inside and ready to strike.

As for the ordinary citizens of Burbon, most were already off the streets. Though they had faith in Sy and Enin, the thought of goblin raiding parties kept them from unnecessary evening travel and most remained in their homes. Shades covered windows. Those that were uncovered revealed the blazing glow of hearth fires. Only a few souls braved the dark, and these lonely travelers moved quickly to the taverns and inns. They had no desire to walk along aimlessly or to lengthen their route to enjoy the clear harvest night. They chose direct paths and well lit streets. Since the shoemaker's shop was closed, no one ventured near this particular dark alley.

The dwarf commander in charge of this attack considered his situation and the

means to achieve his objectives. He was to cause major casualties to the human guard, to destroy their military headquarters as well as any weapon stores, and relieve the humans of their food supplies. Underground listening posts had identified and located most of the targets. The office of the captain was located near the center of town, as were many general stores. The dwarf commander now had his strike force above ground, covered in the darkness and in formation. He need only make his way to the guard headquarters to achieve the better part of his objectives. His eyes narrowed. Accustomed to the relative darkness of his underground home of Dunop, he saw well into the night.

Most of Burbon's streets were well-lit with flaming lamps. Only side alleys remained bathed in darkness. The main roads were straight and clear of obstruction. The dwarves would have to venture into the light of the lamps if they wished to reach the city center. There were only meager shadows and even less cover. The commander lifted his arm and waved to the opposite end of his formation. A dwarf sentry moved across the alley to make his report.

"Human guards spotted near the wall. They are moving away from us, watching the perimeter. Four towers with full complements accounted for. All watching outside the wall. Fifth tower out of my sight. Sixth tower incomplete, no platform, and no guard. Inspection of either the north or south gate impossible at this time."

The sentry waited for further orders.

The commander whispered his instructions, but with no less bark of authority. "Take two axe men. Return to the tunnel. Take the second exploratory tunnel and resurface near the sixth tower. Chop the support beams of the unfinished platform. When it collapses, return here."

The sentry did not delay. He tapped two dwarves upon the shoulder before diving back into the tunnel. The two dwarves followed obediently.

#

Enin stood near the south gate. His attention remained focused beyond the wall, upon his magic web that covered the blind spot in the hills. The wizard had recast the spell only moments ago, and the web was restored to full power. It was ready to catch its intended prey, but Enin truly doubted it would be necessary. Since Ryson had left, there were no further signs of goblins, or of the serp and

the shag. The wizard felt nothing, sensed nothing. If there were goblins out there, they were far in the hills. They were certainly not near his web or he would have sensed them. Enin felt secure enough to consider what he had learned about the web spell. Though several guards stood around him, he spoke openly to himself of altering the spell in another form.

“I thought of a spider, like a spider, and I created a web. Combining a trap with a warning. Stronger spells of the same kind could be very helpful to us. It’s good to be warned of an enemy, but even better to trap it before it can cause any harm.”

The soldiers nodded. Certainly their jobs would be easier, safer, if Enin could trap the goblins before a battle ensued. Nearly every guard there had faced the hail of crossbow fire. A few had been hit in the arms and shoulders. Perhaps magic was a dangerous thing, but they’d welcome a spell which would remove them from harm’s way.

Enin paid them little attention. He focused on his own calculations as he continued to speak of them aloud. “A web is nice for small areas, but it can be avoided. I could probably enlarge the web, but that would take more energy. It would also lock us in as well as locking others out. We couldn’t get to the fields, merchants couldn’t enter the gates. No, that won’t do. It has to be something that identifies a true threat and only stops that. That’s an interesting thought. A spell that can identify as well as trap and warn. Now that would be a great spell. I wonder how much power it would take. What would it be like? A circling wind. It would pass around the walls constantly. When it touched someone, it would identify, and then, decide whether to strike. Like a hunter wind! I don’t know if that’s possible. I wonder if it can attune to the different way the magic surrounds everyone. The goblins have a different aura of magic. What if the spell could react to that specific aura? That might actually work. It would take time. I’d really have to know what makes the magic around the goblins different. But the wind idea is a good one. It could sweep around gently until it hits a goblin, then it could alter into something more powerful, like a tornado, trapping the goblin at its center.”

A familiar voice called out to interrupt the wizard’s concentration. “Thinking of more ways to trap our friends out there? That’s good. I like to hear it.”

Enin snapped from his thoughts to see Sy walking up to him. The captain

clapped him on the shoulder.

“I was just thinking about variations of my web spell.” Enin explained. “Spells like that can be quite useful.”

“I know. Did you recast the web?”

“Yes, just a few moments ago.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. It really doesn’t take much energy.”

“Well don’t exhaust yourself,” the captain advised. “I’m not too worried about tonight. My men have been briefed. I’ve been going around to each post and no one has seen a thing. All the lamps are lit in the clearing and the sky’s clear. There’s no sign of any movement. The tower guards are reporting all clear. I think when the serp ran into Ryson, it knew it would have to delay any plans for a raid. How about you? Have you sensed anything out there?”

Enin was not allowed to answer. A crash from the southeastern edge of town broke the silence of the night, not quite an explosion, but loud enough to shake the windows of most of the shops. Silence followed for but a brief moment. Quickly after, calls shot out from all over town. Shutters were opened by worried, yet curious, townspeople. The fading light was not sufficient to reveal the source of the clamor from the ground, and questions rang out from the night.

“What was that?” Enin questioned.

The guards came to the ready as Sy took immediate control.

He called first to the guard perched in the tower. “Report.”

“The new tower’s collapsed. No sign of any other activity.”

“Any fire?”

“None.”

“Any street lamps out, any sections of town dark?”

The guard scanned the town spread out below him. “All lamps lit.”

“Signal the other towers. Tell them to maintain watch.”

The tower guard lit a long torch and waved it high above his head. A special sequence of movements relayed the message.

Sy caught Enin’s attention. “Is the web still in place?”

“Yes,” the wizard mumbled with confusion. “It’s intact. I know it is. It hasn’t been broken at all. I don’t understand. I don’t feel anything. There can’t be any goblins around, I don’t feel them!”

“Relax!” Sy ordered. “We don’t know what’s out there. All we know is the tower collapsed. It’s under construction. Anything could have caused it. We have to check it out.”

He shouted out again to the tower guard. “Signal the perimeter patrol. I want them to meet me at the new tower. Everyone else stays at their post.” He then turned back to Enin. “I want you to go back to command HQ. Assemble all reserves. Wait there until you get a signal, or until I come back for you.”

Sy watched the tower guard finish his last set of signals before giving his final orders. “Tower guard! Keep your eyes on the clearing. Make sure no one crosses it. No one gets to or past the wall.” He then instructed the gate soldiers which numbered twice as many as normal. “I want three men to come with me. You, you and you. The rest of you stay here. The gate remains closed no matter what. No one gets through.”

Sy did not run off in haste. He checked his weapons first, bid his soldiers to do the same. The minor pause brought a sense of ease to those that watched him. They saw he remained in total control. It settled their own nerves. His sword remained sheathed as he carefully set off toward the sight of the disturbance. He stepped quickly, deliberately, but he showed no sign of panic. He carefully eyed all passage ways he crossed. When he spotted townspeople on their porches or worse, in the streets, he politely but firmly ordered them back inside. When the collapsed tower came clearly into sight, he slowed his pace.

“Fan out,” he whispered and his soldiers obeyed. He stepped up to the collapsed remains first, carefully avoiding any large pieces which might be hiding a goblin

ambush. He stood motionless for long periods as he listened for any signs of intruders. Nothing. His eyes fell from the broken wood and swept across the immediate surroundings. Nothing caught his attention until the perimeter patrol moved up from the west.

He chuckled a heavy sigh. "I don't think there's anything here. I want to know why this thing fell."

The guards began to inspect the tattered wood as Sy stepped up with authority to the closest house. He knocked gently. "Sy Fenden here. No sign of a threat out here. I need to speak to someone."

A curtain ruffled at a side window before an elderly man opened the door.

Sy spoke quickly but with a calming tone. "It seems there was an accident. Sorry to disturb you. Did you see anything?"

The man appeared off sorts, trying to come to grips with what he might or might not have seen. "I don't know."

"What don't you know?" Sy asked calmly.

"I'm not sure what I saw."

"Describe it."

"A couple of shadows running from the tower after it collapsed. They just disappeared."

"Can you be more specific? Were they human, did you think they might have been goblins?" Sy didn't want to alarm the man, but human shapes would certainly look different as compared to goblins. "What size were these shadows?"

"They were short, but not that short. They were big, too."

Sy held back a sigh of exasperation. "They were short, but they were big?"

"I mean they were broad. Not like goblins at all."

Sy shook his head. He thought he might have understood. “Thank you for your help. I wouldn’t worry about it. Please go back inside for now.”

Sy walked wearily over to his soldiers. “It seems we have some pranksters in our midst. Kids. I guess it is that time of year again. I would have hoped our people would have left the mischief to the real goblins, but it looks like a couple of ‘em just couldn’t resist.”

A soldier inspecting a support beam interrupted Sy’s explanation. “Captain? Can you come and take a look at this?”

Sy nodded and stepped over to a thick block of wood that jutted up from the ground. He did not like what he saw.

The soldier’s explanation did little to ease any worries. “Sir, this is the main support column of the tower. I helped place it in the ground myself. It didn’t break, it was cut. And I don’t mean chopped down, I mean sliced. It looks as if one axe blade went right through it with one swing. There’s no kid in Burbon that can do that. I don’t know if there’s any man that could make that kind of clean cut with one chop.”

Sy saw the same thing, but he wanted to confirm it. “Are you sure? Could it have been done with a saw?”

“There’s no saw dust. And we would have heard it. The grinding from a saw would have echoed out long before this thing fell over. No, someone was able to cut through this thing with one axe swing.”

Sy considered the power for such a feat. He thought of the shag. Only problem with that was the man saw a couple of short shadows. Shags were never short.

“What in Godson’s name is going on here?” He quickly checked his momentary lapse of control. He growled firm orders. “Everyone draw your swords. Spread out and check the ground for prints. I can’t tell you what to expect, just look for anything out of the ordinary.”

The soldiers stiffened with readiness. The air filled with the swish of drawn swords. They took to a spread formation as they carefully scoured the ground. Immediately, one guard called out.

“Over here.”

Sy moved to the soldier. “The rest of you stay in position. Stand ready.” Sy found the tracks pointed out by the soldier. He found two other trails, all moving in the same direction. He followed them slowly. They disappeared into the ground. Carefully, he patted the soil where the tracks stopped. The dirt was loose. He took a dagger from his waistband and pressed the fine point into the ground. The dirt gave way and revealed an entrance to an underground tunnel. Immediately, Sy called out more orders. “I want eight men, now!”

Eight soldiers moved up to the hole in the ground. They waited impatiently for their orders.

Sy pointed to the hole. “Whatever wrecked our tower escaped down this hole. I don’t expect them to come back, but I want it covered. I want three of you to form a circle around here. The other five I want circled further back around the first three. If something tries to come out, order it to stop. If it comes out, order it to stay put. If it moves to attack, defend yourselves. If it turns to go back down, let it. Under no circumstances are you to go down the hole. The rest of you, come with me.”

#

The dwarf commander waited for the return of his axe men that collapsed the tower. The entire strike force remained as still as statues, bathed in the darkness. While the town’s attention fixed upon the confusion, the axe men returned without casualty. The commander ordered for reports on all human guard activity. They were mixed. The collapse of the tower had diverted attention, but most of the guards remained at their posts. The main patrol had been dispatched to the diversion, but the tower and gate guards remained on alert and in position. The commander grudgingly gave respect to the human in charge.

“He is keeping his forces well deployed,” he growled. “By dispatching only a small patrol to investigate our diversion, he maintains control of key points of the town. We must remain careful of being outflanked. Still, they watch outside the walls. They do not know of our full presence. We must move now. To the demons with their lamp lights. If we are spotted, we attack.”

With a final grunt, the dwarf motioned for his strike force to move out. They remained in diamond formations, but they spread out to cover the full width of

the wider streets which would lead to the town center. They moved slowly, but quietly. As guard posts were placed on the outskirts of the city and not around the town center, the attack party moved without obstacle toward their prearranged objectives.

#

Sy reached command HQ before the dwarves. He found Enin waiting outside with a complement of thirty soldiers. They stood with swords in hand, agitated and waiting for news.

Sy spoke directly to the wizard, moving straight to his point. “I don’t think we’re dealing with goblins, serps, or shags for that matter. The tower was brought to the ground by someone cutting the support columns, someone strong, very strong and capable with an axe. A witness said they were short, and they disappeared into the ground. They escaped through a tunnel, a long tunnel, one that was probably built in the time you and I shave. You know what description that fits?”

“Dwarves,” Enin replied quickly.

“Exactly. From what Ryson has told us, it has to be. That tunnel wasn’t there when construction of the tower began. No one else could dig that quickly. But now we get to the difficult questions. Where are they, what do they want, and why did they destroy our tower?”

Enin mulled over the points with confusion. “You said they escaped down a tunnel. Does that mean they’re gone?”

“I have no idea where that tunnel leads. They could still be inside the walls, or far away from here. They could be above ground or still in the tunnel. I’m certainly not going to send any men down there to check on it. That would be a death sentence. What do you sense, anything?”

Enin shook his head. “Nothing, nothing at all.”

“I don’t know if that does us any good. They were inside the wall when they collapsed the tower. Their tracks are proof of that. You were at the south gate. That’s not that far, and you didn’t sense them then.”

“I know. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“I don’t either and that’s why I still have to question whether they still might be within the walls. I also have to wonder what they were doing here. Ryson told us they were going to war with the algors. Nothing was said about possible hostilities against us.”

“Maybe they are searching for allies,” Enin offered. “Maybe they want our help.”

“Allies don’t destroy towers. Now why would they do that? I have only one possible explanation, and it’s not one I relish. That tower had no strategic significance, it wasn’t finished. The only reason I would collapse it would be to create a diversion.”

“A diversion for what?”

“That’s what I need to know.” Sy stopped. His attention shifted to his left. “It looks like we’re going to find out. They’re in the streets!”

Enin looked off down the same lit corridor. He saw the nearly indistinguishable shapes of several short, stout men trying to evade the light. Nothing within him told him that these invaders were anything out of the ordinary. “I sense nothing.”

“I guess your magical alert doesn’t work with dwarves,” Sy responded before quickly whispering orders to a nearby soldier. The soldier disappeared in the opposite direction of the dwarves.

“What did you say to him?” Enin asked quietly.

“I told him to alert the tower and gate guards of what we’ve got here. We may need reinforcements.”

The dwarf commander kept his force in the same diamond formations with himself at the point of the center group. This put him in the middle of the wide street which led toward the human command post. His eyes, well accustomed to the dark, spotted every human soldier ahead, regardless of the shadows of night. He counted thirty, a larger group than he expected. He also had to walk in the open, through lit streets, but he believed he held the advantage. The human guard held swords, the only true mistake of his counterpart, but a grave mistake

none the less. If the humans were going to face them in hand-to-hand combat, the battle would be over before it began. His forces moved unimpeded toward the heart of the town. This was indeed too easy.

Sy tensed with questions. Armed dwarves moving towards his position was not something he had ever dealt with before. He knew so little about his enemy. Why are they here? The dwarves showed no sign of stopping, and they moved with axe and mace ready for combat. Yet, to his knowledge, Burbon had done nothing to warrant an attack by his men other than destroy the tower.

“This is ridiculous,” he muttered to Enin. “They’re walking right up to us. I don’t even know what they want. I can’t let them continue without knowing their intentions.”

“What can you do? You’re not thinking of attacking, are you? You don’t want to start a war.”

“Absolutely not. That’s why I haven’t given the order to attack. They may be here just to talk. I guess there’s only one way to find out. You men keep ready. I don’t know what may happen here.”

Sy took a step forward. The dwarves were easily in shouting distance, about forty paces away. Sy called out with authority. “Please hold your position and be identified.”

The dwarves kept moving.

“I am Sy Fenden, captain of the guard. I need to know your intentions.”

Not a dwarf spoke. They advanced at exactly the same pace as before.

“Your approach is threatening to us. We do not wish to fight.”

The dwarf commander gave his reply in the form of a hand signal to his forces. The back half of the diamond formation broke. The dwarves in the rear moved up to the front, forming an angled wedge with the point directed at the human captain. They broke into a battle run, but they were not fast by any stretch of the imagination.

Sy had more than enough time to react. His first command was a surprise to his

men. “Everyone fall back, back into HQ.”

Most men moved without hesitation, but a few stared at the wedge of dwarves and wondered why Sy had not ordered them to break the formation.

Sy repeated his order angrily. “Inside, now!”

This time, each soldier acknowledged. Quickly but orderly, the thirty soldiers filed through the door of the brick command post. Sy waited by the door. When all his men were inside, he threw the thick oak door closed and bolted it.

“Cover the windows. If they start to come in, call out. I need ten men at the door.”

Enin spoke his confusion. “What are you doing?”

“I still don’t know what they want. I’m not ready to get into a battle, not just yet. I’m giving them one more chance before they force my hand. They have axes and that’s a wooden door. If they really want to attack us, they’ll chop right through it. At least then, I’ll have no other choice but to order our defense. This will also give our reinforcements a chance to get here.” Sy turned to one of the guards. “Get on the roof. Signal the towers. I want all the tower and gate watches to divide, half stay at their post, the other half I want here. Go!”

Outside, the dwarves were ordered to a full halt before they reached the command building. Sy’s retreat surprised the dwarf commander. He expected the humans to either arrogantly attack the wedge or to stand stupidly about and meet their fate with blank expressions. The command post was made of brick, and though it was not worthy of dwarf construction, it would hold against several mace blows. The door was another matter. It would fall quickly.

He kept his force in close formation rather than spreading out about the building. He ordered one dwarf to quickly circle the command post. There was no other door. Since dwarves lived underground and always considered what was over their head, the commander then looked to the roof. He stepped back and saw the human soldier make his signal.

“Very good,” the commander mused. “He wants us to go to the door. He’ll have his men waiting there on the inside. We break through the door and fight to get through a narrow passage way. Just when we break his force, reinforcements

would hit us from behind. He would probably sacrifice his own life in the process, but we would be trapped.”

The dwarf commander pointed to an axe man. He ordered the destruction of the door.

Inside the command post, Sy positioned himself with a contingent of ten men to meet the dwarves right at the archway. The dwarves would only be able to fit two through at a time. The odds would be even better for his men. They all watched the door, waited for the inevitable.

The first blow of the axe split the door, but did not shatter it. The second sent wood flying in every direction. Sy tensed to meet the assault, but no dwarf advanced through the opening. He scanned what he could see through the broken space that used to be the door. There was no sign of the dwarves. He said nothing. He pointed to a guard near a window. He motioned for him to look outside. The guard shook his head revealing he saw nothing. The clang of steel from outside threw Sy into even greater confusion. He stepped carefully up to the doorway.

Outside, the dwarves were back in their wedge formation and carving through a group of reinforcements like woodcutters through soft wood. The human reinforcements were careless, misinterpreting the dwarves’ small stature as a sign of weakness. They attacked before Sy could stop them. They believed their superior numbers and size would lead to easy victory. They were massacred.

Sy cursed, but in that split second he managed to assess the dwarves’ battle strengths. Fighting them with swords was near useless. Moving in close quarters allowed the dwarves to use their short arms to meet the attack. The dwarf axes were breaking the sword blades as if they were made of glass.

Sy adjusted his plans in the snap of a finger and gave his orders with the same quick deliberation. “Grab spears and get outside.”

The men sheathed their swords and quickly pulled spears from the weapon racks. They followed Sy outside as he ordered the reinforcements to fall back. “Break off! Break off! Don’t get close to them. Spread out. Use your speed; force them to come to you.”

As more reinforcements appeared, Sy ordered them to retrieve new weapons as

well. As his force now totaled nearly one hundred men, all armed with spears, he ordered them into position. “Spread out! Surround them. Don’t get close. If they move up to you, jab them in the face. Use the length of the spear. Everybody moves!”

The dwarf commander grunted with dissatisfaction. He had killed over twenty humans in the small skirmish, but now the larger body of the force was before him. He knew his objectives, and he would not suffer a defeat to these despicable creatures. He ordered his force to alter their formation. They formed a tight circular cluster. He would press his assault all night if need be. He would wear the humans down, they could not run forever, but he received one more surprise.

Enin stood behind the spread circle of guards. His hands stretched out to the skies. Power sparked about his wrists. The familiar white spheres returned and they flashed with brilliance, brighter than any nearby lamplight. He whispered words to the night air. His arms spun and the magic danced. The two intertwining spheres of energy rotated and grew. Never before had he used so much energy, never before had he allowed so much to flow out of his core. His knees wobbled. He fought the growing weakness in his arms. The power grew with fury. The spheres flared and small rumbles, like distant thunder, rolled off of his palms. With one last conscious thought, he whispered another word and threw his arms at the dwarves.

The magic exploded from him. Guards that stood next to him were knocked off their feet. The spheres rotated about as they merged together and formed a large translucent dome. It fell upon the dwarves with a force that shook the ground. They were encapsulated in a glowing but clear force field.

The dwarves angrily struck at it. Their axe blades bounced off without making the slightest dent. They were trapped, each and every one. The dwarf commander growled.

Enin mumbled a command. “Throw your spears.”

Sy immediately ordered two soldiers to do so. The spears cut through the night and then through the force field. They penetrated the barrier with ease. One embedded itself in the arm of a dwarf, the other bounced off the chest plate of a second target. The force field stood with no sign of entry holes. Sy held his

men's desire to strike quickly. He directed them to do so with patience. He also gave the dwarves an opportunity to surrender.

"You don't have a chance. You can't get to us, but we can get to you. Drop your weapons and surrender."

The dwarf commander finally spoke. "Never."

"Fine," Sy replied and pointed to two soldiers. They moved up carefully, picked their targets, and let their spears fly. Two more wounded dwarves.

The dwarf commander sneered, but would not surrender. He ordered his men to dig.

Sy marveled at the speed in which they worked. Some of the dwarves had retrieved tunneling tools from their packs while others were simply digging with their hands and their weapons. A ditch quickly turned into a pit, which was quickly turning into an escape tunnel. The removed dirt began to pile around the sides giving the dwarves even more cover. Sy ordered more spears to stop them, but it only slowed them. A few more dwarves were wounded, but soon they were out of sight and range.

Enin collapsed and the barrier dome disintegrated with his consciousness.

Sy stepped up to the dwarf-made tunnel. It extended beyond his sight. He ordered his men to spread out around town to make sure they did not break through the surface within the wall, but there was no further sign of the dwarves that evening.

Chapter 9

Enin awoke on a cot in command HQ. Morning light cascaded through the shattered front door. A cold autumn wind drifted in behind it. Sy stood at the far end of the room looking over a map of the city. The wizard struggled to sit up. He coughed.

Sy looked over to his groggy friend. He put down the map and walked over to the edge of the small bed.

“How are you feeling?”

“Empty. Tired.” was the exhausted reply.

“Your spell saved us.”

“What happened? I don’t remember much.”

“They couldn’t break out from the barrier you cast. They ended up digging through the ground. We inflicted a good amount of damage to them while they tried to escape. I guess they thought they were in no shape for another round. They didn’t resurface anywhere in the city. This morning, I sent a few men down some of the tunnels. Not very far. Just far enough to see where they go and to see if they heard anything. They all seem to lead back out toward the hills, and I think they’re all empty. I’ve given orders to collapse each of them. Wouldn’t stop the dwarves the way they dig, but might slow them down a bit.”

“How many men did we lose?”

Sy stiffened his back. “Thirty.”

Enin’s shoulders drooped.

Sy felt the same. “I know. I know. It’s more than just a waste. This is all becoming a tragedy. I keep wondering what I’ve done wrong, but I don’t have any answers. I just don’t know what else I could have done. What’s worse is I don’t know how to prevent this thing in the future. It seems these dwarves can dig tunnels from here to the hills in half a day. How do I stop them from just

popping up anywhere? The wall and the towers helped us against the goblins, but they seem pretty much useless now. All I can think of is to post more soldiers, but now I have to station guards in the streets as well as around the wall. Tower guards have to watch the town as well as the clearing. I'm going to run out of men."

"It's my fault," Enin professed. He dropped his head back into the pillow, an act of resignation to his own self-doubts.

Sy shook his head. He had spent much of the night analyzing the events which led to the battle. He had gone over the stationing of his soldiers, their responses to his orders, his own tactics. He was not about to place fault with one person or with one decision. "There's enough blame for everybody. No one individual can take full responsibility."

Enin held to his own conclusion. "I can. I should have sensed them. It's been my job to warn you of attacks before they happen. Everybody counted on me. They got right up to me and I still didn't sense them." He pounded his fist on the mattress. "Why couldn't I feel them? They're not humans. How could they get so close? What's wrong with me?"

Sy shook his head. "I can't answer that because I don't understand the magic in the first place. I do understand that I should have been prepared for something like this. In the last season we've seen more than one strange thing. Why is it so surprising to either of us that these dwarves avoid your senses? I don't know why you weren't able to sense them, but I know it doesn't make it your fault. It's not like you were asleep on duty. You were out checking the streets just like me. What else could you have done?"

"I should have sensed them," Enin held to his self-incrimination.

"But you weren't able to. That's my point. What do we know of these dwarves? Very little, I can tell you that. Maybe they just have the power to shield themselves from your senses. It's not like it would be the only difference between them and us." Sy looked away, looked to the broken remains of the front door. Only a small portion of wood hung at one hinge. The rest of the shattered remains had been swept up earlier that morning. "You saw what they were able to do. They're damn strong, unbelievably strong. Who could have thought any of this would be happening?"

His own words rang too true in his ears. Sy shook his head as he considered all the circumstances brought to bear upon them. The enormity of it all was almost too much for a sane man to handle.

“Godson, this is crazy. Goblins, shags, and now dwarves. This is insanity. I keep thinking that this is some bad dream that I’m going to wake up from. Was it so long ago that things were normal? It’s hard for me to believe my own job sometimes. I mean, think about it. Over the past season, the majority of my time was spent preventing goblin raids. Goblin raids, for Godson’s sake! Say something like that this time last season and I would have been run out of town as a loon.”

“You and me both. Look at me,” Enin sighed. “How do you think I feel? I’m a wizard.”

“Don’t knock it. I, for one, am damned thankful for what you can do. That’s the only thing that’s allowed this town to survive, you and our friend the delver.”

Enin gladly grasped the thread of another topic. “Speaking of Ryson, how do you think he’s doing?”

“I don’t know.” Sy brought a hand to his chin as he considered the delver’s mission. “I wonder. You know, I haven’t thought about it until just now, but I’m beginning to think Ryson’s trip and our difficulties last night are connected in some way.”

“Hmmm?” Enin puzzled.

“Well, doesn’t it seem odd that the delver went out to warn algors about a dwarf war just before we were attacked, also by dwarves.”

“Other than the dwarves, what else is the connection?”

“I don’t know, but it seems too much to be just a coincidence. I can’t help thinking that we’re now all involved in the same thing. Maybe this war he spoke of has spread or maybe it’s something else. “

“You think Ryson might have been lured from us on purpose?”

Sy just shrugged. “I don’t know what to think. If he was lured away, I have to

ask why. The dwarves might have been afraid of his speed, or his sword. More likely they might have worried he would hear their digging before they could break through the surface. That, at least, seems plausible. I don't know why it was an elf that came to get him. Maybe the elf was in on it or maybe he was tricked as well. But it doesn't answer why the dwarves attacked us in the first place. What did they want?"

"Perhaps they think we are a threat, perhaps they are just war-like creatures. I don't know anything about the dwarves. I should have tried to read their minds." Enin began to consider how to do such a thing. As often happened, his attention drifted from the topic at hand to the possibility of a new spell. "I wonder how I would go about that. It seems to be fairly common. I've heard of wizards able to cast such a spell. They can see thoughts, not deep hidden ones, not secrets, but they can often read what is being actively considered. I should know this spell. I know it's just a mix of a basic sight and awareness link. Just let your own thoughts ride the waves of the magic with a sight spell attached. Direct it at thought rather than at seeing. I wonder if it would work on dwarves."

"You can try it the next time they show up, which I hope is never," Sy stated firmly.

Sy's voice brought Enin out of his spell searching thought. He looked about the small cot and decided to rise. He slowly rolled on his hip and threw his legs over the side of the mattress. He labored to his feet. His muscles did not ache, but a weakness penetrated his limbs. He yawned heavily, drinking in the air as well as the magic held within it. The spell he had cast drained him of most of his magical energies, his body was now in the process of recharging. He stretched out his arms first, then his legs as he walked across the room to the maps spread out about the table.

"What are you doing with these?"

Sy pointed to certain marked spots. "I'm trying to pick the best places to put guards in the town. I can't put one on every street, but then again I have to cover every section. If these dwarves can tunnel right under us, they can come up anywhere. The only other thing I can think of is to rig the ground so it would collapse if they tunnel in certain areas. I have some miners out looking at the tunnels before they're filled. Hopefully, they'll have some suggestions for us."

“So, you do think they’ll be back?”

“I see no reason to believe they won’t,” Sy admitted heavily. “The question is how to stop them. If they send more warriors, spread them out, we’ll be in a whole lot of trouble.”

“Should we ask for help?”

“You mean from Connel? I don’t know how they’d feel about that. I doubt they’d send men. If they hear about what happened to us, they’ll keep every available soldier for their own protection. They may allow us to come live with them under their protection, but I doubt too many of our citizens would even agree to that. No one wants to be a refugee. They’d know what would be waiting for them. Tent cities, crowded unsanitary conditions. They’d have to leave their homes here. I doubt it would happen. I think those who would leave have left a long time ago. What they’d probably be more willing to do is enlist to help save their homes, and that’s what I’m going to offer to them. It’s really the only solution I can think of.”

#

A goblin sentry stood uneasily within the confines of the shag’s den. The serp was not in, and thankfully neither was the shag, but they were due back any moment. The goblin waited uncomfortably. Every instinct called for it to run from this grotto. A shag feeding cave was no place for a goblin, but it was now the adopted home of his serp commander. While his fears called for him to leave, a buzzing in the back of his meager brain bid him to stay.

Footsteps, heavy thuds, announced the shag that escorted the serp. The goblin bristled with fear. Only the sight of Sazar kept it in place. The hypnotic eyes of the serp mesmerized the goblin, the fear of the shag drifted away into the background. It was still present, but the goblin no longer felt the need to run for its very life.

Sazar stepped directly in front of the goblin. His snake-like eyes penetrated the creature. “I was told you have a report for me.”

The serp’s voice soothed the goblin. The small creature was able to respond even as the shag stood within arm’s reach. The goblin’s voice was rough and tired. “Last night there was activity within the human compound. There were many

signals from the towers. I heard screams and sounds of battle.”

The serp probed the emotions of the goblin. He cast his doubts upon the creature to test its certainty. “I have no report of anyone entering the town last night. The gates were closed.”

“No one entered through the gates,” the goblin repeated Sazar’s fact.

“They fought among themselves?”

“No, they fought with dwarves.”

The serp looked ever deeper into the eyes of the goblin. “You are sure of this? Absolutely?”

“I saw the dwarves myself this morning, just before dawn. They came up from an underground tunnel very near my position. There were many wounded. They ran off to the woods.”

“In which direction?”

“The southwest.”

“They are from Dunop,” Sazar said to himself. He turned from the goblin as he reflected on his own thoughts. “I have heard rumors of rebellion in this city. Now they attack the humans. Interesting.”

Sazar turned back to the goblin. “You saw the exit but you didn’t say you saw them enter.”

“No.”

“They might have entered from another point. What was the first thing you saw?”

“The signals in the tower. I saw little after that. Before the signals I heard a large crash. I am not sure what it was.”

“It was their new tower,” Sazar announced. “I received another report that it was demolished last night. I already checked that for myself. I could not understand

why the humans would do such a thing. They know of the blind spot. Their wizard cast that cursed web spell to temporarily cover it. The tower would have removed it permanently. Now, I know why. The humans did not destroy it, the dwarves did. Probably a diversion on their part. What happened after the signals?”

The goblin struggled for certainty of memory. “A pause, and then the sound of battle. I could not see. I was far from the wall.”

“What next?”

“Nothing. I waited for more signs. Much later I saw the dwarves surface and take off for the woods. I came to report to you after that.”

“Take me to this escape tunnel.”

The goblin gladly and quickly departed the cave. To his dismay, the shag followed Sazar and would accompany them to the site of the tunnel. The goblin pointed to the dwarf escape point. It was roughly covered, a quick and untidy job.

“They were in a hurry,” Sazar hummed as he pressed against the covering with his foot. Dirt gave way under the pressure and the hole opened up. “Normally, dwarves would do a much better job in filling their tunnels. They were probably fighting time as well as their wounds. I doubt they wanted to get caught out here in the daylight. If they got to the trees, they would at least have cover. How many did you see?”

The goblin did not know how to count. He stammered as he tried to explain. “A small group, not too many, but more than would be needed to scavenge food.”

The serp chuckled at the goblin’s short-comings. “I would guess that would be around two dozen, maybe a few more.”

The goblin, not knowing what that meant, simply nodded.

Sazar looked to the wall of Burbon. “So a party of dwarves attacked the town. This just after their delver left with two elves. I know that relations are now very strained between the elves of Dark Spruce and the dwarves of Dunop. This is very interesting. Is it possible the dwarves were not happy with the delver? Did

they come looking for him? If they rid the land of him, it would certainly do us a great favor. Still, there are other opportunities at hand.”

Sazar looked into the tunnel. He ordered the goblin to climb down and investigate. The goblin showed no reservation at such a task. Goblins had no fear of small tunnels or the dark, and the descent would allow it distance from the shag.

“Do not go far. Simply tell me what you see. How far do you think it goes?”

“I can not see, it is very dark,” the reply echoed from below.

Sazar sighed. He fished a very valuable item from his pocket. A light gem, a jewel which the dwarves used to reflect light down long tunnels. He had stolen it from one of the air shafts of Dunop. He held it out over the tunnel entrance. The gem absorbed the light, tightened it into a narrow beam, and finally directed it into the darkness within the hole.

“The tunnel goes farther than the light. It goes on, very long,” the goblin finally reported.

“It probably extends all the way back to within the town.” the serp observed.
“The dwarves obviously did not take the time to collapse their escape route. Come back up here.”

The goblin obeyed, left the security of the tunnel and again stood on an open hill side within reach of the shag. It stood nervously next to the hole, though, like a prairie dog waiting to dart back into its own tunnel if any sign of danger appeared.

Sazar virtually ignored the goblin. He looked back and forth from the tunnel to the town of Burbon. “We can make great use of this, but we should begin work immediately. The humans will no doubt attempt to fill in these tunnels. We can not have that, not completely anyway. We can collapse this tunnel ourselves, just beyond the wall’s edge. They will think the dwarves were responsible and they will never find this portion of the tunnel. We can dig our own pathways from the point of collapse later. We will not be able to dig with the efficiency of the dwarves, but they have already performed the heart of the task. This tunnel will serve as access to a point under their wall.”

Sazar turned to the shag. He grunted and growled, made signals with his hand. He pointed to the tunnel and then the town of Burbon. He mimicked the sight of the wall with his hands.

The shag grunted in response. It turned toward the goblin and began to step forward. The goblin cowered. Fear overtook it. It crouched, shaking uncontrollably.

Sazar sighed. "Move out of his way."

The goblin's eyes shifted from the shag to the serp and back again.

The shag stopped in front of it. It stared down on the creature with lifeless eyes.

Sazar had to repeat his order. "It's not going to eat you, it's going down the tunnel. You're in the way. Move aside."

The goblin jumped in obedience. The puffy swelled flesh around its eyes and cheeks seemed to sag in relief.

The shag leaped down the tunnel. It was a tight fit, but the monster was able to move along in a crouched position.

The serp pocketed the light gem. The shag would not need light. He turned to the goblin to give his next set of orders. "Our friend is going to follow the tunnel to a point just beyond the wall. He will collapse the tunnel at that point, breaking off the link between this portion of the tunnel and the section that leads above ground within the town. This tunnel will be ours, permanently. One day we will use it, but not today. I need to find out what is going on with these dwarves. You have done well this day. I am going to raise your rank. I want you to assemble a surveillance party. Take six goblins. You will go into Dark Spruce. Seek out the camps of the elves. Do not engage them. Stay away from their guards. Simply look and listen. Off with you."

The goblin ran off, filled with pride over achieving the praise, while Sazar considered the full breadth of the situation.

"There is no doubt this is all linked together. Rebellion in Dunop. A break in relations between the dwarves and elves. A dwarf attack on the humans after the town delver goes off toward the southwest."

Sazar's head snapped to the southwest. He thought of what waited beyond the trees, beyond the canyons.

"The Lacobian desert," he remarked gleefully. "The delver went with the elves to the Lacobian to find the algors. That completes the puzzle. Those that came together for a brief moment at Sanctum Mountain are now facing a new struggle. They succeeded in destroying Ingar's sphere together, but now their alliance appears to be falling apart. It will be interesting to see where this leads. Very interesting indeed."

#

"Retreated? They retreated?" Yave spouted a mix of anger and disbelief.

Strog grimaced. "They suffered many casualties. Two of the commandos have died from their wounds since returning home. Two more are doubtful. If they did not retreat, they might have all died."

"And how many casualties did they inflict?"

"The raid attack commander specifies that fifty humans were killed."

"Ha! He is lying."

"I would guess he might be exaggerating."

"Exaggerating?" Yave bellowed. "It is an out and out lie. You said before the attack the humans had maybe a force of two hundred men in Burbon. If they killed fifty, that was a quarter of the total force. I doubt they would have had to retreat."

Strog rubbed his hands together sullenly. "As I said, it does sound exaggerated. They did, however, inflict at least half that many casualties. I have interviewed the individual soldiers. They all have at least one confirmed kill. Some have two or more. I believe at least thirty humans have been killed."

"Just thirty? There was supposed to be over one hundred." Yave turned her ire directly upon Strog. "Was not that one of your own objectives handed down to this incompetent commander? You believed that one dwarf could easily account for at least five human casualties."

“The battle did not turn as I expected,” Strog grumbled.

“Obviously not. And what of their other objectives? Did they destroy the human command post? Or the weapon supplies? Did they return with the human stores of food?”

“No,” Strog grimaced. “The commander focused on decimating the human guard first. When that was not achieved, it was no longer possible to destroy the weapons or sack the town of its food supplies.”

Yave placed the blame directly and without hesitation upon the War Com. “How is this possible? A well trained dwarf attack force defeated by an unsuspecting, untrained, and poorly equipped human army? A very small army! Isn’t that what you called them? Isn’t that why you said only a small force would be needed to attack Bourbon?”

Strog, for the moment, bit back his flaring anger. He had to look away from the queen for a moment. He stared down at the thick stone table top and made his explanation under guarded breaths. “There were two factors I did not count on. It seems the captain of their guard was well versed on tactics. He deployed his forces with a battle savvy I would not have guessed a human to possess. If that were it alone, we still would have succeeded in our objectives. According to all reports, the battle was moving in our favor, but a magic caster intervened.”

“A what?!” Yave’s voice sizzled like bacon on a hot grill.

“A human wizard,” Strog grunted. “I was not aware of this.”

“A single wizard caused our defeat? Impossible. He would only be a novice. The cursed energy has not been loose long enough for a single magic caster to be any threat to us. We are resistant to magic, more so than any other race. What kind of spell could this human wizard cast which could affect us so?”

“We are resistant to direct magic assaults only. As always, we are as susceptible to indirect uses of the power as any other race, more so, because we can not cast spells of our own to counteract such powers. The human wizard trapped our war party in a barrier shell. They could not break out and were open to attack by the humans. Their captain ordered the use of spears and coordinated the attack well. It is as it’s always been, had it not been for the magic, we would have won.”

Yave growled with disgust. “I will not accept that!”

“You will have to. The magic was the only factor which was beyond our control. Look at our other two campaigns. There were no magic casters in either case, and in each case we were the victors. The force under my command dealt a severe blow to Connel. The humans had no idea of what hit them. It will take them many cycles to repair the damage we caused. Their forces have been significantly reduced, their army is in tatters. They would not dare attack now. What force remains will have to focus on defense. We destroyed many of their weapons, and relieved them of large portions of their food stores. They are no longer a threat.

“As for the elves, they are in confusion. Even now, they probably argue over why they were attacked. The dwarf commander in charge made every attempt to conceal the origin of his party. The elves will not know for sure if it was a force from Dunop or simply a renegade party with no home city. Many elves were wounded, some badly, food and wood were taken from them. Still, I doubt they can be sure it was us who attacked. Without that certainty, they can not justify an assault of their own against us. We have covered our flanks.”

“But not with Burbon,” Yave insisted with indignity.

“Burbon is no threat,” the War Com insisted.

“No threat? They managed to defeat your battle force with relative ease. It is an embarrassment.”

“I can not be expected to overcome magic casters.”

“Excuses!”

Strog slammed his fist down on the table. “No! Not excuses. The truth! The magic does not serve us. The fact that it is released is a danger to us all. It is why you have the throne and not your son.”

Yave’s eyes flared. “Never say that again!”

Strog did not back down. His angry stare locked with the queen’s. “Then do not question my strategies.”

Yave was about to rage with acidic remarks, but Strog stopped her with a tone of command. “Against my better judgment, we have attacked the elves and the humans. This was your bidding, not mine. I was against this from the start, but as you are so quick to remind me, you are the queen. You have the authority but I am the War Com. If you do not like what is happening here, I will resign. As will the rest of my generals. We will leave you to handle all armed conflicts yourself. I will withdraw my men from your palace.”

Yave bellowed. This brazen insignificant worm actually challenged her, defied her authority. She growled like a hungry tiger. “You dare! They are not your men, they answer to me. All of Dunop answers to me.”

Strog again raised his fist, ready to smash it even harder against the table top. Had he let it fly, it most likely would have broken the stone, but he held it in the air. He stood on the brink of frustration, just as he recalled the truth of this unholy alliance. As it quelled his own anger, he professed it to the queen. “Let us stop this game. You are queen because of my forces. My forces remain in control of Dunop because you are queen. This truth is undeniable. As much as both of us may wish to deny it, we need each other. If we fail to recognize this, we will fail.”

Yave grimaced. She was not as willing to concede that her authority was not absolute.

“You may fail, but I will not. It is best you remember that.” Still, her voice lowered in tone and in challenge. She may not have openly acknowledged the truth professed by Strog, but there was a glimmer of acceptance. “You will remain the War Com and I will remain the queen. That means you will listen to what I want, and I will accept how you intend to bring us victory. And what I want now is to erase this embarrassment. I want Burbon laid to waste.”

Strog groaned. “That is not a sound military objective. I tell you Burbon is not a threat to us.”

For the first time in this meeting, Yave controlled her temper. She spoke with authority, but with the coldness of an ice flow. “Anyone that threatens our independence is a threat. The humans defeated us, they showed us to be weak. We must rectify this at once.”

“There are other things to consider.” Strog gritted his teeth and held his own

impatience in check. “The algors remain in the desert. Their stronghold remains intact. Let me deal with them first.”

Yave remained defiant against this suggestion. “You defeated the algors.”

“Not completely. That is what you must consider here. Many of the algors remain alive. By ignoring them, we invite an attack on our flanks. As long as enough live to create an army, they remain a threat.”

“I don’t think so. Do you really think the algors would dare to attack us? They would be no match for us in our home tunnels.” For the first time, Yave spoke the truth of her desires, admitted the purpose of keeping the algors alive.

“Besides, I want some of them to survive, at least for a little while. I want them to think about what they’ve done and to know what it has brought them. If they still linger in their mountain in the desert, let them wait a little longer. Let them ponder their crimes and ponder the justice of the dwarf.”

For a moment, the thought of the algors suffering calmed the queen. She took pleasure in her victory. Yet, at the same time, she quickly considered her defeat, her embarrassment. Her voice grew colder still.

“It is the humans that are jubilant.” She spat her judgments out like a bad taste. “The humans of Burbon now think they can get away with this injustice. They may even now be laughing at us. That I can not have. You speak of the algors and the threat they represent. What of the threat of the humans? They are now filled with confidence. They believe they can beat us. If you send your army to attack the algors, our flanks will truly be exposed. Not to the demoralized algors, but to the cocky humans. That is the true danger. It is my command we address this threat first.”

Strog made one last attempt to sway the queen of this folly. “I am not ready for this. To attack Burbon I will need time to develop a full battle strategy. Their captain is no fool. He may be calling for reinforcements right now. He may find none in Connel, but there are hundreds of human villages. I will have to assume this is so and I will have to use the bulk of my forces. It will take time to organize them.”

Yave was not the least fazed. “Take all the time you need.”

“That is not what I mean. My forces are prepared to attack the algors.”

“I want that to wait.”

“That is not wise. To attack Burbon I will need several days.”

“Then begin your preparations as soon as possible.”

Strog could say nothing more. He grumbled under his breath, considered ignoring her orders, but even if Yave wouldn't acknowledge their mutual dependence, he did. He left her without further argument. His war boots thumped along the palace corridors as he uneasily considered the best strategy for redeploying his troops against Burbon.

Chapter 10

Back in the trees, back near the heart of Dark Spruce, Lief and Holli climbed, leapt, and moved like squirrels. No longer were they slowed by the hard rock or barren landscape of the desert, no longer were they assaulted by the oppressive daytime heat of the Lacobian. Upon these branches, they moved with swift agility. Again, they were one with the land; again they were at home in their surroundings. On the forest floor, Ryson matched and surpassed their speed. He remained at ground level, but he was equally pleased to be free from the dangers of the desert wasteland. He glided over fallen trunks and jutting roots as he circled below the limbs and branches. He searched diligently for goblins and river rogues, but he found only the pleasing sight of colorful autumn leaves during the peak of the season.

Unfortunately, no blessing of the trees could remove their true troubles. Despite the welcome sight of the surrounding forest, the thought of the algor crisis remained paramount. Their grim expressions hid their joy, and the cool shade of this autumn day could not erase the image of what was to come. The war was escalating to a point far beyond their expectations. Even at this very moment, the algors were carving a massive army of sand giants and preparing to animate the legion with magic. There was little the three could do now, nothing else but return to the elf camp and warn others of this growing insanity.

Once in the trees, Holli had relaxed her guard, equally joyous to be far from the threats of novice wizards and sorcerers. Within the forest, she relied more upon her new found magical perceptions, and she remained untroubled for most of the return journey. Her ease, however, dissipated upon their first pass of an elf guard perimeter.

Her fellow guards reported the area safe for travel, but an angry, nervous edge painted their words. They said little, simply reported on the current conditions. There were no signs of any true danger, only small scavenging groups of goblins. To Holli, the perimeter guards appeared excitable beyond the point of such inconsequential circumstances. She sensed their unease and pressed for greater detail.

The guards hesitated at first. It was not their place to reveal critical events, even to members of their camp. They were guards not elders. Such information should

be passed on by the camp leader or his council. It was up to the elder to interpret and to explain, but this thought did little to strengthen their own security. That, and the fact that Holli was a well respected member of their own elite, forced their tongues. They spoke hurriedly of an attack by the dwarves, elf casualties, and a loss of food.

Lief cursed.

Holli went rigid. She immediately returned to a state of alert which matched her caution when they traveled through the desert. Her eyes swept across the forest, her attention directed at ground level.

Ryson stayed upon the forest floor, constantly circling the elves from underneath. He heard the reports from the elves as they spoke. He turned vigilant for shifting soil or deep vibrations from below which might reveal dwarf tunneling.

Lief asked as to the elf response to the attack. He was not surprised at the answer. Nothing. Apparently, the camp elder was attempting to uncover the reasons behind the attack.

Lief cursed again.

Pressed by the unsettling news, the three quickly moved on. As they entered the elf camp, a hodgepodge of small fires and food stores, Holli and Lief dropped from the trees to join the delver on the ground. Ryson followed the two elves to the opposite edge of the camp. Several others were caught up in a lively debate. They stood about one male elf, whose eyes shifted from one elf to another. It appeared as if this central figure was trying to listen to each muddled opinion, but was failing miserably. His expression revealed pained confusion.

“As expected,” Lief grumbled. He stepped up to the assemblage of elves.

Holli held back at the edge of the group, but motioned for Ryson to move up. She remained outside the crowd. Her eyes swept across the tree-lined ground, but she kept an awareness of the conversation.

Ryson stepped up to Lief’s side. His attention centered upon the elf in the middle. He wondered why this individual was the center of attention. He looked lost.

The other elves came to a curious quiet. They waited impatiently for someone to take the lead. There were a few uncomfortable coughs.

Lief spoke first. He nodded to Ryson. “This is the delver Ryson Acumen. I am sure most of you remember him.”

Most nodded with respect and acknowledgment.

Lief continued. He presented the confused elf to the delver. “Ryson, this is Petiole. He is the new camp elder.”

Ryson hid his surprise. He remembered when he first met the previous camp elder, Mappel. Mappel commanded respect with his very presence. He demanded order, and other elves waited for his opinion. Ryson doubted that Mappel would have ever let such a disorderly assemblage occur among his people, but the delver buried any comment. He would not allow his surprise to become evident. He bowed slightly, but respectfully to Petiole.

In that moment of silence, the delver drank in a wealth of information. There was a marked sign of age on this elf, with more hints of worry than wisdom. The elf stood with uncertainty, fumbled both with his hands and his feet. His eyes darted about like a nervous thief. He constantly shifted his weight as if he wished to be somewhere else. Most of all, he did not know what to say to the delver. He stood nearly tongue-tied as he mouthed a simple greeting.

“Welcome delver.”

The uncertainty was even more evident in his voice.

Lief, with a shrug of impatience, immediately took the reins of the discussion. He was not an elder, but his participation in the battle at Sanctum Mountain brought him far more respect. He was as much a part of elflore as any of the legends. Though he did not have the true authority to rule, he spoke with the tone of command. His eyes narrowed upon Petiole.

“What has happened here? We have heard of a dwarf attack.”

“Yes.” Petiole battled to sound as forceful as Lief. He failed. Confusion and uncertainty coursed through his words. “Two nights ago, a party of twenty dwarves broke through the ground behind our perimeter of guards. To their

credit, our guards spotted them instantly, but they were too far away to immediately stop the assault. The dwarves attacked those upon the ground. They stole food and wood and disappeared back into their tunnel.”

“How many elves were hurt?” Lief asked angrily.

“About two dozen.”

“How many dead?”

“Four,” Petiole admitted reluctantly.

Grief driven fury swept across Lief’s face. He dropped his head to gather himself.

Petiole simply waited.

It seemed strange to Ryson, Petiole answering questions like a subordinate. It continued.

Lief pressed through his grief. He inhaled deeply before questioning Petiole further. “How much food and wood did they take? Will we face shortages?”

“I’m not sure.”

Lief showed his impatience. “Well, what did they take?”

Petiole shrugged.

Tuber Berisom, the elf in charge of storing the harvested food, spoke up to answer. “They took little that was of any real long term value to us. They took mostly fruits. Berries, crab apples, pears. Not much more. Most of that would have spoiled anyway. They did not find our supplies of nuts, salts, and dried crops. We can increase our fruit picking to the east to make up for what was lost.”

For the first time, Petiole spoke without reservation or hesitation. He stared angrily at Tuber. He spoke not with the diplomacy of a leader, but with the hostility of an insulted adolescent. “I have not made that decision yet.”

Instantaneously, the order of the meeting fell apart. Petiole began to scold many of the elves as they voiced their displeasure with him.

“What else can we do?” Tuber asked with a temper. “We’ve lost food. We have to make up for it.”

“We won’t starve if we don’t,” Petiole responded angrily. “You yourself said so. You said we have plenty of food. Do you now change your opinion?”

“We have enough food to get us through the dormant season. That is what I said. I did not infer that we should not make up for what we have lost.”

Other elves began to bicker about the amount of available food. Ryson was near shock. If this was the council of elders, they were acting like children. They insulted each other with disrespect. They were obviously incensed at the dwarf attack, and they were taking it out against each other. It was embarrassing for leaders to act in such a fashion, and Petiole raged with the best of them.

“What if the dwarves come back?” The lead elf challenged.

“What if they do?” Tuber countered with no greater dignity.

“They’ll just take it again,” Petiole answered, stubbornly holding his ground. “I will not allow the work of this camp to go to waste. I must direct the activities of this camp with regard to the consequences. If we are to restock our food supplies, we must first come up with a way to protect them.”

A decorated guard commander immediately jumped into the fray. “That is what I have said, and you haven’t yet given me a decision on my plans. We can’t just let the dwarves step all over us. We have buried our own dead because of their unwarranted attack. We can not just stand here and wait for another. If you allow me to teach those dwarves of Dunop a lesson, we will not have to worry about them coming back to steal our food.”

“We have no way of knowing who it was that attacked us,” Petiole remarked as if insulted.

“Of course we do.”

“No we don’t. They could have just been renegades.”

Holli spoke from the rear. She did not step up to the others. She simply let her voice carry over theirs.

“There can be little doubt as to who attacked us. Yave sent her warriors from Dunop and I believe I know why. The delver, Lief and I were set upon in the desert by a dwarf war party. They wore the markings of Dunop soldiers. They believed us to be spies out to assist the algors. They attacked us, but the delver proved too agile for them. Obviously, the party returned to Dunop and informed the queen of what happened. Based on what we already know of her, it is not unreasonable to believe she ordered an attack in response to that skirmish. It all fits together, especially now if she believes we have allied ourselves with the algors.”

“I did not know of the skirmish,” the elf commander replied quickly before anyone else could speak, “but I already stated that Yave was the only dwarf that would order such an attack.”

“But these renegades did not wear the markings of Dunop,” Petiole insisted. “We can not be sure of this.”

“I think we can,” Holli replied with as much respect as she could muster. “If the dwarves had sent a full-fledged army, they would have displayed their Dunop arms with egotistical pride. From what you have already said, however, they only sent twenty. They would probably want us to believe it was simply a raiding party of renegades, to create the confusion we have now. It fits together.”

“Why would they do such a thing?”

Holli offered a possible theory. “The full complement of their forces may be elsewhere. They may be focused upon the algors, or they may have another target.”

The words struck the delver like a hammer. He gasped with dread and uncertainty. “Burbon!”

Holli did not wish to exaggerate the delver’s fears, but she could not disagree with the possibility. She simply nodded.

Ryson stared at the elf guard. He did not wish to accept his own thoughts, but they crashed upon him with grave savagery. “If Yave decided to attack here to

get even with you, she would have been just as upset with me. She would have...”

He did not wait to finish his sentence. He flew from the elf camp, ignoring the calls of Lief and Holli.

#

Ryson reached the walls of Burbon to find it safe in Sy’s hands. The guard at the gate informed the delver of the dwarf attack. There were casualties among the soldiers, but no civilians were hurt.

Torn between relief and dread, Ryson first went to the Borderline Inn. His fears would not be completely quelled until he saw Linda safe and well.

The inn was empty, not a single patron. As he shut the door behind him, the click of the latch snapped the silence like the crack of a whip, but only for a heartbeat. The quiet rushed back upon him. The tavern area, which was normally full of life, welcomed him with only ghosts of memories. The floor boards creaked ever so slightly under his feet. Normally, such a sound would easily have been drowned out by conversation, music, even laughter. Not today. The creak of the wood played like a symphony. Ryson looked to the bar, now just a silent and lonely block of intricately designed architecture. The stools waited like sleeping sentinels or dead soldiers. A grave yard.

Ryson’s heart raced. No civilians had been hurt, but where was Linda? “Hello? Linda?”

He heard her call from the back, from the kitchen.

“Ryson?”

The door to the back swung open with the force of a hurricane. Her eyes fell upon him, swelling instantly with tears of relief. She ran to him. She threw her arms around him, held him with every force of her being.

“Oh Ryson! I was so scared. I didn’t know ...” the rest of her words were muffled, her face pressed in his chest.

Ryson returned her hold. He stroked her hair. He wanted to comfort her, but he

was overcome with the same sense of relief. He did not know what he would have done if she was not there to greet him. He breathed heavily, freeing the tightness in his body.

“It’s alright. Everything’s alright.”

They stayed together for long moments. Neither of them spoke. Finally, Linda released her iron strong hold. She stepped back and she wiped the tears from her eyes. She quickly moved around the bar and got a towel to wipe her face. She laughed a little, embarrassed by her own emotional outburst. The relief of seeing Ryson fueled her joy, and she laughed a little harder.

Ryson smiled. “I guess we both have stories to tell, huh?”

“Are you hungry?” she was finally able to get out.

“No, I’m alright. Maybe just some water.”

Linda got two cups. They both took long gulps, trying to swallow the remnants of their emotions.

Ryson took another look around the inn. His delver curiosity began to chew at him. “What happened here? Why is this place so empty?”

Linda appeared to shiver. “We were attacked again, but not by goblins.”

Ryson helped her out. “I know. It was dwarves. I was afraid of that. What have you heard?”

“They dug tunnels under us. They attacked the command post. They killed a lot of men.” Linda shuddered. She had to stop, take another drink.

“That’s alright. Don’t go into that. I’ll get that from Sy. What’s happening now? Why’s the place so empty?”

“They’re training,” Linda forced out.

“Who’s training?”

“Most everyone. Sy put out a request. He said he needed volunteers to help fight.

It was either that or leave for the protection of Connel. No one wants to leave their homes. Everyone agrees we have to stay and fight. Even I wanted to join. Sy wouldn't let me. He said it would interfere with your thinking. He couldn't have that. He said the people of this town would need you thinking straight more than they would need me."

Ryson did not know how to respond. He was thankful for what Sy had done. He did not want to worry about Linda. He spoke his thoughts openly. "I'd rather you didn't put yourself at risk. In all honesty, I don't know what's going to happen next."

"That's what scares all of us," Linda admitted.

"Can you leave," Ryson pressed, "can you lock this place up for a while? I want you to come with me. I'm going to see Sy. I want you to hear what's going on."

Linda waved to the empty room. "I don't think that's a problem."

Linda and Ryson moved quickly to the command post, past hundreds of civilians training in the streets. Sergeants of the guard spoke respectfully but forcefully to them all, whether they were merchant or mid-wife. This was no game. Their lives were at stake and each face showed it. Grim and determined, fearful but angry; the townspeople followed the training without objection.

The scene was powerful. Men and women of all ages, learning to use weapons of death and destruction, willing to cast aside their normal lives to protect their homes. They disregarded their status as civilians, there were no more civilians. They were all soldiers, soldiers that had to learn quickly. They made mistakes, and when they did they cursed. There was no joking, no playful laughter. This was life, and death. They came together under the watchful eyes of the sergeants; they put aside any past differences. For this moment, there was unity in purpose and in spirit.

Ryson guided Linda into the guard headquarters, into Sy's office. He offered greeting to Sy and Enin.

Sy could not have been happier, and he made no attempt to hide it. "Thank Godson."

"Godson?" Ryson quickly responded with a smile. "I didn't know you followed

that faith.”

Sy smiled broadly. “I’ll believe anything that brings you back to us. Do you know what’s going on here?”

Ryson’s own smile evaporated. “Most of it. I know the dwarves attacked. Tell me about the particulars.”

Sy revealed each detail, hoping the delver might find some understanding in this madness. Upon finishing his description, he asked for enlightenment. “Do you know what’s going on here?”

Ryson gritted his teeth. “I’m afraid I do. It seems you were right. You yourself said that wars often spread. I guess you can say that most of this is my fault. The elves and I stumbled across a dwarf war party in the desert. They called us spies and attacked us. We beat them off but they must think we have allied with the algors. They also attacked the elf camp in Dark Spruce.”

Sy did not want Ryson to assume any fault in this matter. He wanted the delver’s head clear. “You can’t blame yourself. You said you had a responsibility to warn the algors. No man can be faulted for living up to his responsibilities and nothing can justify the attack on my men.”

Ryson revealed the full merit of his own disappointment. “I’m afraid I failed with the algors as well. I was too late in getting there. The dwarves had already attacked. The algors suffered heavy losses.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sy offered.

Ryson did not know what else to say.

Sy turned to his obligation of protecting the people. He focused on obtaining more information. “I need your help. I need to know what you think is going to happen next. In all honesty, I have no idea what to do. The way these dwarves can tunnel leaves us with hundreds, maybe even thousands, of blind spots. The wall is useless. They can attack any part of the city at any moment. I have my soldiers spread so thin I had to ask for volunteers.”

“I saw. Quite impressive.”

Sy nodded with respect for the people it was his duty to protect. “Not surprising. These people really have no other place to go. None of us do. It helps, but only to a degree. I can’t say what they’ll do if they face a real battle. I need more experienced soldiers. I sent a messenger to Connel. She hasn’t returned yet. I can’t count on it until I know for sure. For now, I have to rely on what I’ve got. Anyway, you’ve told me why they’ve attacked, I need to know if they’ll attack again.”

Ryson considered the point. The thought was not pleasant. “I don’t know. If I had to guess, I would probably say yes. You defeated them. I doubt that is sitting well with them. They seem to be such a proud race. Any loss is just going to make them angry. I would think they would try again.”

Sy frowned, but revealed his agreement. “That’s my thought, but there is still so much I don’t know. How large of a force will they send against us? What kind of weapons will they use? Will they tunnel again? And most importantly, when will they attack?”

“I can’t answer any of those questions. The only thing I can say is that I don’t think dwarves are very patient. If Yave is attacking us out of anger, she’ll probably waste little time, but I can’t guarantee that she won’t wait.”

“Damn,” Sy grumbled. He looked at Ryson with fading hope. “There are other problems as well. Enin here can’t detect them. For some reason, they can get close and if he closed his eyes he wouldn’t be able to tell them apart from our regular citizens.”

“It bothers me greatly,” Enin confirmed what Sy was saying. “I have spent much of the past day trying to figure out why. Even now, I don’t understand it.”

“The dwarves are very resistant to the magic,” Ryson explained. “Holli, the elf guard, explained that to me before. That’s probably why you didn’t sense them.”

“Resistant?”

“They don’t store it, they have a hard time using it, and apparently, spells are not very effective against them.”

Enin filled with relief. “It wasn’t me? There wasn’t something happening to me?”

“No.”

“That doesn’t really help us, Enin.” Sy sounded upset with the wizard’s show of solace. “We still won’t get any early warning on them.” The captain turned back to the delver. “I’ve put men at posts at different intersections around the town. I’m using them as early warning. I’ve also had some miners dig some warning traps. They tell me if the dwarves dig underneath them, they’ll collapse. I don’t know how much faith to put into that, though. They seem like they would work, but these dwarves can dig like nothing else I’ve ever seen. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Not really? I...”

Enin did not let him finish. “Something’s approaching the wall.” He ran from the office, ran outside into the open air.

“Great,” Sy grumbled. “What now?”

He, Ryson and Linda followed the wizard. They looked to him expectantly.

Enin faced the south gate. A smile crossed his lips. “Elves. Two of them. They are approaching the wall.”

Understanding washed over the delver.

“It’s probably Lief and Holli. I left them rather abruptly,” Ryson admitted.

Sy turned to a soldier keeping guard at the door. “Signal the south gate. There are two, uh, individuals approaching. Let them enter and instruct them to come here.”

“Should I go meet them?” Ryson questioned.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Sy confessed. “I’d like to hear everything they have to say for myself. If you go off on your own, I might miss something important.”

“Fair enough, but we should meet them here, outside. They probably won’t like being cramped up in your office.”

Sy frowned with uncertainty. He spoke to the delver almost guardedly. “Before

they get here, I have some questions. You said the elves were attacked as well as us. What did they say about the attack?”

Ryson offered the little information he had overheard. “It was a small raiding force, about twenty dwarves. They had some casualties, not as bad as here, but they did take some supplies.”

Sy pressed for more detail about a possible elf response. “What did they say they were going to do about it?”

“They were arguing that point when I left. I think some of them wanted to attack Dunop. It’s just like you said, this war is spreading, and I don’t know where it’s going to end.” Ryson paused to look down the main street that led to the south. His sharp eyes picked up the elves being escorted by two guards before anyone else could see them. “Here they come now.”

Sy called for Ryson’s undivided attention. “One more thing before they get here. I’m going to talk openly to these two. If I say anything which bothers you in any way, speak up. I have no idea of what I’m dealing with here. I’m going on instinct alone. I need any help you can give me.”

“I don’t know much more than you,” Ryson warned.

Sy shook his head. “That’s nonsense and you know it. You’ve dealt with elves before. You’ve fought alongside them. I can’t say that. Don’t worry about hurting my feelings and don’t be damned humble. I’m nearly in the dark here.”

“Alright.” Ryson could not ignore his plea, and could say nothing else.

The elves approached. Holli surveyed the area, summed up each human guard that stood near. She showed no sign of agitation, only careful analysis of her surroundings.

Lief did not appear happy.

“That was not wise,” the elf admonished the delver. “You ran out of our camp without a thought to the threats in the forest. You ran off before you could voice your own experiences in the desert.”

Ryson spoke out defensively. “I thought Burbon might have been attacked. It

was. I had to get back here as soon as possible. You would have done the same.”

“Without escort? Alone? I don’t think so.”

“There was no time for that. I had to move fast.”

“Fire upon your impatience,” Lief cursed.

Holli spoke softly but firmly. “There is no cause for that, Lief. What’s done is done.”

Ryson thanked the elf guard and quickly introduced her to those around them.

Holli found each individual interesting in their own right. She could sense the strong magic in Enin. She recalled Lief’s description of the wizard. It did not surprise her now that he cast white magic. One day he would be a powerful wizard, perhaps stronger than any other, this she could not deny. Had it not been for the aura of pureness around him, this encounter would have given her nightmares.

Linda had no magic in her, none whatsoever, and that was also fascinating. It went beyond normalcy for resistant humans, even beyond the dwarves resistance to the energy. Even most dwarves Holli met touched the magic to at least some degree, but this human woman seemed to almost repel it, to shed it from her as if it was an unwanted and weak virus.

As for Sy, he sparked the most curiosity in the elf guard. He was obviously a soldier, a leader of this human army that was even now training in the streets. She wondered about his skills, his experiences. She would have liked to speak with him alone, to learn everything he could teach her. She was not so arrogant to believe that only the elf guards knew proper battle tactics. She need only look around to see the walls and towers as well as the placement of guards to know that this man had wisdom in the ways of war and defense. She asked openly of the training exercises.

“You have many learning to fight and Ryson spoke of a dwarf raid. Have you been attacked?”

Sy spoke without hesitation. He spoke openly and with all honesty. “We were attacked by dwarves that tunneled under the wall. We weren’t ready for that. We

lost about thirty soldiers. Our forces were deployed for other threats. I have these people training because I don't have enough experienced men to cover the town. The truth of the matter is I'm spread too thin, not something I would like to admit. I'm telling you this because I accept you as an ally, a friend. In all honesty, we need all the friends we can get. It's been hard enough for us to deal with the constant threat of goblin raids. I have to tell you, I'm afraid this town is under the threat of extinction. If I can't count on you to treat us as an ally, I don't think there is any hope for us."

He looked to Holli, looked to her for a soldier's promise, a word of good will that would go beyond negotiated treaties. She did not disappoint him.

"The elves do not feel threatened by the humans. We have no animosity to you or your town. We can be friends and allies, we need to be friends."

"That's good to hear, because another enemy I don't need."

Sy looked to Ryson, looked to see if he said anything he would later regret. The delver simply nodded and smiled.

Lief, however, returned his wrath to the delver. "And as friends, we should not run out on each other. Your word was needed."

"I thought I was needed here."

The response did little to alleviate the elf's anger. Ryson saw this clearly, and he attempted to assuage his friend's anger.

"Maybe I can go back," he replied somewhat apologetically.

"It is too late for that. Holli and I recounted our experiences. Still, your words might have swayed Petiole. Whether you like to accept it or not, you are a part of elflore now. Your opinion would have been highly regarded."

Sy forced the conversation back to his own needs. "I'm not sure what's going on with your camp, but I can tell you that I need the delver here. Of that I'm sure. That may be the only thing that I'm really sure of. I'm worried the dwarves may come back at any moment. For the most part, we were lucky."

"What do you mean you were lucky?" Holli asked with interest.

Sy detailed the battle and the retreat of the dwarves. “We were lucky Enin was here. I don’t now how many of my soldiers would have died if we had to battle them without him.” Sy could not help but notice the expression on Holli’s face. It exposed her reservations with the victory. Sy narrowed on this, demanded an explanation. “That’s not the expression of someone that’s just heard good news. Something about what I said is bothering you. What is it?”

“Your victory in that battle may cost you much in the future,” Holli responded like one steel nerved officer speaking to another. “If our suspicions our correct, the dwarf war party was sent here to punish you. You did not let them succeed.”

“Was I supposed to?”

“No. You were put in a no-win scenario. No soldier would allow an invader to attack without attempting to defend. You acted as any true leader would. But that won’t change what will probably happen next. Not only were you not punished, you forced a retreat and inflicted casualties. The dwarves will find this an embarrassment. They will most likely attack again, but next time they will come in greater numbers and they will spread themselves in formations which will keep your wizard from trapping them again.”

“Damn!” Sy quickly looked out across the streets, looked to the civilians now training to be soldiers. “They won’t be enough, will they?”

“I don’t think so,” Holli responded with honesty that would befit an ally. “But do not yet lose your faith. There are other aspects of this war to consider. The dwarf army may never reach you.”

Both Ryson and Sy spoke at the same time. “Why not?”

Holli hesitated at first. There was something immediately upon her lips, but she did not speak of it. Instead, she referred to knowledge that was already Ryson’s. “Ryson knows of the sand giants. The algors intend to send them upon the dwarves. Such an event may forestall any attack upon you.”

“Wait a minute,” Ryson interrupted. “I thought it would take time for the algors to prepare the stone and to capture the magical energy needed to cast the spells. I didn’t think the sand giants would be ready for another several days.”

“That is probably true, “Holli admitted, “but we also don’t know when the

dwarves will plan a second attack against this town.”

“Hold on. Hold on,” Sy demanded. “You’re going way beyond my comprehension here.”

Ryson explained as quickly as possible.

Sy knew not to doubt, even if the thought of giants carved from sandstone and animated by magic seemed beyond sane thinking. He simply accepted the facts as revealed by the delver. The algors intended to send an army of sand giants against Dunop. If so, that would certainly occupy the dwarves if not destroy them completely. Still, Sy had to speak of his own interpretations. “If I understand what you’re saying, it’s possible that these sand giants may take care of the dwarves for us. If that’s the case, our town may yet be safe. But I have to offer you two possibilities. What if the dwarves return to the desert and defeat the algors before these sand giants are created?”

“That is certainly a consideration,” Holli conceded.

Sy continued. “That means the dwarves may still show up here. It’ll just take them longer to regroup their army. The other possibility is that the sand giants don’t reach Dunop until after the dwarf army attacks us. You said the sand giants will use the tunnels constructed by the dwarves as the means for them to reach Dunop. If the dwarves did a good job destroying those tunnels, it may take the sand giants days even weeks before they reach their target, plenty of time for them to deal with us.”

“That is also possible.”

Sy pointed out the obvious. “Then, in all honesty, the odds remain high that the dwarves will still attack here, and I don’t know if I can stop them.”

“There is one other factor you are overlooking,” Lief said abruptly. He paused for a moment as everyone turned to look at him. Holi grimaced briefly but then nodded her head. Lief would have made the announcement with or without her approval, but he was glad to have it. “You are unaware of what Petiole, the leader of my camp, has decided. This decision makes an attack against your town very unlikely.” He exhaled deeply as if the next words were not welcome to his lips. “He plans to unleash shadow trees upon Dunop.”

The mere mention of shadow trees caused Ryson to shiver. He recalled the power of these mutated creations, how they thrived in darkness and consumed all living things. He had dealt with them in Sanctum and he still recalled their nightmare. Shadow trees were beyond horror, they were living darkness and the thought of their existence in Dunop was stifling. He thought of the lifeless evils growing in the dark caverns of the dwarf city. The hideous creations would overwhelm the city, consume every inhabitant. Dunop would be destroyed, of that there was no question. He then considered the sand giants. They would clear tunnels as they sought the dwarves, make paths for the shadow trees to grow and reproduce. They would thrive in the darkness and they would spread, perhaps through every underground city in the land. Maybe it was not Burbon that faced extinction, but the dwarves.

Chapter 11

Sazar strolled the hilltops. His goblin minions had informed him of the return of the delver, as well as the arrival of the two elves shortly thereafter. He looked to the sun, estimated the time to its departure from the sky. He watched the passing of only a few clouds. A dry wind blew from the west. This would be a good night to attack.

He considered his advantages. The humans had indeed relaxed their watch upon the clearing. In fact, it appeared as if they now all but ignored the threat of a goblin raid. The scouts by guards on horseback through the tall grass had ceased. The number of armed humans at the gates dwindled. The town as a whole appeared more concerned with a greater problem. They might be more anxious over another dwarf attack, but it was not a wise idea for them to turn their backs on him.

There was also the consideration of diversion. The delver had returned, along with the elves. What news did they bring with them? Something important enough to cause great commotion? Probably. The humans would be even more absorbed in other matters. Their attention was divided.

The shag had been successful in saving the tunnel for him. A goblin raiding party would not even have to pass the clearing. They could get behind the wall with ease, maybe even reach the stores of weapons and food without being spotted. Supplies could be transferred through the tunnel. Even the danger of a costly retreat vanished.

If ever there was a time for a successful goblin raid, this was the night. Sazar had the means and the opportunity. It was almost as if Burbon was welcoming him. This was no trap, no false illusion. Food and supplies waited for his taking. With a little luck, he and his goblins would be set for the entire dormant season. Now is the time, now we should raid.

The order was on his lips. All logic pointed to this one course of action. All that was necessary was for him to speak the command, but Sazar remained silent.

He paced the hilltop, always looking to the shadow of Burbon in the distance. Just as his snake-like tail slithered through the grass behind him, images of

greater glory wavered through his thoughts. A more enticing opportunity was at hand, he could taste it. A war. There was nothing firm, no strong evidence, but he could not shake the belief that it was imminent.

The participants were certainly in place. The elves, the dwarves, the algors; all signs pointed to escalating tensions. The invasion by the dwarves on Burbon certainly indicated hostility, but Sazar was quick to remind himself that small skirmishes did not always lead to all out war. Nothing fit perfectly, but nothing contradicted his theory, either. Coincidence would only go so far to explain what he already knew. Then, there were the rumors. They were strong, too strong to ignore. Rebellion in Dunop and strained relations between elves and dwarves.

The rumors were supported by fact. The dwarves had attacked the humans. This was not a sign of healthy relations. Elves from Dark Spruce were now speaking with the humans, not something they did in the past. Yes, there was tension.

A few questions bothered him. Where did the algors fit in all of this? Why did the delver and the elves head off into the Lacobian desert in the first place? And why did no algors come back? How far would the hostilities go? Which races would be allies, which would be enemies, and which would try to remain neutral?

The serp stalked the tall grass as if he was hunting rodents. His mind, however, was firmly set upon the puzzle. He wanted a war, but should he count on it? He had before him a known opportunity, a chance to obtain much needed supplies. He did not wish to let the chance of a successful raid slip through his reptilian fingers, but how much greater were the rewards in the event of a larger conflict?

He considered his quandary. Perhaps, he should call for the raid anyway. He was not really worried about any goblin casualties. He could always find replacements. Goblins were as plentiful as weeds. He might be able to raid Burbon and still enjoy the later opportunities of war.

Still, he did not want to be a factor in the culmination of the coming conflict. He did not want his decisions to change the course of events. In all honesty, he wanted the war more than he wanted this single raid. He would have both if he could, but he would not risk the one for the other. That is where he needed to remain careful.

If only he knew for sure, if only he had more information. He would bless the

goblin that could bring him such intelligence.

As if in answer to his own twisted prayers, the goblin he promoted and sent to Dark Spruce came into his view. The goblin labored through the tall grass and up the hill. It was out of breath, but eager to speak.

“Sazar, sir. My party has returned. We have found what you wished to know. The elves were indeed attacked by the dwarves.”

The serp’s eyes gleamed. He appeared like a cobra ready to strike. “You are sure?”

“We are sure,” the goblin exhaled heavily, still trying to catch its breath. “We did not see the battle, but we overheard elf guards. There was an attack, but they do not know where the dwarves came from. A few argued that they had to come from Dunop.”

“Of course they came from Dunop,” Sazar said with near glee. “They attacked the humans, and now, also the elves. This is too good to be true. Do you understand what this means? Don’t answer. Of course you don’t. Fortunately for you, I do. A skirmish between the humans and the dwarves may not lead to anything more than confusion. The humans would not know how to respond. They worry more about protecting their town. They would not seek a counter offensive. But the elves, they are a different story. They will not simply forget this. They will want to respond. There has always been tension between the elves and the dwarves. This will be the spark to a greater fire. There will be more attacks, greater tension, escalating hostilities.”

Sazar began to pace the hilltop again. This time, however, he appeared like a child at a birthday party; excited, gleeful, impatient, wondering what present to open first.

“The two elves came back with the humans. That means that all three races will be involved. The algors did not show. That may mean they wish to remain neutral. Still, conflict between the others affords us so many opportunities.” He turned back to the goblin. “Truly, this is a time for us all to rejoice. We have just what we want. War.”

A full-fledged war. Music to his ears. The potentials of such a proposition opened before him. His goblins would be like vultures waiting near the edges of

every battle, ready to steal weapons from the dead and defeated, ready to hunt the wounded for food and gems or gold. There would be a need for spies. The humans would pay for information. There would be a need for assassins. How much would the dwarves pay for the services of his shag?

This news also brought an end to his languishing over the raid. His decision was made. There really was no choice. If war was possible, he should hold off his goblins.

War was a tricky thing. It started and stopped over the smallest incidents. There would also be another time, another night for a raid. Perhaps not as perfect as this one, but he would find another moment. After all, the tunnel would still be there and Burbon wasn't going anywhere. The raid simply had to wait for another time. Too bad.

#

“I can't allow this. This has to be stopped.” Ryson was more than adamant, he was blazing with dissent. The memory of the shadow trees invoked his passions. He narrowed his focus directly upon Lief. “You were with me, down at the bottom of Sanctum. You saw those things. You can't let this happen again. They're a nightmare.”

Ryson's voice trembled. To him, it was more than a bad dream. The shadow trees were real, and they waited in the darkness of his memories. His recollection of this horror was as crisp as a dried leaf. It would never leave him. The delver spent many a sleepless night fighting off the memory of the terror in the dark.

“I don't care what the dwarves did. Nothing would justify this. If the seeds are dropped on Dunop, the trees will kill all the dwarves. The young, the old. The innocent! Everyone down there.”

“It was not my decision,” Lief replied. His expression was colored with the gloom of his own memories of the monstrosities.

“Godson! It's everybody's decision. Yours, mine, everyone's. We either allow it, or we don't”

Linda was shocked by his outburst. “Ryson. Try to clam down. I don't think he wants this to happen any more than you do.”

Ryson could not, would not, calm his emotions. “It’s his camp. He can stop it. He’s respected there.”

Holli spoke somberly. “He tried. He could not sway the opinion of the camp leaders. They see Yave as a threat to our existence.”

“But you’re not just putting an end to Yave, you’re putting an end to Dunop. Godson, maybe even worse. Don’t forget the algors and what they’re planning. What do you think is going to happen when the sand giants start breaking through the tunnels? They’re going to open more paths underground to get to the dwarves. The shadow trees will spread, they’ll spread into the desert and right under the algors. How many will die? This is beyond not being right, this is criminal.”

Holli reminded him of who he was shouting at. “Be that as it may, Petiole would not listen to Lief, and right now you are blaming him.”

Ryson would not concede the point. He remained livid. “I’m blaming everyone. Myself included. I have to do everything I can to stop them as well.”

“What would you do?” Holli questioned sharply.

“Let me talk to Petiole. I’ll stop him.”

“He would not listen to you. He did not listen to Lief. You do not fully understand what is happening in our camp.” Holli did not pause, did not for a moment contemplate whether or not to speak the true reasons for this calamity. Without hesitation and with the clarity of a mission briefing, she pinpointed the crux of the dilemma. “Petiole is the eldest elf, but he is a weak leader. He worries more about how the elves view him. He believes the dwarf raid was a direct attack against his leadership. He is angry and offended. He believes he has to act to bring back the respect of the camp.”

Ryson was aghast. The idea of using the shadow trees to defend one’s reputation was beyond depravity. “Good Godson, you can’t be serious? Is he mad?”

“It is not my place to say.” Holli replied evenly. “It is simply what he wishes. And Petiole will see any attempt to stop his plans as an affront to his authority, a challenge. He will not listen to you anymore than he would listen to the youngest elf of our camp.”

“Then you need a new leader!” Ryson demanded.

Holli did not answer. No matter how much she agreed with this, as an elf guard, she was sworn to protect the camp elder’s authority.

Ryson noted her reluctance. His eyes narrowed upon the elf guard. “You can’t tell me you support this? You have to agree this has to be stopped? Don’t you?”

The elf guard fell silent. Worse for Ryson, she became stone-faced, rigid to anything he might say.

The delver’s disbelief over the situation doubled. “I don’t care who the leader is, you can’t let this happen. If you do, you’re saying you think every dwarf in Dunop is responsible for what’s happening here. Worse, you’re saying everyone has to be punished. Not only punished, but tortured. I saw those shadow trees. I know what they’re like. If you don’t do something to stop this, you’re sentencing all of Dunop to an end so painful it’s probably beyond your comprehension.” He waited impatiently for some kind of response from the elf.

Holli still would not answer. She did not return his blazing glare. Instead, she looked over his shoulder, beyond him as if he was not there.

The silence brought discomfort.

Lief attempted to break it. He did his best to speak for her. “Easy to say, not easy to do. Elf leadership is probably older than any form of human government. It is as old as the ancients, it comes from elflore.”

Ryson was not even slightly swayed. His emotions continued to bubble over like a burning stew. “So what are you saying? Because of your traditions you’re going to allow what you call a weak leader to kill thousands beyond thousands with this horror that should never have even been created? Isn’t that what you said about the shadow trees when you first told me about them? You were embarrassed that the elves could even conceive of such a terror. I remember how you looked when you described how they were first used. It was another dwarf-elf war. The fact that the elves used such a weapon pained you. Now, you’re going to allow it to happen again?”

Lief erupted. “What can I do?!”

Ryson did not pause in his response. “Whatever it takes!”

Lief began to show anger himself. “And do you know what that might be?! Our leader is now determined to strike back. He will not be swayed. He has the authority and the right to make such a decision. Despite what you think, I have no right to question him.”

“No right?” Ryson’s eyes shot open wide. “You have every right. And what justifies the crime he’s about to commit? Just because he’s the camp elder? That means nothing. No one who could even consider such an act should even be allowed to lead.”

“Again, you speak with no knowledge! What do you think we can do? Just ask him to step down? Take a vote like the humans? He is the leader because he is. There is only one way to end his role, and that is with his death. Maybe you think I should just kill Petiole?!”

Ryson did not back down for an instant. He was against killing, he held life sacred, but perhaps that is what pushed him to this limit. He yelled right back. “If that’s what it takes. Better for one to die, than to allow him to do this.”

Lief clenched his fists. Ryson’s reaction was no true surprise to him, and the solution was not something foreign to his own contemplations. Yet, as an elf, he knew more, more of what was involved, more of what was truly possible. Yes, he had considered such a thought, and he revealed as much as he spoke through a set jaw. “You think it’s that easy! You don’t know anything! Ask Holli if she would let me get near Petiole if she knew I was going to kill him.”

Holli did not wait for the question. She answered without emotion. Her monotone voice rang hollow. “I would have to stop him, kill him if necessary.”

Ryson’s eyes widened. His accusing glare turned from Lief to Holli. “You would kill Lief?”

“It is my oath.”

“Your oath? What in the name of Godson is wrong with you?”

“Ages of what you call tradition,” Holli replied.

Ryson raged on. “That’s not acceptable! What happened long ago means nothing compared to what’s going to happen right now. Can you look me in the eye and say that you support even the thought of releasing the seeds on Dunop? Can you?”

“No, I can’t.”

“But you would protect Petiole?”

“They are not the same.”

“Yes they are! Godson!” Ryson grasped for reason, searched for alternatives. “Fine. You won’t let Lief stop Petiole. What about me?”

Linda could not hold her own reaction. “You? You would go out to kill this elf?”

Ryson kept his eyes on Holli, but as he spoke to Linda, he checked his rage. “If it would stop this, yes I would. You know I don’t believe in killing anything, but I’ve seen those trees. Anyone that would even think of using them has to be stopped.”

Sy entered the debate cautiously, made a point of his own, a consideration of the humans in Burbon. “I don’t know much of these shadow trees, but I do know the dwarves are a threat. They attacked us. They attacked the elves. You can’t fault them for wanting to defend themselves. The dwarves want to kill us, all of us.”

Ryson shook his head. “Not all of them, and I can tell you about these trees. They would kill every dwarf in Dunop.” He turned his attention back to Lief and Holli. “What about that? What about the dwarves that resist Yave? The ones that wanted us to warn the algors, to help them remove Yave from power and stop the separatists? Do they really want to attack us? Do they deserve a torturous death? And what about Jon? Does he deserve to die because some irresponsible elf is worried about his own stupid reputation?” His voice got rougher as he directed more and more of his reply at Holli. It was soon evident he was questioning the elf guard. “What does that make the elves? Jon stood with me, stood with us, to defeat Ingar, to save the land, including the elves that were being poisoned by the magic. Is this how we repay him? We destroy his home with the worse nightmare I’ve ever encountered. Is that what you’re protecting?”

Holli remained steadfast in her reply. “I protect the elders of my camp as well as

all elves. The eldest is the leader. It is not my position to question his decisions. If you tried to enter my camp with the intention of harming Petiole, I would do everything in my power to stop you.”

Ryson’s disbelief widened. “This is ridiculous.”

Lief listened to the delver with commiseration. This same debate, these same questions raged in his own soul the moment Petiole announced he would use the shadow tree seeds. He began to reel in his own anger at Ryson. He knew what fed the delver’s passion. In truth, it fed his own. He would rather see Petiole removed from power than face the prospect of living with the guilt of unleashing the seeds upon the dwarves. He would even accept the responsibility to kill Petiole, if that was a plausible solution. It wasn’t, as he understood the elf culture. He knew what Holli went through to become an elf guard, knew what oath she swore. Ryson did not know these things.

The elf did his best to explain the facts of the situation. His voice was filled with regret as he tried to reassure the delver of what was simply not possible. “I know how you feel about the shadow trees. I feel the same way. I also agree that Petiole has no right to unleash such a weapon just to reaffirm his authority. Be that as it may, I can not blame Holli for what she has said. She is an elf guard. She takes an oath so strong it has never been broken. It is more than just a promise to the leaders or even to the camp. It is also more than just tradition.”

Lief rubbed his hands together as he searched for a way to explain the unexplainable. “I believe I know you well enough to say that you would do anything to keep your own word. Holli’s oath is beyond just giving her word. It might be like you making an oath tied to the blessing you have with the woman who stands beside you. If you break that promise, you irrevocably destroy that very same blessing. That is the strength in her own responsibility. She can not question it, no more than you can question the feelings you have for this woman.”

At first, Ryson wished to debate the issue. No promise was worth committing this crime. No oath of service was so strong as to deny morality. What was this elf saying to him? That killing off every dwarf in Dunop, the innocent along with the guilty, that was simply acceptable because the elf guard swore to protect their own.

His mouth opened to protest just as Linda gently held him at his arm. He looked to her. He saw his own life in her eyes, his happiness, his future. He would kill to protect her.

His focus shifted to Holli. He saw pain. The elf guard held her oath as sacred as Ryson held Linda. In this moment, that same oath was forcing her to do something which was justified by no other reason. He saw the grief in her choice, the grief he would feel if he committed murder to protect his own love.

Ryson swelled with regret. His harsh words to the elf guard forced their way back into his memory like the returning tide. He immediately babbled out an apology. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't blame you. I didn't understand. I thought you were defending Petiole's decision. I think I see it's something more now. I am sorry."

Holli simply nodded. She herself had doubts. For the first time in her life she faced a choice which actually brought her close to breaking her oath. Ryson said nothing which was not true. Despite the attack of the dwarves, she could not justify the use of the shadow trees. But elves had died in the face of the attack, more would die if tensions escalated. Wouldn't the seeds save lives as well as take them? Then again, was that truly why they were being used? Petiole was doing nothing more than fighting for his own standing. He was wrong. She knew this. Yet, she must defend him, protect him. Her inner turmoil kept her silent.

Lief spoke up, placed the blame on its ultimate recipient. "What is being said here is nothing which hasn't already been considered. This debate can rage forever without a proper conclusion. And no matter what we decide, it will not change Petiole's decision. Still, he is not the true problem. Do not forget that it is Yave that is at the center of all our difficulties. Look around you. Why are these humans training? They know they will be attacked by the dwarves. Remember the algors? Who attacked them? Not Petiole. Again, it was the dwarves under Yave's leadership. And as for Petiole himself, he would not be in the position he is currently in had Yave not ordered an assault on the elves as well. I say this not to justify the use of the shadow trees. I can never condone that. Unfortunately, there are many elder elves that do. And remember the algors. Any day now they will unleash their army of sand giants. It is Yave that is causing this. It is Yave that is the problem. As much as you hate the thought, there is little we can do about this."

Ryson's jaw was tight with emotion. He could not accept everything Lief said, but the underlying truth was undeniable. Whether it be shadow trees or sand giants, both were only reactions to dwarf attacks. Yave and her followers drew first blood, and there were no signs of her stopping. The first sin was hers, but that would not forgive the future sins, including sins of abeyance. He would not be faultless if he did nothing to stop this abomination. "That may well be, but I can't just do nothing. There has to be a way to stop this."

"You would have to stop Yave," Lief replied firmly.

"Then that's what I'll have to try and do."

The shadow of doubt quickly darkened Lief's face. "And how will you accomplish this feat?"

Ryson clasped his hands together. He laid out the situation in simplicity. "Yave attacked the algors because she thought they were responsible for Tun's death. I know that's not true. I'll have to convince her of that."

"If you are considering what I think, it is foolishness. Yave will not listen to you," Lief retorted. "You are a delver. Have you forgotten? She now sees you as an enemy as well. Why do you think she attacked this place?"

"I have to try."

"Try what? Suicide? You are thinking of going to her, attempting to sway her opinion. That much I can see. She'll have you killed."

The words fell like bricks upon Linda. She looked to Ryson with growing dread of his intentions. "You can't do this."

"I have to do something. I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"You can't be irrational either," Lief admonished.

"Listen to him, Ry," Linda implored, pleading while tears filled her eyes. "What good would it do if you just get yourself killed?"

Holli found the strength to finally speak. "They are right, delver. You would accomplish nothing but your own death. You are now the enemy of the dwarves

in Dunop. If you attempt to speak to the queen, she will have you killed as a spy. Do not forget who you are dealing with. Yave has imprisoned her own son. If she is capable of that, she is capable of anything. She has no reason to listen to you.”

“But I was there. I can tell her.” Ryson halted with this thought as another burst into his head. “Wait a minute, wait a minute! Dzeb! Dzeb was there, too. He can tell her.”

Lief and Holli did not immediately reject the idea. They appeared to consider it with slight puzzlement.

Ryson continued. “You’re right. Yave won’t believe me, but how can she refuse a cliff behemoth. She can’t. They don’t lie. They dedicate their lives to the word of Godson. This can work. I can bring Dzeb into Dunop. He will speak the truth. Once she realizes Tun was killed by the sphere and not by the algors, all of this will end. Even if she doesn’t accept it, the other dwarves of Dunop will. She will lose her power. They won’t follow her if she openly refutes a cliff behemoth.”

Lief displayed hesitation. “I don’t know, let me think about this.”

“What’s there to think about? No one in the land, not even Yave could deny a cliff behemoth. She would have no choice. She would lose all her reasons to attack any of us.”

Lief frowned. “What you say is possible, but you forget many things. You must first find Dzeb, that will take time. Of that, you have little to none. Even now, plans are being made to drop the seeds.”

“You can delay them,” the delver demanded. “Tell Petiole of my plan. Tell him I’m not trying to stop him. I’m trying to stop Yave. If it works, Yave will have to admit her fault. There won’t be anymore challenges to his leadership, and he won’t have to drop the seeds. Wouldn’t that be the best solution to his problem? He has to give me a chance. All I’m asking for is a few days.”

“Even if I could convince him to wait, what about the algors? They will not wait. I expect that even now they are carving the bodies of the sand giants. They will be released soon. While you go searching for Dzeb, the sand giants may destroy Dunop.”

“I don’t think so,” Holli interrupted. “In order for the algors to send enough sand giants to destroy Dunop, it will take them at least several more days. I doubt they will send an inadequate force. They will surely want to make the first attack overwhelming. They may be able to carve that amount quickly, but they will still need time to collect the magical energy needed to animate all of them.”

Enin’s interest leapt to untold heights. “Truly? A spell of animation?”

Holli spoke guardedly of the use of magic. “It is a powerful spell. It brings life to rock, and as far as elflore goes, it has only been cast by the algors.”

Even if it was a spell beyond the power of a human, the thought of such a conjuration enticed the wizard. “And it will take them time to collect the magic? It must use a great amount of energy.”

Holli offered an explanation, but somewhat reluctantly. “Yes and no. The power is great, but not as much as you might think. As a human wizard, you store magical energy within you. The algors do not. They take the magical energy directly from the air. They can collect it, but only hold it temporarily.” She spoke the rest of the explanation to Ryson. “This gives you the time you need. In order to animate an adequate number of sand giants, the algors will need more time to collect the magic. I believe your idea has merit.”

Lief was not so willing. “It may give him a few days, but not unlimited time. He has to first find Dzeb. That in itself could take a season.”

“I don’t think so,” Ryson objected. “I think I know where Dzeb is. Based on what I learned from him when he came to us, he lives in the Colad Mountains. For me, the trip to the north range is less than a half day’s journey. I can be there before nightfall today.”

“But then you have to escort him back,” Lief reminded the delver. “He will not move as fast as you.”

“Are you kidding? His legs are double the length of mine. Maybe they don’t move as fast, but his stride is twice as long as any of ours. We can be back here before midday tomorrow and to the Dunop entrance before the following nightfall. That’s all we need.”

Lief began to succumb, but Linda voiced her own objections.

“But then what? You can’t just walk into Dunop. They might kill you.”

“I don’t think so,” Ryson reassured her. “Even if I was alone, they’d want to take me prisoner first, try to find out what I know. If I’m with Dzeb, they might not even come near me. Remember, we’re talking about a cliff behemoth here. I know you’ve never seen one. You just have to take my word for it. Just the sight of one is awe-inspiring.”

Linda wanted to protest further, wanted to keep Ryson from endangering himself. She wondered if saving the dwarves was worth the stakes he was willing to risk. He answered the question for her.

“You have to let me do this. I won’t be able to forgive myself if I don’t try. I don’t think either one of us would want to live with that.”

The image burned its imprint in her picture of the future. Ryson despondent, guilt-laden, and worse. He would blame her. He would wish to be free of her. He would seek the escape of exploring as only a delver would. His excursions would become longer and farther from home. It would be hard enough to keep him anchored as it was. This would destroy them. She gave him the only answer she could.

“Do what you have to.”

Lief would still not let this be the final word. “There is yet one more consideration. If I can prevail upon Petiole to delay the use of the shadow trees, there will be nothing to slow the dwarf army. Most of us agree that Burbon is now Yave’s most likely target. Your plan puts this town and all its inhabitants in great danger. Are you willing to accept this risk as well?”

This was not something Ryson expected. He did have a responsibility to the safety of the people around him. He viewed his plan to stop the use of the shadow trees as his moral obligation. Did he accept the price? Was it even his choice to make? The seeds were a horror, but using them or not using them might decide whether the people of Burbon would live or die. He dropped his forehead to his hands, crushed by the weight of the decision.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

Sy did not let him face the decision alone. He spoke with the authority that was

his as the leader of Burbon. “That decision is not simply his own to make. If you’re talking about the safety of this town, you speak to me. Now we all seem to believe the dwarves will attack Burbon next, but we don’t know when. You say these shadow trees will stop this attack, but so might Ryson’s plan. If he stops their leader before she orders the next attack, we will be as safe as if these trees you’re talking about destroyed their entire city. From what Ryson tells me, these trees will kill everyone, innocent civilians as well as the dwarf army. I know I don’t want that on my conscience. Maybe the best thing to do is change our tactics. Maybe we can’t defeat the dwarf army, but I can consider different strategies to hold them at bay if they do attack. After all, what we’re fighting for now is time. I would even consider temporarily evacuating the town, anything that would buy Ryson the time he needed.”

Holli’s respect for Sy elevated to that of an equal elf guard. She heard sincerity in his words and iron in his will. He was willing to consider all options to make Ryson’s plan work. He did so not simply to protect his own people, the humans, but to save the lives of dwarves, a race he had only encountered in battle. Her tone carried that respect as she offered him the only true alternative.

“I do not think evacuation will help you. If the dwarves do attack before Ryson brings Dzeb to Dunop, they will catch you in the process of leaving the city. You will not be able to defend yourself, especially if you are walking on open roads. I do, however, see another option you may consider. Will you hear it?”

“Of course.”

“I can order a contingent of elf guards to help defend your town. I can tell you how to fight to avoid great casualties. You will not be able to defeat the dwarves completely, but you will have a chance to hold them off and protect most of your town for at least a day or two. The dwarves will not expect the defenses you will throw at them. It should frustrate them. I can not guarantee anything but a greater chance at survival.”

Lief spoke out once more, one last decree at the choice involved. “Let none of us make a mistake about this. That is what we all face. Survival. Though none of us may wish to consider it, the shadow trees would stop the dwarves and enhance all of our chances to live. But we all also seem to be against such a thing. Still, I want it to be clear. While we wish to save Dunop, we risk our own lives, some of us to the hands of the very same dwarves that have brought this conflict upon us.

Is this what we all say? If so, I shall do my part, I will convince Petiole to hold off on using the seeds. He can refuse my ideas, but he can't refuse listening to them. As Ryson has said, I have gained enough status within my camp to force a meeting of all the elders. I will talk for two days if that is what is necessary. That will give him the time to bring Dzeb to my camp. Once that is accomplished, Petiole will have no choice but to let Ryson carry out the remainder of his mission. If, however, Ryson can not find Dzeb as easily as he believes, this may all be for naught. I can not stall the elders indefinitely. Petiole will give his order and the seeds will be dropped. We will have taken a great risk for nothing. I say this not because I doubt Ryson, I only wish to make our situation clear."

Lief paused, took a deep breath, before finishing with conviction. "I say we take the risk and give the delver his chance, but my risk is not as great as the others. What about the rest of you? Are we all in agreement?"

They were.

Chapter 12

Holli's attention was divided. She stood on the platform of Bourbon's western tower just as Lief advanced upon the Fuge River and Ryson sped off to the northern mountains. Enin and Sy waited at her side, but they said nothing to distract her. Instead, she watched her previous companions, her friends, begin their individual quests in grim silence. Her eyes followed their trails, but she also took several sweeping glances at the town behind her. Ryson and Lief's safety were of paramount importance, but this human town was now charged to her care. Three points of focus. She fought to keep her attention upon them all.

At this particular moment, though, Lief's progress called to her with the greatest sense of urgency. If Lief faced danger in his trip back to their camp, it was at this moment. She knew he could not sense river rogues. Once he reached the trees of Dark Spruce, he would be safe, but now, at the river's edge and moving through tall grass, he was vulnerable. Damn stubborn elf. He refused an escort, even just to the trees. He told her it wasn't necessary, that she should focus upon the preparations to defend the human town. He even rejected an escort of Sy's guards that were already prepared to scout the area on horseback. How foolish was that? Pride. Ignorant, stubborn pride.

As for Ryson, he was simply a blur of motion. The spectacle itself called for attention. No dust kicked up in his wake. Only the blurred outline of his body was visible, and it rushed along the ground as a bird soars across the open sky. As fast as he moved, as far as he traveled, he would remain in her sight for some time. Her eyes were strong, and the delver moved over the flatlands to the north. She commanded a strategic view from this platform and she could see well toward the horizon. The Colad Mountains stood proudly, clear in her sight. They waited like a great barrier, an impenetrable wall. They extended for untold distances. Surely, the cliff behemoths waited there, but how long would it take Ryson to find the one he needed, to find Dzeb?

As for the town, it waited for her in unmoving silence. At her request, the human volunteers had stopped their current training. That would become necessary soon enough, but they would also need to rethink their methods of fighting. It was of no use to train them as simple ground soldiers. To do so would invite disaster. If they were to fight off dwarves, they would have to focus upon evasion.

The townspeople of Burbon surprisingly did not question her. Rumors were spreading of course, rumors that an elf was going to teach them how to fight. Most did not protest, and they showed no sign of resentment. They did not know how to fight dwarves. Those civilians that thought they did were quickly rebuffed by soldiers that watched comrades die in the first dwarf attack. As these stories were recounted, any mumbling of dissatisfaction quickly died away. The people simply waited, waited for her direction, waited and hoped that this elf might hold their salvation.

Holli sensed all of this. First, however, it was necessary to review the full breadth of the town. The tower she now stood upon held that opportunity. She could inspect the structures and the lay of the land from this vantage point. It also allowed her to watch the departure of Lief and Ryson. As for the deliver, he was relatively safe. She doubted there was anything that posed a threat to him in the open lands he now traveled. She doubted anything could catch him. Though his speed of movement held her fascination, it was Lief that held her concern.

Her own muscles drew tight as she watched with narrowed eyes. She tried to drink in the magic that filled the air as Lief moved upon the bridge. She knew she couldn't sense that far, but she made the attempt. She also requested the same of the human wizard that stood beside her.

“Enin. Do you sense anything? Any disturbances in the magic that surrounds you?”

Enin immediately understood her purpose. It was as if he could see her thoughts, her concern painted itself in the magical energies which flowed around her. “I can not discern anything out of place, either in the town or in the clearing. I sense you standing beside me, but I can not sense anything else, not even your comrade so far in the distance. I'm afraid that is beyond my range. You are worried about a river rogue?”

“He won't be safe until he reaches the trees,” Holli admitted.

Sy grunted. “Then why didn't he accept an escort? He's as important to us now as anyone else.”

Holli did not answer. Lief was on the bridge. He seemed to move in slow motion. “Why doesn't he move faster?”

Holli's hands gripped the railing of the tower. Her eyes scanned the river. She saw nothing. Unable to do anything else, she pulled the bow from her shoulder. She took a long, thin arrow from her quiver and placed it upon the string.

Sy wished to question her, to ask her if she saw anything, but he remained silent. He would not distract her, not even for a moment. Instead, he also took a precaution. He signaled to the scouts on horseback to prepare to advance. He held his hand for them to wait as he now watched Lief with equal diligence.

Lief was upon the bridge, moving to its far end. He stopped. A moment of caution as he surveyed the banks of the river below him. Nothing, no river rogue, no danger. He moved forward. With no obstacle before him, he moved undeterred to the trees. He took to their limbs.

Holli stood down from her state of readiness. She slowly released the tension on her bow string and returned the arrow to her quiver. She spoke with obvious relief. "Lief will give word to the elf guard. A contingent of archers to assist us should be here before nightfall."

Sy signaled all clear to the scouts and motioned for them to begin their standard patrol.

Holli took one last glimpse at the fading outline of Ryson to the north before she fixed her attention on the streets of Bourbon.

Sy, however, would not immediately disregard Holli's previous intentions. "Could you have hit a target from this distance? It's a long way to that bridge. It would also be a dangerous shot. Your friend would have been in harm's way."

"I don't know," Holli replied stoically. "But it was all I could do."

Sy weighed the reply. If he was going to place his faith in this elf guard, he wanted to know more about her, including her consideration of risk. "That doesn't really answer the question. An arrow would have to travel a long way from here. The target could have moved. Lief could have moved, right into the path of your arrow. If a river rogue attacked, would you have taken the shot?"

"Yes," Holli said shortly.

Sy waited.

Holli noted the expectation of his silence. She offered her explanation. “If Lief was attacked by a river rogue, he would have had no chance of survival on his own. That is a plain and simple fact. His only chance would have been my arrow. If he was attacked and I hit the rogue, he would have had a chance to escape. If my arrow missed, it might have distracted the creature. Again, Lief would have had a chance to escape. If my arrow hit Lief, it would be no worse than a rogue’s teeth or claws.”

Sy pressed for more information. “Would you have given your friend there a chance to escape on his own? I mean, how long would you have waited before you took the shot?”

Holli answered quickly. Her mind was on the new task at hand, protecting the town, but she answered with all honesty. “Not long. If Lief was caught on the bridge, his fate would have been certain. If he made it to open ground, he might have been able to draw his sword and outmaneuver a rogue.”

Sy rubbed his chin. “You wouldn’t have waited for him to call for your help? You would have made the decision as to when to risk his life based on your own interpretations?”

“The bow was in my hands. It was no one else’s decision to make.”

“Is that how you will see to the defense of this town?”

Holli raised an eyebrow. “Do you object?”

Sy pointed to the cold facts. “At this point, my objections are pretty much irrelevant. I’ve accepted your expertise in this matter. You will guide us. That has already been decided. That doesn’t mean I want to remain ignorant of your views. Your opinion of acceptable risk will certainly define your tactics. I would be negligent if I didn’t attempt to recognize just how far you would go, what you might consider appropriate in the face of danger.”

“I see. It’s an acceptable question. You are putting your life in my hands.”

“I’m putting the life of everyone in this town in your hands,” Sy reminded her firmly.

Holli looked over the streets, scanned the buildings, and settled her attention on

those that watched and waited for her advice. “Yes, you are. Will it ease your worries if I tell you that I don’t think there are any acceptable casualty counts? That I think the loss of one is one too many?”

Sy did not reply.

Holli did not wait for him. “I don’t expect you to believe me, and I guess you will remain ill at ease as long as you depend on another’s judgment. But you also know what we face. If the dwarves attack us, there will be injuries among your people, there will be death. I can not prevent that. But I still believe that one casualty is one too many. I will do everything within my power not to just limit the number of casualties, but to eliminate them. If the battle ever arises, and I truly pray it does not, my plans will be to save all, everyone. Even when that no longer becomes possible, even when I see the dead on the field, I will act so that those that are still alive fighting will remain alive.”

Holli nodded over to the bridge. Lief was now out of sight, his trail covered by the limbs of the trees.

“You asked me if I would take the shot from this tower, would I risk Lief’s life to save it. Yes, I would, but you have to understand why. I would not risk Lief’s life for my own glory, but I would if I felt it was his only chance. That is how I will deal with your people as well. Does that ease your mind?”

Sy smiled. He liked Holli, appreciated her honesty. “My mind is never at ease, but it does answer my question. I believe I have put my faith in the right person. Excuse me, the right elf!”

“Let me now ask you a question.” Holli nodded to the throng of onlookers below. “How much can I count on the humans you are trying to train? Do not rate them as soldiers, that is not what I need to know. Rate them for what we face. I need to know if they will be determined to carry out the orders given to them. Do not be concerned with whether you think they are able to defend themselves or able to perform with competence, just their willingness to do so. Will they hold their position to save the town, or will they run to save their own lives?”

Sy considered the question. He thought of all the different people, all the different characteristics of those that now seemed willing to help defend. It felt difficult to judge them with one sweeping statement, but he kept his answer short

and pointed. “Some will run. Most will do what they can to do what’s expected of them.”

“Do you think you can weed out those which might run?”

“No.”

Holli frowned, but only for a moment. “That is unfortunate. When one runs, others that might have held often join in flight.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s just no way I can tell for sure. I can make some guesses, but that’s all.”

“I will ask you to do that. Those that you feel are prone to run in the face of battle must be given other tasks.”

Holli turned from Sy. She inspected the town again, this time she took long, discriminating studies of many of the buildings. Her eyes followed the length of the wall. Only for a brief moment did she inspect the clearing between the hills and the barrier. She revealed little as she quickly focused back on the heart of the town. She looked at the crossing patterns of the roads and alleys, the differing heights of the many structures. It would not be like fighting the dwarves in the forest, but it held many advantages. She quickly played out several scenarios in her mind.

Sy and Enin left her to her study. They watched her carefully, but said nothing.

Holli repaid their consideration by speaking her thoughts aloud. “If we do this right, if we’re lucky, this may just be the perfect place to hold out against the dwarves. A good deal will depend on how many they send at us. I’m sure it will be a large complement of warriors, but we can make that work to our advantage. Dwarves are stubbornly proud and easily taunted into breaking ranks. It will help us if they send several hundred soldiers as opposed to small strike teams. The commanders will have trouble keeping their warriors in formation. It is in confusion which we can overcome their strength.”

The warrior elf turned to the ladder which led down from the platform. “I’ve seen all I need to from this point. I need to see things from ground level now.”

Sy and Enin shrugged at each other. They simply followed her.

Holli stepped lively through the streets. At times she would stop in the middle of intersections. She gauged the distance between opposing rooftops, judged the height of several buildings. Many times she crouched as she walked, assuming the height of a dwarf. She took a perspective of seeking cover. She sought out narrow alleys and covered porches. In each tight place, she knelt and looked to the heights surrounding her. She nodded or frowned, but she said nothing.

As she passed many of the humans that watched her, she did not ignore them. She watched how they moved, how they stood. She looked for signs of impatience. She looked into their eyes, watched for focus and concentration. She seemed neither pleased nor disappointed with what she saw.

Finally, she made a request of Sy.

“I would like to see your supply of arms.”

Sy guided her to the main armory, another brick building located next to the command post. He waved to the guards as he led her inside. Well organized rows of crates lined most of the available space. Some were open and revealed their contents, mostly swords and spears.

Holli ignored these. She turned her attention to the slings, crossbows, and long bows. She picked up a crossbow first, then a sling.

“Excellent,” she murmured.

Both Enin and Sy watched her carefully. Sy was curious about her attention to certain weapons. The spears were effective against the dwarves in their first battle, but she was as indifferent to these as she was to the short swords.

Enin focused on her ability to deal with this enclosed place. He remembered how uncomfortable Lief appeared within the walls of Sy’s office. She appeared calmer with her surroundings than her male counterpart. If these brick walls invoked a sense of discomfort, she hid it well.

Holli noticed their attention, but she disregarded it. Her concentration remained squarely upon the stock of weapons. “These boxes? They contain more of these bows? And these? More slings?”

“Yes,” Sy answered simply.

“You are well supplied.”

Sy revealed more truth. “It’s not like we really had a choice. After the first goblin attack, we made sure we were capable of defending ourselves. This isn’t even all we have, either. I wouldn’t keep all my eggs in one basket. I have more stored at command HQ. Those are ready for immediate use, no unpacking is necessary. I also have stores hidden in certain buildings throughout the town.”

“You have more?” Holli questioned with a note of appreciation.

“Buying this stuff cost the town plenty, but it was a cost we were all willing to pay.”

“It was wise. It may save your life.”

“You seem most interested with the bows. I have to tell you, the spears worked well for us last time.”

Holli did not reply immediately. She weighed what she wanted to say and how she would say it. She respected this man, and she would not callously disregard his opinions or his input. His actions, as told to her, in the previous battle with the dwarves saved many lives. She would not offend him. Still, this was his only encounter with the dwarves, and it was only a small attack force. He had no experience fighting a full-fledged dwarf army. No human did. There was no knowledge for him to draw on. It was her responsibility to give him that knowledge, for her to draw on elflore and her own training to impress upon him what they face, but she would do so with absolute respect for him as a soldier and as a leader.

“Do not take lightly what I will tell you, for I will never take lightly what you have to say to me. You have already accomplished much more than any other living human commander can claim. You have faced a dwarf attack and forced their retreat. There is no question in my mind as to your ability to lead, but there is a need for you to instill what I can teach beyond your own experience.

“You must forget what you think you know about war. I can say this because over the many cycles of the seasons, I have watched how humans have fought against each other. I have learned a good deal about how your commanders think in battle, and I have seen what guides their decisions. While these maneuvers would work well against almost any other race in our land, they will not work

against the dwarves.

“There are no battle lines, no points of defense. There is no safe haven, there is no place which is more secure than another, and there is never a clear border between you and the enemy. The entire area is the battlefield. No matter what is going on in another section of this town, there is always the threat that a hundred or even a thousand dwarves may surface right in front of you in an instant. You can never be sure where their army is, or how large they are. Just when you think you have found the main body of their army, a larger force will break through the ground behind you. I say this because you show some confidence in the use of spears. I tell you in all honesty, if our lives become dependent on spears, we are lost.”

Sy grasped for the knowledge she offered, grasped for hope. “Can we depend on those? Can we depend on bows and slings?”

“We have to depend on how well we can use them,” Holli replied. “Remember our goal will not be to defeat the dwarves, but for us to survive. It is not the same thing.”

“I know. It’s the difference between attack and defense.”

“Very true, and we will defend this town with but one goal in mind, to allow everyone the greatest chance to live to see tomorrow.”

She did not press the issue at this point. Instead, she began inspecting more of the crates. “My advice at this point is for you to begin handing out these bows and slings. Have your people train with these.”

She turned from the crates and moved back outside. Again, she looked to the rooftops. As Sy followed her out the door, she made her final requests for preparation. “You will need ropes and ladders. Have them in place as soon as possible. Hang the ropes from the rooftops to the ground. Place the ladders against the sturdiest of your structures. As an elf I know this, the way to escape a dwarf is to climb out of his reach. We would climb the trees of our forest, you will have to climb these structures you have built. It does not guarantee survival. A band of angry dwarves could collapse these houses, just as they can fell a tree in a single swing, but it is a needed escape route. You will also need bells in the towers, an alarm.”

“We use signal fires,” Sy advised.

“That is even better, but we will also need a general alarm that can be heard. Dwarves normally attack right after sunset when most of your citizens will be in their homes.”

Enin spoke up, unable to curb his own desire to offer his unique service. “What is there that I can do to help offer warning? Is there any thing you can think of that I can try? I know the dwarves are resistant to magic, but there must be something I can do. Elves know a good deal of magic, don’t they? Is there a spell which might locate the tunnels as they are being dug?”

Holli cast a doubtful glance at the wizard. “I doubt at this time elves know anymore than you in the way of casting spells.”

Enin could not contain his surprise. “Really? I thought elves were very prone to using magic.”

“As a race in whole, elves are more inclined to magic than humans, but that is not the case when it comes to comparing individuals. Throughout the legends, throughout elflore, the most powerful of the wizards and sorcerers have been of human descent. Do not underestimate your power.”

“You think I have great power?”

Holli did not want to answer that question. She narrowed her words to his original question. “I am uncertain of the extent of your power. I also do not know any spells which may help us. Magic is a powerful tool, but at this time, too much knowledge has been lost for it to serve us with any reliability.”

Enin felt the need to defend his new found craft. “I don’t know about that. I’ve already been able to come up with a small web spell. I know that won’t help with dwarves that can tunnel underneath it, but there may be an offshoot of that spell. It may be just a case of finding a variant, something that would sense the movement underground.” Enin’s eyes lit brighter as he carried the proposal even farther. “Maybe I can do even better. Maybe there’s a way I can stop them from digging under us all together. I can try to find a way to collapse the tunnels, like an earthquake, small in scale of course.”

Holli replied coarsely. “I would strongly advise against experimenting with such

spells. If you don't know what you're doing, you could cause great damage."

"I would be careful," Enin protested.

"I'm sure you would, but it is still too risky to attempt. Dwarves are very resistant to magic. Anything you try may have dangerous consequences to us, and may do nothing to stop the dwarves. I will also suggest that during battle you refrain from attacking the dwarves directly with any spells you have not previously cast with certainty."

Enin looked at Holli with bewilderment. "What would you have me do? Should I just sit on my hands?"

"I would simply ask that you remain careful. Experimenting with spells may be more dangerous than the dwarves themselves."

Enin would not hold back his growing insecurity. "You know, the other elf didn't trust me, either. I sensed that. Now I sense the same thing in you. I want to know why."

Holli became somewhat rigid. "I can not speak for Lief. I can only speak for myself. It is not you I don't trust, it is the magic."

"Nonsense!"

Holli's expression remained blank. She would hide her emotions as a trained elf guard. No one would be able to read the slightest sentiment from her face.

Enin, however, looked beyond her expression. He looked deep into her being; he saw her thoughts, felt her emotions. He became angry. "You don't trust me! You're hiding the reasons. You deem them an important secret. Why!"

Holli looked to Sy. "I thought I was here to assist you. Am I now on trial here?"

Sy rubbed his hands uncomfortably. "Of course not. Your assistance here is greatly appreciated. I think ..."

Enin did not take his eyes off of Holli, even as he cut Sy off. "Don't involve him. This is between you and me. You are telling me not to help protect my own home. You are making this decision based on mistrust. I want to know why!"

Holli gave him the truth. "I fear what you can do, whether willingly or unwillingly. There is nothing about you which gives me this fear other than the potential of your power. I sense nothing but good within your intentions, but I feel the range of what you are capable of. That in itself is enough to create my doubts about you. The magic is again new to the land. There is no knowledge to guide you, no elder sorcerer to train you. If you had an inkling of just how powerful you could be, you would understand my doubts. You might even share my fears."

"Why should I be afraid?" Enin demanded.

Holli responded with a question of her own. "How much do you truly understand of this magic you use? Do you understand the significance of the circles which enclose your wrists at the time of your casting? Do you understand what it means to cast white magic?"

"Yes," Enin replied stoically.

"Do you really?"

Sy listened to the conversation with mystification. He did not understand the significance and expressed as much. "What are you talking about? What's the deal with the white magic and the circles?"

Holli answered the question but kept her attention upon Enin, gauging his reaction to her response. "The color of the magic at spell casting signifies the wizard's true power. The color represents a control over one of the dominions. All wizards can learn to cast spells over each dominion, but their power is normally enhanced over the dominion of their true spirit. A wizard that casts green magic has great power over nature, yellow magic is power over light. Each color represents a discipline of the forces of this land. Others include fire, water, land, air, and storms. There are, however, two very rare and unique representations of color. White and black. Black is the power over forces beyond this land, power over shadows. White is power over all the forces of the land, not just one. A wizard casting white magic could cast spells with equal power over fire or over water, or any other force of the land. The wizard has no weakness in any of the dominions." Holli spoke coldly now, spoke to the wizard. "Lief saw you cast a spell. He saw the white light. In all of elflore there is no true record of such a wizard, there has only been rumor."

Enin did not blink, even as Holli compounded the references to his strength. The elf pointed to her wrists. “The shapes at spell casting are also a sign of strength. The closer the shape comes to a perfect circle, the stronger the spell. Angles or points invite breaks in the power. Circles represent strength throughout. In the time of legends, spell casters practiced for many cycles of the season, lifetimes, before they could perfect a single circle. You have two and the magic has been here in the land for less than a full cycle of the seasons.”

Sy looked at Enin with greater appreciation. He stammered at the possibilities. “Is all that bad? After all, he’s on our side.”

Holli did not bend even slightly from her position. “He has the power, but no one has the knowledge he needs to control that power.” Again, she directed her last sentiments directly to the wizard. “We face a very grave situation here. If the dwarves attack in force, we will need every advantage just to survive. Your power might give us that advantage, then again, it might disrupt our own forces. You might unwillingly become the spark that leads to the complete destruction of this place. That is the risk of your power, that is what creates my doubts. Without the magic, I honestly believe this town has a chance. It will be difficult, but the hope is there. That is the hope we all have to hold. If instead, we put our faith in the chance you may find a way to use your power properly, we will be grasping at chance. Do you understand this?”

Enin turned away from her, not out of anger but out of need. She doubted him, for whatever reason, she mistrusted him. He could not accept these same doubts. They would ruin him if he acknowledged them. Better for him to ignore her. Otherwise, he would stagnate. He could not have that. In his mind, she was right about only two things, and that’s what he would focus upon. There was great power within him, and he had nothing but good intentions. If she did not want his help now, he would not offer it, but he would not be cast aside either. He would remain in Burbon, wait for the attack he somehow knew was coming. He would hope they would prevail without him, but if not, he would be there. He walked away from the elf and his commander without another word.

Sy watched him leave. The guard captain wondered about what just happened. “I don’t think that was necessary. He’s helped this town survive over the last season.”

“I had no choice,” Holli admitted. “He read my emotions. He knew of my

mistrust. I could not hide it from him, even though I wanted to. He is very powerful.”

“Powerful enough to possibly save us.”

“Or destroy us,” Holli noted. “Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I did, but I know him. He’s here to help us. That’s all.”

Holli replied bluntly. “And that’s all I am here for. I’m not requiring you to accept all of my decisions. As you once said, the safety of this town is ultimately your responsibility. If you think I have made a misjudgment, by all means call the wizard back. I will continue to advise you in whatever decision you make. If you want the wizard to attempt spells, I will do what I can to work it into my plans. Remember, I’m not here to take control. I am here to help. It is simply my judgment that, when dealing with dwarves, a novice wizard is more of a danger than an advantage, especially a wizard that is capable of what he is capable of. Do you disagree?”

“How can I disagree? I don’t know a damn thing about dwarves.”

“Then what is it you want of me?”

Sy simmered in his own frustrations. “I just want your help.”

“Then let me give it to you. Forget what has happened for now. I believe the wizard understands what I have said to him. He is not leaving this town. He is only leaving me to my duties. We have much work to do. We have to train your people, we have to construct obstacles for the dwarves. Let us begin that now and let us worry about the wizard another time.”

Chapter 13

“Why are you unwilling to give him this chance?”

“Because the longer we wait, the more we invite another attack from the dwarves.”

Petiole’s reasoning rang hollow. Lief attacked it.

“If anyone’s inviting an attack, it’s the humans, the same humans he has vowed to protect. If he is willing to take that risk, if the humans are willing to accept it, I can not see why you can’t. Are you saying the humans can now teach us a lesson in bravery?”

Petiole lashed out defensively. “No elf has anything to learn from the humans, especially me.”

“Yet, you won’t wait.”

“I will not wait because we are more at risk than the humans. We will be attacked next, not them.”

Lief’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Even you can’t believe that. You know what has happened. The humans at Burbon forced the dwarves to retreat with heavy casualties. You think Yave will bother with us after this. Every elf in this camp is sighing with relief upon hearing this news. They know the humans are now the true target of the dwarves.”

Petiole remained obstinate. “That does not make us any less of a target. From what you say, the humans will be easily overrun. The dwarves will then turn their attention back to us.”

Lief scratched his head. He searched for the words to make Petiole understand. He did not want to be confrontational, Petiole usually became stubbornly defensive at such provocation. He had to swallow his emotions, speak with diplomacy, something very difficult for him. He calmed the tone of his voice.

“Holli believes the humans can hold for a few days. With the archers we have

sent them, so do I. That is all I'm asking from you, a few days. Hold off on using the seeds. Just wait a little while. We will know soon enough as to whether this will work. The delver's option is the best for everyone involved."

"That's not my opinion."

So much for diplomacy.

"Oh? And you think using the shadow trees is the answer? You would rather just wipe out the city of Dunop and everyone in it, including the dwarves that remain loyal to our past treaties and want nothing but peace with us. Is that how you wish to be remembered?"

Lief struck a nerve with the camp elder. Petiole's insecurity over his own image as well as his legacy influenced each of his decisions. He wallowed in hesitation. "You can not place the blame of this situation on me! It's not that I want to use the seeds. I have no choice. It was the dwarves who attacked first."

Lief noted the indecisiveness. He pressed harder. "It is still your decision on how we react." He paused for a moment, let a silence build. When he spoke again, he did so with weighty tones. "Do you understand how important this moment is? Your place in the history of this camp, in elflore for that matter, will depend on what you do at this moment. This is the first time we have faced open dwarf hostilities since the last time the shadow trees were used. Do you recall elflore of that occasion? How are the creators of the shadow trees looked upon? With respect? Or with shame? You now face the same situation. Whether you like it or not, you will become part of elflore with what you do now. How will you be remembered, Petiole?"

The camp elder held to his fears and insecurities. "How will I be remembered if I let the dwarves attack again? How much respect will I lose if I appear to be weak?"

"How much respect will you gain if you show some patience? That is not weakness. That is strength."

Petiole was not so sure. He often delayed his decisions, not out of patience but out of confusion. It seemed the longer he waited, the harder it was to decide. The elves in his camp would always look to him expectantly. He would hear the whispers - Petiole can't make up his mind. He did not want to hear that again.

And what if the dwarves did attack again? They would blame him, say he shouldn't have waited.

Then again, what would they say if he ordered the release of the seeds? Right now they might praise him because they are afraid, but what would happen as time passed? The fear would subside. Stories of the dwarves' fate would reach the surface. It would be a horrible tale. He might be remembered as a criminal. He continued to flounder in self-doubts.

"You do not understand." Petiole spoke, almost pleading for compassion. "I do not want to drop the seeds, but I don't want to be responsible for the death of more elves. The seeds seem like a horror... I mean, they are a horror, but they have kept peace among the dwarves and elves for so many cycles of the seasons. It may be they are needed again, just to bring that peace back. What am I suppose to do? Sacrifice this camp so I'm not remembered as the elf that destroyed Dunop? How will I be remembered then?"

Lief shook his head. "You're missing the point of my request. It is not simply making a choice between using the seeds or not using the seeds. I am asking for you to wait. Let the delver Acumen find the cliff behemoth. Let them both go to Yave. How can Yave deny the word of a cliff behemoth? She can't. The war will end before it begins. And you will be remembered for your patience."

"Or for my indecision!" Petiole suddenly lashed out. His emotions swung like a pendulum. His indecision turned to fury and petty jealousies. An angry fire burned in his words. "It's so easy for you to stand there and speak of how I'll be remembered. Your place in the legends is already forged. The great Lief Woodson, the elf that stood with Ryson Acumen at Sanctum Mountain, the elf that helped destroy the sphere of Ingar and save the land. You have nothing to lose in this. No one will blame you for anything. But what about me? I have already announced my intentions to this camp. They know of my decision. What will they say once they hear I've changed my mind? You speak so arrogantly about our place in elflore. That's because that's all you have. You don't face the weight of leadership. You have the respect of every member of this camp, but you have no responsibility. You think I'm going to stand here and let you place even more burdens on me. It will not happen. I have made my decision and that is that."

Lief seethed. His own words flowed from him like slow bubbling lava. "I don't

think so. You don't know what you're doing, and I won't have it. Would you like to see how much responsibility I'm willing to take? Would you like to see how I'm willing to take the weight of leadership?"

The younger elf stepped forward, like a stalking cat. Desperation, frustration clouded his thinking. He was tired of Petiole, tired of his inability to lead. He forgot where he was.

Petiole immediately took a step backwards. He shook ever so slightly.

Suddenly, two elf guards dropped from the trees. They took a position between Lief and Petiole. An arrow split the air and plunged into the ground at Lief's feet.

Lief made no attempt to move other than to turn his head in the direction of the arrow's origin. He glared into the thick branches of a blue spruce. To his sharp eyes, the outline of another guard was visible. The bow was again ready to fire. Lief shook his head and cursed. He did not look at Petiole, but he directed serious words at him. His eyes remained on the guards, inspecting their blank expressions. They would kill him if he made another move toward Petiole, but they could not stop his declaration.

"I suggest you give me the time I want. If you do not, I will call for a meeting of the full elder council. I will outline every flaw in every decision you have ever made. I will do so to prove that you are not worthy to make this decision. I realize they will do nothing to remove you from power, but because I am Lief Woodson they will have to hear me out. What do you think will happen when an elf of my standing begins to openly debate your every decision? If you think the elves of this camp doubted your word before, just wait."

Petiole's fear grew. "You wouldn't do ..."

Lief cut him off. "I will get the time I want. You will not be able to drop the seeds as long as I call for a meeting of the elders. You will have to wait. If I have to speak continuously until the delver has returned, I will. I will have my way at your expense. Can you imagine what I will be saying?"

Petiole's shoulders slouched. He didn't know how to respond. "You can't do this to me. Do you know what this will cause? Our camp will be in disarray."

Lief exploded. “It’s already in disarray. It has been so since Mappel died.”

Petiole recoiled as if Lief had pierced him with a spear.

Lief caught a glimpse of Petiole’s reaction. He knew he had hurt the elder elf. Not out of sympathy, but out of reason, he gave Petiole one last hope to grasp. “I will make but one concession. I will announce to the camp it was my wish to delay the use of the seeds. I will take full responsibility. That way, if we are attacked again by the dwarves, you can blame me. I don’t care what you think about me. I don’t care what this camp thinks of me. I don’t even care if I lose my place in the legends. I care about giving Ryson Acumen the chance he desires, the chance he deserves. I owe him that. We all owe him that. I’m giving you this chance to save the little respect you have left. I suggest you take it. Take it, Petiole, resign yourself to the fact that I’m not giving you any other choice. Unless, of course, you order these guards to take my life. That is the only way you can stop me. Will you go that far? And if you do, will they follow that order? They might have been ready to protect you when I was ready to attack, but what about now? I make no more advance upon you. Will they kill me just to protect your ego?”

Lief watched the expression of the guards change. The blankness dissolved. Agitation grew. They wished Lief would stop. Surely they did not want to make that decision. It was their sworn duty to protect the life of the camp elder, but would they follow an order to kill a fellow elf, a legend.

Lief persisted. “Well? What is your decision Petiole? Do you want to test the loyalty of these guards? Who will they be loyal to?”

Petiole mumbled as he directed his gaze to the ground.

Lief did not hear him. “What?”

“You have five days,” Petiole repeated slightly louder.

#

When the contingent of elf archers reached Burbon, many new defenses had already been constructed. Battlements with jagged, lowlying edges lined many a street. Barricades of barbed wire crossed most intersections. Nets of thick rope blocked alleyways. The design of each obstacle was clear, to herd emerging

dwarves away from cover and into the open.

The human soldiers handled the construction of these obstacles, at least the ones that volunteered for ground duty. They would be the first to engage the dwarves during any attack, and they would need to know the lay of these obstacles.

Building them helped them understand their purpose. Sy stayed with these men, his finest soldiers. He would lead them in the coming battle. As he helped with the battlements, he spoke openly of the strategies for the ground forces. Those on the ground would risk their own lives to serve as diversions.

As for the civilians, they learned the use of ranged weapons from masters at the bow. The sharp eyes and steady hands of the elves made them natural archers. Holli knew she could not teach these aspects to the humans, but she could make them far more deadly than if they were left to practice on their own. She brought the human students up to rooftops and to the heights of the wall. They learned to use the downward perspective of their higher position with their very first shot. Holli taught them to pick their targets, to reload and shoot with timed patience. She taught them the limits of their range and how to use cover to hide their own position. As the other elves arrived, they assisted in this training.

The sun set and darkness slowly crept through the streets. The air became cold quickly. The volunteers were allowed a break for a meal, but all were asked to return in order to learn to shoot during the darkness of nightfall. Every civilian complied with this request, without hesitation, without grumbling.

Holli counseled them further on how to pick targets based on movements and shadows. She advised them how to take shots which would not endanger their own forces on the ground. Most of all, she invoked upon them a spirit of togetherness as well as a will for survival. If the archers and slingers moved in concert, their attacks would be so much more powerful. If they became one in purpose with the ground forces that lured the dwarves into vulnerable positions, the dwarves would fall while they would remain relatively safe. Despite the fact she was elf, she appealed to a sense of unity for their own survival.

In the middle of such training, her focus was ripped from the humans. Upon the top of the wall, her head jerked to the west and to the clearing that divided the town from the hills. She gave no explanation to those she trained, other than an order for them to stand ready. She directed their attention to the clearing. She did not profess the object of her alarm, other than stating it was not the dwarves. She

flew down a ladder with ease, a product of climbing trees all her life. She sought out the ground forces, she called for Sy.

At the same time, Enin appeared for the first time since he left earlier that day. He also called for Sy.

Sy moved away from his soldiers. Concern gripped his features. He looked to both at the same time. "What is it?"

Holli yielded to the wizard.

"Goblins," Enin stated. "They're snooping around the walls."

Sy cursed as he looked to the edifice in the distance. "Are you sure?"

"I have felt them, too," Holli confirmed. "That is also why I am here."

"Damn." Sy heaved a frustrated sigh. "That's all we need."

Holli offered encouragement. "I agree it is not welcome, but it is not a terrible situation. After all, we are prepared. At the very worst, we can use this event to assist in the training of your people."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Enin announced.

Holli looked to the wizard with puzzlement.

Enin explained quickly. "They are not here to attack." He turned a glance to Holli. "Since you didn't think I would be a help to you today, I spent my time working on a spell to read thoughts. I was practicing on the townspeople as they trained. It was amazing to see what they were thinking. In a strange way, most of them really want the dwarves to attack, almost as if they want to prove something. Anyway, when I sensed the goblins, I probed their thoughts. They are not here on a raid. They are here to investigate what's going on. From the hills, they've seen our people on the wall. They saw the group of elves enter through the south gate. They know we are preparing for something. Apparently some serp, named Sazar I think, has sent them to find out more of what's going on behind the wall. By his order, they are not to attack us."

"You have learned to read thoughts from that distance?" Holli asked with her

surprise evident.

“Yes,” Enin happily acknowledged. “Yes, I have. It’s easier when the person is up close, like you are right now for instance, but if I use the magic to lock in on their position and I focus the spell, I can read thoughts of any one that I can sense. You are surprised by this? You didn’t think I was going to just sit around and sulk all day? No, I can see by your thoughts now that you didn’t, but you didn’t expect this either. I can read your thoughts right now. This doesn’t make you comfortable. You’re thinking if I can do this, I would be a dangerous enemy if the humans and elves ever went to war. Why do you think this, especially at this moment?”

Holli replied quickly, but uneasily. “I am an elf guard. I must always think of the protection of my camp.”

Enin pressed her as he wore an almost smug grin of satisfaction. “But we’re not in your camp now. You’re here to protect us. Why do you worry so much about a conflict between the elves and the humans? I thought the dwarves were our common enemy?”

“That’s enough, Enin,” Sy spoke in the tone of command. “You have no right to ask her such questions.”

Enin laughed. He found the moment entertaining. “Maybe I do, and maybe I don’t. It was she who first mistrusted me. I’m not doing anything more than returning the favor. If she feels uncomfortable with this, well now she knows how I feel.”

Holli flashed a glare of anger. “How can I know how you feel? I can’t read your thoughts like you can mine.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it,” Enin rebuked the elf. “Remember who you’re dealing with here. I can read your thoughts now. Very clearly. Oh, you can keep secrets from me, things you truly wish to conceal, but your reactions, no, you can’t keep those hidden. You don’t like me questioning you any more than I appreciated you telling me I was useless. Well, it seems I’m not so useless anymore.”

“I never claimed you were useless. I said your power was dangerous. I still believe that.”

“I know you do,” Enin grinned. He took delight in reminding Holli he could read her thoughts before she spoke of them. It was not so much out of revenge, but more out of redemption. His spells would help the town, as he just revealed the goblins intentions, and her doubts would not stop him. “You spoke of my potential and that if I realized what I was capable of that I might be frightened myself. I can see now what you think I might become. It doesn’t scare me. I know how I want to use that power. What did you think? That I was going to take over the land? Chain your race?”

“No, I never doubted your intentions, but even now, I doubt your ability to fully control what you can do. You need time and guidance. There is little of the first and none of the second.”

“And yet, I have revealed the intentions of the goblin party. Do you doubt this?”

“No, I can see that you have control over this spell.”

“Is that why you were so worried about how I might use it against the elves?”

“I have already answered that question,” Holli replied.

“Then answer this one, do you think my magic can now be used against the dwarves?”

“I would still advise against it.”

“Why?”

The elf answered honestly, knowing that any lie would be immediately sensed by the probing wizard. In truth, it did not change her answer. She would have spoken the same reply even if she could close her thoughts to Enin. “Because the dwarves are different than the goblins, they are different than the elves. They are resistant to magic. You would not be able to sense them. You probably wouldn’t be able to read their minds. Even if you could read their intentions, how would that help us? We know why they are attacking. What else could you do?”

“I could capture some. I have already proven that.”

“Only a handful and you would exhaust yourself in the process.”

“I don’t know about that,” Enin challenged. “I’m growing stronger. I know how to capture and hold more energy. I won’t tire like I did the first time.”

Sy intervened. At first he was uncomfortable with the debate, but now he noticed his soldiers watching with interest. He did not like the message being sent. The argument spoke of division. He could not have it continue. He spoke with authority over both wizard and elf. “That’s enough from both of you. I can’t have this, won’t have it. You are both needed to help protect this town. Your bickering is counter-productive to that goal. Enin, I don’t know why you’re doing this. You’re acting like a child. You’re mad because she thought you might be a danger if you started experimenting with the magic. That’s her opinion and she’s entitled to it.” Sy then turned to Holli. “But I don’t agree with it. I don’t know how the magic works against dwarves. It may put us in danger, but I also know we can’t ignore a single advantage just because it may prove risky. If he can capture a few dwarves in a force field, well that’s a few less we have to deal with. That in itself is worth something. As a soldier, you should know that.”

“It will be as you will,” Holli replied stoically, not offended by the captain’s lecture.

“You’re damn right it will.” Sy then turned back to the wizard. “That goes for you, too. No more outbursts because someone mistrusts you. Godson, I mistrusted you the first time I learned of your power. Does that make me any less your friend? I don’t think I rely on anyone more than you.”

Enin could not help but read the captain’s thoughts. He smiled with good humor. “You rely on Ryson more. At least that’s what you believe. That’s alright. It’s not so bad to be the second most trusted man in your command.”

Sy rubbed his head, first in frustration. Suddenly, he laughed. He could not hold it back. He shook his head in disbelief as he gazed at the wizard. “Are you going to be doing this to me all the time now?”

“Not all the time,” Enin joined him with a chuckle, “just most of the time.” The wizard’s delight allowed him to face the elf with less antagonism. “I offer my apologies to you. I was, like the captain said, acting like a child. In regard to my spells, I will also try to defer to your judgment. I have to admit, I also practiced my mind reading spell upon you while you were training these people. I know you are sincere. I did not wish to accuse you of anything. I just wanted you to

understand my feelings toward your mistrust.”

Holli answered as if the event never occurred. “Your apology is accepted. Let us put that behind us. For now, we have other concerns. I still sense the goblins. Do you?”

Enin lifted his head, stared up over the wall to the west. He turned slightly to the south and continued until he faced the southeast corner of town. “Yes. They are circling the town, but they still have no intention of entering. They know that most of our people are preparing for war, not just the soldiers. They have spotted some of the battlements by the south gate. They find this all very interesting.”

Sy searched for answers. “What do you think they’re really up to?”

“It is like I said,” Enin revealed, “they are out here because the serp wants more information. I can see little about this serp. They seem very confused about him, like they can’t think straight.”

“That is not surprising,” Holli offered. “The serps have the ability to manipulate the thinking of most of these creatures. If they could think clearly around the serp, they would probably not follow it.”

“What do you think the serp wants?” Sy posed the obvious question to Holli.

“I imagine the serp is interested as to the reason for the increased activity in your town. They are opportunists. Perhaps, it thinks it can gain something from our trouble.”

“Can it?”

“I doubt it. Look at your walls. They are filled with archers ready to test their new found skill. Have you ever been more prepared for a raid?”

“No.”

“I’m sure the serp will also realize this. My guess is that it will wait to see what happens next.”

#

Sazar waited on a hilltop far to the west of Burbon. His scouts would return soon. Most of the puzzle was coming together. A few pieces were missing, but nothing which would make him question the inevitable. The war he wished for was at hand.

The only thing that truly bothered him at this moment was the departure of the delver. He went north, left quickly and alone. Why?

He would have to wait for this answer. The goblin scouting party made their return known. They struggled through the tall grass to make their report. They said nothing which he did not expect. He sent them away.

He stood not so alone, his shag waited close-by, hiding in the hill grass. He spoke, however, only to himself.

“The alliance is firm. More elves join the humans, train them. They will fight together against the dwarves. They expect an attack, expect it soon. They also expect it to be large. They are well prepared. Their defense seems clear.

“I wonder how much the dwarves of Dunop would pay for such information. They may already know much of this. If so, they would not reward me. I am certain they must know of the alliance between the elves and humans. They would be foolish if they didn't. As for the preparedness of Burbon, they can find out much by tunneling underneath. I doubt they would be willing to pay for anything I could tell them.

“I could offer them an alliance. If they fight alone against two races, they might accept joining with my goblins. We could offer ranged attacks with crossbows. That would certainly help against the planned defense. But the dwarves are so stubborn. They will believe themselves superior regardless of the planned defenses.

“And I still do not know the position of the algors. The dwarves may already have an ally. The elves and the delver came back from the Lacobian alone. It is quite possible the algors refused them. The question is did they join the dwarves instead. Now, I come back to the delver. Why did he leave? Is he against the war? If so, why did he go with the elves to the Lacobian? If not, why did he leave just before battle?”

Sazar flipped his tail back and forth with his thoughts. He agonized over details

now, trying to find the most lucrative means for taking advantage of the war soon to be fought.

“The humans will not trust me. That is certain. They also have the help of the elves, therefore they will not be desperate either. I can offer them little. A bargain maybe, a cessation of hostilities for a price. They may be willing to pay much for that. If they do not have to worry about us, they can turn their attention completely to the dwarves. Of course, that doesn’t mean I have to honor that bargain. If the humans are weakened in battle, we could easily use the tunnel to attack and take what is left.

“At the same time, the dwarves have much in the way of gold and light gems. I might be able to offer the services of my goblins as a diversion. That tactic always appeals to them.”

The thought of the light gems and the gold struck a chord with the Sazar. Yes, the dwarves had the most to offer, but did he have to wait for an offer? There was a chance he could simply take what the wanted. His thoughts spilled over the possibilities.

“The humans expect a large attack. If that is true the dwarves will tunnel directly from Dunop to Burbon. The path will be there for us. Win or lose, any dwarf attack will tire their forces. The moment will be right. That is what I must wait for.”

Chapter 14

The Colad Mountains - rough travel, difficult terrain, even for a delver; from a distance, they stood as a wall. At their base, they shamed even the most prideful with their majesty. Each monument of rock boasted a snow-capped peak. The steep slopes ranged from jagged rock paths to sheer cliff faces adorned with sprawling waterfalls.

Though this range of powerful mountains could not stop a delver, they could hinder one. They forced Ryson to slow his pace, coerced him to consider many of his paths. He struggled with more than one climb. He often second-guessed his choices, especially when he found himself facing a sheer vertical slope, or on an isolated ledge with little options right or left, and no paths forward. During the first dark, he slowed his pace to a near crawl. His night vision allowed him to see as well as in the day, but the ground became moist, the rock slippery. He would have sought better terrain. Then again, he wouldn't find the cliff behemoths in the valleys.

The delver felt only one true fear, not of falling but of taking too much time. His goals were not without deadlines. He wanted to save Burbon from the dwarves, he wanted to save Dunop from the shadow trees and the sand giants, and he wanted to stop the war before it intensified to a point of no end. Time for each of these remained limited. Each pause, each delay was like a pin prick in the back of his brain. Unfortunate but true, the mountains were not an adventure to him now, they were an obstacle.

He didn't seek the peaks at first. He rounded the leading mountains only halfway up their side. As he continued northward, he pressed further and further up each slope he encountered. He walked above the tree line, climbed with mountain goats, touched snow for the first time this season. A cold wind blasted him like an unwelcome visitor. He was thankful for his thick wool coat. The footing became rocky, treacherous. At these heights, the air was thin. He adapted quickly, the blessing of a delver, but the first few climbs were not without rests. Soon, however, he was racing to the very heights of each mountain without pause.

He took to the peaks with only one hope, to find signs of the cliff behemoths. Still, as a delver, he could not ignore the staggering view. At these heights, the

land opened up before him. Behind him, to the south, he could see all the way back to Dark Spruce Forest. To the west, he thought he could see signs of the ocean. A mist kept him from being sure. Taller, more striking mountains waited to the north. Ryson knew he would find cliff behemoths here. They would direct him to Dzeb.

He moved on instinct, listening to the wind, smelling the rock. His heightened delver senses would seek out the object of his pursuit. As he became more and more accustomed to the terrain, he moved with greater speed and certainty. His haste was rewarded.

Upon a lonely ledge, a single cliff behemoth eyed him with an apparent struggle between apathy and interest. It was not Dzeb, but it was certainly a cliff behemoth. His mammoth size was a simple testament to that. The rock-hard hide, the massive fingers, the simple rounded head, and most of all the innocence of expression; these traits endured unmistakably.

Ryson surged with joy upon sighting the behemoth, an exultation greater than simply meeting one of his objectives. The gentle giants were a blessing to this land. They were so simple in purpose, so pure in being. The word of Godson, that was all they lived for, that was what guided their every thought, their every action. The innocence which surrounded each behemoth shined beyond their simplicity. At the same time, no other creature in the land could boast of greater power. No army would stand a chance against a host of these giants. The land was theirs for the taking, yet no such desire existed within them. So much power, so much strength, yet all devoted to the simple word of Godson, devoted to peace. The sight of such a creature encouraged faith. Ryson's own purpose strengthened.

The delver moved up quickly to the behemoth, feeling no fear in approaching a creature with the strength to make a shag envious. Ryson danced over the rocks, leapt from one ledge to another as if he could fly. In an instant, he shared the same ledge as the giant.

The cliff behemoth did little in the way of moving. He remained on his perch, a large boulder half-embedded in the cliff face. He sat comfortably with his legs hugging the front of the boulder. His hands were folded together in his lap. He would have appeared oblivious to the delver had it not been for his eyes which remained glued upon his visitor. He made no other acknowledgment.

Ryson beamed. He took no exception to the giant's motionless response. He had already learned of the cliff behemoths' apparent aloofness. It was simply their way. It was not out of arrogance. Instead, such reactions generated from their religion. Nothing short of an angel of Godson could stir them from their calm acceptance of the land and what it offered. Ryson, however, did notice the giant's gaze. If nothing else, it was an honor simply to be recognized by the divine.

"Good day," Ryson stated with a broad smile.

"Good day to you, delver." The behemoth's voice was as gentle as his expression.

It was no surprise to Ryson that the behemoth knew of his race. He did nothing to hide it when he climbed to reach the giant. "Yes, I'm a delver. My name is Ryson Acumen."

The giant's eyes revealed only the slightest surprise. "That explains much. I sense Godson within you."

"Thank you.

"I am known as Cyan. How may I help you, Ryson Acumen?"

"I need to find Dzeb. It is very urgent."

Cyan did not respond immediately.

Ryson wondered if perhaps he did not know of the particular cliff behemoth. He offered a simple note of description. "Do you know who I speak of? He was with me on Sanctum Mountain. He helped save the land."

"Godson saved the land," Cyan corrected. "Dzeb was simply the tool he chose."

"Then you know of him?"

"I do."

"I need to find him. I need his help again." Ryson felt the need to explain, to give a reason as to why Cyan should reveal Dzeb's whereabouts. "I'm afraid there's

great trouble in the land again. I'm trying to stop a war.”

Cyan's eyes dropped from the delver. It appeared as if this small but powerful word had wounded him.

Ryson felt shame. He knew what the cliff behemoth was thinking, he could feel the regret. Here was a near perfect being, living simply for his peaceful beliefs. It was more than a shame that others could not live with such divinity, it was a tragedy. Again, he felt the need to explain, to reveal that some hoped to stop this evil.

“It's all a misunderstanding. There's just so much blind anger. Things are just kind of snowballing. A dwarf queen is angry about losing her son. She's blinded herself to the truth and wants revenge. She's already ordered attacks on many different people, the humans, the elves and the algors. It's almost hard to believe that not too long ago, we all stood together to save the land.”

Cyan placed his eyes back on the delver. He opened his mouth to correct Ryson, but the delver did it for him.

“I'm sorry, to help Godson save the land,” the delver allowed. “We were together, and I know Godson was with us. I saw the angels. Maybe that's a big reason why I'm here now. I just can't believe we went through all of that to simply throw it away now. I know most of this must sound pretty silly to you, but I have to do whatever is necessary to stop this.”

Cyan replied with simple bliss. “I do not try to judge Godson's will. If He deems it necessary to stop this war, rest assured He will. If not, you will be left to your own designs.”

Ryson did not know how to respond. He held to the belief that he had some control over what might happen. That was surely another reason why he was now upon this mountainside. “I have to try to do what I can.”

“If that is what you believe.” Cyan sounded less than certain and he showed very little curiosity to the delver's problems. Still, he gave the needed information. “Dzeb normally seeks the word upon His twelfth mountain.”

At first, Ryson felt relief. He could find Dzeb. Unfortunately, he did not know which one was the twelfth mountain of Godson. He revealed as much with a

tone of uncertainty. “I’m sorry, I don’t know which mountain that is.”

“Seek this peak,” Cyan advised. “Look first to the heart of Godson’s mountains, turn but one step to His ocean and count but two peaks away. That is His twelfth mountain.”

“Two peaks to the northwest,” Ryson declared. Happiness washed over him for being so close.

Cyan simply nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” Ryson offered his gratitude.

Cyan closed his eyes. He said nothing further. The behemoth’s focus, his very awareness settled upon his perfect memory of the word of Godson. He would meditate upon this event for many days, considering the implications of what had happened and what would come.

Ryson shrugged as he bid a simple farewell. He climbed with near ferocity to the peak. He followed Cyan’s instructions to the word. Instead of simply counting two peaks to the northwest, he looked first to the heart of the mountains before him. He turned only slightly toward the west, toward the ocean. Two obvious peaks stood directly in his path. The second became his final destination.

He plummeted down from his perch as if he were free-falling. He let the steep slopes do the work as he simply danced downward. His feet shuffled to keep balance. That was all that was needed of them. Gravity propelled him.

Upon reaching the base, his head swerved about and upwards to allow focus on his destination. The first mountain in his path was a mere obstacle. He rounded it with little effort toward climbing and with even less regard.

With the second peak now completely in sight, he stopped to make a quick appraisal. He would find Dzeb in the higher portion, but which side? He could not guess. He would have to search further as he climbed.

His legs pumping like pistons, his hands pulling him over ledges, Ryson ascended the bottom half of this mountain in a blur. Tall pines which covered the base served as much as ladders as they did as obstacles. Once above the tree line, he relied upon the jagged ledges of the mountain side. Loose rocks remained a

danger, but so perfect was his balance that even when a handhold gave way, he remained in control of his climb.

As he closed upon the peak, he slowed his pace. He began searching the rocks. He spied many cavities and large boulders, all of which could have hid the cliff behemoth from his sight, or even several of the gentle giants.

“I wonder how many are up here on this one,” he wondered aloud.

Again, he could not guess. He began to alter his path. Instead of taking a direct ascension, he began to cut a diagonal course over the mountainside. He peered into many a rock formation, but found nothing. Frustration loomed. He felt the pressure of time once more. He called for the cliff behemoth.

“Dzeb! Dzeb, it’s Ryson, Ryson Acumen!”

No reply.

“Can you hear me?! I need to talk to you.”

He heard only the echo of his voice. He grunted with dissatisfaction. He looked to the peak. He could reach it quickly. Upon that ridge, he would be able to look down and perhaps spot his objective from a new perspective. As he reached the precipice, his search came to an end.

The cliff behemoth known as Dzeb stood stoically with eyes searching the skies. He made no acknowledgment to the delver. It was a question as to whether or not he even knew Ryson was there. His back remained to the delver and he made no attempt to turn. If not for the green tunic, Dzeb appeared just like another rock, a statue carved in the image of a simple giant.

Ryson’s excitement jumped. He ran to the behemoth, rounded his side to face him. His smile grew as he felt Dzeb’s warm eyes wash over him.

“It is good to see you, Ryson Acumen,” Dzeb welcomed.

“It’s good to see you,” Ryson admitted. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“And so you have found me.”

Ryson did not want to appear assertive, and he voiced his reservations. “I hope I’m not disturbing you. It’s just that I have an important need.”

“You are always welcome here,” Dzeb replied with such innocence. “Godson still smiles upon you. His blessing warms the very space you fill.”

The statement humbled the delver. It was difficult for him to respond. The cliff behemoth was the most spiritual creature he had ever met. He could never consider himself an equal in such regard. Still, his need was great. If a perceived blessing would help him, he would not ignore the opportunity. “I can’t say if this is the will of Godson or not, but I know it is important. Will you listen to a request?”

“Only the foolish would disregard the thoughts of one who stands in such light. What is your request?”

Ryson began with Yave’s actions as he understood them. He described the attacks of the dwarves on the algors, the elves and the humans. He noted the sadness in Dzeb’s expression as he detailed the losses. The sadness only grew when he spoke of the elves intentions to unleash the shadow trees. The anguish appeared to turn to abhorrence as Ryson announced the algors plan to use sand giants to counter-attack. He hoped such signs of emotion were but a precursor to Dzeb’s acceptance to help.

“I just can’t let this go on like this,” Ryson continued. “I can’t imagine how many will die if this madness isn’t stopped. And it is madness. You were there. You know what’s true. The algors weren’t responsible for Tun’s death. Yave is allowing her grief to spread. That’s wrong. When I look back at what we did at Sanctum, I’m proud. We stood together. Yave is killing that. This war is destroying what we accomplished. I think its destroying what was meant to be.”

For the second time that day, a cliff behemoth corrected Ryson on his interpretations. “No one of this land can destroy what Godson dictates. The land was saved, the sphere was destroyed. That was Godson’s wish. This war you describe can not change that.”

Ryson was slightly taken aback. “But it can. I mean, it can’t bring the sphere back. I’m not worried about that, but it can destroy the land, or at least part of it. This war could get out of hand. An entire race can perish. That’s not what happened at Sanctum. We were all brought together to save the land. I’m sure

you would say that Godson brought us together. I won't argue that. But now, now it's all falling apart and the very events at Sanctum are at the core of this. I can't believe that's what Godson wants."

"We are not always blessed with knowledge of Godson's intentions. It is not ours to question."

"I'm sure it's not, but we still have to act within our own conscience. We have a chance to stop this war. That's why I'm here. I want you to come back with me. I want you to go with me to the dwarf city of Dunop. Yave can dispute me, but she can't dispute the word of a cliff behemoth."

Dzeb looked away. There was sorrow on his face.

The cliff behemoth's hesitancy hit Ryson like a falling anvil. He never expected even a chance of Dzeb declining. He expected immediate acceptance. It was not there.

"I don't really think it's dangerous," Ryson spouted. He did not really think this was the cause for Dzeb's initial reaction, but he was at a loss for any other explanation. "I doubt the dwarves would even threaten you with any harm."

"I do not fear the dwarves," Dzeb replied simply, but his voice now carried the same reluctance which remained in his vacant stare.

Ryson scrambled for an understanding of Dzeb's position. "Does that mean you'll help me?"

"I don't know what kind of assistance I can offer you."

Ryson swept his hand over the top of his head and down to the back of his neck. He kneaded his own tightening muscles as his anxiety began to balloon. "All I want you to do is tell the truth. Everyone knows that cliff behemoths can do nothing else. Tell the dwarves that the algors were not responsible for Tun's death. Tell Yave that what she's doing is wrong. That should be enough to stop this thing."

"What if it wasn't meant to be stopped?"

Ryson's eyes nearly bulged with bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

Dzeb spoke with simple reason, with no inflection of emotion. “You are asking me to interfere in the workings of the land. I am not so sure that interference is justified.”

“How can it not be?” Ryson blurted.

“As I said before, it is not ours to question the will of Godson.”

“So you’re saying Godson may want this war? You can’t really mean that?”

“No, I don’t. Godson does not want war, but He does sometimes leave the workings of the land to itself.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. Is it that you don’t want to help me?”

“I would like to help you. As I said, it would be foolish to disregard the thoughts of someone like yourself, but what you ask has the potential for great impact. You wish me to get involved with the decisions and the actions of others. If you would have your way, you would have me dictate to others what they can and what they can not do. That is not my place. It is only Godson that may make such a decision.”

Confusion continued to haunt the delver. He was not prepared to debate Dzeb. He thought his only difficulty would be in finding the cliff behemoth. His astonishment spewed forth in his words. “Do I understand you right? You don’t want to help because you think it would be like interfering in other people’s business? Well, so what if it is? We’re talking about a lot of innocent lives. We’re talking about stopping a war. You can’t possibly be against that.”

“I am against clashing with the will of Godson,” Dzeb answered simply.

Ryson surged with confusion. “You know, you’re talking in circles. You said Godson wouldn’t want a war. That’s what I’m trying to stop. If you follow the word of Godson, you should want to do the same thing.”

Dzeb shook his head. “It is not my right to question Godson’s will. If he wishes it to be stopped, he will stop it.”

“Maybe Godson wants us to stop it. Maybe that’s why I’m here, talking to you now. Isn’t that possible?”

“If He did want this war stopped, I would not be able to refuse Him.”

“Maybe you are right now.”

“I could not.”

Ryson heaved a heavy breath of frustration.

“Look, we’re not getting anywhere and what’s worse, I don’t understand why. As far as I can tell, you admit that Godson wouldn’t want a war. At the same time, you say you won’t do anything to stop it. Explain that to me.”

Most of the time, faith can not be explained. Questioning a cliff behemoth about Godson was like questioning why water was wet. At this moment, however, Dzeb made the attempt to clarify his meaning. Perhaps, he was simply justifying his position for his own conscience, or perhaps he simply felt the need to explain himself to the delver.

“Godson does not impose his will on everything, on every creature that walks this land. It is ours to decide whether to accept his guidance or not. I have accepted the word of Godson. I do not question His intentions. I also do not force my opinions on others. It would be prideful to make such an attempt. I am simply a follower of the word. It is not my place to force my interpretations on others. If Yave refuses the peaceful word of Godson, her actions will speak of such. It is her right. It is also her responsibility. I can not take that away from her. She must choose her path. It is how she will be judged.”

The words stung at the delver. He could not accept this explanation. He wasn’t trying to stop Yave from choosing a path of religion, he was trying to stop a war. Why couldn’t Dzeb see that? “So if Yave chooses a direction which would endanger the lives of hundreds, or even hundreds of thousands, we’re all supposed to just accept that?”

“Yave must be free to choose her own way,” Dzeb repeated. “I must not intervene, I must not try to force my beliefs upon her. That is not the way of Godson.”

Ryson gave up on his first course of logic. He turned, instead, upon the peaceful beliefs of the cliff behemoths.

“Wait, wait. Just hold on. You’re talking about how we have the freedom to make our own decisions. Well, that’s what you’re facing right now. I need your help, but you seem to be saying that it’s alright if we just do nothing. Let’s forget about Yave for a moment. Let’s just talk about you. I’m asking you to stop a war. You have the power to do that. Are you refusing?”

“I am not refusing to stop a war. I am allowing others to determine their own way.”

Ryson exploded. “Wrong! You are refusing. You’re making a conscious decision not to help. That’s not something I would be proud of. It’s something I would be ashamed of, especially in the eyes of your faith! I’m not going to stand here and let you justify your inaction by placing the blame on others. You have a responsibility to do what is right.”

Dzeb showed no anger. “And what is right? Is it right for me to decide the destiny of the entire land? Should I become dictator and tyrant?”

It was not a boast. The cliff behemoths in their power could control the land. Anyone of them could become grand emperor and dictate the will of all, but the delver threw such thoughts aside.

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. I’m not asking you to take over, just to assist me in bringing an end to this madness.”

“I know you want me to interfere.”

“You interfered at Sanctum.”

“I was instructed by angels of Godson. I was the tool of Godson’s will. I made no decision without guidance.”

“So that’s how you’re going to justify this?” Ryson demanded harshly. “Godson didn’t tell you to stop the war, so your inaction, your apathy, is acceptable? Do you have any idea of how many innocents will die if this war isn’t stopped?”

“It may be their time. If it is, nothing I could do would keep them in this existence.”

Ryson shook his head. “None of what you’re saying is reasonable.”

“It does not have to be reasonable. It must only reflect my beliefs.”

“And you believe you should stand here and do nothing?”

“I believe I should not interfere.”

Ryson glared. His jaw grew tight with frustration. What could he say? Dzeb was arguing based on religion, not on logic. Whatever Ryson stated, the cliff behemoth could use abstract points to debate the issue. With nothing else to grasp, he turned those same abstract concepts to his own argument.

“You said you would need Godson’s guidance before you acted. Last time you helped us, Godson sent angels to direct you. What if this time He’s sending me?”

Dzeb paused. He had no quick reply. Finally he responded with a question of his own. “Why would He send you?”

“He wanted to. It’s part of my destiny. You said I was blessed.”

“I did not mean you were a messenger.”

“But I could be.”

Again, Dzeb hesitated. “I do not know.”

“But you have to make a decision. If I am that messenger, you will have turned against Godson.”

For the first time, emotion hung in Dzeb’s reply. “I do not turn against Godson. I have accepted Godson. I live by the word,” he responded as if offended.

Ryson pressed the point. “Maybe, but if I am a messenger you will have refused none the less.”

“You are speaking in riddles, trying to use my faith against me.”

“And you’re trying to use your faith as an excuse to keep from doing what’s right. You are responsible for your decision. Will you help?”

Dzeb closed his eyes, stood as if searching his own soul. Finally, he answered with marked sorrow. “I can not. When I helped you with Sanctum, I knew in my

heart I was carrying out the will of Godson. There was no doubt. Today, now, there is doubt. If you were truly a messenger of Godson, those doubts would not exist.”

Ryson swelled with emotion - sorrow, disappointment, anger, fear, and confusion. He did not know what to do now. He never believed Dzeb would refuse him. He had nothing left, no where else to turn. His fingers massaged his forehead.

“So you won’ come with me?”

“No.”

“Is there anything I can say that would change this.”

Dzeb looked away. “No.”

“I can’t believe this,” he muttered, his voice filled with the exhaustion of his emotions.

A pain erupted in Dzeb. His eyes glistened. “I am truly sorry you feel this way. I wish I could make you understand.”

“I don’t think you can,” Ryson admitted. “I’ll try, and I’ll try not to blame you, but I think what you’re doing is wrong.”

He said nothing further. The delver simply turned to the south. He could do nothing now but leave the mountains.

Chapter 15

Ruins - destroyed buildings, crumbled roads, crushed carts, and ransacked stores - this was the sight which welcomed Ryson upon his arrival at Connel. Smoke still plumed from burnt out homes. Rubble waited in every alley. Bridges spilled over the water in tattered shreds. For every building that stood unscathed, another three lay in devastation. What was left of this city was nothing like the Connel that Ryson remembered.

It had been over a season since he walked these streets. Once he made his commitment to Linda and to Burbon, Connel was no longer his home. Yet, he could not avoid the pain of seeing this destruction. Though he had left it, Connel still represented a part of his life. To see it in ruins was to see his memories crushed.

Ryson walked slowly through the debris. While disbelief weighed upon his shoulders, little else served as an obstacle. Most of the main streets were cleared. The shredded remains of broken stands and merchant carts were simply pushed aside, mixed with the waste of crumbled walls and store-fronts. This meager attempt of cleanup did little to diminish the picture of utter chaos. He walked like a mindless zombie, captivated and discouraged by this grievous spectacle.

He was not alone. Shock gripped the stragglers on the streets. He assumed them to be residents burned out of their homes. They walked in the same daze, staring vacantly, moving with no destination, many just walked past him without notice as if he was just another lamp post.

Soldiers also stalked the streets. They, however, moved in large groups, much larger than normal patrols. In walking a mere five blocks, he encountered three separate groups of heavily armed men. Some expressed fear, some anger, but they obviously did not see Ryson as a threat. They ignored the delver, treated him as just another homeless castaway.

One word burned in his mind, one word held the answer to all of this.

“Dwarves,” Ryson cursed.

Just as Burbon had been attacked so too was Connel, but obviously with a

greater force. Ryson could only wonder as to how many dwarves comprised the assault. Obviously many. This much destruction could not have been carried out by a mere few dozen. Ryson was well aware of Connel's armed strength. The city housed thousands of soldiers, and many delver scouts as well. For the dwarves to wreak this much havoc, they must have sent at least a thousand warriors. The fighting, the slaughter, it must have been beyond brutal.

Fighting these horrific images, Ryson moved onward. He sought the Church of Godson and the reader Matthew. This was the reason he came to Connel. He found himself walking faster and faster as panic crept over him. He worried over the well-being of the reader. He imagined the church destroyed, the reader mortally wounded in the rubble. He tried to cast away these apprehensions. He failed. Over and over, his imagination played out the worst possible scenarios.

Worse, he considered why Connel was attacked. Burbon and Connel, the elf camp, even the algors; these were the targets of the dwarf attacks. Why? The answer haunted him. He was considered an enemy to the dwarves, just like the elves and the algors. Yave would seek him out. She would order the attack of his home just as she ordered the attack of Lief and Holli's camp. Burbon was his new home, Connel was his old. He had brought this upon these people. He had brought this devastation. The thought crashed upon him. Everything that happened here was because of him.

Though he found the strength to momentarily press aside his guilt, he could not cast away his fear for the safety of the reader. If Yave ordered attacks upon those remotely connected to Tun's death, then certainly Matthew was a potential target. It was at Connel's Church of Godson where those who would assault Sanctum first met. Matthew, though he did not enter Sanctum, played a major role. He might indeed have been a target himself. Ryson was certain that if Yave had her way, the church would have been razed.

The thought brought even more despair. His fear pressed him faster, like a whip at his backside. He battled with it, fought for control. He did not race with the speed of a delver. Though Connel was now used to such a sight, he did not want to send the soldiers into a panic. He did, however, match the pace of a trotting human.

Passing near mindless wanderers and concerned soldiers, he ignored more than one question as to his hurry. The destruction he passed faded from his focus, his

purpose fixed upon one sole destination.

When it finally came into view, he welcomed his own relief. From a distance, his eyes narrowed on the church's outline. There was no sign of damage. He slowed slightly, but his desire to see his friend moved him beyond a slow walk. While maintaining the grace of a softly floating cloud, he dashed up the tall stone steps of the church and bounded through the front door. The momentary spell of relief disintegrated in an instant.

This was not the place Ryson remembered. It was not the place where elf, dwarf, human and delver met to deal with Sanctum. It was not a Church of Godson. It was no longer a place of worship at all, but a hospital.

Instead of waiting seats for faithful followers, beds lined the expanse of the church's open interior. The benches were removed. They rested haphazardly atop each other off to the side. Instead of a simple altar, the front of the room stood covered with blood soaked sheets. There was no joy of faith in this room, there was only suffering and slow agony.

Attendants moved about with empty hands and sorrowful expressions. The patients no longer called for them. The injured and dying knew there was nothing for them. Meager bandages barely covered their wounds and little else covered their frail bodies. The lucky ones were sheltered in old, dusty wool blankets. Others made do with old clothes for covers.

The sight of this horror was burden enough for the delver, but the sound was haunting. The silence overwhelmed him. A few soft moans or sick coughs broke it for a heart beat, but it would return like some unrelenting fog. It held more than despair, it held shock.

Ryson moved with heaviness, as if the silence was a weight upon his shoulders. He sought an attendant, someone he believed he recognized. He remembered her name as Rachael, a follower of this church. He hoped she would direct him to Matthew.

His stealth startled her. He apologized as he greeted her.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you. I just didn't want to disturb anyone.”

She looked vacantly at him at first. She had been approached by so many

relatives looking for lost family members. She was never able to give them the news they wanted. It had reached a point where she now recoiled from visitors. Then, a spark of recognition brought a beam of hope to her face.

“Ryson?”

The delver returned the smile and he nodded.

“Thank Godson.” She threw her arms around him.

Though surprised at the reaction, Ryson did not retreat from her. He returned her hug. “Are you alright?”

Rachael nearly laughed at the inane question. She released him and moved to an arm’s length. “Is anyone alright? I guess I’m better than most. I’m just so glad to see you.”

Ryson spoke a single word in the form of a question, simply to confirm his obvious suspicions. “Dwarves?”

Rachael’s expression went gray. She spoke as if recalling a nightmare. “Thousands of them. It was terrible.” Her voice cracked and she had to stop.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to say anymore. I think I understand.”

Rachael forced herself to speak further. “Then explain it to me. I’m so confused. I remember the dwarves coming here before. They were here to help. Matthew told us all of what happened at Sanctum. The dwarves were on our side. One of them even died to save the land. Why are they doing this now?”

Ryson spoke as soothingly as possible. “Because they lost sight of what happened. It was the queen’s son who died. She wants to blame us all for his death. It doesn’t make any sense, but that’s what’s happening.”

Rachael simply shook her head.

Ryson did not want to dismiss her questions, but again time made its demands. He moved to the point of his appearance. “I’m here trying to stop all of this. I’m here to see Matthew. I need his help.”

Rachael's expression of confusion was now clouded with sorrow. She obviously did not want to speak words of explanation. She dropped her gaze to the floor. She floundered with uncertainty. She finally spoke, but it was more of a disheartened whisper.

"I'll bring you to him. Follow me."

Ryson followed, his delver curiosity matching his apprehension. He moved behind Rachael, walked in her footsteps to the reader's back room. Another sight of tragedy greeted him.

Just as the benches had been cleared away, so too was the reader's desk. A single bed rested in the middle of the room. Matthew slept there, pasty white and frail. He appeared older than the delver remembered. While sleeping, Matthew's chest rose and fell as if breathing was a constant struggle. His arms rested over his covers, the gray color of his hands seemed to blend into the dingy tint of the sheets. Other than the fading yellowness of some bruises, there were no other signs of injury around his upper body. Ryson's gaze followed the outline of the reader's form beneath the sheet which covered him. One of his legs did not show through. Ryson groaned.

The noise woke the reader. His vision, clouded at first, slowly found the delver. His eyes cleared as again the sight of Ryson brought joy to his beholder. Matthew grinned, laughed with relief until he coughed. The weakness in his body could not overcome his delight.

"I can't believe it's you," the reader marveled.

"It is." Ryson attempted to maintain high spirits. "I guess I've been away too long. How are you holding up?"

Matthew laughed again. "You have a delver's eye. You tell me. Are you going to pretend you didn't notice my leg, or the absence of one?"

"I noticed. I still want to know how you're feeling now."

"It's not my time, if that's what you're worried about."

Rachael could not hold back a sob.

Matthew looked at her with comforting eyes. "It's alright, Rachael. You have to stop worrying about me. I'm going to be fine." The reader redirected his attention back to the delver. "For some reason they don't believe that. I guess they think I'm just fooling myself. I tell you, though, I really believe it. Godson doesn't want to take me now. There's more for me to do. Don't know what it is, but I'm still in the grand plan. Do you believe that?"

Ryson considered all that was happening, all that had happened. "I've learned to believe about anything now. I know how strong your faith is. If you believe it, it's probably true."

Matthew heaved a heavy sigh. "It's good to finally hear that." He turned back to Rachael. "Did you hear him? He believes me, and he's been touched by Godson."

Ryson felt a twinge of embarrassment. He felt uncomfortable with such statements. It distanced him from others. He did not want that, did not want to be considered a prophet or a holy relic.

Matthew ignored the delver's momentary blush. His attention remained fixed upon Rachael. "Why can't the rest of you believe me? I tell you I'm not going to die, yet you keep coming in here thinking it's the last time you'll see me."

Rachael rattled off her fears. "The doctor. He said your time was short. You lost too much blood and your wound was not healing."

"Phhh! Doctors. They're all nothing more than witch doctors and snake oil salesmen. When I get out of this bed and start hobbling around on a cane, they'll look at me like a medical mystery. The fools might even call it some kind of miracle. They wouldn't know a miracle if it spat in their faces. I'll get better and it won't be any damn miracle." Matthew suddenly blushed himself. "Sorry, I didn't mean to curse, but it's true. It's just not my time."

Ryson flashed a smile toward Rachael. "I think you better believe him. He may try to get up sooner than he's ready just to prove he's right."

Rachael looked to Ryson with expectant hope. She spoke to him as if he was the holy symbol he did not wish to be. "Do you really think he will get well?"

Ryson weighed his answer. He did not want to give this woman false hope, but

did not want to crush her spirits, or the reader's. He searched for a noncommittal answer. As he did, he looked upon the reader. He saw a spark of life. In that instant, he began to believe himself that it was just not Matthew's time. Despite the reader's pale cheeks, the grey pallor which covered his exposed arms, Ryson sensed an urgency to live.

"Yes. I don't think he's going to die, not yet anyway. There's something about him...I don't know why, but he's not going anywhere." His words hung in the room like the notes of a triumphant choir. Matthew reveled in the glory of the statement. Tears rolled down Rachael's face.

Ryson's own smile grew broader. "I hope you can learn to get around with just a cane."

"I'll get along fine."

"I'm sure you will."

Rachael bubbled over with enthusiasm. After many long days of trying to console the inconsolable, she finally grasped a piece of hope for herself. She wished to share her joy. "If you don't mind, I'd like to leave you two alone. I want to tell some of the others."

She didn't wait for an answer. She nearly ran from the room.

Matthew shook his head. "I don't know why they're so concerned about me. Even if it was my time, they shouldn't consider it such a loss. I'm not so special."

"Evidently you are," Ryson quipped.

"Well, I shouldn't be."

"Hey, you said it yourself. You still have a destiny here - something important, something about a grand plan. Isn't that how you put it?"

Matthew fell short of complete agreement. "That doesn't mean I'm more important than any other follower of Godson. If something happens to me, the task will fall upon someone else."

Ryson rubbed his hands together. “I don’t think you believe that. Otherwise you would have accepted what the doctor said about you. You probably would have given up and died by now.”

Matthew simply shrugged.

Ryson moved on. “Why don’t you tell me how this happened, how were you hurt?”

Matthew strained to repeat the tale of destruction. The memories obviously pained him. He spoke with grunts of dread as he recounted the scene. “Waves of dwarves attacked at twilight, appearing right out of the ground, crashing out of buildings and onto the streets. Thousands of them, heavily armored, they lashed out at everything in their path. They growled like angry lions and swarmed through the streets like wasps ousted from their nest, but there was also method to their seemingly deranged assault.

“It seemed as if each cluster had its own purpose, some more deadly than others. Formations of dwarves would cross in the streets, ignoring each other but always bent on their independent objectives. To and fro, tightly woven groups of them rambled through the open streets as even more emerged from hidden underground tunnels. With such division, tracking them became impossible. It was just as impossible to know which set of dwarves would openly attack, which would sack the stores of food and supplies, or which would simply set upon destroying the structures of the city.

“The constant barrage, the continuing movement, it all added to the confusion. They kept the soldiers in disarray, the people in panic. The only saving grace rested in the fact that the dwarves were slow and did not use ranged weapons. As long as their intended targets remained out of reach, the dwarves could not cause injury.

“Unfortunately, the soldiers were expected to battle these dwarves, to stop them. Every confrontation was one-sided. The casualties to the army were too numerous to count, the devastation too horrible to recall. Hundreds dead in just the first moments.”

Matthew then turned to his own downfall. “I heard the screams from the streets. Godson, you would have had to have been deaf not to. I herded many of the townspeople into the church. It felt safe and the dwarves seemed to ignore us.

They appeared more interested in the merchant stores. I guess a Church of Godson meant little to them, or perhaps they worried about some kind of sacrilege. I don't know what kind of religion they practice. Whatever the case, they left us alone. From the top of the steps, I could barely see a battle take place down the road. It seemed to be growing darker with each scream I heard, and the screaming didn't stop. But for some reason, I could make out the shapes of this battle. I counted only about ten dwarves. They went through thirty humans soldiers as if they were facing paper cut outs. They didn't kill them all. I heard a few cries for help. I couldn't ignore it. I tried to move quietly. Godson, I was scared. I could hear two or three of our men calling for help, whispering really, but I couldn't move fast. I was so worried the dwarves would hear me. Truthfully, I wanted to turn back. I kept trying to force the fear out of my head. It didn't work very well. I just about moved like a snail to get to them. The whole time all I could think of was what might happen to me. I did everything I could to keep from being seen. I even tried to stay in the shadows."

"They can see very well in the dark," Ryson interrupted.

Matthew snickered within a cough. "I should have guessed that. I know they live in caves. But I really wasn't thinking. I was too scared. I finally reached what was left of the soldiers. The first few I checked were dead. I didn't hear any more cries. I began to think I was too late. I heard one gasp and I moved to a soldier near the edge of the road. He was hurt bad, but not fatally. If I could get him back to the church, I could save him. I never got the chance."

Matthew paused. He steadied himself as he recalled his last memories of that night. "When I started to lift the soldier, I caught movement ahead of me. A dwarf had snuck up to my position. A female warrior. She didn't look happy. I guess I wasn't a threat as a reader of this church, but I became one when I tried to help the soldier. She pierced the man I was trying to help in the middle of his chest with her broadsword. She then took a slash at my hip. You know, I didn't feel any pain, but I saw my leg topple out from under me. It really was a strange sight. I know I must have lost my balance almost immediately, but I seemed to be hanging in the air forever. The next thing I remember I was here. I've been told a few of the church followers saw me leave to help the soldiers. They followed behind and brought me back, put a tourniquet on what was left of my leg. I have no idea who it was. The only thing I can really see clearly is the face of that soldier when the dwarf woman finished him off. He felt it. I know it."

The reader coughed. He endeavored to press these blood soaked images from his mind, but they would never release him. This particular nightmare would never fade completely from his consciousness. It would become the sole event which would always remind him of the brutality which was possible in this world. Whether he lived only one more day or one hundred more cycles of the season, he would never forget the carnage of this single battle.

The narration haunted Ryson as well. He pictured what might have happened had the dwarves focused their strength on Burbon instead of Connel. What if they attacked there with thousands instead of just a few? What if they are planning to do so tonight? The question caused an ache, and yet again, he felt the pressure of time. Each moment which passed, Burbon remained vulnerable, Linda remained in danger. He had to move quickly, but unfortunately, he had no further moves to make. He came to the church hoping for advice from the reader, perhaps the reader might accompany him to Lief's camp in Dark Spruce. He hoped if he could reassemble those that stood at Sanctum, it might carry more weight in convincing Petiole to not use the seeds of the shadow trees. He knew it would be asking the reader to take a great risk, but now, with the reader's injury, such a request moved beyond difficult and into the realm of impossible.

Matthew seemed oblivious to Ryson's contemplations. He continued his narrative with a dull sorrow as he described the aftermath of the attack.

"Most people are homeless. At least two thirds of the structures sustained damage. I haven't seen for myself, but some of the other followers have scouted around town. They've been trying to set up temporary shelters. They're trying to rebuild as quick as possible. Not a good time for that. It's not like it's the beginning of the growing season. Dormancy will be here in a matter of days. I can feel the chill of the wind even in here.

"It's a good thing we have a new mayor, an honest one. She's getting the people together, but she's facing many problems. The army has to rebuild, and people that might be helping in the construction are training for war. We have no idea if the dwarves will come back.

"That in itself has created another problem. A good many people are leaving now. They're just picking up and heading east, out into the plains. Rumor is spreading that the dwarves don't like the ground out there. It's too soft. They say the dwarves live mainly in the hills and the mountains. They think they'll be safe

in the flatlands.

“I don’t know whether to believe that or not. I just know that most everyone’s beyond just being scared. It’s fear and uncertainty mixed together. We didn’t know why the dwarves attacked. Even now that you’ve explained it to me, I have a hard time understanding, and we don’t know if they’ll be back. I can have word sent to the mayor as to what you have told me. She’ll try to explain it to the people, but do you think they’ll accept it? Two seasons ago most everyone around here didn’t even believe in dwarves. This is insanity to them. People dead, the city destroyed, all by creatures of a dream.

“I guess we should be somewhat thankful. Most of the farms were completely untouched. The stocks of grain in the silos remain. Those of us that stay, we won’t starve, but I don’t know if we will survive the fear.”

Matthew coughed again. Once in control of his breathing, he realized he had been doing all the talking. He took a long look at Ryson and considered his appearance. He saw the conflict, saw the doubt within the delver. It raised many questions. “You didn’t think you’d find us this way, did you? You didn’t come here to help us with the dwarves; you came here for something else.”

“In truth, I came for your help,” Ryson admitted candidly

Matthew’s intuitiveness was rather remarkable, especially considering his situation. “Was Burbon attacked as well?!”

“Yes, but not like this. They only sent a few. Our soldiers managed to fight them off. We were very lucky.”

“Then why did you come here?”

Ryson quickly explained his intentions. When he spoke of Dzeb’s refusal, Matthew displayed disbelief.

“He wouldn’t offer his help?”

“He said it wasn’t his place.”

“So he would let everyone suffer?” Matthew seemed almost incredulous.

“I don’t think that’s how he sees it. I guess he thinks we’re creating our own suffering and it’s up to us to stop it. Either that or he wants more of a sign from Godson. Maybe you understand it better.”

“I don’t understand it at all. It’s inexcusable.” Matthew was rather resolute in his judgment. His face soured at the thought of the cliff behemoth refusing to help.

Ryson offered solace so as to calm the wounded reader. “Don’t be too hard on him. I was at first. I was mad at him. That’s hard. Just looking in their faces, all you can see is peaceful content. It still bothered me he wouldn’t help, but I started to think about it as I was coming here. It may be a blessing that they can remain so detached from such things. I mean, what would happen if the cliff behemoths started to think it was their right to interfere in every single matter? I don’t know how many of them live up in those mountains, but I’m sure there’s enough to basically take over. If they wanted to, I’m sure they could dictate everything we do.”

“We’re not talking about that,” Matthew objected. “We’re talking about Dzeb’s unwillingness to stop this war.”

“It may be the same thing,” Ryson countered. “I know it sounds strange. I’m arguing against my own point, but I’m also a delver. I have to examine things, learn from what I see and hear. Dzeb doesn’t want to help me, and at first that really angered me. It still does. I think he should step forward. He was at Sanctum. He knows that what happened was no one’s fault. He should say so, but that’s only my opinion. He has a reason for not acting. Whether I accept it or not, I have to admit that the reason holds at least some merit.”

“You’re defending him?”

“I don’t think so. I’m just taking a hard look at what might happen if they interfered all the time.”

“Interference is not the equivalent of correcting a grievous error,” Matthew stated firmly.

Ryson shrugged. “I know, but that’s his decision.”

“So you came here to see if I would go with you to speak with this Petiole.” Matthew paused to contemplate the idea. “I would like to go, but I would have

liked some time to heal a bit more.”

“I appreciate that, but I can’t have you go with me now. It would probably kill you, and you’d slow me down. I guess it doesn’t really matter anymore. I can’t think of anything else to do. The dwarves won’t listen to me. They’ll continue to attack. The algors will send their sand giants and the elves will drop the seeds. I guess it’ll all be over soon enough. No way to stop any of it now. It still bothers me, though, even after seeing all this destruction. The entire city of Dunop shouldn’t be destroyed just because one woman went mad with grief. I only hope the delay I caused didn’t lead to more deaths in Burbon. That would be hard to live with.”

“If that is the case, you can’t blame yourself. You did what you thought you had to do.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Ryson responded sadly. “Anyway, if you’re worrying about the dwarves, my guess is they won’t be back here in force. At least not right away, and probably not at all. Both Lief and Holli agree. They think the dwarves are going to set their sights on Burbon. Besides that, the algors will be sending the sand giants, and I probably won’t be able to stop Petiole from dropping the seeds. Dunop and the dwarves will most likely be destroyed in a few days. You can tell your mayor that.”

The reader nodded, almost with a thankful nod to the heavens. “I will. It will probably help her a good deal. It’s already easing my mind.”

Ryson placed a hand on the reader’s shoulder. “I’m glad I could be of some help. If you need anything from me, just send word to Burbon. I’ll do whatever I can to get it to you. I’ll be back when this is over to see how you’re doing.”

Matthew nodded. “Thank you. I look forward to seeing you.”

He watched the delver turn to leave. As he did, he saw the sheath of the sword at Ryson’s side. An image ignited. He thought of the sword and its power as he remembered it. He blurted out a question. “Is that still the magic sword? The Sword of Decree?”

Ryson stopped and eyed the reader with a perplexed expression. “Yes, it is.”

“The same sword that Dzeb told you to hand to Tun in this church basement?”

“Yes.”

“Tun didn’t believe the sphere should be destroyed,” Matthew noted out loud. “I remember that clearly. He was against the release of the magic. He wanted to encase the sphere, bury it again. He wouldn’t listen to reason. You let him hold the sword and his opinion changed. He saw the truth behind the sphere, he saw what he needed to do.”

Ryson understood in an instant. “You think it would work on Yave?”

“If it has been blessed with such a power, I can not see why not.”

“I didn’t even think of that.” Ryson rubbed his chin in careful consideration. “I would have to get her to hold it, and I have no idea if it would do anything. It doesn’t work on command or anything like that.”

Matthew tried to sit up. He pulled himself forward slowly as he found strength in his own faith. He considered the events of the past two seasons. He thought of the prophecies of Godson and how the future and their fate now seemed to be in their own hands. He remembered the scene on Sanctum Mountain where the delver found the power to destroy Ingar. He believed that that was a blessing of Godson. He spoke of the present with the same conviction. “If you were meant to stop this war, it will work. You have to have faith in that. You intended to enter Dunop with Dzeb. You must still go. I don’t envy you. I don’t even know what your chances might be. I guess you have to ask yourself if you really believe it’s your responsibility to stop this.”

Ryson waved aside any concern over his own safety and focused on an immediate question. “But how do I get to Yave to hold the sword?”

“How did you intend to enter the city without them killing you on sight even if you were with Dzeb?”

“I figured I’d be worth more as a prisoner, they’d want to question me.”

“If they question you, you can challenge them to hold the sword. Again, I go back to the basic question. Do you believe you still must try to stop this?”

Ryson did not pause in his reply. “I saw those shadow trees, saw them up close,” he said holding back a shiver. “I saw what they could do at Sanctum’s bottom. I

heard about how they destroyed a dwarf city the first time they were used. If there's something I can do which might actually stop this, then yes, I have to give it a try."

"Then you have your answer. It seems your destiny with Godson's will is not quite over."

Ryson considered what he went through at Sanctum Mountain. He now thought of facing an army of dwarves and their vengeful queen. His shoulders drooped with the burden. "Why does it have to come to this? I don't want to be a hero. I don't want to be blessed or anything like that."

Matthew simply raised an eyebrow. "I think that's what they might mean when they say a blessing may also be a curse."

Chapter 16

Ryson took little time in leaving Connel and racing directly to the site of the elf camp in Dark Spruce. He bypassed Burbon completely, even as the thought of his home gnawed at him. He wanted to know what was happening there, wanted to know if the dwarves had attacked again. He realized quickly, however, that such knowledge would not help him. He needed to get to Dunop. That was now the simple crux of his plan. Attempting to learn the fate of his new home was now nothing more than a distraction.

Like lightning cutting across a wide open sky, he bolted across the farmlands that divided Connel from Dark Spruce. He raced through the thick forest and towards the heart of the elf camp. He slowed only for an instant, to be recognized by the perimeter of elf guards. He did not wait for their invitation, though; he simply called out his name and exploded back to full speed.

The guards may not have appreciated the delver's boldness, but they did nothing to hinder him. They only stopped to wonder if they even could. The delver was a blur of motion. Could they mark him with an arrow, could they even target him? It was unlikely. Beyond this momentary diversion, they cast their attention back to the brush beyond their camp, or to the ground beneath them.

Ryson darted through the camp. Twisting and turning, covering the breadth of the camp, his head spun about searching for signs of Petiole or Lief. He found Lief first, alone and muttering to himself.

Ryson drew to a halt near the grumbling elf.

"I'm back," the delver greeted.

Lief looked upon the delver with obvious surprise and much dismay. "I heard you call in. Where's the cliff behemoth?"

"He would not come," Ryson responded plainly.

Lief blinked, as if not wanting to accept this answer.

Ryson actually felt the exasperation. "I'm sorry. I tried."

The elf only cursed. “Fire upon all of this. Why not?”

“He needed a sign.”

“A sign?”

“Something from Godson,” Ryson stated, seemingly with only slight annoyance. He continued as if Dzeb’s decision was now immaterial. “He wanted his doubts washed away, or something like that. He didn’t believe he should interfere. He kept talking about everything being Godson’s will, one way or the other. I don’t know. It’s hard to argue with a cliff behemoth. They use their faith as a reason. How do you fight that? Anyway, he’s not coming.”

“That’s not what I needed to hear,” Lief posed. He rubbed his forehead as his eyes bore into the ground.

Seeing such agitation, Ryson turned to other matters, his own questions over equally important events. “What’s been happening here? Did you talk to Petiole?”

“Yes,” Lief replied with a heavy weariness as he lifted his head and now looked to the sky. His face revealed a sense of desperation as if he was asking the heavens why he was so damned. He spoke with a tone near resentment. “I convinced Petiole to hold off using the seeds. He gave us five days. He agreed based on my insistence that you would bring a cliff behemoth to stop this war. This will not go over well.”

Ryson was apologetic. “I tried. I just couldn’t convince him.”

Again, Lief shook his head. “I do not blame you. I’m just tired of this.”

Ryson tried to sound hopeful. “I have a new plan.”

The statement did little to soften the elf. “It was hard to believe in your first plan.”

Ryson kicked at the ground. He struggled with how to explain his intentions. He realized there was no way to make his idea sound sane, let alone reasonable. He unveiled it bluntly. “I’m still going into Dunop. I’m just going in without Dzeb. I’m going to give my sword to Yave. I hope it will show her how Tun really

died, how it wasn't the fault of the algors."

Lief simply stared at the delver. He said nothing, his expression revealed nothing.

Ryson spoke faster. "I know it sounds like suicide, but it is a chance. I don't understand this sword. Your people made it, used their own magic to enchant it. It's shown the power to reveal the way things are. It's worked before. It showed me how to defeat Ingar. It also helped convince Tun to help us destroy his sphere. If it can do that, I think it can help convince Yave to stop before she does more damage. If she realizes that Tun's death was an accident, she'll stop these attacks. She can make amends with the algors. We might still get out of this."

Lief still said nothing.

Ryson heaved a heavy sigh. "You think it's a ridiculous idea. I knew you would. It's just ..."

Lief did not let him continue. "It may work."

Ryson's eyes widened. "You think so?"

"It is as you said, the sword has helped us before. If it had the power to break through Tun's stubbornness, perhaps it can break Yave's madness. It is as good a plan as bringing Dzeb to her."

Ryson smiled. "I thought so, too. Actually, it was Matthew's idea. After Dzeb turned me down, I went to Connel. I didn't have any other ideas. I thought Matthew might come with me. I was hoping we could all be together again... you, Holli, Matthew, and me. We might be able to at least stop Petiole from using the seeds. Unfortunately, the dwarves had attacked Connel. He was hurt."

Lief revealed genuine concern elves normally don't show toward humans. "Not badly I hope?"

"I'm afraid very badly, but he's sure he'll survive and so am I."

"At least that is something. What of the attack? The city fared poorly?"

"Very. The dwarves did damage beyond what I could explain. The city's

basically in ruins. If anyone from Burbon thought Connel might lend help, they can forget it now. It'll take a long time for Connel to recover from this. They barely have the resources to help themselves, let alone someone else."

News of Matthew's injury and the damage to Connel did little to lift Lief's spirits. His mood decayed as he reflected upon the heart of the problem. "Who would have thought it would have led to this? Yave and her separatist followers. The damn fools. It is so senseless. To attack a city, to wreak such havoc, all out of revenge. What will satisfy her?"

"I don't know, but it's even more reason why I have to try and stop her. If the dwarves attack Burbon like they attacked Connel, no one will survive."

Lief straightened at Ryson's lack of faith in Burbon's protectors. "Do not give up so easily on what others can do. Give the credit that is due to your captain and to Holli," Lief admonished.

Ryson took hold of Lief's conviction as a sign of hope for Burbon's well-being. "Have you heard anything? I didn't stop on the way here. I didn't think I wanted to know."

"We have scouts keeping an eye on Burbon from the trees. We need to know the dwarves' strength. As of yet, there have been no further attacks."

Ryson's eyes lit up. It seemed as if a block of weight fell free from his shoulders. "Then everyone's safe?"

"For now, but we must make yet another critical decision. Do you really wish to enter Dunop? I agree the Sword of Decree may hold the way out of this war, but it is not without risk. I know you are adverse to the shadow trees, but the option still remains. Petiole will gladly drop them now. Any threat to you or Burbon would vanish nearly instantly. You must also consider another point. If you fail, if Yave does not grasp the sword and continues her plans of war, the seeds will be released anyway. If you are captured, you will face the same fate as the dwarves. Are you willing to take this risk?"

Ryson heaved a heavy breath. "I don't see as if I have a choice."

Lief frowned. "Do not be so dramatic, delver. There is a choice, and it's yours to make."

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I do have a choice. I have to try to stop this. That’s what I meant to say.”

“I understand and I agree with you. I will accompany you to Dunop.”

Lief waited. He eyed Ryson with defiance.

The delver responded with surprise.

“I’m very happy to hear that. I don’t want to go alone. I’m sure you expected me to decline, but I won’t. I’m glad you want to come with me.”

“You will not argue the point?”

“No. I don’t know where the entrance to Dunop is. I have no experience with dwarf cities. There is no advantage to me going alone. And I’ll be glad to have the company”

“I’m glad you admit to this.” The elf was about to say more, but Lief paused. Again, time was running short. He exhaled heavily as he cast a glance about the camp. He put a hand to his chin as he considered the next step, a burdensome one.

The elf’s consternation was not lost upon the perceptive delver. “What’s wrong?”

“We might face a more difficult problem than the dwarves right now. You remember I said Petiole gave us five days? That was on the condition you would bring a cliff behemoth to speak to the dwarves. I have no idea what he’ll say about this new plan. He might reverse his decision.”

“We have to convince him not to,” Ryson cited.

“We can try.” There was more than a hint of pessimism in the elf’s tone. “Follow me.”

The delver obeyed. He moved alongside the elf. As they moved further away from the heart of the camp, he spotted Petiole standing alone at the outskirts of the camp.

“Why is he out here?” Ryson quipped.

“He is afraid,” Lief said with near shame. “He wishes to be as close to the perimeter of guards as possible.”

“What’s he afraid of? The dwarves?”

“Me,” Lief said succinctly

The reply was blunt and Ryson, though questions burned his mind, did not press for details. He knew there was truth to Lief’s words as he saw Petiole’s reaction upon their approach. The elder fidgeted, stepped back slightly and finally motioned for a guard. Two elves swung down from the trees above him and took defensive positions by his side.

The sequence amazed the delver. The guards treated Lief as a genuine threat. They drew long daggers as they took two small steps forward. They left an opening between them, a space for Lief to see the face of the elder, but they made it clear he was not to pass beyond them. There would be a buffer and they would close off the path if Lief tried to move beyond it.

“Childish,” Lief grumbled. He said nothing more until he stood before the camp elder.

“The delver has returned.”

Petiole spoke with resentment, toward both the delver and Lief. “I see that. Where is the cliff behemoth?”

Lief answered for Ryson. “He declined to come.”

Petiole jumped upon the response. “So we have waited for nothing?! You threaten me, you force your decision on me because you are ‘the great Lief Woodson’ and now you come to me with this? If we had been attacked, the blood of any elf would have been on your hands. The delay was uncalled for. Your delver friend returned with nothing. This will not be forgotten. I will move to have you expelled from this camp.”

Lief ignored the threat. “The absence of the cliff behemoth does not end the delver’s plan. He still intends on entering Dunop and stopping this war.”

The statement stunned Petiole.

“Without the cliff behemoth?”

“Yes. He still believes there is a chance to end this before it goes any further. He will enter Dunop, so we still must wait before dropping the seeds.”

“You still want me to wait? You have no cliff behemoth and you still want me to wait?”

“You gave us five days,” Lief answered simply.

“Five days to bring a cliff behemoth before me, not five days for nonsense. What can this delver do to stop this war? The cliff behemoth had a chance, he does not.”

Lief did not back down. “You said you would withhold from using the seeds for five days to allow Ryson the chance to stop this war. He still intends to do so.”

“How?” Petiole demanded.

“The sword,” Lief answered just as bluntly, but his tone carried a challenge.

Petiole appeared to weaken at the response. He bit down on his bottom lip with uncertainty.

Ryson watched with growing interest as Lief played upon the elder’s display of weakness.

Lief growled with authority. “The sword, a prized possession of this camp for untold cycles, which was given to this delver by Mappel. It was done because the sword revealed new powers in his hands. Are you going to deny the existence of those powers?”

Petiole slumped. It was difficult enough for him to argue with Lief, but to cast doubt upon the memory of Mappel was beyond his abilities. It was Mappel’s shoes he could not fill. It was Mappel’s reputation he could not meet on his own terms. He was always cast in the past elder’s shadow. He was always compared to the memory of the fallen leader, and always unfavorably. Mappel’s decision to give the enchanted sword over to the delver was never debated. It was also well

known that in the delver's hands the sword destroyed the sphere and saved the elves. Surely, the camp would scorn him if he questioned the power of the sword. They would turn against him, question him like they always did.

The current elder mouthed puny resistance. "Yave is far removed from the sword. It is here and she remains in the cave castle of Dunop."

"That is why the delver still plans to enter the dwarf city."

"So what does the delver intend to do?"

"He will allow Yave to hold the sword. It will break the hold of her madness."

Petiole seized quickly upon a weakness. He saw a way to attack the logic of the plan while not attacking the enchantment of the sword. He spoke with renewed vigor. Again, the resentment and sarcasm dripped from his every word. "And how will he accomplish that? Simply walk into the throne room of Dunop and command her to hold the sword?"

Ryson jumped into the fray for the first time. He was growing tired of Petiole's resistance. He was not looking forward to entering Dunop, but he had made the choice. Better to get it over with as quickly as possible than to stand here and argue.

"Not simple and not command," the delver said. "I do intend to walk into Dunop, but I will surrender myself as the delver that was with Tun at his death. Yave will demand to see me. You can't doubt that. She probably blames me as much as the algors. She must also know the sword I carry played a great role in our deeds at Sanctum. I will offer it to her as a sign of my own grief. She'll either accept it as such or take it as a trophy of her victory over me. Either way, I truly believe she will take hold of the handle. That is all I can hope for. I can't control the rest."

"And who does?" Petiole attempted to fight the idea.

Ryson answered flatly, not hesitating to reveal his uncertainty. "Fate, maybe. Destiny, maybe even Godson. Who can tell? I don't know when or even how the sword will work. It either will or it won't. If it does, she'll see the truth. She will see how Tun died and know that it wasn't anyone's fault."

“And that is it?” Petiole pressed.

Lief eyed the elder with growing hostility. “And what more do you want?”

The elf guards appeared to tense.

Petiole brooded. Finally, he lit upon an acceptable solution to his own fears. “I want assurances from you. I want you to take responsibility for everything that happens from this point on. If the delver fails, I want you to admit it as your failure. I want you to leave this camp and never return. And if you are banished, I want you to admit I was always correct, state that the shadow trees were our only true choice.”

Lief glared with burning thoughts. Puny leader, puny elf. He spat out his response like a bitter taste. “On the first, you will have more than my word. It will be clear that I back this course of action for I am accompanying Ryson to Dunop. No one will question that I demanded the delay of the shadow trees. And if we fail, you will not have to demand my exile. If we can not stop the dwarves, I will not be returning. As to the last, defending the use of the shadow trees will be your concern, not mine.”

“You will go with the delver into the caves?” Petiole asked with more than a hint of hopefulness.

“I will remain with him unless the dwarves choose to separate us,” Lief replied firmly.

“But you will put your fate in the hands of Yave and the dwarves?”

Lief did not hesitate in insulting the elder, something he would never have considered with Mappel. “I put my fate in things obviously beyond your reckoning. I will not, however, run from the dwarves. I will enter Dunop. I am sure they will take me prisoner along with Ryson. They will not let me go unless Ryson succeeds. That should be enough for you.”

Petiole sneered, but said nothing. He grumbled then nodded his acceptance.

Lief wished to leave the elder immediately. He took one last look at the guards before he left. They returned his glance with suspicion. “Fire upon you fools.” He swung his shoulders about and marched back toward the center of camp.

Near a small tent made of pine branches, Lief made his final preparations. He removed his thin, double-edged sword from his belt, and the bow and quiver from his shoulder. He looked to the delver to give his explanation.

“If we are surrendering to the dwarves we should go unarmed, except for your sword of course.”

The delver agreed. His hand went to his pouch searching for his dagger. As his fingers came up empty, he recalled the algor burial where he had left his knife in the sand. “I don’t have my knife anymore. I’m going to have to replace it when I get back to Burbon.”

Lief smiled. “Optimism. I like it.”

Ryson chuckled at the thought. “I guess so. Well, do you know where the entrance to the dwarf city is?”

“It is not far. We can reach it well before dark. You realize we will meet resistance immediately. The entrance was the point of meeting between elf and dwarf when we traded goods. They will not leave the passage unguarded.”

“I didn’t think they would.”

With no other preparations, the two left the elf camp. The elf took to the trees and the delver followed at ground level. As Lief jumped from branch to branch, Ryson rambled across the ground, twisting and turning like a fleeing rabbit. He did not wish to be caught by any enemy until he reached the cave-city entrance. Lief called out directions from above and the two crossed the necessary distance without incident.

Close to the entrance, Ryson called out a warning of his own. “I’ve caught a scent. I think it’s dwarf.”

“Probably,” Lief replied. “The entrance should be within your sight. Look to the northwest, through that clump of willows. Do you see the thick brush?”

Ryson spied it in a heartbeat. “Yes. That’s it? It’s not in a hill side?”

“No. There are not many hills this deep in the forest. The entrance is a small vertical drop into a tunnel. The tunnel declines at a fairly steep grade with few

turns.”

“Do you think there are dwarves outside?”

“It must be a scout hidden in the brush. That’s probably the scent you have seized. He is most certainly back down the tunnel by now, warning others. There won’t be any others outside. It would not be wise, especially if they are worried about a counter attack from elves. They would be targets for archers.”

Ryson tore off in a blur of motion. At top speed, he circled the clump of brush. His eyes scanned nearly every inch of the forest surrounding the mound. The area was clear. He stopped several body lengths from the brush. He could detect the outline of the hole which led to the access way. He waited for Lief to drop from the trees to join him before he moved closer.

As the elf hit the ground, he showed signs of tension. He looked at the hole with apprehension.

Ryson sensed it. “Anything wrong? I didn’t see anyone around.”

“It’s the tunnel. I do not like being bottled up in the ground.”

“I didn’t think of that. Do you want to stay here?”

Lief was resolute. “By now, the dwarves know we are here together. We have to surrender together. Otherwise, they will suspect a trick.”

“What should we do? Call to them? Announce our surrender?”

“It’s a start.”

Lief called out their intentions to the silent hollow. He then turned to Ryson. “There is little else for us to do now but move forward.”

Ryson did not wait for an objection and immediately took the lead. He jumped through the hole before Lief could protest and simply waited for the elf to follow.

As he stood within the tunnel, Ryson marveled at its intricacies. Sparkling beams of light bounced off the walls and cascaded down the descending path. Light

gems embedded in the walls and floor reflected the sun beams with perfect precision. The air was strangely dry, almost devoid of the moisture Ryson expected in the cave. It was also surprisingly fresh, a by-product of the dryness. With no mold or mildew, there was little to spoil the air. The tunnel's construction also amazed the delver. It used no lumber for support. Instead, the very rock and dirt was compacted into a smooth, solid exterior as if they walked within clean and even pipes. The path was amazingly wide and there was plenty of head room for the delver. He could stand without difficulty, and even extend his arms well above his head. He would have to jump slightly to actually touch the tunnel ceiling. It brought a question to his mind as Lief joined him in the access way.

“I was expecting a tighter fit. Why did the dwarves make this tunnel so large when they're so short?”

“This tunnel was used to transport timber obtained from us to the city below. The dwarves would also bring up stone they would trade to us in return. To allow the passage of such large material, the path needed to be wide.”

A faint smell of smoke drifted up from deep down the tunnel and caught Ryson's attention. “I smell smoke.”

“The dwarves burn small fires for light as well as using the light gems. These tunnels serve many purposes including air flow.”

The elf was not allowed to continue. Portions of rock slid away. Hidden compartments and tunnel offshoots were revealed immediately as a dozen dwarves fell upon the elf and delver. They stood with malice as Lief and Ryson froze. One finally barked a command.

“Unfasten your belt and drop the sword,” a female warrior growled.

Ryson did not move his hand.

“Are you deaf, human?”

“I'm not human. I'm delver. My name is Ryson Acumen.”

Near bedlam. Some dwarves advanced, some lowered their weapons. All shouted.

Ryson stared down the female warrior that seemed to be in command, tenuous as it might have been. He dared her to attack. “You seem to know of my name. Then you must also know I was with Tun and Jon Folarok at Sanctum. I am here to surrender to your queen.”

“Do not touch him!” the commander hissed to the other dwarves.

Ryson responded with even greater authority. “I wouldn’t touch my friend, either. The elf is unarmed. He is Lief Woodson. We were both at Sanctum. We both witnessed Tun Folarok’s death.”

A call came from the dwarf pack. “Lies.”

Ryson kept his gaze locked upon the warrior. “The sword is proof. How much do you know of what happened in Sanctum?”

“Enough,” the female snarled in reply.

“Then you know of the sword’s enchantment. I’m going to unsheathe it now to show you. Then it goes back to my belt. Nothing more.”

Ryson did not wait for the warrior’s approval. Slowly but deftly, his right hand grasped the hilt of his sword. The blade glided free from its sheath. The light within the cave doubled and redoubled. There was no denying the source. The blade glowed like fire. Ryson held it aloft for but a moment. With delver quickness, he returned it to its scabbard. He stood empty handed, the sword at his belt, waiting for the dwarf reply.

“I will take the sword,” the warrior claimed.

“It is not for you,” Ryson replied with a slight laugh.

“You scorn me?”

“You’re not taking this sword from me.”

Lief watched silently. He was a secondary player in this scene. Though the dwarves kept a suspicious eye upon him, their attention bounded over the delver.

“You will stop me?”

“If I have to. I’m surrendering, but not to you. I’m surrendering to Yave.”

“Yave is not here.”

The note of contempt was not lost upon the delver. “So one of the separatist followers has no love for the queen? You would care little about her wishes?”

The warrior shot back quickly. “You think I should just let you pass with a sword at your side? Disarm. Now!”

“No.”

The dwarf’s eyes widened. “This is not a debate.”

“I know, but you don’t seem to realize that.”

The group of dwarves growled with contempt. They shouted out their own desires with rabid fury.

“Kill him now.”

“Take the sword from him.”

“Let me.”

The female waved her hand at the others. “Be quiet.”

Ryson summed up the situation quickly. “I know you can take the sword by force. You can kill me now, but that’s not the issue, unless of course you want to displease the queen. I’m here to surrender to Yave. Don’t you think she’ll want to hear that from me? There are enough dwarves here to relay this news to her. Word will reach her that Ryson Acumen and Lief Woodson were at her door. She’ll want to know why they weren’t brought before her. She’ll demand to know. What will you tell her?”

The dwarf woman hesitated. She looked about the collection of scouts, guards, and warriors. Some would keep their mouths shut. They were loyal to the separatists, not the queen, but not all of them. A few might speak of this incident. If so, she would be punished if she did not bring the delver to Yave. She succumbed, but not without assuming some authority. “I will bring you before

the queen. You will follow my instructions, or I will kill you. Understand?”

“Understood,” Ryson mouthed with little respect.

The dwarf turned her back on the delver, a senseless display of disregard for the delver and the elf. She quickly issued commands as to those who would accompany her. She chose only two others, another display of disrespect. She commanded the remaining dwarves to stay at the entrance and watch for an elf assault.

Ryson and Lief followed the stodgy warrior down the tunnel and deeper into the ground. Ryson attempted to gauge their descent. He wondered how far down they would travel before they saw the first signs of the underground city. The thought filled him with anticipation. This was his first excursion into dwarf living space. He could only imagine what he might find.

Lief, however, found no appreciation in their journey.

“I hate tunnels,” he mumbled.

“Quiet!” the dwarf ordered.

Lief grunted.

Ryson noted more and more branches of the smaller corridors as they progressed down the main tunnel. He wanted to ask their purpose, but he knew the dwarf would not respond. He looked at signs upon the ground. He saw only a few faint tracks, as only the rock dust and loose dirt would allow for an imprint, but he noticed a level of wear. Some tunnels were obviously used more often than others. He also began to notice grooves and hollows penetrating the rock. It could have been caused by water erosion, but the lack of moisture removed that possibility. Ryson speculated that the use of heavy carts filled with gems and stone might have created the ridges. Stone wheels would easily grind away at the tunnel floor. Ryson could only wonder as to the frequency of repairs to these tunnels. Further down the main passage, Ryson began to notice the scent of smoke growing stronger. Also, the growing light in front of them began to rival the light from behind.

“More light gems from other tunnels and air holes converging at one center,” he speculated out loud.

“Quiet,” the dwarf reminded him. This time, however, she attempted to accentuate her command. She did not turn, but she intuitively knew the distance Ryson walked behind her. She thrust the butt-end of her axe handle backwards, intending to strike the delver in the midsection. Ryson saw her muscles tense just before she struck. He side stepped the blow with ease. The blunt handle bottom hit nothing but air. The warrior almost lost her grip, and certainly lost her composure. She twirled around with hot rage.

“Do you wish to attempt escape?”

“I wish to avoid being struck by your axe handle,” Ryson responded sternly.

The warrior hissed with fury. “I will ask the queen that I have the honor of executing you.”

Ryson wanted to respond with sarcasm, but he held his tongue. He simply looked away and waited for the dwarf to lead them again.

In but a few more steps, he noticed two large blocks of stone waiting like sentries at opposite sides of the tunnel. Their mass seemed to defy movement, but they hung from stone hinges as thick as Ryson’s chest. Once pushed together, they would form a nearly impenetrable barrier. Another contingent of dwarves waited here. They eyed the party with distrust.

As the woman warrior explained the situation, Ryson looked beyond the check point and down the final length of the passage. The path widened only slightly from side to side, but the ceiling sloped upward and out of his sight. The passage no longer appeared as a tunnel, but as an alley way. Instead of curved walls, the sides became blocked structures with doors and windows. The ground flattened out into a well-trodden street made of cobblestone. A small lamp post, apparently molded out of iron, stood with a small flickering light. As he considered the simple lamp post, he drank in the familiarity of these surroundings. It looked almost like a side street in Bourbon, but instead of wooden buildings, everything was carved into or out of stone.

Ryson arched his neck to see further down the underground street. He saw small pockets of activity. The attention of other dwarves drew towards his position. This he did not like. The grumblings of these dwarves attracted others. The number of those fixated on him grew with every blink of the eye. They were not happy and he did not relish the thought of marching by them.

He looked back to the guards. They appeared unfazed by the growing mob. Were they certain the crowd would not take their prisoners? Or did they simply not care? Ryson wanted to hasten them, but he held his tongue. He knew if he spoke, they would only linger that much longer. He swallowed his apprehension as he looked to Lief to gauge the elf's worries.

Lief appeared more concerned with the rock that surrounded him than with the growing number of dwarves. He looked up at the ceiling constantly as if he were afraid of its imminent collapse. Ryson wondered how long the elf could last down here before the claustrophobia took its toll. His thoughts were interrupted by a command of the female warrior.

“Wake up and move!”

He saw a desire to strike him in her eyes, but also hesitancy. She remembered her past failure and apparently did not want to appear foolish in front of the gatekeepers.

Ryson stepped forward and followed the warrior. Uneasiness gripped him as they headed directly toward the crowd. Thankfully, as he drew closer, he realized their faces were filled more with curiosity than hate. They did not intend to lash out or take him and Lief by force. He wondered how many of them knew what was truly happening.

As his eyes perused the onlookers, he drank in a wealth of new images for his delver mind. He saw the makeup of simple dwarf people. These were not warriors, not guards, and not royalty. They lived in this underground city like the human civilians lived in Burbon. He imagined the tasks they performed by their clothes and by what they carried. He saw them as rock cutters, jewelers, builders, and miners. As he looked upon dwarf children for the first time in his life, he saw them as families; husbands and wives, sons and daughters.

In this instant, he knew that what he was doing was right. These people were not responsible for the attacks on the algors and the elves. They did not commit the killing in Burbon or Connel. And they did not deserve to face the shadow trees. He walked on through Dunop with renewed confidence, believing it was not foolishness that brought him here.

Rather than worry over his own well-being, he now allowed himself the opportunity to gaze at the wonders of this underground city, a masterpiece of

design and construction. Tunnels became streets and alleys, caverns became squares and plazas. Boulders the size of hills were hollowed out for merchant shops and homes. More than once he crossed a stone or iron bridge which spanned an underground river. To his surprise, he saw fish.

This revelation caused him to look for more of the unusual. Vegetation grew, both in the river and in the soil. It seemed impossible. They were far underground. He looked up, but there was no sky, only rock. There was no sun, but there was light, and that held the answer.

The light gems and mirrors brought sunlight through the air holes and tunnels. Every carving of rock reflected the light. To the dwarves, it was viewed as the one resource which could not be wasted. Sun beams glistened through every passage. They sparkled off jewels and polished rock. Dim as it was, it brought life to this underground city. It was not overwhelming, certainly not like noon time upon the surface, more like just before twilight. This allowed for the growth of algae in the rivers and sparse plants along the roadsides.

His observations sparked his delver instincts. As he walked behind the dwarf escort, his spirit pulled at him to investigate more of this city. It urged him to take off down one of the mysterious corridors or to the center of a large cavern. He wished to inspect the interiors of the shops and homes or to follow the run of the river. He bubbled with enthusiasm like a child in an amusement park. This was not just a cave; this was a place of magic, not the kind which allowed spells and enchantments, but the magic of something new and nearly inconceivable.

Thoughts of exploration, however, quickly slipped away as the appearance of heavily armed dwarves became more common. As they proceeded, they passed more check points. The reason soon became obvious. Dunop's Royal Palace appeared at the center of the city in a large expanse of a cavern.

The structure emanated more strength than beauty. It overwhelmed the space with a sense of power that typified the dwarf race. The palace appeared part of the cave, as if stalagmites and stalactites grew together over untold cycles to form this dominant structure. The obvious brilliance in design, however, quickly removed any thought that this might be a simple haphazard coincidence. The rock was sculpted with perfect precision. From the steps of the front entrance to the highest ramparts, the very lines of construction defied weakness.

Immediately, upon his very first glance, Ryson could sense the intentions of the architects. From the start, before the first rock was placed at its foundation, the palace was viewed as a whole. Each rock, each piece of granite was to be molded together until this palace was born into a single entity. The edifice would boast of strength. Vulnerability would not be permitted.

The delver wished to stop, to gaze at the stark power and drink in the image. Strangely, the dwarf escort allowed him to pause.

The warrior slowly turned. She wore a grin, but it held pride to the degree of venom. Her pasty white, rugged flesh wrinkled about the curl of her lip.

“View the last place you will ever see, delver. Know the true power of my race. Know that there is nothing we can’t do.”

The delver ignored her. Lief did not.

“Climb a tree,” the elf said sarcastically.

Rage took the place of pride in the dwarf. She moved upon Lief. Two dwarf guards in the rear fumbled with uncertainty.

The elf straightened with defiance. His own eyes blazed with equal fury. He held no weapon, but he would not cower before this separatist. Only the delver’s speed prevented his murder.

Ryson stepped between them. He did not touch the dwarf or draw his own weapon. He simply blocked her path, kept her from getting within arm’s reach of the elf.

The dwarf growled. Her eyes remained fixed past the delver and upon the elf. She tried to sidestep Ryson. She could no sooner outrun the wind. Her frustration billowed. She reared back with her axe, determined to cut her way to the elf, if necessary.

“Enough!”

The warrior froze as every other dwarf guard came to immediate attention at the arrival of another dwarf, a dwarf whose command was exceeded only by that of Yave herself. The War Com stepped down the palace steps toward the party. He

mumbled an order to the warrior. She did not attempt to question, but she offered a glare toward Lief as she stepped away. Strog eyed the two uninvited guests with mistrust. He said nothing. He simply stood in front of them and stared.

Ryson was not in the mood for another contest of wills. He knew what Strog intended, stand there rigid until one gave up and spoke first. He decided to voice his intentions without delay. He wasn't giving in to the War Com, he just didn't intend on playing this ridiculous game.

"I didn't come here to stand around and see who blinks first. I've already surrendered myself. I'm sure the queen will want to know this."

The War Com did not respond. He continued to stare silently as if he would play the game regardless.

The confrontation had gained the attention of many dwarves. Many stood watching from a distance. Ryson spoke up, loud enough for all of them to hear. "My name is Ryson Acumen. I was with Jon and Tun in Sanctum."

Strog closed his eyes, trying to block out the reaction. He couldn't. He heard the murmurs of the crowd. Word of this would spread quickly.

"Follow me," he said with disgust. He turned to move, but stopped suddenly. He placed his fury on the warrior escort. "Why does he still wear his sword? Why was he not disarmed?"

"He wouldn't allow it."

"He wouldn't allow it?" Strog cut her off. "Since when do prisoners dictate to us?"

Ryson interrupted. Again, he spoke loud enough for all around to hear. "The sword is not for you or anyone else. Only the queen. It was named the Sword of Decree by the elves that forged it. It is the sword that convinced Tun to help destroy the sphere. Don't you think you should bring us, and it, to her now?"

Strog folded his hands together. His first response was to dismiss the female warrior. He would not even let her voice her request to have the honor of executing the delver. He ordered the other escorts to return to the tunnels and motioned for palace guards to join him. Finally, he turned to Ryson.

“I will take you to the queen. Not because you request it, because I desire it. If you attempt to draw your sword, I will have you killed on the spot.”

Strog did not wait for a response. He turned on his heels back towards the palace entrance and marched up the polished steps.

Ryson and Lief were soon surrounded by a cluster of dwarf warriors. They were urged forward down long corridors and placed first in a tiny room devoid of all furnishings. The queen would have to be summoned. She was not simply available for every prisoner that was marched through the palace.

After a brief wait, they were again ushered into the corridors, and finally brought into the throne room and put before the queen. Ryson saw the mix of emotions captured in her face and eyes. Cold hate. Blazing hot fury. He sensed the conflict within her. She wanted to lash out. She wanted to make them cower in her icy stare. And if she favored either the elf or the delver with her distaste, it was Ryson.

The delver treated her malice with equal measures of respect and indifference. He would not ignore her ire completely, would not speak with reverence as if greeting a friend, but he would not bend from his purpose. He knew she blamed him for the death of her son. The memory of Tun cast a shadow upon his soul. He would not stand there as if there were no loss. At the same time, he considered the losses to the algors in the Lacobian and to the humans in Connel, all because of her madness. It was her thirst for revenge which brought him here. It was his intention to end this dementia, an intention he was not sure was possible. He stood before her with patience and indignation, remorse and sympathy, uncertainty and determination.

He folded his hands before him, as if praying, and dropped his gaze to the floor. It was not his desire to lock upon a battle of wills with Yave. He would not invite further hostility. He waited to be recognized.

Lief, as with every other dwarf in the room other than Yave, swung his attention back and forth between the delver and the queen. The crux of this moment was pinpointed. There was little he could do. These two would now decide the fate of the dwarves in Dunop, the elves in Dark Spruce, and the humans in Burbon. The die was cast. He could only wait, and watch the result.

Yave cleared her throat. “You are the delver that brought my son to Sanctum?”

“I am,” Ryson responded without looking up.

“This elf was with you?”

“He was.”

“And you now surrender yourselves to me?”

“We do.”

“Why?” The word ended with a rattle in her throat, as if her fury was about to spew forth.

“We want to try and stop all of this. It’s not a secret why you attacked the algors. I don’t think it’s too difficult to figure out why you attacked Connel and Burbon. And the elf camp in Dark spruce. You’re trying to get those you think are responsible for Tun’s death.”

“Who ARE responsible for his death,” Yave corrected.

Ryson chose not to dispute her. “I was the one that helped convince Tun to go to Sanctum. I’m sure you blame me as much as the algors.”

Yave’s suspicion flowed over her repugnance for the two prisoners. She revealed her mistrust. “Is that all? No other reason? I was told you would not allow my dwarves to take your sword. Maybe you thought as a delver you would move quick enough to assassinate me.”

“I have no such intentions.”

“And I am simply to take your word for that?” Yave scoffed. “What am I supposed to believe? That you simply surrendered because you did not want to run? You are a delver and I am no fool. I know what you are capable of. You might elude us for seasons without end, but you surrender anyway. You think maybe I would be moved by this act? Did you think I might be impressed by what you might believe is courage? Or do you really wish to sacrifice yourself?”

“I do not wish to sacrifice anything.”

“But you came here to surrender to me?”

“I was hoping there might be a way we might satisfy you without need for further violence.”

“You think I will be satisfied with this?”

“I don’t know.”

Yave shook her head. “What is it you’re trying to tell me, delver?”

“I want this all to end. That’s all.”

Yave spat upon the rock floor. Such behavior actually surprised the delver. He recovered, however, before Yave’s gaze locked upon him once more.

Yave’s eyes narrowed. “Let me tell you what I think. I believe you are more concerned about other things. You did not come here to simply surrender. You came here to try and talk your way out of the justice which will be rendered upon you. You wish to try and save those you hold dear. I will not have it. No one saved my Tun. My son is dead. Do you have family in Connel, or in Burbon? Where?”

Ryson stiffened. He would not answer.

“I think you do. I guess I will have to see them all killed in each city. What do you think of that, delver?”

Ryson redirected the conversation. “Did you know that Tun was against destroying the sphere?”

The question temporarily stunned Yave. “What?”

“Tun did not want to enter Sanctum,” Ryson repeated. “He did not want the magic released.”

“I know that,” Yave snarled. “You tricked him.”

Ryson ignored her. “He wanted to seal the breach, keep the sphere buried. He held to this for long meetings with the elf elder Mappel. He ignored the requests of the humans as well. He was not convinced the sphere was a true threat. Do you know what changed his mind?”

Yave's eyes narrowed even further until they became mere slits. Only the blacks of her pupils were visible between her lids. "I heard the story. You and an infernal cliff behemoth came to Connel, you handed him your sword and tricked him into believing your falsehoods. You made him think that releasing the magic was good."

"No. He never wanted to release the magic, but he knew the sphere had to be destroyed."

"That's the same thing!" Yave bellowed.

"No, it's not. He never accepted that the release of the magic would be anything but trouble for the dwarves. He hated the idea, and he mistrusted everyone that entered Sanctum. But he realized something else. He realized the sphere would destroy everyone. He didn't want the magic released. He simply didn't have a choice."

"So what? What does any of this have to do with those responsible for his death? Are you saying he had to die? Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No, I don't. I expect you to believe what you want to believe. Just like Tun. I only brought it up to make sure you knew why Tun entered Dunop. You blame me, you blame Lief, and you blame the algors for Tun's death. If that's true, you also have to blame the sword that's at my side. It brought light to the core of Sanctum. It led us to the algor tier where Tun died. If I surrender myself to you, I also have to surrender my sword. That's why I brought it here and didn't let anyone else take it from me. It's here for you. If you wish to destroy the algors, if you want to kill me, then you must also want to destroy the sword. If you believe you have to have justice on all those involved at Sanctum, you might as well take the sword as well."

Yave's eyes broke wide open. Her mouth curled to a distorted snarl. "I will take your sword! I will kill you with it! That will be justice!"

Ryson could have stopped her. He could have deflected her hand or he could have darted away in the bat of an eye. She moved so ploddingly it was almost humorous. He allowed her, however, a clear path to his sword handle. As she leapt up to him, the top of her head reaching up only to the center of his chest, he made no move. He kept his hands folded in front of him. As her thick fingers took hold of the hilt and her short arms struggled to pull the long sword free of

its sheath, he waited without objection. Even as the light bathed him from the blade which was now free, he made no move of defense. He simply watched her closely, waited for the sign of enlightenment that held all of his hopes.

With the sword firmly in her grasp and the blade free, Yave stepped away and reared her elbow back. The point of the sword aimed right at the delver's stomach. The blade never wavered, but it never pierced the delver. It held suspended in midair as confusion washed over Yave. She stood like a statue staring into blank space.

"No," she whispered.

Her shoulders shivered like an autumn leaf hanging on to a branch by a thin stem. Her left hand met her right upon the sword's hilt. She doubled over forward, still hanging upon the sword, the blade still filling the room with light, the point still directed at the delver.

"Tun, Tun," she spoke in agony.

She lifted her head and her eyes revealed tears. The hate slowly ebbed from her face as her brow was knitted not in fury, but in despair. She looked upon the delver and the elf with regret, but only for a moment.

Her grip tightened upon the sword. She whispered her son's name again. Her focus drifted down the flaming blade. Her shoulders squared as she filled herself with her own intent. She lifted the sword up high before pulling it to her breast. She hugged the flat of the blade with her arm as she jammed her eyes shut.

With yet another turn of emotion, she shook with a start. She screamed in anguish as she threw the blade to the floor. Her hands pressed against her face as if the magnified light burned her skin.

"Cover the sword!" she cried.

A guard moved to seize it.

"Do not touch it," she commanded before his fingers could touch the weapon. "Blanket it, but leave it where it is. No one is to touch it. Ever!"

The dwarf guard looked about with confusion. Throwing his hands up, he

removed his own cloak and thrust it over the blade. The room grew instantly darker.

Ryson looked upon Yave in a stupor. “Didn’t you see? Don’t you understand now?”

“Shut up!” Yave violently pulled her hands from her face, scratching her cheeks with her own nails.

Confusion bit at the delver. “I ...”

He was not allowed to continue.

“Imprison them with Jon. They all saw to Tun’s murder. Let them share the same cell.”

Shock prevented the delver from reacting. He was immediately in the grasp of several dwarf guards. The strong hands held him firm. There was no escape.

Chapter 17

They said nothing, delver and elf, as they were escorted roughly through the corridors of the palace prison. They did not struggle. Each felt the strength of the dwarf hands that held them. They would have been tossed about like rag dolls had they chosen to resist, even the delver. Ryson's gift was in his dexterity, his agility, not in strength. He could avoid the grip of a dwarf, but not break it.

The dwarf escorts brought them before a stone door. Their grip tightened on the captives as one saw to the opening of the cell. Both Ryson and Lief felt dwarf fingers crushing their flesh right to the bone. The release of the pressure was welcome, until heavy hands thrust them both into the darkness of the cave-like hold.

"I don't understand!" Ryson proclaimed to Lief once they were thrown into the dank cell. His statement was punctuated by the heavy closing of the stone door. Rock thumped against rock just before a single click testified to the locking of their prison. The delver looked to the door with abhorrence. Small cracks of light pierced the edges of the door, an accent to their predicament. "How can she still think we're responsible? How can she just throw us in here?"

Lief appeared more concerned with the conditions of their imprisonment. He stared up at the dark stone ceiling overhead. He pressed his hands against the thick walls which surrounded him. He exhaled heavily as if trying to rid himself of a tightening of his chest. A groan escaped his lips.

Concern for Lief replaced Ryson's bafflement. "Are you alright?"

"Stupid question," Lief mumbled.

Ryson agreed. "You're right. It was. What can I do for you?"

"Give me space. I just need a chance to adjust."

"Right."

Ryson backed away quickly. He did not pressure the elf with further questions. Instead, he took the chance to examine the cell. His eyes bore through the

darkness and immediately fell upon the slumped figure residing upon a flattened piece of stone.

“Jon?”

No answer.

“I think that’s Jon.”

At the moment, Lief did not care.

Ryson took four bounding steps across the cell. His presence was not acknowledged by the dwarf. Other than heavy, uncertain breathing, Jon made no movement at all. The delver needed to bend over to get a clear look at the dethroned dwarf king.

Dirt and grime adhered to Jon’s gaunt face like slime on a stagnate pool. His expression was vacant. His arms hung from his shoulders like limp clumps of seaweed. His hands were thin, almost bony and not at all like the powerful hands Ryson remembered. His back remained hunched over even as Ryson placed a palm on his shoulder. Jon showed no sign of sensing the delver’s touch. There was little spark of life to generate any reaction whatsoever. His eyes were open, but he chose not to see.

“Jon?” Ryson whispered.

Still, the dwarf did not respond.

Ryson shook him gently. The dwarf only slumped further. Any stimulus which would bring him back to reality was unwelcome.

Ryson stood up straight, took his hand from the dwarf and placed it on his own forehead. “I can’t take much more of this.”

The delver stiffened. He kicked once at the rocks by his feet before returning his hand to the dwarf. This time he took hold of the dwarf’s tattered shirt at the shoulder. There was plenty of cloth to grip. The shirt was loose and roomy around Jon’s neck as the dwarf was now simply wasting away.

“Jon! don’t you remember me? It’s Ryson.”

One last time, the name of the delver stirred the dwarf's memory. He lifted his head slightly. He did not look at the figure before him. His head turned slowly from side to side. He blinked his eyes over and over as if trying to see through a cloud of fog. He started to slump again, welcoming the hazy mist of near unconsciousness.

Ryson fought him. He pulled at the cloth, trying to lift the dwarf off the slab, but the shirt began to slip over Jon's head. Ryson released his grip, but threw his arms to Jon's sides. He shook the dwarf more vigorously.

Jon resisted reality. He moved with Ryson's shake as if he were nothing more than a pile of jelly.

"This is ridiculous." Frustration bubbled from the delver.

"He's given up," Lief spoke up. The elf had found a place in the middle of the enclosed cavern, an area which gave him the most available space. He continued to struggle with the growing dread of his claustrophobia, but he managed to display some semblance of control. His hands closed into tight fists. Each breath heaved his chest with vigor. His gaze shifted uneasily about the all-encompassing rock as if it could not be trusted. Still, he spoke with a hardened understanding of Jon's true plight. "He does not want to believe this is happening anymore than I do. Give me a few days down here and I will probably look the same."

"You can't mean that. Look at him. He hasn't been locked in here that long."

"His troubles exceed the time of his imprisonment."

Ryson would not listen. He shook the dwarf harder. "Come on, Jon! It's me! Don't you remember?"

"He probably remembers more than he wants to," Lief argued.

"So what?" Ryson nearly exploded. "He can't just give up like this."

"He has and I don't think you can blame him."

Ryson released the dwarf and walked away in near disgust. "Sure I can."

Lief admonished the delver with a harsh tone. “He has lost his brother. His father has left him. The throne was forced upon him and then taken away by his own mother. Think about that. Can you still blame him?”

Ryson was in no mood to look at things logically. “I don’t know. I just don’t think he should sit there like a toadstool. We may need his help.”

“Help for what? What is there left for us to do? You don’t really think we have any options available to us, do you?”

The question struck at Ryson like a hammer. He looked at Lief, he looked at Jon, and he looked upon the tons of rock that surrounded him.

“We can’t get out of here, can we?”

“Not likely.”

Ryson would not accept that answer. He shook his head with vehemence. “There has to be some chance of escape. They have to open the door at some time to feed us.”

Lief almost laughed. “They do? Why? Are we honored guests?”

“They can’t just leave us here to starve.”

“Of course they can.”

Ryson stared in disbelief at the stone door. “No one can be that evil.”

Lief breathed with a sardonic laugh. “She’s mad, insane. There’s no telling what she might do, but I seriously doubt we will ever see the surface again. Look at Jon. When do you think he had his last meal?”

“Maybe they’ll come to question us.”

“About what?” Lief posed.

“I don’t know. Godson, Lief, help me out here. There’s got to be something else we can do.”

“Unless you know of a way to break through rock, there is nothing we can do.”

Ryson's eyes flared. "Stop it. Don't you know what you're saying? If we've failed, the dwarves will attack Burbon, and probably Connel again as well. You heard her. She wants to go after my family. She won't stop until everyone in Burbon and Connel is dead."

Ryson stepped closer to Lief. He didn't care about the elf's desire for space. The thought of Linda in danger fueled the fire of his spirit. "We can't let that happen. I don't care what we have to do."

"Do not be so certain of Burbon's destruction," Lief attempted to assuage the delver. "It is preparing for the attack. They have a chance at survival."

The thought did little to comfort the delver. Ryson focused on his own desire to help instead. "We don't give up, not as long as Yave wants to continue this. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, but I have not heard your solution to our current predicament. I would welcome any suggestion to be free of this prison."

Ryson caught his anger. He did not apologize for his outburst, but he turned away from the elf. "They're going to open that door. When they do, I'm going to be past them so fast they won't know what to think."

"I hope they do open the door," Lief agreed.

"This doesn't make any sense," Ryson continued to argue. "Why didn't the sword work? It did something. You saw her face, didn't you?"

"I did."

"When she held it, something was revealed to her. Why didn't she see the truth?"

"Maybe she did."

"Huh?"

Lief did not hesitate in explaining. He had been considering this ever since they were taken from the throne room. He offered his own conclusions as he constantly grappled with the enclosed space. At times his voice labored and his attention drifted to the encircling stone, but he maintained enough composure to

offer the only plausible solution.

“I don’t think anyone would deny that the sword did something in Yave’s hands, but the enchantment of the sword is new and unknown. In your possession, it somehow gained the power to bestow knowledge to the holder. You once said it saved you from a vampire. When you gripped the handle, you simply knew how to deal with the monster.”

“That’s the truth,” Ryson admitted.

“I do not deny it. I also know that Tun understood the true danger of the sphere after holding the sword. He no longer argued over our course of action. He agreed to journey to Sanctum, reveal the dwarf secret, and help destroy the sphere. He did so even though he knew the magic would be free again. The sword told him what must be done.”

The delver continued to agonize over the sword’s apparent failure. “I know that, too. So why didn’t it work with Yave? Why doesn’t she realize that what she’s doing is wrong.”

“I believe it did work with Yave, but not as we hoped. We wanted the sword to remove Yave’s anger, to show her that her desire for revenge was misplaced. That may have simply been beyond the power of the sword. The enchantment does not seem to be of sheer truth, but of knowledge. In my mind, that is the only explanation. I ask that you look only to Tun’s experience and you will probably agree. After grasping the sword, Tun knew the sphere was a danger to the dwarves, but he never released his mistrust of our intentions. He doubted us to the very end. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, but ...”

“But nothing. If the sword had the power to reveal all truth, Tun would have cast aside his mistrust over our intentions. He never did. The sword simply made him understand the sphere was a true danger to all the dwarves. That is what made him agree to help us. Nothing made him trust us.”

Ryson shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense. How could the sword reveal to him knowledge about the sphere, but not knowledge of our true intentions?”

“I have no idea. I am not a spell caster. I have no desire to be one. I only know that it didn’t, and you know it, too. Tun never trusted us. I don’t know why, but even though he knew the sphere had to be destroyed, he held to his suspicions. The sword’s enchantment is beyond my reckoning. I do, however believe there is consistency in its workings. Just as it did with Tun, I believe the sword imparted knowledge upon Yave. She now knows what truly happened in Sanctum. I believe that.”

“You think so? Then why doesn’t she call this off? Why did she throw us in this cell? Why does she leave her son to be nothing but a mushroom?”

“Because the sword will not change her interpretation of people’s intentions. Think of what happened in Sanctum. Can you remember Tun’s death?”

“Of course I can.”

The elf detailed his own memories as he tried to forget the surrounding rock. “If the sword allowed Yave to see that moment exactly as it happened, what would she see? She would know the sphere kept the algors from controlling the sand giants. She would also see that Tun struck upon the sand giant on his own, but what else would she see? She would see us, you and me, Holli and the algors, unable to stop the giant from crushing Tun. She would see the algors unable to heal her son. She would know all of that now. How would she interpret it?”

“We tried to help Tun. We didn’t just let him get killed,” Ryson protested.

“We both know that, but she does not. She did not know our intentions. She does not trust us. Just like Tun didn’t trust us. Tun held to his doubts even after holding the sword. Now, so does Yave. That is why we are now in this prison.”

Lief exhaled again. He rubbed his hands together still trying to ignore the stone which seemed to close upon him.

Ryson’s frustration doubled. “So we came here for nothing? We never had a chance, is that what you’re saying?”

“No, we had a chance. For a brief moment we almost succeeded. You said so yourself. You saw Yave’s face as she held the sword. The sword imparted the knowledge upon her. It did all that you could have hoped for. For one brief moment, Yave might have even understood that no one was responsible for

Tun's death. That one moment of confusion and despair on her face, that was our chance. Unfortunately, it did not last. She simply chose to cling to her anger. We could not control that. Often knowledge and emotion do not lead to the same results."

Ryson hung his head. "So that's it? What a waste."

"You don't believe that," Lief corrected. "It was not a waste to try. Too many people agreed to help you for that to be true."

"I don't know what I believe anymore. I just know that people are now in danger because of me. And there's nothing I can do about it. Maybe I should have done nothing, stayed in Burbon, helped fight off the dwarves and leave Yave to her madness."

"And let Dunop be destroyed?"

"Better Dunop than Burbon."

"You are speaking out of frustration and anger."

"What else should I speak with?"

"You are taking blame for no reason. Your reason for coming here was of the highest virtue. You wished to save others."

"And now I might have sacrificed others."

"You came here to try and prevent further tragedy. You did all you could and more. No one will deny that."

"Why should I care? You think we'll be left to rot in this dungeon."

"I doubt we will get a chance to rot."

The ominous tone of the elf's voice brought revelation to the delver. In an instant, he recalled what Dunop now faced, what he and Lief now faced. The words fell from his lips like recalling a nightmare. "The shadow trees."

Lief nodded. "Petiole will drop the seeds for certain when we don't return. That

may be your consolation. Though I see no hope for ourselves, I see hope for Burbon that you are unwilling to give. Yave has only a small amount of time before the shadow trees fall upon her palace. And the algors will send their army of sand giants. The dwarf army will not have an endless opportunity to attack Burbon. Dunop will be destroyed. Unfortunately, so will we.”

Ryson considered his plight. He cared little for his own safety, though thoughts of being consumed by shadow trees left a cold shiver in his bones. He also felt sadness for leaving without seeing Linda one last time. The thought of her alone opened a gap in his spirit which led to even more chills. He took solace in only one thought, the fact that his own end would mean Burbon would be vulnerable for only a short duration, a few days. When the seeds fall upon Dunop, threats to Burbon, and to Linda, would end.

His comfort was short-lived. He recalled the faces of the dwarves he had encountered during his passage to the palace. Did they deserve the fate of the shadow trees? No. They were as innocent as the people in Burbon. Despondency seemed to bite at his heels.

A look upon Jon, however, brought fight to his spirit. He thought of Burbon, of Linda, of seeing her again. “I won’t just give up. There has to be some way out of here.”

“I am open for suggestions.”

“Well, for one thing we can hope the sand giants reach us before the shadow trees.”

Lief considered the thought. It held merit. “That may indeed give us a chance. The sand giants have the power to break through this door. They might ignore us. Their single-mindedness might keep them from viewing us as an enemy.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

“Of course it won’t help Jon.”

Ryson’s spirits dropped slightly. “I didn’t think of that.”

“You will have to consider it. I know you well enough to realize that you won’t just leave him here to an attacking sand giant. In his current state, he would be

helpless. If we are indeed lucky enough to be freed by the giants, we must consider a way to protect Jon. Then, there is also the shadow trees. They may be dropped before the sand giants reach this place. The trees may not be able to break through rock, but their branches can slip beneath the cracks about the door. We will not be safe in here.”

“I know. I’m just hoping we don’t have to deal with that. I’m counting on the sand giants first or the dwarves themselves opening that door. After all, Petiole gave us some time. That may be what saves our lives. If we can get out of here, we still may have a chance of stopping this. I can retrieve my sword. Maybe put it in the hands of some of the other dwarf leaders. I don’t know. I’ll think of something. I just hope that Holli and Sy can fight off any dwarf attacks until then.”

Chapter 18

Yave seethed and ordered an immediate attack. “No more delays, no more waiting!”

Strog protested, the War Com was close to final preparations. “Two more days. That is all I need.”

Yave would not have it, refused the request. They would attack Burbon this very night.

Strog again resisted. “The main access tunnel from Dunop to Burbon is complete but I need more time. Several secondary tunnels remain unfinished.” His overall plan included a swarming attack from over two dozen surfacing points. He tried to make the obvious clear. “If we attacked now, we will be forced to push through only eight or ten sub-tunnels. My forces would be congested. It would take greater time for them to surface, longer for them to cover the strategic points needed for victory.”

He pointed to his well-crafted plan. He had all the information he needed. There were no mysteries of Burbon’s defenses. The initial strike force repelled by Sy and Enin provided Strog with a clear layout of the human town. He had chosen several points of attack based on this information. If allowed to finish the entire set of sub-tunnels, he could swarm over Burbon in one quick assault. Given the full complement of his dwarf army and the all-encompassing details of his invasion plan, he would wipe the surface clean of Burbon within a quarter of the night. For now, he was simply not ready.

The tunnels were not the only concern. He also needed time for the construction of war machines. Rock drivers, mobile heavy drills; only a few were complete and ready for combat. These weapons would ensure the destruction of the wall, towers and many buildings in mere moments. With a full arsenal, he could guarantee not a single structure in Burbon would remain standing by midnight.

Yave was far from impressed. Anger burned her thoughts like acid on an open wound. She would not wait for tomorrow’s twilight.

“The attack will begin tonight!” she ordered.

Strog continued to defy her, until she challenged him. She questioned his courage, his ability to defeat the humans if he did not have his way.

“What would you do if you could not prepare?” she asked. “Are you afraid of the humans, are they that much of a threat? If so, perhaps it is time for a new War Com.”

Strog fumed, but he realized the precarious weight of his situation. Young separatist dwarves had already scoffed at his preparations. They had their own ideas. The humans were weak. Why was so much needed to defeat them? The dwarves already suffered one embarrassment at the hands of this weaker race. It was time the humans learned a lesson, and learned it now.

His warriors grumbled with impatience. They resisted the work to construct his war machines. A good dwarf axe was all that was needed, or so they professed. Even his force commanders revealed reluctance for such measures. They reviewed his tactical points with half-hearted enthusiasm. Such impudence already forced his ire, more than once, and upon more than one force commander.

As Yave bellowed for an immediate attack, he thought of these warriors. They would side with her. It made him sick, but as a strategist, he needed to acknowledge the truth. Many of the separatist generals openly questioned the value of such preparations for an obviously inferior race. They wanted an earlier assault as much as the queen. If it came to a direct challenge between him and Yave, they would not side with him. If she wished to replace him as War Com, he doubted he could count on even minor support. One of them would gladly take his place.

Disgusting.

He considered the overwhelming contradictions of these facts. The separatists were basically anarchists. Or were they? They hated the thought of royalty controlling their lives. Yet, their hate for the humans and their blind sense of superiority would lead them to follow this queen, this symbol of the royalty they despised.

Idiots!

What was left for him? Open confrontation with the queen in a struggle he could

not possibly win? He would gain nothing in this. He cursed his fellow generals, cursed their arrogance and impatience. In the end, he grudgingly accepted his only true course of action.

Strog heeded to Yave's demands, but he vowed to himself it was his last concession. After Burbon was defeated, he would strangle her and throw her carcass from the heights of a palace tower. He would never be put in this situation again. Let her crushed bones symbolize the end of royal rule in Dunop.

As for the revolution, he now cursed it as well. The followers of this separatist movement were nothing more than spiteful, jealous jackasses. They cursed the monarchy because it represented what they did not have. They hated the elves, the algors, and especially the humans for all the same reason. They were not leaders, they were jelly. They could be molded by anyone that would feed their pathetic malice. Right now, the queen gave them their scapegoat, the humans. That's why they would follow her. That was the only reason.

But after this, after he disposed of Yave, they would follow him. If these so-called separatists defied him, he would have their heads as well. He doubted that would be necessary. He would offer them the next prize for their superiority. He would return to the desert and decimate the algors. That would feed the hate of these so-called separatists.

As Yave turned her back, moved out of the throne room with a victorious grin of blood thirst, Strog stared at the back of her neck. He could already feel the joy he would experience when his fingers took hold of that neck. He would not break it. No, her death would not be quick. He would choke her. Slow and painful. He would laugh as he released the tension for just a few moments. Let her breathe again, just once, just to keep her conscious for a few more heartbeats. Yes, this would be the last order he would follow.

Before leaving the throne room, he considered another of the queen's commands. His eyes found the dwarf cloak that covered the delver's sword. Yave ordered the sword covered. No one was to touch it. He wondered how long she would let it lie there. More foolishness. The crumpled cloth rested upon the floor as a testament to the folly of all her commands.

No more. He decided to make the first direct denial of her authority. He would take the sword, take it into battle and use it against the humans. Yave would hear

of it. Good. Let her call for him after he returned from destroying Burbon. He would find her, find her and strangle the life from her. It was long overdue.

For now, he would have to settle for the sword. It beckoned to him as much as Yave's neck, but this prize he could have immediately. His powerful fingers knifed toward the neck of the cloak, and he viciously ripped the cover from the fallen weapon.

The sword beamed bright. The throne room was bathed in the light of a hundred stars. The blade glowed with white fire, yet the light did not burn the eyes of the dwarf, it welcomed them. This weapon would be his.

His powerful arm reached to the floor. He took hold of the handle and lifted the sword to his face. He gazed with wonder up and down the glowing blade. He knew of this sword, knew it was labeled as the Sword of Decree. Ryson Acumen carried it within Sanctum Mountain. It was the weapon which destroyed Ingar's sphere. It was now his, and it would now mark his place in the legends.

As if responding to his wishes, the sword began to glow even brighter. It surged with power and many secrets revealed themselves to the holder. Revelations washed over Strog like a raging flood. He saw Holli and Sy building defenses. He understood their tactics at once. Their plan was sound, the strategy brilliant. The humans and elf archers represented a great threat to the dwarf army.

Still, he almost laughed. Now that he knew their true plan of defense, the danger vaporized. He would now alter his plans, attack the wall from the foundations beneath the ground. Not a single dwarf would be sent into the streets until the wall and every structure of Burbon was collapsed from below the soil. The archers would not be given a single target. He would sweep away the survivors in the rubble. Now, Burbon truly did not have a chance.

He saw more.

He saw the algors carving sand giants in the desert. Another threat. One he did not previously consider. They would be on the march soon. They would use the very tunnels dug by the dwarves which led to the sandstone mountain.

Let them come.

He would leave the tunnels intact. He would wait for the sand giants to move

through the openings into Dunop, but there they would fall. He would simply place a force of dwarves with rock crushers at the entrance. Sand giants would be a great threat in hand to hand combat, but he would not allow that. Catapults would bury the giants in boulders of granite. Pile drivers would break them apart, and diamond headed drills would grind them back into sand.

The revelations still did not end.

He saw a serp in the hills outside of Burbon, a serp watching this war very closely. The serp controlled many goblins, even a shag. Strog could not surmise what the creature truly wanted, but he knew such a serp presented yet another threat, one to be watched closely.

In this moment of discovery, Strog envisioned his growing power. He would be revered by other dwarves as a savior. He would lead Dunop into history with one victory after another. He would...

He saw the seeds. The elder elf of Dark Spruce even now was calling for them. The elves were preparing to drop them, not just yet, but soon. In the darkness of Dunop, they would grow. The shadow trees.

Fear gripped him like a shag trap. He trembled. No way to fight. No way to win. His army would be strangled in dark branches of death. His strategies and tactics would be useless. The image grew clearer in his mind. He saw Petiole, Petiole with the seeds. They would fall upon Dunop like rain. They would grow. Dunop would be destroyed. He would die a terrible, painful death.

#

“Strog has left.”

Yave looked at the servant, but said nothing. She knew Strog did not want to attack Burbon on this night. He was delaying. She would not have it, no more time would be wasted. The humans would die tonight.

“Tell Voth Stonepillar that he is now the new War Com. He will lead our forces against Burbon tonight.”

The servant hesitated. He mumbled the words, but spoke clear enough for Yave to comprehend. “The delver’s sword was found uncovered in the throne room,

your majesty.”

Yave erupted. “Have it covered immediately! No one is to touch it. When Strog is found, have him executed on sight. The same goes to any dwarf that touches the sword. See to it now!”

The servant turned and ran from the queen’s quarters.

Yave snarled. “That bastard. What did he see?”

She would never know for Strog was never found.

#

Voth Stonepillar took joy in bringing the force commanders under his authority, and they took joy in his desire for quick vengeance upon the humans.

“We attack tonight” the new War Com announced haughtily. “We will waste no more time on the construction of any war machines. In fact, I see no reason why we should weigh our warriors down with the burden of lugging them to Burbon. We will leave them here and attack in force as we did in Connel. How many surfacing tunnels have we constructed off the main tunnel?”

“Eight, sir,” came a proud response.

“That is all we will need. Bring the diggers back now.” Voth stole a glimpse out the window. The meager light of Dunop was already beginning to fade. The sun was setting on the surface.

“Strog was such a fool,” he declared without challenge. “If he had prepared for an attack rather than waste time digging all those tunnels, we would have already destroyed Burbon. As it is, we will not have time for a twilight attack.”

He turned his gaze back to Strog’s battle plan. He wanted to crumple it in a bold display of his own superiority, but he needed the map. He shook his fist as he called for the attention of his underlings.

“We still shall attack tonight. All squads will have the same orders. We are not here to take supplies from the humans. We don’t need them. The thrust of each team shall be to kill the humans and destroy their structures. Anything else will

be a waste of our time. I will assign each of you to a surfacing tunnel. In most cases, there will be at least five force commanders per tunnel. Therefore, I will also assign a number and direction for your squads. You will follow these numbers for your surfacing. After that, I leave you to your own discretion. Find the humans and kill them all. Leave no structure standing. Have all your warriors prepared for a midnight strike.”

#

Holli walked the wall. She nodded silently to those that offered a greeting. It was cold in the open air. Cold and dark. The light was focused on the ground. It would be easier to spot targets that way, easier to spot dwarves.

She doubted that would be the case tonight. It was long after sunset, much closer to midnight. She looked to the sky. Clouds hid the stars. She wondered if it might snow. It was early, but the dormant season was on its way. A few flurries in the dead of night would not be unheard of.

The thought of snow brought her a sense of peace. Quiet filled the land, a quiet she did not previously anticipate. In truth, she had expected an attack this night. Though neither she nor the human wizard could sense dwarves, Enin had cast a spell to sense the shifting of the ground. He said it was something like the web spell he created to catch the goblins. A powerful wizard. He detected the dwarves as they dug. They were constructing their tunnels directly beneath the center of town. When he professed that afternoon that the digging had ceased, Holli could only conclude that an attack was imminent.

With Sy’s approval, she had placed the defenders on their highest alert. She brought all the archers, both human and elf, to the walls and rooftops just before twilight. That was the normal time for a dwarf attack. It gave them the whole evening before they had to deal with the rising sun and its effect on their eyes. It was at that time Holli truly believed the attack would commence.

It did not.

Time passed as Holli steadied her archers and slingers, leaping from rooftop to rooftop like a squirrel dancing among the trees.

Sy stood with his ground forces in cold silence. He let his steel nerve lift the courage of his soldiers. Enin moved about the town like a shadow of death.

There was no gleam in his eye or prattling of new spells, only stark concentration on gathering every shred of magic lingering in the air.

The entire population of Burbon had waited at the ready in eerie silence. Frightened civilians, facing battle for the first time in their lives, gulped back their fear. Guards upon the ground, soldiers with the deadly task of diverting the dwarf warriors into the many crossfires, stood almost breathless. Silent prayers lingered on their lips. When someone coughed, it echoed through the streets like the death rattle of a god.

They had waited, but still nothing had happened. The sun set, the darkness grew, but still nothing. They spent the entire part of dusk and well into the darkness of evening ready to defend. Human and elf waited with growing anxiety. As all light vanished to the west, the tension increased to a point of frustration. They did not want to fight, did not want this war, but few could withstand the heavy weight of the seemingly endless vigil.

Sy had called to Holli only a short while ago, when he sensed the growing impatience of his soldiers. He asked for her council, openly wondered if the dwarves might be holding off for greater surprise.

Holli doubted it. She could not imagine dwarf commanders feeling the need for surprise to attack humans. She began to wonder herself if the attack would actually take place.

Her opinion was overheard and her words quickly spread. Relief began to replace the tension. Holli and Sy did not fight it. Half the volunteers were allowed to return to their homes for rest and food. They would return after midnight to relieve those that stayed in position.

Holli remained alert, however, even as her forces broke in half. She stayed with the defenders, she would take no rest this evening. She would wait until after sunrise before she would even consider sleep.

As for now, she welcomed the peace as she walked the length of the wall. It was surely close to midnight and hard to imagine a dwarf attack this late in the night. The dwarves had granted them a reprieve. Perhaps they would attack tomorrow. Or perhaps there would be no battle at all.

She thought of Ryson. She would hear word soon. Elf guards acting as scouts at

the perimeter of Dark Spruce already informed her that Ryson had returned without the cliff behemoth. Not words she wanted to hear, but they also told her he went to Dunop anyway. He would enlighten Yave with the Sword of Decree. That brought her hope. Maybe that was the reason for the peace on this evening.

Enin broke that peace.

“Holli! They’re back. They’re digging again.”

“Where?”

“Close. Very close to the surface.”

She almost cursed, but she discarded her emotions. She became as dark as an assassin and as determined as the north wind in a snow storm. She called first to the closest tower.

“Tower guard! Light your signal fires. Alert all positions, we are under attack! Have the bell rung. Everyone is to return to their posts.”

The bell rang immediately. The clang broke the peace just as the thought of battle chased away the cold. Clamoring in the streets followed. Those previously resting in their homes hurried into the streets. They looked to the towers first and read the signal fires. The message confirmed their greatest fears. Most ran to their positions, though some lost their courage, and took back to their homes.

Holli turned to those around her, to the humans that stood on the wall. Most of them never held a bow before two days ago, and except for a few professional soldiers, none had ever faced battle. She gave them a quick nudge of encouragement.

“Hold to your positions. Remember the men and women that risk their lives on the ground. For them, for your homes, pick your targets and aim with a mind to the threat this enemy represents. Distance yourself from fear, remorse or regret. Become the tool of your own survival.”

She turned back to Enin who stood upon the ground below her. “How close are they to the surface?”

“They are moving up fast. The ground is in total upheaval.”

Holli looked to the ladders filled with defenders. Many struggled to climb quickly. In their haste, they were creating bottlenecks. It would take time to redeploy the full complement of the archers and slingers.

Better news on the streets. Sy had the ground forces in position. The diversions would start well coordinated. Group leaders were already communicating through hand signals. All lamps burned brightly and the streets remained well lit. The nets and bulwarks waited as formidable obstacles to keep the dwarves from reaching key defense points. When the enemy surfaced, they would face considerable challenges, and a hail of arrow fire if the archers would only reach their positions in time.

As if to crush this hope, the first dwarf burst through the ground within one block of Holli's position. After the digger broke open the surfacing point, warrior dwarves began to pour out the opening.

Holli called out her first battle commands. "Tower guard. First dwarf tunnel at southwest region, block four. Signal all posts. Archers hold your fire. Let the ground forces bring them to the ambush points."

Holli looked again to the archers struggling to reach their elevated positions. Too many of them remained stranded on the ground or fighting to climb the ladders. She scanned the streets, searching for more dwarf surfacing tunnels. To her surprise, she could not find any others.

"Only one," she mumbled to herself with slight surprise. "I would have thought they would have been better coordinated. If we could just ..."

She stopped herself in mid-sentence as she yelled a request to the wizard. "Enin?! Can you seal that tunnel? Just for a moment. We need just a little more time."

Enin answered in the form of action. His arms spread over his head. The familiar white circles found their place at his wrists. With a flash of his hands, the circles erupted into a blast of energy which cascaded across the air like the rolling wheels of a freight train. The two circles of magic power plowed into the ground atop the opening of the dwarf tunnel. A seal of white magic formed about the opening, closing the exit to hundreds of dwarves still beneath the surface.

Enin called back to Holli. "They'll dig around it, but it will take some time. The

spell will fade quickly anyway. It would take too much energy to keep it in place for long. You have only a few extra moments.”

“That’s all we need. Thank you. Make haste wizard. I fear you will be needed more this evening and you are vulnerable upon the ground.”

Enin smiled. The elf not only requested his assistance, but acknowledged he would be needed again. He nodded his head before he swerved away in another direction.

Holli surveyed the current situation. All the archers were moving quickly now. A signal came from the tower across town to the east, then another from the north. Two more surfacing points appeared. She could not hope to seal those, but it no longer mattered. They appeared too late to take advantage of the momentary scramble. Her forces were now almost completely in place.

Another signal, another opening in the ground. The mass of the dwarf army would begin its swarm soon enough, but for now, she turned her attention to the first true threat.

Roughly thirty dwarves had surfaced from the first tunnel before Enin had sealed it. Their force commander was with them and had them in formation. The commander was taking his time, making observations as he waited for the remainder of his force to break through the blocked exit point. This was a seasoned warrior.

“Taking him out would certainly add to our advantage,” Holli whispered.

Her hands took to her bow. An arrow found the string. With fluid movement, her deft fingers pulled back the bow string and released it in one quick motion. The arrow sizzled through the dark, the feathers whistling through time and space. The razor sharp tip plunged in to the force commander’s neck, just above his armored breast plate.

The dwarf did not fall immediately. He fought against the gripping hands of death. He pulled the shaft from his body and threw it with disgust. He could not see the wound but he knew it was mortal. He glared back at the source of the strike, fiery hate raged in his eyes. He spat in Holli’s direction before he crumpled to the ground.

At first, the surfaced dwarves held their formation in the face of their commander's death, but many were raw recruits of the separatist movement. Like the humans on the wall, they had never faced true battle. Without a force commander, they shuffled about their positions. They looked to the sealed tunnel. Diggers were finally breaking around Enin's force field. Hope of reinforcements held them in place. They waited impatiently for support and for guidance.

Holli pressed upon their growing uncertainty. She ordered the archers around her to send a single volley of arrows at the dwarves. There was an immediate response.

The twang of bowstrings was nearly simultaneous. Dozens of arrows cut through the night, harbingers of death for the dwarf invaders. Some of the shafts bore the carved inscription of "Dwarf". Many of the tips were coated with poison.

Holli methodically surveyed the damage. Most arrows plunged into the ground. Others slammed against dwarf armor, the shafts shattering as the tips flattened against iron chest plates or helmets. A handful, however, found their mark and five dwarves dropped with fatal or serious wounds. She was pleased.

She stroked their confidence. "Good shooting, excellent shooting."

The dwarves below began to break. They scattered with little thought to direction. Some came to the wall and Holli ordered another volley. More dwarves fell. The archers cheered.

Holli nodded in approval. Over a dozen dwarves were down. The survivors ran without formation, no longer a threat. They would be taken out by other archers on rooftops or by Sy's men.

The thought of the ground forces compelled her to consider the battle as a whole. She looked to the towers. Signals of dwarf movement were becoming more frequent. Based on this information, she calculated only seven or eight surfacing points, more good news for she expected over a dozen. At the beginning, the dwarf forces would be clustered together, easier targets for her archers. She needed to move to other areas to check on their progress. Before she left, she handed command over to the senior guard soldier.

"Keep them firing at the surface point. Try to hold them down there as long as

possible. They won't stop coming up. There's probably hundreds down there. Slow them as much as you can and don't let your people get discouraged."

She yelled her final directions for all to hear.

"There is a long night ahead. Keep your fire focused on that surfacing point. Don't all fire at once. Remember your training. Shoot in groups of five, reload and wait for your turn to fire again. A constant barrage is better than intermittent larger ones, so keep the arrows flying. Pick your targets and try to make every arrow count. Don't be fooled. They'll eventually realize your position and they will come after you. If they attack the wall, break to safety and fire again. I'll be back as soon as possible."

#

Sy did not have to speak a single command to keep his men in the ready. His ground troops were the finest of Burbon. The elite. They knew their task, knew every hand signal of the group leaders. They waited within dark warehouses, in narrow alleys, and at crucial crossroads. They read the signal torches in the towers and knew of the dwarf positions before the battle commenced. The strategy of the elf guard and their own captain remained imprinted in their every thought. They held to their broadswords and shields as if these weapons were but extensions of their own arms. They waited with patience, without fear.

The first of the ground forces to go into action was granted a reprieve when Enin sealed the initial dwarf surfacing point. They would get another chance, but they would have to wait. They pulled back, returned to a dark alley as the situation was signaled to other commanders.

The second dwarf tunnel opened up near the eastern tower directly across from Holli's original position. Ground forces under the command of Ray Coale immediately readied for the first engagement. Coale's men, numbering twenty, waited in an abandoned warehouse as Coale signaled the enemy position and his intentions to the other group leaders in the vicinity. He would distract the dwarves from this tunnel and lead them to a crossfire of slingers and archers three blocks to the west.

The dwarf tunnel appeared just one block from the warehouse's main door. The street lamps burned bright and the dwarves surfaced in clear sight. Coale counted off the dwarves as they rose from the tunnel. He watched carefully as

they took their formation. They moved slowly, but deliberately. A dwarf force commander rattled off angry orders. As the dwarf leader called for a formation, the first thirty dwarves formed a three pointed wedge. They wore heavy armor. Coale could only imagine the strength needed to carry such weight in battle. The dwarves carried weapons of raw power, weapons such as axes and maces. A few held broadswords and mauls, but he saw no bows, long or cross.

With the formation in place, the first dwarf assault group moved forward. They stepped slowly almost clumsily, and in that, Coale's confidence grew.

Coale shifted his concentration from the surfacing point to the moving formation. More dwarves continued to evacuate from the hole, but Coale would not concern himself with these. He signaled the next closest ground team to divert this second enemy formation. The first would belong to him. He gave his first order just above a whisper.

“Loose circles. Keep them at bay, engage long enough to get their interest, then pull back at my command. Nothing fancy, no heroes means no casualties. Let the long range defenders earn their keep. We'll sure as blazes be earning ours.”

He moved out first with a staunch yell. He took to the open street and his men filled in behind him. They did as he asked, forming four loose circles, each of five men. They spread out knowing their greatest advantage was not their height, but their maneuverability.

Coale, a large man, towered over the approaching dwarves. He held out his sword with menace. His own bulk matched the stockiness of the dwarves, yet his greater height gave him overall size superiority. He motioned for the dwarves to attack, if they dared.

They did so with fervor.

The charge of the dwarves was almost laughable. They moved with all the speed and grace of an anchored cargo ship. Yet, no soldier could deny their uncanny strength or their unyielding will to conquer the enemy.

Under Coale's immediate direction, the circle formations spread wide and moved with the dwarf assault. Soldiers backpedaled slowly, allowing the dwarves to close only slightly. Three of the four circle formations each drew a bead on one of the three wedge points. The fourth waited in the rear as support.

Coale displayed caution with his antagonism. He allowed the dwarf force commander to believe he was willing to engage, but he was also moving with care. He gave ground slowly, showing no sign of his true intentions. The dwarves continued to pursue even as he led them to the place of their destruction.

As the invaders drew close, the soldiers at the forward points of the circles jabbed out with their swords. Those in the rear called out advances as the soldiers on the side perimeters stepped up and back to disorient the enemy's perspective of distance.

Coale kept a constant flow of backward movement, slow enough to keep the dwarves interested, fast enough to keep from full engagement. A few times, he allowed the invaders close enough to make a single strike. Blows from axes that landed upon his shield split the metal with long gashes. The power of the attacking dwarf vibrated through his own arm and shook his entire body. In such instances, he revealed no surprise, only a bizarre grin which enticed the dwarves into further pursuit.

As the conflict slowly yielded to a large open square, Coale suddenly ordered a fast retreat. The circle formations of his own men quickly dissipated as the soldiers took off to the four corners of the square.

The dwarves were left swinging at air as they could not pursue with the same speed. The dwarf commander eyed his surroundings and saw open streets in four separate directions. He quickly ordered the wedge to break into a square. He took the center as he attempted to surmise Coale's next move. He could not believe his eyes.

Coale's men took hold of long lines hanging from building corners. They pulled upon them with furious desire. Thick nets dropped from above and blocked all points of escape for the dwarves. Just as the last net hit the ground, arrows and rocks fell like rain from the sky.

The square formation broke as dwarves ran for cover that did not exist. Some hoped to cut the nets with their axes, but they moved so slow they fell victim before they could reach their target. Those that survived the volley of arrows, felt the sting of swords from Coale's men. Again, just as Holli's first ranged attack met with complete success, the first ground engagement proved one-sided with

the dwarves on the losing end.

#

Sy read the signals of these initial successes just as his own contingent was about to enter the battle. The eighth and final surfacing point appeared four blocks from his position. He could not have asked for better placement, and he wondered how the dwarves could have made such a tactical error. He could only assume the dwarves hastily completed their tunnels without scouting. If they had, they would have never chosen this point for surfacing, and he would not allow this blunder to go unpunished. In response to the dwarf miscalculation, he moved his attack group immediately, even as the first dwarves emerged.

The tunnel opened upon the street just in front of a sturdy barricade. Two separate lines of heavy tree trunks blocked all northern passage. Sharpened ends pointed down to dwarf level, waited like the fanged smile of a dragon. When the first dwarf commander struck to the surface, she cursed this dilemma. She did not expect the humans to prepare such bulwarks. Her forces could break them, but it would slow them and they were already bottlenecked in the tunnel.

Sy double-timed his men up from the south as he blessed his own luck. Two bands of archers and one group of slingers waited upon the rooftops directly over the dwarf tunnel. They waited for his signal, without giving away their own position to the enemy. They moved into place silently overhead, using the shadows for cover, and though the dwarves could see through this darkness, they did not think to look skyward.

This was a definite ambush point, a place Sy had hoped to bring the enemy, a place like many others around Burbon where the battle would be fought to their own advantage. The dwarves had stumbled upon it now by their own choosing. If Sy could keep them here, the dwarf army would suffer greatly.

His first battle command was to light two waiting hay carts ablaze. His men sent the flaming wagons directly at the tunnel entrance. The dwarves struck at the carriages, breaking them into splinters, but the burning hay dropped upon them like scorching rain. The darkness overhead scattered and the entire dwarf position looked like a fireworks display.

Sy signaled for the ranged attack to begin with the attack of the carts. Arrows and rocks followed the burning hay. The initial barrage was awe-inspiring as

dwarves crumbled in surprise as well as agony. The flying embers blinded them to the archers' position. They could not comprehend the depth of their situation.

The dwarf formations broke apart before they could take hold. The force commander cursed her own warriors, screamed at them to fall into place, but only confusion reigned. Despite her ranting, the warriors sought safety that did not exist. Some attempted to scramble back down the tunnel which served only to slow the exiting dwarves even more.

Sy's men lit another cart, then another. They kept these at hand, used them to block any southern escape. The bright light of the fires dissuaded the dwarves from approaching. Sy's men stood without challenge while the enemy fought against the volley of arrows and stones from above.

The dwarves were trapped and many panicked, but the force commander kept her head. She crouched low and used her armor as protection against the hail of projectiles. She ordered her warriors to follow suit. If they could maintain a formation, she knew they could break through the northern bulwark with their axes.

Her warriors failed to respond. Only a handful followed her direction, and though these were safe for the moment, they could only watch as their comrades fell. Those that lost their heads scurried about against her orders. They moved in anger and in confusion. They set at first to breaking the bulwark. When they could not reach it, desperation led them to the flaming carts.

With some dwarves now moving toward the wagons, Sy ordered the appropriate response. As many of his men had crossbows draped over their backs, he directed their immediate use. Now, arrows struck from ground level as well as above. The arrows cut down the dwarves in handfuls. The dead piled about the surfacing point. His men remained calm even as the invaders hastened about in pure confusion.

Sy signaled the situation to the surrounding group leaders. He read the responding signal fires from the towers. He was not alone in success. The first battles were indeed going their way. Ground forces all over town were diverting dwarf attack parties into waiting ambushes while archers were keeping a steady stream of arrows upon every surfacing tunnel. From what he could tell, the dwarves were armed only with standard weapons. There was not a single report

of a war machine. The enemy had come with arrogance and was now paying the price.

Sy hoped the price would include a hasty retreat, an end to this battle before it wrought even more carnage, but the fury he saw in the dwarf commander kept him from holding long to such hope.

#

Voth Stonepillar growled at the dwarves in front of him. His forces were not moving quickly enough through the tunnels. He was trapped below the surface long beyond what he had hoped. Worse, he began hearing reports of battles, battles with unsettling outcomes. Dwarf casualty reports were mounting even as he stood stuck in that infernal tunnel.

“What is happening?” he demanded of his aide-de-camp.

The aide could not answer. He was stuck as well, and there was no room in the tunnel for a forward runner. Every single branch of the main tunnel was clogged with dwarf warriors. Only rumors drifted back from the lines.

“Why aren’t we moving?” Voth demanded again.

“The main body of our force is progressing,” the aide assured without really knowing.

“How do you know?” Voth snarled.

The aide decided to return to silence.

Voth’s patience was at an end. He began pushing his way forward. Warriors ahead of him scowled and cursed, until they saw his armor crest. In the presence of the War Com, they quickly bit back their complaints.

Voth moved to a sub-tunnel which led to the western edge of Bourbon. He continued to press through the packed corridor even as his aide became trapped in the cluster of dwarves. Cursing and shouting, the new War Com pushed to the end of the passage. Just at the surfacing point, his eyes fell heavily upon the dwarf in charge of attack coordination. His hands fell even heavier as he took hold of the monitor by the armor.

“What is going on?”

“We are being slowed,” the monitor replied with distaste for Voth’s hold upon him.

Voth did not remove his thick hands. “Slowed by what?!”

The coordinator pushed Voth’s hands away. He had no love or respect for this War Com. Strog was the true War Com, replaced unjustly by the royalist swine that dared to call herself queen.

Voth stared in disbelief at the monitor’s disrespect. “Slowed by what?” he repeated.

“Resistance!” the coordinator replied with defiance.

“Resistance? From the humans? That’s impossible. Get these warriors moving. I want them up on the surface immediately!”

“Fine.”

The coordinator waved to the waiting warriors. “You heard the War Com. Get moving. Everybody moves.”

The first warriors in line hesitated.

Voth exploded. He grabbed one around the waist and literally threw the warrior up beyond the opening. He grabbed others waiting behind and forced them upon the surface as well. The line started to move and Voth’s face lit up with satisfaction. He turned upon the coordinator with vengeance.

“You are relieved of your post and duty. The queen will be interested to hear how you have slowed our progress.”

The monitor did not need to reply. A chorus of death cries from outside the tunnel formed a response for him. He simply looked upon the War Com with his own silent satisfaction.

Voth stopped the line. “What was that?”

“The death of twenty or so warriors. Their blood is on your hands.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the resistance from the humans. They have already pinpointed this tunnel. They have nets surrounding the opening. They also have a host of archers on rooftops and out of our reach. As soon as our warriors file into a formation to tear down the nets, they get routed.”

“Archers? Nets?”

“Yes. Leaving this tunnel is like committing suicide.”

“Then send them down another tunnel,” Voth ordered.

“Which one? There are only eight. There are already too many dwarves per surfacing point. We have close to a thousand dwarves backed up at this one alone. Every one is clogged and I assume every one is under heavy attack.”

“This can’t be.”

“But it is. If we had used Strog’s battle plan, this never would have happened. Our entire force would already be upon the surface. We would have been able to bring down the walls and buildings the archers are standing upon. Instead, we are stuck down here while the humans pick us off despite our superiority in arms, strength, and numbers.”

“Strog is gone,” Voth shot back, unable to respond in any other fashion. “We have to attack with what we have.”

“Don’t be a fool. These warriors do not deserve to die. Give them a chance at victory.”

“And what is it you suggest? What great plan do you have?”

Voth did not expect an answer, but he received one just the same.

“I’ve already called for diggers to branch off this tunnel toward the wall. They will surface at its base. That is where the greatest number of archers are positioned. We will surface there and crumble the wall. A force commander can

then take a formation to rip apart the nets that contain this tunnel. Once the nets are down, we can exit from both points. If we get four strike teams of fifty warriors each, led by seasoned force commanders, upon the streets, we can begin to take the battle to the humans.”

“You ordered this on your own?”

“I did.”

Voth boiled but withheld any condemnation. He turned with a defeated grumble.

“Send a runner back to keep me informed. I will see to the remainder of our forces.”

#

Sy kept his men in tight formation. They jabbed at any dwarf that succeeded in reaching the still blazing carriages, but they did not engage beyond that point. Arrows from crossbows saw to the demise of any surviving stragglers.

Even as the dwarves fell, one sight disturbed the captain of the guard greatly. Despite the number of dwarves that had succumbed to the ambush, dozens more continued to emerge from the underground tunnel. After fifty, he hoped they would slow. After a hundred, he hoped they would stop. They did neither. It quickly became a matter of numbers. There were not enough arrows and stones to keep all these dwarves at bay.

Worse, the dwarves that now surfaced and witnessed the carnage began following the advice of the force commander. As she remained crouched upon the open ground, she was nearly invulnerable to the barrage of projectiles. Though dozens of arrows struck her, they bounced harmlessly off her armor. As the other invaders now followed her example, the number of threats on the surface increased exponentially.

With a formidable force now on the surface, the commander called for the execution of a battle plan. She used the blade of her axe to cover her face as she called orders to the others. Slowly, they fell into formation to handle the bulwark. Tightly bound together, they used each other as shields. They trudged forward to the pointed stumps of the northern obstacle. Once in arm’s reach, one after another would rise up and swing an axe or mace. Their mighty weapons

made short work of the barricade. Splinters of tree trunks quickly replaced the once formidable bulwark. With the northern passage free, the force commander ordered an immediate advance.

Sy followed with an order of retreat. He did not wish to leave the tunnel unattended, but it was now necessary. If they remained, he knew what would happen. The force commander was probably circling around even now. If he kept his soldiers in place, he would be caught between her and the tunnel. There would be no escape.

He signaled his new plans to the archers as he moved his force quickly to the west. Before leaving, he took one last glance at the battleground. Dead dwarves lay strewn across the open road like lumps of stone in a gravel pit. He estimated well over two hundred casualties for the enemy and none for his own force. Even with such overwhelming evidence of a one-sided battle, Sy could not chase the feeling of impending disaster.

Perhaps it was the number of dwarves that continued to file out of the tunnel, or perhaps it was the cold chill in the air beyond the burning wagons, but whatever caused it, Sy felt little more than dread for the remainder of the battle.

#

Enin walked silently through the streets unseen by both friends and foes. A spell of deception hid his existence. The light bent around him. Emptiness swallowed his footfalls. It was not quite invisibility, for he could be seen if one looked directly at him and was well aware of his presence. If not, he was nothing more than a disturbance in the air, a breeze not worth noticing.

From alley to alley, he moved through the town examining every facet of the burgeoning battle. It became quickly apparent that Sy's faith in Holli would be rewarded. The placement of troops and obstacles blended together perfectly. The advantage rested squarely with the town's defenders. As the number of fallen dwarves mounted, Enin could not find a single wounded human. As dwarves fell to the host of arrows and stones, they could not lay their hands upon the daring defenders. Ropes and ladders allowed ground troops to escape the wrath of this short-armed enemy. Dwarves were left grasping at air, cursing the humans and facing a hail of projectiles.

He continued to drink in the magic as he watched the ongoing battle with great

attachment. He could not distance himself from his neighbors that fought so bravely, and though he wished to conserve his energy, he could not refrain from assisting in his own unique way.

He cast only a few minor spells, nothing to call attention to himself. He cast near invisibility upon a group of trapped soldiers to help them escape. He strengthened a barricade forcing dwarves to turn into another ambush. He crumbled the opening of one of the dwarves' surfacing tunnels with a wind spin. His acts saved lives. This he knew, but he knew more.

An awareness sparked within his essence. Beyond the sensation of magic, beyond the spell allowing him to read minds, he could sense the very soul of this battle. It was taking shape before him, growing like an infected wound. It grew angrier, a hurricane feeding on warm waters. It was feeding on the emotions of the participants, from fear to courage, from anger to exultation.

He looked to the sky above and beyond. In a moment of sheer cognizance, he saw the universe, the dimensions above, beyond and within. In an instant, he understood how the magic opened pathways for the dark creatures to enter his land. He saw the true homes of goblins and shags. He shivered.

Yet, with each fear came hope. He understood the immortality of his own soul. He saw the unending path of life. Circles, declines, ascents; the avenues were endless. He understood death and its lie to those unaware. Above all, he saw the true faces of angels and demons. To this point they came. They waited, the angels with patience, the demons with hunger. They were here to collect the souls of the dead, to guide or to trap. This battle was calling to them. This battle would offer them much.

Tears rolled down Enin's cheeks. Tears of joy, tears of despair; he experienced joy for what he was becoming, suffered despair for what was happening around him. He understood that this battle was only beginning. Death would take many more before this night was over, more from both sides. How many of his friends would die on this day? How many souls would be lost because of this monumental stupidity?

But what of him? He was growing in power, growing in knowledge. He could save them.

The tide of battle turned with the first collapsing portion of the wall. The supplementary tunnel which allowed the dwarves access to its base gave them their first success. Heavy maces broke the foundation, and the wall section collapsed instantly. A dozen archers fell with the stone, fell into the waiting hands of the enemy. Death was quick, if not clean. The heavy ball of a mace did as much damage to human bone as it did to stone and wood.

More dwarves surfaced and more of the wall was destroyed. Dwarf force commanders brought their warriors into attack formations and brought down the nets with razor sharp axes. After that, the change of fortunes was so swift it was almost frightening.

Seven strike squads took off in separate directions and the dwarves now had unrestricted access to the surface. In mere moments, they took control of a three block square. Buildings supporting archers were brought down with crashing immediacy. The strike squads under the barking orders of seasoned force commanders advanced with great destruction. Crash after crash filled the night. Burbon was being taken apart piece by piece.

As the invaders took greater ground, their own strength increased. Surfacing points were cleared of threats and the number of surface bound invaders grew with leaps and bounds. More strike squads formed and their ability to encompass larger sections of Burbon expanded.

The human ground forces tried to break the attackers, divert them to new ambush points. This time, the dwarves did not respond. They ignored the diversions, keeping their mind and weapons upon the structures that held the ranged threats. More and more archers and slingers were brought to the ground with the sheer force of the enemy's numbers and power.

There was little the defenders could do. They were now out positioned by a force with strength beyond their reckoning. How could they fight a foe which could destroy their defenses with a single swing?

Desperation overwhelmed the human ground forces. They forgot their initial successes. They began frontal assaults and full engagement with the enemy. Dire results. Soldier after soldier fell as the dwarf warriors moved forward.

Holli leapt about the town with speed almost matching a delver. She ordered all archers to shoot and move. It was their only chance. If they stayed positioned,

they were inviting disaster.

On the ground, Sy recalled all the ground forces. He rallied them at the center of Burbon in front of the guard headquarters. He ordered a rearming. They would switch to poison-tipped spears and crossbows and hold an angled line which would cut from here to the two eastern corners of town.

Holli noted the adjustment and redeployed her archers to hold firm at these lines. She dropped to the ground to meet with the captain.

“I never could have guessed they would have sent so many,” she apologized.

Sy focused on the here and now. “What is it going to take to stop them?”

Holli said nothing, but the question was answered.

“I can stop them.” Enin seemed to appear out of no where. Seriousness covered his face like a death mask.

The darkness of his expression took the breath from both Holli and Sy.

The elf recovered first. “What will you do?”

“I can blind them and disrupt the ground beneath them. Attacking them directly will be of little value. As you well know, they are resistant to magic, but they are not as resistant to the blinding light of the sun. That is what they will see. They will also not be able to stand upon ground that shakes or in tunnels that collapse. The two spells combined will leave them defenseless for a temporary period. If you charge them, they will not be able to protect themselves.”

Holli remained reserved. “A spell of light that strong will take a great deal of power.”

“I have spent the night collecting what will be necessary.”

“There are thousands of warriors on the surface. You can hit them all?”

“The light will form right above us. Any dwarf that looks towards us will be blinded momentarily. As for the force blast, I will succeed in knocking a good number off their feet, many unconscious. I will not be able to seal the tunnels

completely, but it will certainly cause havoc down there.”

Sy finally managed to enter the conversation. “Will they retreat?”

Enin spoke with cold confidence. “I would bet on it. They will not like what they see.”

Sy asked the only remaining question. “What will it do to you?”

“It will exhaust me, that is all. I won’t be able to cast many spells for a while, but I will certainly survive.”

Holli’s doubt over the spell caster’s knowledge surfaced one last time. “Do you really know what you’re doing?”

Enin did not answer.

Sy did not accept the silence. “Well? Is there a danger to us?”

“No more danger than those approaching dwarves,” Enin replied logically.

Sy glanced down the western streets leading to the town center. Two dozen formations of dwarves crept closer. He estimated close to twelve hundred dwarves closing on his position. He wondered how many stalked him from back alleys. He surveyed the number of his own men. Maybe a few hundred on the ground, he wasn’t sure how many archers remained on the rooftops. He couldn’t hope to divert this many dwarves, couldn’t possibly stop them. They would take the guard quarters and the store of weapons. What would happen if they armed themselves with the crossbows that waited in the stock rooms?

“Do what you have to do,” the captain said firmly.

“I will prepare the archers to fire after you cast your spells,” Holli echoed without emotion. She shimmied up a dangling rope as if it were a tree branch. In a single blink of the eye, she was upon the rooftops and readying her ranged attackers.

Enin gave her but short notice. Once he saw the elf on her way, his concentration fell upon his own task. He gripped his hands before him, whispered words unintelligible to those around him. He began to glow, brighter than the

surrounding lamps. He appeared to burn, a flaming phoenix of white magic. His words grew in volume and power.

The dwarf invaders came to an abrupt halt. Force commanders stood silent in the streets. They saw the power, and understood. This was a power which vexed them throughout ancient history, a power which far surpassed their own intrinsic strength, a power which they could not harness themselves. Some cursed, some ordered charges. Those that advanced only guaranteed the obliteration of their own warriors as Enin's spell came to full fruition.

Two glowing spheres of white circled Enin about his whole body. They erupted to the sky like plumes of smoke from a volcano. The circles of pure magical energy found a place over Burbon's heart, low in the sky. They merged. They flared. A midnight sun. Daylight came to this town before sunrise and the dwarves covered their faces in pain.

A second blast of power emerged from the human wizard. This one shot forward. It hit the ground at the feet of the invaders. The ground crumbled like powdered sugar in a windstorm. Dwarves fell in panic and confusion, still shielding their eyes from the blinding light overhead.

Holli ordered an immediate attack. Everyone fired, everyone at once. They fired over and over without a thought to conserving ammunition. Arrows and stones fell upon the dwarves from all directions.

Dwarf force commanders ordered a retreat, but their warriors were blind and disoriented, many unconscious.

Sy brought his soldiers to a wedge. They stormed the closest group of enemies. Poison tipped spears guaranteed swift death to those dwarves that survived the barrage of projectiles from above. A fierce cry of victory erupted as the humans felt the tide of battle sway decidedly to their side.

In this swell of emotion, the captain advanced his forces further, determined to take back more territory. Confidence renewed, the soldiers responded with ferocity. Block by block the soldiers moved forward, smashing the remains of the broken dwarf formations. No longer caring about creating diversions, the ground forces eagerly moved into direct and full engagement with the enemy, an enemy that could no longer use its great strength.

Blinded dwarves at the forefront of the assault had little chance. Reinforcements were trapped in half destroyed tunnels. They could not see, their strength meant nothing, and the human soldiers fell upon them like hungry jackals. They tried to retreat and regroup, but they moved slowly and without clear vision. Each attempt at escape normally met with disaster as Sy's ground forces began to move with swift vengeance.

The dwarves at the rear could do little in support. The blinding light burning overhead hampered their ability to offer reinforcements. They struggled to maintain lines of supply and support, but they failed in the face of Enin's spells. The display of such powerful magic crippled dwarf morale, sent them seeking refuge. The force commanders attempted to rally their warriors, but failed as dwarf soldiers worried as to what other spells might break their own forces.

Voth witnessed this turn of events with frustration. He lacked the knowledge and experience to cope with such a counter-attack. His forces were being decimated as the infernal light gave a distinct advantage to the humans. He looked to the eastern night sky with even greater dismay. A faint glow of orange beckoned his fears. Sunrise was near, and it would add to his problems. The wizard could cancel his own spell of light once the natural sun rose. He could then turn his powerful magic to other responses. The War Com looked to his retreating warriors, they had already suffered casualties mounting in the thousands. A staggering number. His force was down to less than a third of its original size. If he allowed this battle to continue, he risked total annihilation. Reluctantly, bitterly, he ordered full retreat.

The dwarves took to what was left of their tunnels. Retreat was as unceremonious as expected. Dwarf warriors dropped sullenly into the ground. As the last warriors fled, they did not even take the time to collapse the openings.

Once more the humans cheered.

With the dwarf threat evaporated, Enin ended his spell just as the first fiery edge of the sun appeared over the eastern horizon. He did not collapse in exhaustion. He merely stood still, tired and weak, watching the celebration of his victorious neighbors.

Sy ordered an immediate search of the town. The wounded, both dwarf and

human, were quickly taken to makeshift hospitals for care. Any straggling invaders were not pursued or taken prisoner, they were allowed to leave through the tunnels. Sy had no desire to spark further animosity.

As the last traces of the enemy force dissolved, Sy looked over the carnage. Over a quarter of his town was in ruins. The dead of both sides draped the streets. He was on the side of victory, but he could not find it within himself to celebrate.

Holli took to his side as he wandered through the streets.

Sy acknowledged her with praise. "I have to thank you. You did a marvelous job. If we were on our own, I don't think we would have made it."

"I don't know," Holli responded thoughtfully. "It was your wizard that truly won this battle and it is because of your wizard that I doubt the dwarves will come back."

"You think this was it, we won't have to go through this again?"

Holli looked far to the west before replying. Large sections of the wall which once encircled Burbon were now nothing more than rubble. Nothing blocked her view of the edge of Dark Spruce. She thought of her camp, she thought of Petiole, and she thought of Ryson.

"Ryson has had time to speak to Yave. He has either failed to convince her or he has succeeded. If he has succeeded, there will be no more attacks. If he has failed, Petiole will drop the shadow trees in but three days. The dwarves will not be able to regroup in that time. Even if they did, I doubt they would want to face the wizard which they now know protects this place. No, they will not be back."

"What do you think happened to Ryson?" Sy asked hopefully.

"I do not know. I can only suppose he is doing his best to get his sword in the hands of the dwarf queen. If he can succeed in that, I believe we will all see an end to this war. If he does not, I doubt he will be as lucky as we were tonight."

Again, Sy looked to the destruction of his town. He saw the motionless corpses.

"Damn."

Chapter 19

Sazar strolled through the clearing toward Burbon with confidence. He watched the previous night's battle from the hills. He received many reports from goblin scouts. He knew the dwarves were forced to retreat, he knew the casualties they suffered.

He also knew the humans were tired, probably incapable of fighting off another assault. He knew of the powerful wizard, but he understood magic and how it would take time for the magic caster to regain enough energy to return to a true threat. He knew of the great damage to the wall, and as this allowed him clear sight of Burbon's streets, the destruction of so many buildings offered him little surprise. Indeed, he knew much, and he knew the great opportunity which awaited him.

It was not Burbon that enticed him. Though his forces could easily defeat the remnant forces of the human guard, his greed centered upon more worthy riches. His snake-like eyes gleamed like the treasures that waited within Dunop; light gems, diamonds, gold. His scaly tail swished with delight at the thought of such wealth.

It would be easy. He would need only a platoon of goblins and his shag. The shag would overpower any dwarf sentinels and the goblins would quickly collect the treasures. Any other resistance from the dwarves would be token at best. The fight of their warriors had been shattered by the power of the wizard. There was little left of their pride, and probably less of their desire to fight. All he needed now was to follow the weakened force back to its home. His mind focused upon the new tunnels dug by the dwarves. He wanted access to them. His own captured tunnel led from Burbon to the hills, but these new tunnels, they led directly to the dwarf underground city. Of course, he could have used his smaller tunnel to access this new passage, but his shag would exhaust itself in digging to make the connection. He did not wish to waste the time or his shag's energy, especially when a better alternative waited within Burbon itself. Besides, he wished to keep his own tunnel a secret. It might be needed in the future.

Defiance blazed in his eyes as he glared at the battered, tired guards that stood in the rubble of Burbon's western gate. He was unarmed. He was alone. The hills were at his back as he stepped over open ground. He was surely an inviting

target for one of the guard's spears, but he did not fear such an attack.

The guards watched the serp with equal amounts of suspicion and fatigue. No goblins escorted the creature. There was no sight of a raiding party or a shag bodyguard. Still, the soldiers knew of the serp's reputation. Though they stood in near exhaustion, an entire night without sleep and facing the dwarves in battle, they knew they could not lower their watch against the approaching serp.

Sazar stepped up to the guards as if he were approaching simple ticket handlers at a sideshow. He spoke with disregard to their importance.

"I wish to speak to the captain of your guard."

One guard exhaled heavily before responding. "What do you want?"

"I just told you what I want," the serp replied with impatience.

"So what? You think you can walk up and speak to the captain? Give me a reason why I shouldn't run you through right now."

The serp scowled. "If you kill me, there will be no one to control the hoard of goblins that stands ready to attack."

The threat forced the guard to retreat from his aggressive stance. He looked to one of his partners. "Go get Sy."

With a weary nod, the other guard accepted the task and jogged off in a tired gait. The first guard kept a close eye on the serp even as he felt the heavy drag of exhaustion on his bones. He was quite happy to see his partner return with Sy in attendance.

Sy nodded at the guard before placing his focus squarely on the serp. Though fatigue hung on his spirit as well, the captain appeared fresh and aware.

"I'm Sy Fenden. I'm the captain of the guard. What do you want?"

Sazar did not waste time explaining his desires. "I want access to the tunnels used by the dwarves. I wish to follow them with a force of my own."

"Excuse me?"

Sazar sighed. Dealing with humans was extremely tiresome. “I want access to the tunnels used by the dwarves. I want to pursue them to their home city. Is that so hard to understand?”

“Yes, it is,” Sy said angrily. “What are you going to do?”

“That is not your business.”

“So you just want me to let you walk through town until you find one of their tunnel entrances, and then, you’ll just be leaving?”

“Not just me. I will bring one shag and several goblins with me.”

Sy’s face turned to stone. “Forget it.” He turned to the guards. “Take him prisoner. He’s caused us enough trouble over the last season. This is it for him.”

The words of the captain were unwelcome, but not unexpected. Sazar enlightened him. “I wouldn’t do that. An entire army of goblins waits beyond those hills. They wait and they watch us, even now. If you take me, they already have their orders. They will attack immediately.”

Sy fought off the concern which he felt rising in his midsection. “How many goblins?”

“Do you think I will tell you?”

“It’s probably just a small raiding party,” Sy shot back.

“I am the serp who has taken control of a shag’s mind. How many goblins do you think I might then also be able to control? Ponder that while you also consider the current status of your own town. There is little left of your wall. Your western towers have been leveled. Your men are tired. They are not prepared to face another full assault, especially one consisting of crossbow fire. Do you have many archers left in position? Do they have many arrows remaining? I think not.”

“We were able to defeat the dwarves. We can stop you,” Sy growled.

“Yes, yes, the dwarves. Give my congratulations to your wizard for that powerful display of his. Quite impressive. Creating a ball of fire, daylight before

sunrise, quite a powerful spell. And a force blast on top of it. Indeed powerful. I give him his due. Of course, I'm sure he's not prepared for another such spell. I'm sure he's quite tired."

"We're all tired, but we'll fight you if we have to."

"But you don't have to," Sazar noted. "Listen and listen well. I want supplies for the dormant season. I could take them from you. Your forces are out of position, and your defenses are crushed. It would take little effort to break through the clearing on this day. Once we reach the rubble that is left of your town, how would you fight us? My goblins are small. They could use the broken remains as cover. They can hide in every crevice and fire at will. The thing is, I don't want anything from you beyond access to the tunnels. The dwarves have what I want. I wish to follow them now. I will take a raiding party of goblins with me, as well as my shag. I do not wish to be stopped or questioned. I will also need safe passage when we return. Again, I expect that I won't have to answer to you."

Sy grimaced. He did not wish to give the serp what he wanted.

Sazar acknowledged the glint of defiance, challenged the captain with his own understanding of the situation.

"Do not misunderstand what I offer. I do not offer any kind of alliance. We will not become fast friends. We are on different sides. That will always be the way. I assume after you rebuild your town and regain your strength, we will again become hard adversaries. But right now you have something I want. I also offer something you desperately need, a respite. I can hold off any attack against you. By now, you must realize that I have been behind the many goblin raids against your town."

"Raids that have consistently failed," Sy interjected with a steely, proud tone.

Sazar scoffed. His snake-like eyes peered deeply into the captain's face. His own voice grew colder, harsher. "That is when you had a wall and well rested guards. At this moment, you have neither. Let me ask you again, how would you stop a full-fledged goblin assault at this moment? My forces can move in the day as easily as in the night. I have a shag at my disposal. I would lose goblins, I do not deny that, but what would be my reward? I could own this town. Take the tunnels by force. You can not afford to fight me now. Admit it. The plain truth is so simple. You would have survived the dwarf attack only to be decimated by an

army of goblins. Everything you own would be mine.”

Sazar held up a clawed hand to hold any rebuttal until he was finished. “We have diverged from my true point. I do not want to attack you this day. The reward would not be worth the effort, especially when a more profitable bounty waits at the end of the dwarf tunnels. That is what I will have this day, with or without your acceptance. The question for you is simple. Will you make me take the tunnels by force, or will you accept my proposal for a temporary truce?”

Sazar allowed a knowing smile before continuing. “Perhaps you should consult with your elf friend. Oh, do not act surprised. I know there is a contingent of elves here, allies in your battle against the dwarves. I also know that they are just as tired and out of position. Elves like to fight from elevated positions. Look around at the crumbled buildings and at the shattered wall. Where will the elf archers perch themselves? There are no rooftops left in this section of town. The dwarves saw to that.”

Sy turned from the serp. He looked far into the hills. He tried to guess how many goblins might be hiding out of his sight. He thought of his soldiers. He didn’t believe they could survive another attack. Still, the thought of offering assistance to this abominable creature gave him pause.

“I don’t think I can help you,” he said almost despondently.

“Then you invite attack.”

Sy rubbed the back of his neck. Fatigue clouded his thoughts. “What other choice do I have?”

“You can accept the inevitable.”

“Maybe I can’t. The thought of helping you makes me sick.”

“Do not be so stubborn, human. Do not think of it as helping me. Think of it as protecting those that live in this town. Is that not your responsibility? You are not helping me; you are simply giving me passage. That is all I want from you. Don’t be foolish.”

“I could take you prisoner, use your worthless life to bargain for time,” Sy shot back suddenly.

The serp did not hesitate for a moment. “Then do so. Do so right now. Lead me away from this spot. As you do, watch the hills. My goblins will rise over them before I move more than three steps.”

“Maybe not. If I threaten your life, they might stay back.”

Sazar laughed, a deep hearty laugh. It surprised Sy.

“What’s so damn funny?”

“You give the goblins more credit that they deserve. Do you think they can act on their own? They have their orders. They will follow these blindly. They would walk into their own stupid death. They are as dim-witted as the rocks around you, but they do not question my commands. They will attack if you even try to take me hostage. It will probably mean my death, but it will mean yours as well, and the death of everyone you’re supposed to protect.”

The serp’s eyes sparkled. His forked tongue danced with the rhythm of his words. “Don’t you understand why I came here like this? There is only one choice for you. It is not between giving me what I want or sending me away. It is between giving me what I want or seeing the complete obliteration of everything around you. I know you won’t have that. You fought too bravely against the dwarves to let it end like that. But that is why I am here. There is no bargaining, no alternatives. You give me what I want and we all live. Deny me, and there is death. Death for me, yes, but also death for you, and more importantly death for the other humans you are sworn to protect. I understand that. Do you not accept this?”

Sy did not respond.

Sazar did not wait for a reply.

“Good. We finally understand each other. If it leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, I take pleasure in that.”

Sy folded his arms at his chest. “Before you leave, I want more assurance from you. You say you won’t attack if I let you pass, but what happens when you return with whatever it is you want? I have no idea how long it will take you. You could be back before noon and then order an attack. My people will still be tired, the wall will still be down. Seems to me that I really don’t have any

alternatives at all. You have an opportunity to attack, you just want to wait until you get your hands on some of the dwarf treasure first.”

Sazar responded as if insulted. “I assure you, I will want nothing from you after I succeed with my initial quest in Dunop.”

“Not good enough. Right now, you want the tunnels, but after you get what you want, you might not resist attacking us anyway. Now, I’m not foolish enough to believe you will stand by your word, but I think we can come to a different understanding.”

“And what might that be?” Sazar asked with a growing dislike for the human’s tone.

“You say you’re willing to die right now. I don’t believe that. I think you’re here alone only because you know I won’t do anything while the threat of your army hangs over my head. What’s more, I think if you get what you want from the dwarves, you’ll want to stay alive that much more. So here’s my deal. You come through with your goblins and your shag. We won’t stop you, but when you come back, you stay with us for two days. That will give us time to rest and rebuild some of our defenses.”

“You can’t be serious,” Sazar said.

“You stay,” Sy said firmly. “You and you alone. You can send your shag and your goblins back, but you remain here. It’s very simple. I know that you won’t order an attack if your life is really in danger. I can bet on that.”

“And how do I know you’ll keep your word.”

“I promise,” Sy responded with a wry smile.

“No, no. Once you rebuild your wall, you might simply kill me. I can not take that risk.”

“Then go order your attack,” Sy said firmly.

“You would sentence the humans of this pathetic town to their death so quickly?”

Sy stood firm. His tone indicated he would not move from this stance. “I’m here to protect them and I believe I found a way to do just that. We’re not safe as long as your goblins are ready to attack. I can ensure that won’t happen if you remain our guest for a couple of days. You want access to the tunnels, that will be the price. You stay with us for two days after you return from Dunop, then you can leave. As for your worries about me keeping my word, I have no reason to break it.”

Sazar took one last stab at Sy’s fears. “You realize I could simply order an attack now and take the tunnels without making any bargain.”

“You can, but it is a risk. How much time will you lose if you have to fight us? What if we offer just enough resistance that you miss your opportunity? You wouldn’t like that. And what if we all realize we’re fighting for our lives. Maybe we won’t be as tired as you think. And maybe our wizard isn’t as tired as you hope. From what I’ve learned, I know that dwarves are resistant to magic, but goblins aren’t. I bet you aren’t either. What if our wizard has enough power for one last spell, a spell to fry you where you stand? That’s your risk. Do you wish to take that or accept my proposal?”

Sazar frowned. Then, he laughed. “You speak with a sly tongue, human. I honor that. Though I do not believe you could stop me from taking the tunnels by force, we will have it your way this day. I will accept your invitation to stay with you when I return. I expect you will honor our agreement. I will return shortly with my escorts.”

#

Deep in the caves of the sandstone mountain, hundreds of giant statues waited for the animation of magic. They stood with blank faces in simple lines. One looked much like the next, the positioning the same for each. They were not created for the purposes of art, as an expression of someone’s creativity, or to convey some meaningful message. They were tools, tools that would soon hold great power.

The carvings were composed of the same sandstone that surrounded them. The rock was nowhere near as hard or as durable as granite, but it was easier to carve. The statues were given powerful arms as well as sturdy legs by their algor sculptors. They stood in lifeless, unmoving columns. They stood near the tunnel

ways the dwarves used to attack the algors. It would be the second time this day that an enemy would invade Dunop using the very tunnels dug by the dwarves themselves.

Groups of algors stood in circles about the giants. They pressed their hands upon the statues in the same way an algorian healer would tend the wounded. The magic flowed from them in similar fashion, except it was not intended to heal living flesh. Instead, it brought life to lifeless rock.

Statues began to act. They moved at first as if waking from a long sleep. They took small steps, stretching their arms, turning their heads. The cave began to rumble as more and more of the once immobile sculptures took to their own movements.

The sight was beyond comprehension. Solid rock was turning, twisting, and moving like any other creature of the land. It defied the very fabric of reality. Objects carved of sandstone - without muscles, without joints - they walked, they turned, they grabbed and held. It was a spectacle that perhaps only the algors could witness with such detachment.

The algors, however, were not alone in their appearance of aloofness. Despite the miraculous power bestowed upon them, the sand giants themselves lacked any true appreciation for their own spectacular birth. They did not stare in wonder at their own flexing fingers. They did not look to each other with amazement. They did not even draw a connection between their own bodies and the abundance of lifeless rock that surrounded them. They appeared as if their awakening was nothing of any magnitude.

If anything, the deficit of expression was almost frightening. As there was no curiosity, no substance of emotion, there was proof that this was not truly life, but simply the animation of rock. At that moment, their limited consciousness was almost completely blank. They had no purpose, no direction, no will and no desire. Though they had the capacity for each, at the moment of animation their awareness was limited to the fact that they could now move. Further awareness would be pressed upon them by the algors.

As the sand giants now stirred about like dullards, they awaited their instructions, the command from their creators that would give them purpose. They remained harmless for the moment. There was no intrinsic thought of

malice or destruction. They would only become the terrible weapons of war after the algors instructed them to be so.

The algors that survived the dwarf attack now clustered about the animated giants. They waited for the very last statue to drink the energy of their hands. They had exhausted every spark of magic that had taken many days and great effort to collect. As the algors do not store magic without great concentration, the labor had left them weary. Many would collapse even now had they not been so determined to carry out their own act of vengeance.

The memory of their dead haunted them. No other race could understand the hold of their community. Though through some twisted fate of nature they each craved individualism, they all belonged together. They can speak in unison, think as one. They can share thoughts, dream together. As much as they wish to be apart, they are all connected. No matter how far a single algor will travel out into the lonely desert, the hopes of this individual will always remain a part of the community.

It is only in this light that the severity of the dwarf attack could be understood. As hundreds of algor lives were vanquished in that moment of battle, the torturous pain was magnified for their community. The community felt the death of each individual. The survivors were not untouched, not at the moment of loss and not afterward. They shared the pain of the dwarf strikes during battle, and they shared the grief and despair when the battle had ended. Each loss equated to the removal of a family member to the whole. Each surviving algor felt the pain for each lost. There were no faceless, unknown victims. There was no detachment. Thus, the grief for each algor was multiplied many hundreds of times over.

It was with this pain that the algors now spoke, and they shouted out their grief in one chorus. The chant rang through the cave in simultaneous harmony. They spoke with pride as well as pain, and they gave their orders to the sand giants with honor to their own dead.

“You shall follow these tunnels to the dwarf city. You will attack them. You will continue your assault until the dwarf threat against us has ended. You will remain in the tunnels and in the dwarf city. You will guard against any other threat against us. You will do this to the last ounce of power within your stone bodies. You will do this for the dead, for our brothers and sisters.”

The sand giants made only one simple acknowledgment of the orders that would now dictate the rest of their existence. They turned to the tunnels and began to descend into the darkness. The command of the algors was now their sole drive. It could not be changed, it could not be reversed. They would seek out the dwarves and attack until they could find no more, or until they themselves were destroyed. Even the algors themselves could no longer revoke this command.

With purpose now driving them, the sand giants moved with greater ferocity. They pushed through the tunnels like thunder rolling across the sky. They ran into obstacles, cave-ins rigged by the dwarves and granite blocks stronger than their own sandstone bodies. They simply pushed on through falling stone and soil or dug around any obstacles they could not break or crush. The sentinels marched through the caverns with an image of the enemy that the algors had implanted in their limited awareness. They moved forward with the chant of the algors ever echoing in what served as their consciousness.

#

Petiole kicked a long staff that leaned against a tree. The thick, polished branch turned over twice before bouncing off another tree and rolling to a slow stop. He didn't like staffs. They reminded him too much of Mappel.

Mappel always held that blasted staff of his, always walked about thumping the end on the ground. That staff was a third leg for that feeble old elf.

An image of the now legendary leader painted itself in Petiole's mind. This image, however, was far from feeble. He saw Mappel on Sanctum Mountain, helping to defeat Ingar and his sphere, giving his life so that every other elf could live. Of course, he was sure that Mappel held to that annoying staff even to his last.

Petiole had considered the symbolism of the staff before. In times of greater weakness, times of greater uncertainty, he thought of taking up a staff of his own. He wondered if he might garner greater respect had he taken up this symbol of leadership. As much as his own insecurities led him to consider holding a staff, the same inadequacies always forced him to decline.

If he started walking around with one, the elves of his camp might think he was trying to imitate his predecessor. He could not have that. He'd rather clutch his hands nervously than do anything which might conjure up a memory of the

previous camp elder. Now, instead of leaning securely upon a supportive staff, he shuffled about in small, zigzagging paths that always led him back to the same spot. He mumbled as he clutched his hands nervously.

Two other elves watched him with pointed attention. Tuber Berisom wanted an answer to his harvesting requests. Should he begin sending out elves into the forest or should they wait for Lief and Ryson to return?

The other elf, the guard commander that insisted on mounting an attack on Dunop, also had demands.

“It is time we acknowledged the threat these dwarves present to us,” the commander snapped. “We invite disaster by waiting any further.”

“We have yet to hear from Lief or Ryson,” Tuber noted.

“I doubt they will ever return,” the commander said with a continued air of frustration. “They have been gone too long. They have undoubtedly failed in their mission. They have convinced the dwarves of nothing and we still face great danger.”

“We can not be sure of that,” Tuber denounced.

“Of course we can,” the guard commander continued to argue. “How long would it take for them to reach Yave and carry out their plan, a plan I doubted the first I heard of it? It was well-intentioned I admit, but it was destined to fail from the start. The dwarves are stubborn. They will attack us again.”

“They can be convinced. The sword of the delver is powerful.”

The commander shook his head strenuously. “You are far too liberal with your faith. The sword may be able to do much in the hands of an elf or even a delver, but we are talking about dwarves.”

“They may yet be convinced,” Tuber maintained his hope. “Even now the dwarves may have conceded their mistakes.”

“Are you suggesting the dwarves may no longer be interested in war? We have a report that a massive dwarf army attacked the humans at Bourbon just last night,” the commander countered.

“They were defeated,” Tuber reminded. “They suffered great casualties.”

“That is why we must attack now. They are weakened. It is time to exact revenge for the elves that died in their attack against us.”

“And now the dwarves have their own dead. Our elves were also at Burbon. Holli joined in the lead of the defense. Surely that is revenge enough for you.”

“From what I hear, it was the human wizard which defeated the dwarves. We now have sorcerers of our own. Let us allow them to cast their spells within the very caves of Dunop. Let the dwarves know that they must fear us as well.”

Tuber would not be bullied by such sentiment. “This is a pointless argument. Petiole decided to give Lief and the delver the opportunity to convince Yave of her mistakes. If they failed, he would drop the shadow seeds. There was never a discussion of sending elf sorcerers into Dunop.”

“Maybe there should have been.”

Petiole finally spoke loud enough to be heard. “I agree the dwarves are a danger to us.”

“We do not know how Lief fared with Yave,” Tuber reminded as he faced the camp elder.

“We know. He has not returned.”

“He has not had the full time you gave him,” Tuber persisted.

Petiole’s face began to turn crimson. “What would take him so long? Certainly, he must have been brought before Yave by now. Why would he stay?”

“He wouldn’t,” the commander chimed.

Petiole found confidence in tone. “It is like he said, the dwarves attacked Burbon after Lief and the delver entered the cave to Dunop. They have not returned, they must have failed.”

“Finally, some sense,” the commander grunted with disrespect.

Petiole exploded with rage. “I never wanted to wait! This was not my idea. I would have dropped the seeds days ago. It was only at Lief’s demand I withheld. Do not accuse me of not having any sense in this matter! It is you that has no sense! What would you do now? Enter the cave with a few elf magic casters? You would be slaughtered. It was my idea to use the seeds against the dwarves. That is the only thing which will make them understand our true power over them. Then, and only then, will we be safe.”

The commander glared. “Then drop the seeds. If not, give me the order to attack. One way or the other, it is time we made a decision. I leave you to make it.”

The commander stepped away, appearing to inspect some other part of the forest.

Tuber ignored him. He placed his full attention upon Petiole. “You can not allow him to attack Dunop. We will lose the best of our magic casters in such a short-sighted attack.”

“I have no intention of letting him lead any attack,” Petiole said. “The only order I will give him is to seal the known entrance to Dunop to the best of his ability.”

“If you do that, Lief will be unable to return.”

“He is not returning. He is probably already dead.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Tuber denounced.

“I can. Anyway, it no longer matters. I am dropping the seeds without further delay. I have already asked for guards to seek Dunop’s many air shafts. They have found several. We will drop the seeds this morning.”

#

Sy watched the goblins and shag descend down the shaft. He had many of his men in defensive positions, not that they were in any state to truly fight. It burned him to see the serp get his way.

When the creatures dropped out of sight, he was more than half-tempted to collapse the tunnel. He knew the serp would not keep his word. He decided against it only to keep the serp from knowing of his mistrust. He would not, however, fail in taking other precautions.

He looked to two of his men. "I know you're both tired, but I want you to watch that hole. If anything comes out, sound an alarm. It'll just be for a while. I'll have you relieved well before sunset." He then turned to his other guards. "Rest up. We may have another fight on our hands later today. I want us to be prepared."

Holli walked up to the captain as if she had rested all night. "I agree with your mistrust of the serp. The elves at my command will stay for a few more days. We will remain at your service until you can rebuild your defenses."

"I appreciate that."

"We will do what we can, but I believe your most powerful advantage will be to get your wizard well-rested. Goblins are not resistant to magic, and Enin has the power to destroy many of them."

"I'm glad to here you say that. I'm sure Enin will be even happier. He wants you to trust him."

"I believe the wizard knows my feelings. I don't know if anyone could hide them from him now."

"Yeah, well, I ordered him to get some sleep."

A single guard ran furiously to the captain and the elf. She was half out of breath and half captivated by shock.

"Sir, coming in from the north. I don't know what it is. It's unbelievable. Giants, about a dozen of them, maybe more."

Fatigue hung on Sy's words. "Godson, what now. Shags?"

The guard shook her head vigorously. "No, bigger!"

Sy looked to Holli. The elf had no explanation.

Chapter 20

“Another retreat?!” Anger and frustration painted Yave’s face. The sight of Voth sickened her. She paced about the throne room, stomping about in a tirade. She shook with tension. “What are you telling me? Are you telling me that the humans beat us again? Not only beat us, but humiliated us?”

Voth Stonepillar now regretted being selected the new War Com. He lacked Strog’s confidence. He spat out excuses hoping to quell the tide of Yave’s anger. “They allied with the elves. There were archers everywhere. They were ready for us. Every time we got to the surface, we faced another ambush.”

The War Com ground his teeth together. His own words fanned a distaste within himself. The humans had beaten him, outmaneuvered him, out-planned and outlasted him; they had indeed humiliated him. He searched for his own redemption as he sought the words to calm the queen. “We were not prepared for this. We were not ready, I see that now. The humans are weak, but they were well-organized. The elves’ doing. That is the explanation.”

The attempt rang hollow. Yave glared.

The thickening tension pressed upon the new War Com. He scrambled for a way out. “That’s not really what I mean, not all of it. That’s why we had difficulty at first, but we overcame that. Even with the odds against us, we rose above our inferior enemy. We suffered against every break, yet we still had victory in our grasp. Despite the humans’ preparation, despite the help of the elves, we began to take the town. We brought down their wall, crushed their structures. To get that far was proof of our superiority. We overcame everything, we had the battle won.”

“Then what happened?” Yave demanded.

“A light in the sky, brighter than the sun. A wizard cast a spell of light so powerful I could not believe it. He created daylight during the dark. Not just daylight, light that blinds. We could not fight that. He did not stop there. He broke the ground beneath us. He casts with white light. White light! He has great control over fire, light and earth. I tell you, we had the battle won until the wizard intervened.”

Yave was tired of hearing this excuse. There were few spells that could harm them directly, and no living wizard could have attained that level of sorcery so soon after the destruction of the sphere. She hammered at her War Com. “Are you telling me you could not hold your gains until the wizard tired?”

Voth turned to another excuse. “We did not have enough time. Even if we outlasted the wizard’s spell, the true sun was coming up. Without proper goggles, we would have been fighting blind.”

“Why I am surrounded by incompetence?” Yave bellowed.

“What? What else could I have done?”

Yave’s eye twitched uncontrollably. Her thick palm struck the new War Com across the chin. “Don’t you question me! I put you in command of our forces. You are the War Com! It is your duty to determine the strategies needed to win.”

Voth was now gaining a true appreciation for Strog’s struggles with this queen. He wished to be anywhere else than in this room.

Yave continued her rant. “I have heard reports of your attack. This goes beyond a wizard and the rising of the sun. You lost well over half of your force and still Burbon is in the hands of the humans. For some reason, the humans suffered only minor casualties. How could you lose so many compared to their few?”

“It was the wizard...”

“Idiot! Your casualties mounted before the wizard cast his spell! You are not fit to be a War Com. You are not fit to be a general. I would almost bite my own tongue to say it, but I wish Strog was here.”

“So do I,” Voth mumbled.

The queen was about to strike the War Com again, this time with a closed fist, but a breathless dwarf sentry broke into the room.

“How dare you enter...” Yave began.

It was Yave’s turn to be interrupted. The sentry barked out his disturbing news to both queen and War Com. “We are under attack! Sand giants are breaking

through into our southern tunnels. They have passed through every measure of defense. They are already in the streets! The sentries have been overpowered. We need warriors.”

Voth cursed. “The bulk of what’s left of our army is resting in the eastern barracks.”

“Recall them!” Yave shouted.

Voth ran from the room with another curse. Though he wished to be free from Yave’s presence, he did not need this. He stumbled out into the palace corridor shaking his head. The sentry followed as the queen was left to ponder the news alone.

She glared at the open door used by the departing War Com. Her heart beat with a thick, dull thud against her chest. Sand giants - the algors. The words burned her with memories of Tun. She forgot about Burbon, about the humans and the failure of her warriors. The toad-like creatures in the desert dominated her emotions which turned from hot to cold.

Sand giants in Dunop. The same creatures that killed her son. She wished to see them. She marched with malicious determination to a palace balcony. A smooth stone platform welcomed her. She leaned over a black rock railing. A dazzling view of Dunop’s closest streets opened for her inspection. The clamor to the south seized her attention.

The sand giants were easily spotted. Their golden color contrasted with the dark grey of Dunop’s rock streets and structures. The invaders were monumental in size and they towered over every dwarf that came into their path. Their strength was equal to their stature as they broke through loose dirt and rock with the same ease as dwarf diggers. They left a trail of dust in their wake as they marched toward the palace.

Dwarf sentries fought valiantly. Their mighty weapons ground the legs of the sand giants into dust, but for the moment, they were hopelessly outnumbered. Caught by surprise, and with no sight of reinforcements, they failed to regroup. They fought in haphazard clusters, hoping to hold a position, but the gates were lost and the invaders swarmed through like rushing water.

The sand giants moved forward with frightening efficiency. They decimated the

dwarf resistance. They quickly overran all dwarf sentries that dared to block their path. They spread through the dimly lit alleys like a plague. They took no prisoners, and though no dwarf would beg for mercy, such a request would have been beyond these single-minded heralds of destruction.

Unarmed dwarf civilians fled in terror, but most could not outrun their pursuers. The algor creations were by no means fast, but their stride more than tripled the equally slow dwarves. They captured and killed many; they held no regard for differences among the dwarves. They hunted them all.

Yave's hate for the algors was fanned by this spectacle. She thought of Tun, how he perished at the hands of these creatures. The Sword of Decree had bestowed that vision upon her. Now, it was being recreated in her own kingdom. She spat venomous curses at the sand giants as they progressed toward the open spaces of the city center.

Voth finally appeared with formations of dwarf warriors, but even to the eternally optimistic, all hope was already lost. Voth's warriors were fatigued, battle weary. They barely held the strength to maintain their lines. They moved up to meet their foes like sheep ready to be fleeced.

The sand giants, however, attacked with no regard to morale. Such an attribute held no meaning for such creatures. They did not tire, they did not face the ever-swelling emotions of battle. They had but one purpose. They thought not out of self-preservation, they did not think of their fallen comrades. They simply moved forward with the orders of the algors pressing their every action. Even as one sand giant fell, another stepped up to crush four or five dwarf defenders.

The algor creations quickly took the center cavern of Dunop. They surrounded the palace, and spread out to meet advancing dwarf attackers. In these larger caverns, their advantage was magnified. Without the restrictions of tight dwarf tunnels, the gargantuan invaders used the full force of their power. Despite the courage of dwarf warriors that bordered on fanatical, despite the resolve which burned within them to protect their home, the sand giants began to remove all that was left of the dwarf army.

Fury froze Yave in place. She stood upon her palace balcony with pure hate seething through her veins. She watched as the death of her own son was recreated several times over. She could barely breathe. Her chest was tight with

anguish. Dwarf after dwarf was taken by the sand giants, crushed like old newspaper, and then tossed aside; killed just like her Tun.

The invaders cared little for Yave's thoughts. They cared little for the display of death which surrounded them. If they were labeled as monsters, it did not matter. If the dwarves suffered pain, it did not matter. What mattered was the simple existence of these dwarves. They were the threat to the algors, and this threat would be exterminated; completely, permanently.

The giants moved to the palace entrance. They sensed the importance of this edifice, the underground hive that held the queen. They would have this place. They were met by the final force of the dwarf army. The carnage defied sanity.

Dwarves were thrown against the stone structure. Their bodies crumbled, bones shattered into powder. Those that did not die instantly, shrieked in agony.

The sand giants ignored each death cry.

Yave bent over the railing to watch the inevitable conclusion. The last soldier was torn apart as several of the monsters grabbed for him at once. Voth.

Yave felt not true loss for her most recent War Com. She felt only hate, hate for the very creatures that now had unobstructed passage to her palace, and hate for the algors that created them. She pulled a halberd from the wall.

"It is better this way. Let them come," she snarled.

She took one last glimpse over the balcony ledge to count the first handful to enter. Another surprise a large raiding party of goblins. She shouted more curses.

A serp in the throng seemed to stare back at her, appeared to grin.

"Parasites! Rodents!" Yave bellowed. Her hate, born of the sand giants, was now intensified by the sight of a goblin raiding party.

Sazar did not return her insults. He only waved, a sarcastic act of cowardice.

The shag at his side had previously dispatched the sentries left to guard the battle tunnels leading to and from Bourbon. When he reached the streets of Dunop, Sazar had sensed the commotion, noted the lack of resistance by the dwarves. As

he spied the sand giants, he understood his fortune. All dwarf opposition had faded to the power of the algor creations, and thus, his progress through the city was unimpeded. He smiled upon his own luck.

With such upheaval, there was no need for diversions, no need to sacrifice any of his goblins. They could all be used as treasure bearers. More, the path to the palace was now open. He giggled with anticipation.

The sand giants posed no threat to him or his goblins. They focused solely upon the dwarves. It was like having an independent army of great strength at his own disposal, and the serp used such an advantage with great skill.

“Stay behind the giants,” he ordered his minions. “Let them take on the palace guards. No need for us to take risks. Take your time. We have little to worry about, and much to gain. It seems all the dwarves will soon be dead. I believe that before this day is done, we will have this whole city to ransack.”

Sazar brought up the rear of the sand giant advance. He guided his goblins into the palace only after the passage was cleared of all defenders. He dispassionately watched the death of each palace guard. With the corridors free for pillaging, he ordered the search of every room. The bounty was unimaginable. Diamonds, rubies, jewel encrusted objects of all kind fell into their sacks. Gold was there for the taking. Sazar marveled at the riches which would soon be his to spend on whatever he desired. His greed pressed him further through the palace. He took everything of value that his goblins could carry. He began pulling light gems from the very walls. The corridors grew dark, but such creatures had no aversion to the lack of light.

One last time, he blessed the sand giants as they wrought destruction over the dwarves that would have previously prevented such a windfall. He considered their creators. Sand giants were known to be the work of the algors. He thought of the algors and how they fit into this great conflict. He wondered what might have caused them to send this force to assault Dunop. He reveled in this expansion of hostilities. The humans, the elves, the algors; they were all at war with the dwarves. They would all leave him an opportunity for greater riches. Today, he would have Dunop.

He would also have Burbon. He would not honor his bargain with the human captain. Why should he? He could exit with his treasure now at any point. He

did not have to return to Burbon. He could surface in the hills beyond the reach of the captain and his men. He could assemble his forces, entice mercenaries with his new wealth, and attack Burbon after nightfall. He could take Burbon's supplies as well. Two cities would be his to ravage. Burbon and Dunop. What a great time to be a serp of such power. This is why war was music to his ears.

Yave held the halberd with loose anticipation. She stood firmly on the balcony. A dead end. The abominations would have only one course to reach her. They would have to step forward to take hold of her. She would crush them one at a time. She did not care how long it would take, did not care how many she had to destroy. If necessary, she would leave a mountain of lifeless sandstone before her. In truth, she prayed it would come to that.

“Let them all come.”

In the course of her resolve, she saw shadows ahead of her, heard the rumbling of heavy footfalls. She thought of Tun. She would have her revenge.

Her expression fell blank. The hate dissolved. The anger faded. She became as single-minded as the creatures she intended to destroy. Her emotions accepted this moment as vindication for the memories that haunted her. She would cleanse Dunop of these monstrosities, she would single-handedly defeat the army of the algors.

Lights faded, more gems stolen. She didn't care. She would fight in pure darkness, if need be. After all, she was a dwarf. She could see in the dark as well as a shag.

She stood ready for her battle of personal redemption when one last distraction caught her attention. Echoing reverberations thundered through the streets behind her, a signal of more upheaval. She considered the prospect of more sand giants.

“Fine. Let more come,” she stated coldly, but the fury of this rumble gave her pause.

Something was different. Something was wrong. The rumblings consisted of foreign sounds, noises like rock battling stone. She turned her head. The source of the upheaval was plainly evident, undeniable in power.

Cliff behemoths!

They rambled through the streets with majesty. They were larger than life, the thing of dreams and legends. No individual could deny their grandeur, not even Yave, no matter how twisted or vengeful. Such was the purity of the behemoths' physical appearance, such was the simplicity of their inner strength.

In this moment, however, the complexity of what they could become shone evident. They revealed a domination which was theirs for the taking. Their very movement boasted of power. The intrinsic strength of the surrounding dwarf city was impotent in comparison to these titans. In no small words, they could become the very hand of Godson.

Their purpose was clear. They were here not to destroy Dunop, but to save it. They represented no threat to the dwarves, no threat to real life. Their religion prevented such acts. The sand giants, however, defied the cliff behemoths, religion, defied everything the cliff behemoths held dear. These atrocities were an abomination to Godson. They were not bestowed a spirit or a consciousness. They were not gifted life, they were granted animation. They were rock, and only Godson may bestow life upon the lifelessness.

With this temperament toward the tool of the algors, the cliff behemoths set upon the sand giants. They attacked. The peaceful nature of their beliefs dissolved in their intolerance as they crushed the stone creatures with swipes of their mighty arms. They left a trail of sandy dust in their wake, and they moved forward with the conviction to eradicate every imposter.

For the first time in their miniscule period of existence, the sand giants displayed uncertainty. They were here to end the threat of the dwarves. They were not instructed to attack other creatures, unless they were threats to the algors. The cliff behemoths displayed a willingness to protect the dwarves and the sand giants found difficulty in comprehending this action. Their limited instincts left them in a quandary of inactivity.

The cliff behemoths ignored the confused passivity of the sand giants. Massive in size themselves, the behemoths outmatched the algor creations in power. And just as the sand giants crushed the dwarves with detachment, the behemoths crushed the sand giants with disdain.

Yave turned her back upon the sight. She found no relief, no joy in the sight of

her city's saviors. She waited for the sand giants to come for her. They did not. Once more her hate began to boil. She wanted this moment, wanted to face the sand giants on these terms. She would never have the opportunity.

The sand giants within the palace sensed the growing threat of the cliff behemoths. They understood that the newly arrived titans planned to prevent the successful completion of their mission. The queen within the structure would have to wait as the behemoths became the primary danger. The algor protectors went back to the streets to deal with this new menace. They did not return.

Also within the palace, Sazar noticed their departure with growing displeasure. Their exit left him puzzled. Many palace guards remained at posts throughout this rock castle. Uneasily, he faced a reexamining of his situation. He stalked the palace corridors quickly until he found a window to view this unexpected turn. The truth did not please him. To him, the cliff behemoths were an unwelcome sight.

“Why do they intervene?” he mouthed. “This makes no sense. They are not warring creatures. They live by peaceful doctrine.”

Enlightenment hit him with the severity of a falling rock. “Could it be?” he whispered.

He could not deny the facts before him. The cliff behemoths were not acting as invaders. He knew such behavior would be beyond them. They were here to save the dwarf city. The revelation brought an even greater, distasteful realization. Cliff behemoths would not take up one side or another in this war. They would not act as aggressors, but only as peacemakers. They would not escalate hostilities. Any such considerations would be as foreign to them as charity was to him.

His cunning mind understood the complete nature of such actions. Cliff behemoths would not intervene to simply save one city. Such an act was simply out of character. They must have viewed the entire struggle as a threat to their religion. Sazar's war was coming to a quick, judicious end, preempted by beings beyond his manipulative control.

The limitless opportunities once within his grasp, now evaporated like water in a steaming volcano. There would be no more battles like the one in Burbon, no more assaults by sand giants that allowed him to enter a dwarf palace. A moment

before, it seemed the riches of his dreams were in his hands. Now, he wondered about his very safety.

Though the dwarf warriors were decimated, there remained enough dwarf sentries and civilians to capture his goblins. He would lose the treasure already in his hands. His shag would fight to prevent his immediate capture, but even this hairy beast might fall to the strength of angry dwarves looking for vengeance. If he were taken, he would be put to death.

He examined the treasure already procured for his benefit. It would suffice. He recalled his goblins.

“To the shadows with you. Maintain hold over what we have taken. We must move with care. The tide of battle has turned against us. We will find exits in the tunnels, but we will not return to Burbon. The shag will clear a path for us so that we may return directly to the hills.”

One goblin, unaware or incapable of discerning the significance of the cliff behemoths and caught in the thrill of their stolen bounty, ventured to question Sazar about his future endeavors. “Do we now take Burbon?”

Sazar shook his head. “The opportunity is lost. These cliff behemoths have declared an end to the war. We do not know to what extent they might intervene. To attack the humans now would risk our substantial gains. No, we will wait for another day.”

Chapter 21

Heavy footfalls, a pause, and finally, a resounding crash, as if lightning had struck within a hair's breadth away. The massive stone door crumbled to an ash like substance. Its destruction created a curtain of gray and black dust that swirled about the broken edges of the cell entrance.

Ryson did not expect that much power from a sand giant. He wondered as to how many waited behind the cloud of near microscopic debris. Perhaps as many as four had struck together, but his sharp eyes seized only the silhouette of a single giant crouched over nearly in half in the doorway.

Its colossal shape quickly extinguished any thought that this might have been a dwarf action. Ryson could do nothing else but believe they now faced the threat of the sand giants coming for Jon. His keen hearing had picked up the sounds of battle, even deep within this stone prison. Knowing of the algors intentions, he simply assumed the sand giants were now fulfilling their purpose.

In a heartbeat, he pranced past the giant with a dazzling display of speed and agility. Once beyond the first sentinel that obliterated the door, he scanned the corridors to assess the threat. The halls were empty. No other sand giants appeared. No dwarf sentries, dead or alive. Mystifying. He expected greater signs of a struggle, more sand giants, the battered bodies of dwarf guards.

His bafflement expanded as his own quick instincts forced him to take a second look at the giant he had passed. The double-take proved colossal in revelation. This was no sand giant. Its hide was harder than sandstone, darker in color than the sandy tan, and it wore a tunic of brown and green.

“Dzeb?” Ryson mouthed in weary disbelief.

“It is good to see you well, Ryson Acumen,” the titan responded with a soft voice that was so uncharacteristic of this mighty being.

“You’re here?! What’s going on?” Ryson mumbled trying desperately to reorganize events in his mind.

“I am here to help, myself and many others. Let us first see to our friends and

then I will explain.”

Dzeb left a dazzled and bewildered delver in the corridor as he stepped, or actually perhaps crawled would be a better description, into the cell. The doorway in its original form would not have allowed access, but Dzeb pressed through with little care to the tight fit. The outline of the passage was left much larger after he had passed. Once within the cell, he had greater room to move, though he remained hunched over so as not to scrape his head on the stone ceiling. He nodded a greeting to the elf.

“Godson’s blessing upon you, Lief Woodson. It is good to see you as well. You are not hurt, I pray?”

Lief could not hide his smile. “No, I’m fine. You are indeed a welcome sight. We had expected sand giants.”

Dzeb’s expression turned cold, but only for an instant. “Those insults to Godson have been removed. That threat is gone and there is no need to speak of it further.”

As if the statement cleared his own pain, Dzeb again beamed with the purity and grace gifted to the cliff behemoths. “You look much better than when last I saw you. The poison of the sphere had taken its toll upon you before it was destroyed. I am happy that you have recovered so thoroughly.”

“It did not take much. Just the removal of the sphere. I’m sorry you left before I woke up. I would have liked the chance to say goodbye.”

“Why? We see each other now. Godson has taught us that there is no need for farewells. We part and we return. That is the way until we are all brought together in His final judgment.”

“That may be so, but I still would have liked to thank you.”

“You have done so.”

The delver could no longer allow this near idle banter to continue. His mind was froth with confusion. He expected sand giants. Instead, he now beheld Dzeb; not an unwelcome sight, but the cliff behemoth had earlier refused his call for help. A hundred questions circled his every thought, and he jumped into the

conversation with unbridled curiosity as to these passing events.

“What’s been happening out there? I’ve been hearing things, I figured sand giants were moving through, but now I’m not sure what’s going on. You said you removed the threat. Did the sand giants attack? Was that what I heard?”

Dzeb answered somberly. “Your hearing is as keen as always, my friend. Those abominable creations had been loose in the city. I am afraid there has been much loss. Many dwarves have perished.” His voice thickened, grew as if his own faith had been reaffirmed. “But there will be no more loss on this day to those abominations.”

“You destroyed them?”

“There were but a few remaining when I entered this palace. I am sure the others have taken care of them by now.”

“How did you know to find us here?”

“The elf guard named Holli told us you might be held in the palace prison. She requested I see to your release.”

Ryson felt his heart skip. “You spoke to Holli? You were in Burbon? What’s happening there? Is everything alright?”

“I have spoken to your friend, Sy Fenden,” Dzeb replied. His voice was reassuring, soft as gentle cotton. “He wished me to give you a message. The town was attacked, there have been losses, but Burbon has been saved. They fought off the dwarf attack, held the town of your home. There is need for repair, but they have survived. Also, a woman named Linda is in fine health.”

Ryson twisted with relief as well as agony. He beamed at Linda’s name. He found joy to hear Sy had sent him word, but the thought of losses curbed his jubilation. He blurted out questions without pause to breath. “What about Enin? How bad was the town damaged? How did Holli look to you? Was she hurt at all?”

“I do not know of the one called Enin, but the elf named Holli was well when I spoke to her. I noticed no injury.”

Dzeb cut himself off. He turned his head as he gazed deeper into the cave. His eyes fell upon a slumped figure that showed little sign of life. “Is that Prince Jon Folarok of the dwarves?”

Lief’s voice turned grave. “It is. Actually, it’s King Jon Folarok, or it was before his mother took his throne and threw him down here.”

“There is only one throne that is of importance, and that throne belongs to Godson,” Dzeb reminded gently but firmly.

Lief did not attempt to enter a philosophical or religious debate with the cliff behemoth.

Ryson spoke up with obvious impatience. Thoughts of Burbon now weighed upon him. He wished to leave quickly to survey the damage for himself. He quickly advised Dzeb of Jon’s personal torment. “Jon didn’t want any throne. Now, he’s lost. He just sits there, clinging to the emptiness. He doesn’t react to anything I say anymore. He seems to have lost the will to live.”

“That is a gift too precious to throw away.” Dzeb walked determinedly over to the slumped dwarf. He looked upon Jon with eyes of sorrow. He shook his head slightly.

The dwarf showed no sign of acknowledging the magnificent being that stood before him. As Ryson had explained, he clung to the shadows of his escape, the darkness of nothing. Like a clump of partially molded clay, the dwarf sat unmoving with little to reveal any light of consciousness.

“Do you give up on life?” Dzeb questioned almost sternly.

The dwarf did not respond.

“You wish to waste away? Give up the gift Godson has bestowed upon you?”

Again, silence.

Ryson and Lief watched, wondering what power the cliff behemoth might display, hoping the force of Dzeb’s religion might sway the dwarf back into reality. They waited for Dzeb to lift the dwarf with mesmerizing words, to raise him with glory filled hands. Ryson, for the moment, forgot about Burbon. The

desire to watch the cliff behemoth melted his other curiosities. He waited with hope. He would not have been surprised had the very rock opened overhead to bring down cascading lights of miracle.

Strangely, Dzeb walked away, no other words, no miracle. Jon remained detached from reality. He made no reaction in the presence of the cliff behemoth, and did not stir at Dzeb's departure. He remained a shell; breathing, heart beating, eyes open, but unaware and uncaring for his surroundings.

Ryson's words revealed his own distress. He approached the cliff behemoth with a plea in his heart. "Can't you help him?"

"I can not," Dzeb replied.

"Can not, or will not?" Ryson pressed.

"There is nothing I can do," Dzeb replied gloomily. "If I could help, I would."

Dzeb's expression sent daggers into Ryson's soul. He nearly groaned at the pain in Dzeb's words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just that when I asked you to help us stop Yave, you wouldn't because you wanted a clear sign from Godson. I wondered if you might be doing the same now."

"Godson gives us all free will to choose," Dzeb stated almost diplomatically. "Jon has chosen to withdraw."

"So what's going to happen to him?"

"I do not know."

Lief offered the only possible alternative for the moment. "Why don't we try getting him out of here? Perhaps, if we take him from this miserable cell, it might revive him to some degree."

"That's a good idea," Ryson chimed. At that moment, the delver felt the pull of many things. He wanted to survey the damage done to Dunop. He also wondered of Yave's reaction to the entrance of the cliff behemoths. Questions on each of these counts plagued him mercilessly. Leaving this dungeon was the first step in gaining knowledge toward all these mysteries. He motioned to Dzeb. "Can you carry him? I doubt he'll want to move on his own."

Dzeb simply nodded. He moved back to the dwarf and lifted him gently from the slab. He carried the dwarf in his arms as if walking with a sleeping puppy.

“Where shall we take him?”

“I guess we should return to the throne room,” the delver suggested. “We can retrieve my sword. I also want you to speak to Yave, if of course you’re willing. I’m assuming you came here to do more than just beat up on sand giants.”

“I will speak to the queen,” Dzeb said as if there would be no question to this.

Ryson eyed the cliff behemoth with a raised eyebrow. Yet another mystery now entered his mind, a mystery regarding the cliff behemoths, very presence, a mystery which pushed other curiosities from his mind. Again, he rattled off questions. “Why did you show up here? When I last spoke to you, you believed you shouldn’t get involved. What made you change your mind? And why did you bring others? If you were so hard to convince, how was it they were willing?”

Dzeb remained silent. He stood as if the delver had not even questioned him. He waited for the delver to move forward while all the time holding the dwarf with steady hands.

The delver assumed he had confused the titan with too many questions at once. He repeated the simplest, yet broadest, of the queries. “Why did you change your mind and come to help us?”

The cliff behemoth did not answer.

The delver’s curiosity jumped a hundredfold. “Dzeb?”

Still, no answer.

The delver would not move from the cell, his impatience to leave now dissipated in the face of a new and growing mystery. He pressed for an answer. His delver spirit of interest mounted with each passing moment of silence. “Well? I didn’t think you wanted to involve yourself in the affairs of others. You said it wasn’t your right, that you would need guidance from Godson. How did he guide you?”

Dzeb still would not reply.

The continued lack of a response pushed Ryson into a fury of inquisitiveness. He attempted to pull answers from the cliff behemoth by circumventing the original question. He searched for a question which would at the very least elicit some kind of verbal reply.

“You came to speak to Yave and stop the war, right?”

“This violence must not continue,” Dzeb finally answered.

Ryson pounced on the titan’s answer. “You didn’t think you should get involved before, but that’s obviously changed. I take it that means you will see this to an end? You will continue until the war is finally stopped?”

Dzeb nodded patiently. “The dwarves must stop attacking others, and others must cease their attacks upon the dwarves. This clash began because of false blame, a thirst for vengeance, and a mountain of misplaced hate. Each opposes the very teachings of Godson Himself.”

“And that’s why you finally intervened? Because the war began because of things which opposed Godson?”

Again, Dzeb did not answer.

Ryson waited only for a moment. When he realized Dzeb would not reply, he quickly turned to other questions.

“You didn’t come alone. You said other cliff behemoths came to help. I can only guess that they think the violence has to stop as well. Is that true?”

“Yes,” Dzeb answered. “Many cliff behemoths understood the need.”

“Who said there was a need?”

“You did,” Dzeb nodded back to the delver.

Ryson found the reply surprising, but continued to press forward. “But that didn’t work when I first spoke to you. What changed your mind?”

“Maybe it is best you don’t know.”

Ryson stood aghast. “What?”

Dzeb looked deeply into Ryson, looked with compassion, but with no less conviction for his own decision. “I understand that being a delver you are naturally inquisitive about everything. This, however, may be something which should remain a mystery.”

Ryson’s eyes shot open wide. “You can’t be serious?!”

“I am very serious.”

Ryson could not have this. He needed to know. He immediately searched for other alternatives. He blurted one out in hopes of forcing an answer from the cliff behemoth before him. “I could ask the other cliff behemoths.”

“I will ask you not to do that.”

“Why?”

“I do not wish you to ask them. It is a delicate matter. I’m asking as a friend that you honor this request.”

The response caged the delver. He groped for a way out. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Do you decline this request of mine?”

Ryson shook his head with uncertainty. The mere thought of denying Dzeb filled him with guilt, but he direly wanted to know why the cliff behemoth had changed his mind. “If you don’t want me to ask them, I won’t. I owe you that, at the very least. But I don’t understand. Why shouldn’t I know this?” The last was nearly a plea for mercy, as if Dzeb was sentencing the delver to an unfit punishment.

Dzeb paused. He almost frowned as he considered a way to enlighten the delver. Finally, and after much apparent consternation, he spoke with renewed conviction. “What would you think if I told you Godson had sent a message to us, instructing us to help you?”

Ryson took but a moment to consider the question. He answered quickly, hoping

to get to the truth and not play with assumptions. “I don’t know. I guess I would think the war was getting out of hand and that it was time to be stopped. Is that ...”

Dzeb pressed forward. He wanted the delver to truly contemplate such a significant occurrence. “Think carefully. Do not end with that simple answer. Consider completely what it might mean if I told you Godson Himself sent a message. Whether you believe in the word or not, you must consider this carefully. What would that mean to you? What would be the potential if others thought that way? Every time there would be a conflict in the future, you would think to rely on some sign from the heavens to tell you when you have gone too far. That is not the way it should be. All the races of this land must learn to rely on their own judgment, their own decisions.”

Dzeb held up a finger to halt the delver from asking another question. He wanted the delver to consider the full measure of his point. “Before you speak, let me pose the other possibility. What would you think if I said Godson did not send a message; if the cliff behemoths intervened at their own discretion?”

Ryson again answered quickly, hoping to pry the ultimate truth from the cliff behemoth. “I would be happy to hear it. I wanted you to stop this war, remember?”

“But again, how would you feel about the future? Would you begin to worry about how else we might involve ourselves in your affairs?”

The question centered upon Ryson’s own previous considerations. The possibility of cliff behemoths intervening at their own discretion might indeed have dire consequences. Yes, today it stopped a war, it stopped a tragedy. But who was to say how the cliff behemoths might intrude in other ways? They had the power to rule with absolute authority, to become dictators. Would that truly be a welcome thought? That consideration had indeed invaded the delver’s thoughts before. He spoke of such thoughts with the reader Matthew. Would this truly be a blessing, or a curse?

“I don’t know what to say to that,” Ryson answered honestly. “I know I’m grateful you helped today. We needed your help.”

“Then let it end with that,” Dzeb counseled.

Ryson shifted his weight. That conclusion did not sit well with him. It left a hole in his being. Without an answer, he was incomplete.

“Perhaps it is time we moved forward,” Lief finally intervened. “We gain nothing by standing here debating philosophical questions.”

At first, the delver did not move. He searched for one last question, one last thought which might shed a new light upon the matter. He found nothing.

“Ryson?” Lief nudged.

“Sorry,” Ryson responded. He did his best to wipe the burden from his thoughts. He attempted to focus on other pressing needs. He thought of Burbon, of Linda and Sy. He wished to see them. He thought of Dunop and Yave. He wondered how the dwarves fared against the sand giants and how the queen would deal with the appearance of Dzeb and the other cliff behemoths.

With new questions replacing the old, he moved quickly into the empty corridor. “I saw before that no one was down here. Are there any threats we should know about?”

“I sent the dwarf guards away,” Dzeb replied with simplicity. “I did not think it was wise to leave a potential conflict when they saw their prisoners freed.”

“Did the guards leave when you asked them to, or did they resist?” the elf asked with his own curiosity as to dwarf stubbornness in the face of a cliff behemoth.

“They took leave.” Dzeb did not give a description as to the guards’ manner in retreat.

The delver took the lead. His memory of the corridors remained as strong as if he had just walked them. He nimbly took to the stairs and led the group out of the palace depths.

A few palace guards took to posts near the throne room, but made no attempt to stop them. The simple sight of the cliff behemoth left them in uncertain awe. They realized it was these titans that had saved Dunop. Even the sight of the elf and the delver roaming free could not sway the dwarves into attacking the behemoth.

Ryson pushed into the throne room with authority of his own. He ignored the guards at the door, not even giving them a glance. He stepped back into the room like a returning hero, and to his liking, he spotted Yave upon the throne.

The queen sat rigid. Cold emotion bit at her cheeks. Her eyes swooped over them all; Ryson, Lief, Dzeb, and the near lifeless hulk of Jon's body. If she cared even slightly for Jon's welfare, it did not show. She viewed them all as enemies, even the cliff behemoth. In her eyes, Dzeb did not save Dunop, no, he thwarted her moment of vindication, ripped the honor of destroying the sand giants from her very grasp. Her anger remained, her thirst for retribution unfulfilled.

Ryson grunted. Nothing would get through to this woman. Nothing would break the grip of her hate. He felt pity for her, nothing more.

He would waste little more time or emotion on this depraved queen. He no longer cared to try and influence her convictions or change her decision. That was simply no longer necessary. The war was officially over. The cliff behemoths would take care of ending the hostilities, of that he was certain.

He turned his attention to a more personal matter. He looked to a cloak on the floor and moved to it with the grace of a floating feather. With fluidity, he pulled the cover off the sword. Light filled the chamber and all welcomed it, all save Yave, who actually turned her gaze away from the delver. The light did not bring physical pain to her eyes, but it sparked memories that burned her core.

Ryson noticed the queen's reaction, but he would not sheath the talisman. He held it aloft with pride.

With the hilt firmly in his grasp, a warmth spread through his body. The sword's power reached into his consciousness. It seized upon the very questions which previously haunted him. It gave him nearly every answer he required. He saw the damage to Burbon as well as the casualties to the dwarf army. He saw how Yave waited for the sand giants that never came. He saw the cliff behemoths before they left their mountains. He saw how they left, when they left, but he could not see why they left. Their own personal intentions were blocked from him, and perhaps this was best. With this vision, he gained even greater perspective. Lief was right. The sword revealed knowledge, but it would not, could not, reveal the intentions behind such knowledge.

Ryson beheld the enchanted weapon with greater respect and appreciation for

this power. He considered its affect on the queen and how he felt it failed to save the land. He knew now that it had never failed in its true magical purpose, for it was never meant for such use. It was not an item of such enchantment that it could sway the beliefs of another, or that it could alter preference, or even prejudice. It decreed fact, nothing more and nothing less. Further interpretation was left to the possessor. Perhaps, that is the way it was meant to be. Free will, both to choose and to think. Of course, free will would only go so far with the cliff behemoths on the matter of this particular war, and Dzeb spoke with such authority.

“These attacks of yours will end,” Dzeb commanded.

Yave almost erupted with fury. She would not take orders from anyone, not even a cliff behemoth. One glance, however, at the other dwarves that had gathered in the chamber brought her hesitation. In an instant, she realized that the cliff behemoth had seized her power, the power of command over her own kind. They would listen to him, not her. Her options dwindled like melting ice upon the sun.

Dzeb continued with disregard to Yave’s stern demeanor. “You had no right to attack the algors. They caused you no pain. You had no right to attack the humans of Connel or Burbon, or the elves of Dark Spruce. Your anger breeds hate, and your hate opposes the will of Godson. This will come to an end.”

Yave managed to ask one simple question. “And if I refuse?”

“That is your right. You may choose to oppose Godson and continue the path you have forged, but that truth will be known. There will be no further question as to why you struggle. There will be no question as to which side you draw your alliances. What dwarf will follow you on such a path? What city would remain your captive? The magic has returned to Uton and with it many dark creatures. They would oppose the will of Godson to the end of their days. You would be one with them. Is that your choice?”

Yave folded her hands and bowed her head. She hid the twisted contortions of her face, but the uncontrollable shaking of her body was clear for all to witness. In a fit of pure fury, she bolted from her chair and out of the throne room.

Dzeb did not watch her leave. He placed Jon upon the vacated throne. Even as the dwarf body slumped sideways over the chair arm, he turned and gestured to the other dwarves.

“Follow her as you will, but know that her claims are false. The algors did not take her first son from her. The humans, the elves, the delvers; they are not your enemies. The enemy to us all is the darkness she chases. That is her path, let us pray that it will not be yours.”

Dzeb turned and left. He made no motion of farewell to anyone, not to Lief, and not to Ryson.

Ryson watched the back of the cliff behemoth until it turned out of sight. “No need for goodbyes, I guess. But I have to tell you, it’s hard to watch him leave.”

Uncertainty replaced the emptiness caused by Dzeb’s departure. The dwarves lacked a leader. The diminutive citizens of Dunop had no one to guide them, no true path to follow. The separatists had removed those that followed the monarchy, and now the separatists had been scourged of power, partially by the humans at Burbon and completely by the sand giants here in Dunop. The dwarf army was simply no more. No generals, no War Com. Bol was gone, Strog was gone, Yave was gone. Jon remained, but so too did the self-imposed trance which left him disjointed from reality.

Ryson looked to Lief with concern. He nodded to Jon who remained in his unconscious state. “What’s going to happen now?”

“I can not guess,” the elf replied stoically. “I assume the cliff behemoths have removed the threat of the sand giants. I can only assume further that the next move rests with the dwarves themselves. That is basically what Dzeb said. It is their choice.”

Ryson looked expectantly to the group of dwarf guards, sentries, and advisors. “Well?”

No one answered.

Ryson shrugged. He decided to put the question before them as simply as possible. “Is there anyone here that still wants war? Anyone that wants to challenge what the cliff behemoth said? Everybody else wants this to end. I know Burbon doesn’t want this to continue. Is there still one among you that wishes to continue the war against the algors, or the humans, or the elves?”

The dwarves looked at the delver. They looked at each other blankly. Some

shook their heads in dissent, some remained still, but no one put forth a challenge of continuing the hostilities.

Ryson found the near noncommittal response rather frustrating, but accepted the unenthusiastic answer nonetheless. “Good. I’ll take that to mean you want to live in peaceful coexistence with the rest of us. I will give that word to Burbon.”

“And I will bring such news to my camp,” Lief added. “We will leave you now. You have much to discuss and much to determine. You must also look to the health of your king. We will leave him in your care hoping that you realize he also did not commit any crimes.” The elf then motioned for Ryson. “It’s time for us to leave.”

Ryson looked to Lief uncomfortably. He walked out of the throne room but hesitated in the corridors. “Is that it?”

“What else can we do?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t seem like we’re finished.” Ryson lingered near the door. “Maybe something more should be said. So much has happened. We were at war. Now we think it’s over and we just walk away? We’re walking out of here with really no idea of what’s going to happen next.”

“They are in a state of complete turmoil. I doubt they know what they will do next.”

“That’s what has me worried. They don’t have a leader, we don’t know if Jon will recover, we don’t know where Yave went. We really don’t know much of anything. Nothing feels complete. It’s like nothing has been settled.”

“That is how war often leaves things,” Lief responded rather profoundly. “We can do nothing more here. Any action you might see as helpful will only be looked upon as meddling. We must leave them to their own affairs and hope they will not send their army against anyone else.”

“They won’t do that,” Ryson stated suddenly. “Not for a while at least.”

Lief looked to the delver with interest. “How can you sound so sure of this?”

“Their army has been destroyed. You’ll see when we get outside. I just know.

The sword showed me.”

The two, however, did not reach the exterior of the palace before another calamity hit the dwarves of Dunop. A winded sentry raced past the two and stumbled into the throne room. Though his speed was nearly inconsequential to the eyes of the delver, his anguish was not. The delver ignored any thought of leaving this matter to the dwarves. He turned and moved back to the area of gathered dwarves. He heard the announcement with them, but his expression carried even greater fear, greater comprehension of the nightmare.

“Shadow seeds!” the sentry cried through deep breaths. “Dropping down all over the city. Trees are already growing!”

Chapter 22

Stunned silence. Every dwarf in the chamber understood the depth of what they now faced; a box of nightmares had been opened. The shadow tree was the weapon of pure dread, a curse of excruciating painful death. Shadow tree seeds had been used only once before, during the last great war between the elves and dwarves. The magically altered trees devoured an entire city before the dwarves sealed the atrocities in a sarcophagus of rock. They had not been used again, but their legacy remained etched in dwarf history.

The very thought of facing this horror sapped resolve even as it instilled gut-wrenching panic. Trepidation bounded full enough to wash away the fatigue of every calamity already faced that day, but the overwhelming terror slowed the dwarves' initial reaction. Palace guards waited for orders, but there was no one to give them. Ministers and advisors looked about in lost confusion. It was never their lot to make final decisions, only to give opinions. There was only one in the room with the true authority of rule, but if Jon understood the harsh dilemma Dunop now faced, it only served to drag him further into his lifeless trance.

With no other alternative, advisors mumbled their only thoughts as if hoping to draw a group consensus.

“We should send out guards to gather up the seeds quickly, before they start to grow,” one offered. “We can bring them to the surface, make them wither in the daylight.”

“It’s too late,” the warning sentry advised. “The seeds are already starting to grow. The raiding goblins took many of our light gems. Most of the city is almost completely dark. As soon as the seeds hit the ground they are shooting up into saplings. They are not big enough to attack us yet, but they will be before we can stop them.”

“How many seeds were dropped?” an advisor asked with halting breaths.

“Hundreds. Who knows?”

“We should evacuate immediately, seal off every tunnel as we leave.”

Another advisor bore a painful truth. “We can’t leave. We have no where to go. No neighboring city will have us. The separatist revolt, remember?”

A collective groan echoed through the chamber.

Fear bore desperate options. “Then we must flee to the surface.” But these words held little resolution. Life above ground amounted to near torture.

Again, silence prevailed.

One guard finally offered a defeated suggestion. “We can attempt to burn the trees. It is our only chance.”

Lief barged into the room revealing truths already known to the dwarves. “You can’t burn the trees. Flames won’t hurt them once they begin to grow. You can only stop them with sunlight.”

Many of the dwarves stared angrily at the elf. They immediately connected him with the seeds. Like jackals, they sneered.

“He is responsible,” one accused. “His camp must have dropped the seeds upon us.”

Without Dzeb’s presence, the dwarf guards now moved without hesitation upon the elf. They turned their fear into anger and focused it upon their target. They were slow and plodding but they outnumbered Lief by a wide margin. They ultimately surrounded him and took hold of his limbs. They threatened to pull him apart in a fit of anger.

Ryson roared above the din. “Take your hands off him!”

The dwarves paused but did not release the elf.

The delver persisted. “I have the means to save you, but only when you let him go.”

Still, the dwarves retained their grip. “What can you do?” one barked.

Ryson pointed his sword at the heart of the questioning dwarf. “My sword magnifies daylight. I can use it to burn the trees, or I can use it to fight you and

free my friend. Which will you have?”

A group of dwarves moved toward the delver. The sword might indeed hold their salvation, and they considered taking it for their own.

Ryson leapt clear in a blur of motion that dazzled the dwarves. “Don’t be fools. You can’t move quick enough to save your whole city. I can, but I won’t until you let him go.”

“You will promise to destroy the trees?”

“I’ll promise to try. And I’ll need his help as well. He’s the only other one here fast enough to help scout the city.”

The dwarves held little in the way of options. Reluctantly, they released the elf, though most did so with a shove.

Lief boiled over. “I did not drop the seeds on your stubborn heads, you damned moles. I came here to stop it, came here to end the war before it came to this.”

Ryson called out sternly. “Lief! Not now. I need your help.”

Lief glared at the surrounding dwarves.

Again, the delver pressed the urgent need upon the elf. “There’s no time for that. We have to work while the sun’s still up. As long as light comes through the tunnels, we have a chance. Once night falls, it’ll be all over.”

Lief straightened, pushed the thought of the dwarves’ aggressiveness from his mind. “What is it you suggest?”

Ryson spoke quickly. “Pinpoint each seed, each growing tree. I can use the beam of light from the sword’s tip to disintegrate them. It’s the only chance.”

Lief nodded. “You will have to move quickly.”

“I plan to, but I’ll still need help. I’m going to move north first, then come back and take the east, then the south. I want you to go east first, make a preliminary scout. Find where the seeds were dropped. They had to come from air holes or tunnels from above. Look for them. Find them and mark them for me so I can

see them from a distance, a signal fire is your best bet. The more searching you do, the less I have to.” Ryson then turned to the dwarves. “You had a good idea before. Pick up the seeds that haven’t grown or the saplings that are still small enough to handle. Get them topside. The more you can help the better. And get all the light gems you can back in place. We need every little bit of sunlight we can get.”

Ryson didn’t wait for an acknowledgment, he simply dashed off down the hall. The beacon of his sword flashed through the corridors like a spear of lightning. Once beyond the palace doors, the delver turned north. He didn’t need the sun overhead to tell him east from west. He didn’t need landmarks as a reference. He simply knew which way to turn. He rushed up the streets like an unbridled horse. His head swerved on his neck, constantly searching for signs of the trees. He spotted the first cluster almost immediately.

“Godson!” The sight chilled him, revived his memories of Sanctum’s bowels. Shadow trees - the name was perfect in description. Silhouettes of dead gnarled trees, black as tar and as lifeless as ashes, thirsted for life in the darkness of an alleyway. The cluster blanketed the width of the street. They spread like oozing sludge. They grew before his eyes. Small shoots of new branches groped for the darkness. He shivered. Thankfully, none had yet reached full size. The tallest was not yet above his own height, but even at this stunted dimension, they stood like breeders of corruption.

He forced himself to step up to this orchard of disease. Reluctance gripped him, slowed his every step. He finally stopped within an arm’s length of the closest tree.

“Please let this work,” he prayed.

He pointed the very tip of the sword toward the closest sapling. The branches were already retracting from the sword’s glow. When the tightly wound beam from the sword’s point blazed into the thicket, the thin trunks began to scatter.

Another sickening sight. These trees had no roots, nothing to bolt them into the ground. When they felt the burn of magnified daylight, they scurried for the shelter of darkness. They moved like wounded, mutated spiders, leaving slogging trails of black filth.

Ryson gagged, had he eaten in the past few hours, he would have lost his meal.

His stomach, however, was already empty, and in this, he found solace. He turned his full focus to his intended task. He used his great speed to circle the scattering trees. He herded them back into a tight cluster. He then brought the full force of light upon them, one by one.

They began to sizzle and burn, and finally, thankfully, disintegrate into thick black smoke. The smell was horrendous, like old garbage cooking over lava.

He gagged again, but his arm remained steady. The laser thin beam shooting off the point swooped like a wand through the thicket. The trees could not escape. They dwindled in number. Ryson continued to circle about the dark grove, continued to keep each tree under his attack. There was no sound other than the hissing burn. Soon, he had eliminated the entire mass. He kicked at the remnants. Nothing remained but dirt and soot.

“Thank Godson!” He heaved relief for only a moment. The task ahead was daunting. He would return later to make sure nothing else grew, but he knew there were more groupings in the darkness elsewhere. He continued his northward trek. He quickly found another cluster. He also found greater distress and increased danger. The next grove contained more trees with larger trunks. The reach of the branches expanded. With each second in darkness, the trees were growing taller and more powerful. He turned his sword upon them. They rescinded from the initial burst of light, burned with the same intensity, but now they showed a willingness to fight back. Branches swooped down and around the beam. They groped for the delver with the same tenacity in which they sought the darkness. Black sludge dropped into thick puddles as skeletal branches flung outward in an attempt to dislodge the sword from the delver’s hands.

Ryson was forced to dodge as he circled the trees. Only his tremendous speed kept him alive. As he continued the assault, more than one lunged for him. Thick trunks, spindly branches; the trees attacked with their entire form in a final effort for survival.

The delver faced these new circumstances with grim anticipation for the continued conflict. He understood his dilemma, all too well. The darkness of the city was allowing the trees to grow as fast as he could move. The time spent on destroying a single grove would allow each remaining group to grow larger and deadlier. He wondered how long it would take before the trees would encompass

too much space for him to destroy.

“I’m going to need more light,” the delver professed heavily.

As if an answer to his wish, the glow from the city streets began to increase. The delver did not slow in his attack, but the welcome illumination did not escape him.

“Light gems,” Ryson stated with renewed optimism. He danced lively about the dense formation of trees as he smiled at the slowly appearing outline of his own shadow. “I hope the dwarves have more.”

Indeed they did, for the faint glow seemed to increase gently with each passing moment. Obviously the dwarves were hard at work around the city replacing light gems at all corridors and airshafts. Sunlight began to bounce off the polished stone that surrounded the entire city. It was not enough to truly hurt the trees, but it slowed their growth. It also served to increase the power of the one weapon that could hurt them.

The enhanced light was magnified by the delver’s sword. The beam from the point grew brighter and longer, a laser of pure sunlight. It cut through the trees with greater efficiency. Even as the trees had grown more resistant, they could not withstand the growing intensity of this beam. They could not outmaneuver the delver, and they could not block the devastating burn of their only weakness. They withered and steamed instantly.

Ryson delighted in the change of momentum. With the power of his sword increased, he found even greater energy. He moved with the swiftness of a hurricane wind, a speed which only could be surpassed by light itself. He destroyed a collection of over a dozen trees in but a heartbeat.

Ryson pressed onward, moving at speeds beyond the comprehension of the dwarves that watched him. He covered the underground granite streets with jumps and bounds. He darted about, shifting and leaping, turning and twisting. If not for the glowing blade of his sword, he might as well have been invisible. As long as he moved, and he moved almost constantly, the glowing blade served as the only beacon of his presence. He paused only when first confronting a cluster of trees. After a near instantaneous inspection, his legs would again carry him with perfect balance as he circled the trees like a controlled tornado.

His mind kept a complete picture of the area he covered. He never doubled over previously scouted roads, and he never missed even a single back alley. He moved with all the grace and precision that was his to command. He covered the northern section of the city, then the eastern boundaries. His task was made easier here by the signal fires set earlier by Lief. His assault was complete in both these areas. No seeds and no saplings survived.

Still, Dunop was no small city and the trees would not die without a struggle. Halfway into the confrontation, the tide of battle again turned, this time against the delver. The trees began to respond to the attacks before the delver could close upon them. As if they realized their plight, they began to scatter as soon as they could move, fleeing from the delver's sword and the death it would bring them.

Ryson now faced tracking down individual trees as opposed to massacring groups. This slowed him greatly. The beam of his sword was now focusing on single trunks rather than bunches of them. He was also forced into racing back and forth over the same streets as he attempted to annihilate each fleeing tree.

The new tactic flustered Ryson, frustrated him. He felt as if he was chasing his tail. Worse, he began to fear that in his haste, he might miss a tree. Such a mistake would hold dire consequences. A single tree would grow rapidly in the pure dark of night and would drop more seeds to produce more trees well before morning. The trees had to be destroyed now, all of them. He called for the assistance of surrounding dwarves. He needed them to watch for even one tree that might evade his own keen detection.

The dwarves assisted to the best of their ability. Their own eyesight, keen in the dim light, proved invaluable. They guided the delver to many breakaway trees. They used their diminutive size as well. They scouted low grounds and pointed out areas the delver might have otherwise overlooked.

Ryson began to feel a dull ache in his legs and a sharper pain in his side. He was finally tiring, but there was still roughly a third of the city left to scour. He bit back his pain, but he could not forget it completely. It slowed him, forced him to pause on more than one occasion. It would not, however, conquer his determination. Even as the trees continued their attempts to evade him, he proceeded to follow every trail, to hunt them down with cold precision.

He covered three quarters of the town when he finally met up with Lief. Only the western section of the city remained. He barely slowed to speak to his friend when the elf took hold of him.

“Hold yourself, Ryson. You’ve done enough.”

Ryson tried to break free, but the elf held him firm. The delver questioned Lief with irritability. He wanted to finish his job and he let Lief know it. “What are you talking about? There’s still the west side. We can’t leave any trees. Even one can take over and destroy the city.”

“You saved the city,” Lief reassured. “The dwarves will take care of the rest.”

The delver finally came to a halt. As he stopped struggling against the elf’s hold, Lief released him. Ryson muttered the obvious question.

“How?”

“They’re set to bury that portion of Dunop that you have not traveled. They’re going to collapse the roof above. They have already evacuated that section of the town. They will bury the trees in a mountain of rock. They are willing to sacrifice that much.”

“But they don’t have to sacrifice anything. The sword’s working.”

“Not for much longer,” Lief stated sadly. “The sun is setting outside. The light which remains in Dunop is now more firelight than sunlight. Your sword will continue to glow with that light, but it will not hurt the trees.”

“But there’s still starlight! It stopped them in Sanctum,” Ryson protested. “It was night then.”

“It kept them at bay. It did not destroy them,” Lief corrected. “The starlight can indeed hurt them, prevent them from growing, but not with same efficiency as daylight. This deep in the ground, your sword would do little more than cut a path for you to move. Nothing more. There are other problems as well. We tried to mark the spots for you, but the trees have grown too large. That section of town was the darkest. They are moving freely now. If you ventured into that portion of the city, you would do well simply to survive. I am afraid you would be quickly overwhelmed and the trees would have the rest of the city as well. It

has to be this way. We should move back now.”

Ryson resisted. He felt his mission incomplete, as if he had failed, but he could not ignore the sight of retreating dwarves. They were already abandoning that section of Dunop.

Lief pulled gently at the delver’s arm. “Come on. You saved more of their city than they could have hoped for.”

Ryson allowed the elf to guide him away. They finally stopped near the front of the palace.

“I suggest you cover your ears,” Lief advised.

Ryson did so. He waited impatiently, watched for even the slightest movements of activity. He caught a fevered pitch of action near the all-encompassing ceiling of rock. He spied dwarves suspended from ropes with pick axes, shovels and sledge hammers. They worked deftly, but their purpose was foreign to the delver. They seemed to be hammering and digging in haphazard confusion. He soon realized that nothing was further from the truth. The dwarves had acted in a harmony that rivaled that of the algors, and as they struck one last time together, the tons of rock hanging over the western end of the city collapsed in one large mass.

Ryson marveled at the sight. He could not fathom the weight and size of the rock that fell, but the destruction was obvious. Marvelous dwarf structures, statues to their brilliance in the art of construction, were immediately and thoroughly crushed by all encompassing rock.

The ground shook with a great blast. A wave of force crashed forward from the impact. Dwarves were sent sprawling as dust filled the air. It glittered in the beams bouncing off the light gems.

Ryson maintained his balance even as Lief was sent to his knees. The delver turned about to examine the effects of the blast upon the rest of the city. More testimony to the dwarves’ great skill, the hardy buildings remained intact, undamaged as if nothing had happened. And so it truly appeared, even at the very point of collapse. There was no sign of devastation other than the absence of the western city section. There were no crumbled buildings, no broken roads. Only rock. There were no crevices, no cracks, the seal was complete. It was as if

the ground had meshed together and that portion of Dunop had never existed.

Ryson immediately saw the symbolism in this grandiose display. That section of Dunop was simply gone, gone like Yave, gone like the need for any further conflict. The war was over. A wave of relief hit like a sledge hammer. He felt fatigue with the realization that there was nothing left for him to do. He met his challenge, the need for his involvement was at an end.

Lief gathered himself, rose to his feet, and brushed the dust off his clothes. He echoed Ryson's very sentiments. "It seems the threat is over."

Unfortunately, not all agreed. An ordinary dwarf citizen stumbled up to them with a mask of hostility. "No thanks to you, elf." The description of Lief's race was accented with hate and anger.

Another dwarf followed the first's lead, then another. A crowd soon surrounded them, a crowd which quickly turned into an accusing mob.

"You dropped the seeds on us."

"You attacked my camp without provocation," Lief shot back.

"The seeds should have never been used," one dwarf cried.

Others joined in the tirade.

"We have lost part of our city because of you and the other elves. The shadow trees are the ultimate act of war."

"A war you started," Lief replied belligerently.

"And a war we can finish," a dwarf sentry growled.

Lief laughed sarcastically. "With what army?"

"We will all take up arms. Other dwarves from other cities will join us. You have used shadow trees against us! No dwarf will forgive that."

It was the delver that responded. "That's enough!" Ryson's face glowed crimson. Veins bulged from the side of his head. His fatigue ruled his emotions. He

blasted everyone around him with shouts of frustration. “Haven’t you learned anything?! Can you possibly be this stubborn and stupid?”

“Yes, they can,” Lief replied smugly.

The delver would not hold his fury simply to the dwarves. “Shut up, Lief!”

The elf recoiled with surprise.

Ryson continued. “I’m tired of all of you. The whole bunch of you. Things were better off when I didn’t even know any of you existed. Do you know that? How does that make you feel?”

“What do we care what a delver feels?” one dwarf voice retorted.

“Because this delver saved your lives, saved your necks!”

“The cliff behemoths saved us, not you,” another voice rebutted.

“Did the cliff behemoths save you from the trees? They saved you from the sand giants. And who do you think told them of this nonsense?! I did. I don’t know why they came here, but now I’m sorry they did. You deserved to be crushed by the sand giants. Especially, after what you did to the algors.”

“The algors killed Tun,” a female’s voice cried defensively.

“That’s nonsense. I was there. Tun died because he was just as stupid and stubborn as the rest of you.”

“Watch your tongue, delver,” a dwarf guard called sharply.

“Why? What are you going to threaten me with now? Going to throw me in the dungeon like you did before? And for what? All I ever tried to do was to help you.”

“But the elves have committed the ultimate act of war. They have dropped the seeds upon our town. We must respond.”

“Is that so? And what about the algors. You attacked them. Slaughtered them! Don’t they have a right to send more sand giants? And what about the humans at

Connel? I saw what you did there. And why? I know why. Oh, I know for damn sure why. Your queen wanted to get even with me. She knew that I used to live there. That's why thousands of humans died. She ordered the attack on my home for the same reason. When I go back, what am I going to find? Neighbors and friends dead. Buildings destroyed. Does that give me the right to kill all of you right now? Don't tempt me."

A single delver attacking the remnants of a once proud city, the thought was ludicrous, but the dwarves saw the resolve in the delver. Could they stop him? Could they even catch him?

Ryson, however, turned his venom quickly upon the elf. "And what about you?"

"What about me?" Lief responded unwaveringly.

"Your people are now just as responsible for this stupidity as the dwarves," Ryson shot back. "Petiole dropped the seeds. You can't deny that."

"I don't intend to, but what has that got to do with me?"

Ryson glared with disbelief at Lief's apparent hold to blameless detachment. "He's the leader of your camp."

"I was against the use of the seeds. I made him promise to hold off."

"He broke his word. He almost got us killed. What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do about it?"

"See that he never does it again!" Ryson replied angrily, fists clenched tightly. He yelled louder, with greater conviction. "Remove him from power. Take away his right to lead."

Lief began to speak, but Ryson spoke over him.

"I know. I know. You can't do anything about it because its the way you have to live. It's your tradition. More garbage! What he did was unconscionable. It was sinful. We had this stopped. It was over. The cliff behemoths saw to that. The seeds fell and now it's starting all over again. You know what that means? It's all in Petiole's lap now. It was easy for you to blame Yave when she started things.

What about now? The plain simple truth is that Yave was stopped, history! The war was over, and then, the seeds came. Your camp! Do you understand? Your camp is now responsible. Petiole is responsible. What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do? The guards ...”

Ryson growled with contempt. “What do I care about your guards? Petiole is a menace. A worse menace than Yave. For the love of Godson, Lief, think about what that bastard did. He was so worried about his own image, his lousy status among the other camp elders, that he was willing to destroy an entire city. What does that say? If you leave him in power, what does that say about you? Yave was wrong, she acted out of anger and hate. That’s bad, terrible, but what Petiole did was worse. He acted out of weakness, pride, and selfishness. How can you even trust a person like that? Guards or no guards and to blazes with your tradition, if Petiole is still in charge after this, it means you’re all a bunch of killers. There’s no excuse for this. None whatsoever. He promised us time. Time he never gave us!”

Lief was silent.

Ryson let the elf ponder his words. He turned his fury back upon the dwarves. “And as for you. You don’t have a choice! In case any of you have forgotten, the cliff behemoths said there would be an end to this war. This stops here! Now, I want out of this place. I want to get home. Give me and this elf an escort back to Dark Spruce.”

Far removed from the center of the Dunop, deep within a tunnel leading to the surface, Dzeb listened to the final echoing words of the delver. He smiled with glowing grace. “Very good, Ryson. May Godson always bless you.”

Chapter 23

Ryson was back at Burbon. He surveyed the damage with Sy as he recounted his own experiences in Dunop. The sight of the crumbled wall did little to lift his spirits. The delver thought mostly of Yave, how it was her anger that spilled over to create so many hardships. But that was not his only thought. He thought of the elves and Petiole. He considered the serp and how it gained from the conflict between them all. He thought of the innocent in Burbon and Connel, even the algors in the Lacobian. He even considered the magic and what it was doing to the land. Apparently, it had saved Burbon, or at least it had done so through Enin, but what would happen if such power was controlled by the corrupt? Long ago, the magic was used to create the shadow trees. What would happen now, in a time when evil felt so close at hand? Such weighty reflections chagrined the delver, and he seemed almost despondent as the captain of the guard revealed his own considerations.

“It’ll be a while before the wall is complete, but I think with the towers in place, we’ll survive.” Sy spat on the ground. He kicked dirt over the patch of saliva as he rubbed any moisture from his lips. “With all the training our people received from the elves, most of the civilians can now shoot a bow better than most regulars. More than a handful have volunteered for continued duty, even after what you said about the dwarves not being a threat anymore. I’m putting three to four archers on each platform with the watch. They can do a lot of damage to anything trying to cross the clearing.”

Sy took a moment to survey the grounds. Most of the rubble was cleared from the streets. He looked west, he had an unobstructed view of the hills. He gauged the distance between the two broken ends of the unfinished wall. The gap was wide, but it was closing with each plank of wood and each brick of clay and mortar. He considered the resources necessary to finish the job.

“Times are different now,” the captain considered aloud. “All these resources put to defending ourselves. We could have used them to build homes, expand. It’s funny, though, the people don’t complain. The town’s about bankrupt. Things are going to be tough the next few seasons. Still, they won’t say anything. I guess people realize what’s truly important in times like this. We could have built twenty taverns with the brick and wood needed for that wall, but everyone knows none of that is any good if we’re all dead. We have to make different

sacrifices now. We have to think about just surviving. The people seem to realize that. I think that's why they fought the dwarves the way they did."

Sy cast a heavy breath and then spat again. "Well, we can rest a little easier, for a while at least. I guess the only thing we have to worry about now is an occasional shag or river rogue, and maybe the goblins. But I doubt they'll be trouble anytime soon, especially if they stole as much treasure as you think. I can't imagine why they'd risk a raid at this point. They can pretty much buy any supplies they might need. There are enough carpetbaggers out there that would sell to anyone, or even anything. I guess that's the one thing that won't change, even with everything else that's going on. There's always someone willing to do anything for money, even sell food to goblins."

"Or weapons," Ryson added.

The thought bothered Sy. "Yeah, that's true, too. Maybe I shouldn't stop worrying about the goblins. That sneaky little serp didn't come back this way. I knew he wouldn't honor our bargain, and I know he's out there watching us. If some nut sells him a long range weapon, he won't think twice about attacking us."

"It's something we should all worry about," Ryson replied. The delver looked uncomfortable. He started to speak, but held his tongue.

Sy was quick enough to pick up on it. "Something on your mind?"

"Lots of things," Ryson admitted. He began to expel his thoughts. He let his worries loose, as if speaking them might exorcise his own personal demons. "I have no idea what's going to happen with the elf camp. I left Lief without saying much else to him. He knows what I think of Petiole. I think he feels the same way. But ..."

"But you don't know if he'll do anything about it," Sy finished.

"I don't know if he can," Ryson added. "Petiole's got control of the elf guard. As long as they back him, he remains in power, a little dictator given control because he's the eldest."

"Doesn't make much sense, does it?" Sy replied. "I wonder myself what's going to happen out there. I really appreciated having the elves here. They helped us

more than I could have hoped, but with what I've heard of this Petiole character, you just don't know."

"I wish Mappel were still there," Ryson admitted.

Sy never met Mappel, though he heard of the deceased elf's abilities. He knew good leaders were hard to find, even harder to replace. And he knew Petiole was not a close substitute. "I guess that's how the elves feel. Well, it's their problem. They seem pretty straightforward thinkers. I'm sure they'll find a way to do what's right. What else's got you worried?"

Ryson groaned. "Name it. The serp out there in the hills with all that dwarf gold is going to use it against us. I think that's a certainty. Then, there's the algors. They sent out the sand giants to destroy Dunop. I have no idea what will happen if they find out the cliff behemoths destroyed their creations. If they hear the whole truth, they'll probably be satisfied. The dwarves suffered a whole lot of casualties. There's nothing left of their army. And speaking of the dwarves, I left Dunop with Jon basically comatose and no other leader in sight. And then there's Yave. I have no idea where she went, but I know she wasn't happy, or ready to just forget everything."

"I wouldn't worry about Yave," Sy advised. "If things happened the way you told me, she's got nothing left to attack us with. She's on her own."

#

Yave retraced the steps of the sand giants that attacked her home. She moved through underground passages grumbling in half-sentences and cursing in muttered snarls. She moved westward in tunnels which stretched below the Lacobian desert. She could not feel the heat, for she was far below the surface, but an image of her final destination etched itself in her mind, residue from her encounter with the Sword of Decree.

Somewhere below a point of pure desolation, she began her ascent to the surface. The dethroned queen savagely ripped at the soft ground, ripped through soil with her powerful, bare hands. Rock and dirt slowly gave way to sand, and her momentum increased. She shoved the sediment behind her as she pressed her face forward into the darkness of her handmade tunnel. Sand filled the rolls of her royal garb, granules spilled into her mouth and eyes. She ignored the stinging pain and the dry, bitter taste. She broke through to the surface with an

indignant shout of conquest. She pulled herself to her feet not bothering to brush the caked sand from her person. Her eyes turned to the south. In the far distance, she spied a small oasis, a plot of life in this barren hell which she already knew existed.

She labored through the sand, trudging across the desert, moving more out of bitter determination than anything else. The light burned her eyes, the desert sun clouded her vision. The damage was permanent, but she ignored her pain as well as her dwindling sight. She moved from a memory, a slice of knowledge placed in her brain.

The Sword of Decree had showed her all that had occurred in Sanctum. She saw her son die, but she saw other events as well. She saw a sorceress, a human woman that was also in Sanctum. The sorceress took the name Tabris, and at the time of the sphere, she didn't want to be a magic caster, but the damned delver forced his will upon her. Now, the sorceress had power, power to help Yave defeat all who opposed the sanctity of Tun's memory. The human woman dwelled in this portion of the desert, she had created this oasis. The sword had given the dwarf queen that knowledge as well.

Tabris stood at the edge of a small pond, a collection of fresh water created by her many spells of storms and squalls. Vegetation was thick here, coaxed to life by the moisture as well as her magic. She could not control nature with the same power she controlled the storms, but her magic was enough to grow fruit trees in the middle of a lifeless desert. She did not expect Yave's arrival, but she noticed the lonely traveler before the dwarf entered the oasis. She continued to soak in the magic surrounding her as she greeted her visitor.

"You are lost, dwarf." The sorceress spoke plainly and without joy in seeing a visitor or anger in confronting a trespasser. The dwarf queen's presence meant little to her, an oddity to be sure, but nothing that truly evoked a meaningful response from the sorceress.

Yave could barely see the outline of the taller woman before her. Though her vision was aided by the existence of shade trees, she still had to squint out the bright light. She showed no sign of welcoming the cooler temperatures of the oasis. Her personal comfort was immaterial; her quest for justice was her only desire.

“I am not lost,” Yave spouted like a drunkard finding an unattended bar. “I came to see you. You are Tabris, the sorceress that entered Sanctum.”

Tabris looked deeply into the mind of the dwarf. The exiled queen was easy to read. Yave’s emotions burst like fireworks on a clear, dark night. Her desires flared like hungry flames burning dry wood. “And you are Yave, mother of the deceased Tun Folarok. What would you have me do, dwarf? Use my power against the delver, strike out at the elves of Dark Spruce, and then finish the algors? Is that what you wish? I do not hold to your beliefs.”

Yave grunted as her hatred deepened. “You did not want to be a sorceress,” she hissed. “The delver forced you into this. You must desire justice for your own sake.”

“I have not yet decided on that,” Tabris announced. “My path is not chosen as of yet. My choices in Sanctum have not led to a conclusion.”

“My path is concluded!” Yave bellowed. “I need your help!”

Tabris looked upon the dwarf apathetically. “As I have already asked, what would you have me do? I will not attack, not on this day anyway.”

Yave grimaced. “Loose your energies upon me. Give me the power to attack. If you do not seek justice, at least do not hinder one who does.”

Tabris barely acknowledged the request. Her thoughts began to drift to other matters. She considered the alteration and expansion of her known spells. The dwarf queen was simply not of great importance. She was more of a gnat buzzing at her ear. The sorceress answered with casual disregard. “I gain nothing in such an action. Your purpose is not of my concern.”

“What is it you want from me, witch?” Yave demanded. “What must I pay? Name your price.”

“You have nothing to offer,” Tabris responded.

Yave heaved in frustration. Her teeth ground together as she clamored for attention. “There must be something. There are gems where I come from, stones which can hold magic. There are weapons for your enchantment, metals and stone to build a suitable palace.”

“I need no such items,” Tabris replied with her mind on other thoughts.

“What do you need?” Yave asked fitfully.

“I need to practice my craft.”

Yave grasped an idea and embraced hope. “Practice on me. Is there not a spell you might wish to try which could benefit us both? Something which will give me the power I need?”

“You are a dwarf and very resistant to magic,” Tabris replied, but her attention seemed to refocus.

“I will open myself to your spell.”

Tabris considered the offer. Possible spells flooded her mind. “There is something I have been hoping to try.”

“Will it strengthen me? Allow me to exact justice?”

Tabris nodded. “My natural focus is in the power of storms, my magic is dark violet. I have often wondered if I could power the spirit essence of a minion with the strength of storm. If successful, your body would be destroyed. The substance of your being would be transferred to the center of a powerful tempest. Your consciousness would remain, but you would no longer be of mortal form. You would become the force and the drive of a storm. Once the spell is cast, you would have independent thought and you could bring the strength of a storm upon whomever you choose... as long as I allow it.”

Yave hungered greedily for the power. She could not contain herself. “Cast the spell! Do not wait!”

Tabris shrugged. She rubbed her hands together, set them as if praying. Her eyes rolled over white. Her head bowed back as she called for the power of a storm. A violet diamond formed about her hands, the sides rotating, bristling with magic. Her pupils slowly returned, and she set them on the sky. She threw her hands up over her head, and the purple diamond bolted to the heavens.

Dark, angry clouds formed over the desert, ignoring the heat, ignoring the sun. They rumbled with purpose. A bolt of lightning struck Yave. It disintegrated her

body as it swallowed the dwarf queen's spirit.

#

Lief spoke barely a word to the other elves that surrounded him. His eyes drifted across the grounds of Dark Spruce. He searched for Petiole, but found no sign of the elder. For the most part, he ignored the questions of those eager to hear news of the events in Dunop, until someone asked how he survived the shadow trees.

Lief's eyes narrowed, his voice rang out bitterly. "I survived because Ryson Acumen showed greater courage than our leader. I survived because cliff behemoths are far wiser than Petiole could ever hope to be."

The crowd of elves revealed shock. Some tensed, others gasped, but the whole waited for some shred of explanation.

Lief gave it willingly, angrily. "The shadow tree seeds should never have been dropped. It was the action of a coward, a weak and sniveling coward. A river rogue would have greater sense."

Lief turned about to find any objection. He was met with only stunned silence. He still could not find Petiole. He fumed. "Where is our elder? Where is the fool who would not hold to his word? Where is the jackass that would dare to repeat the greatest crime of our race?"

One from the crowd called out meekly. "He waits at the far eastern perimeter. He counsels with the guard."

Lief shook his head in disgust. "He counsels with no one. He hides like a worm in the mud. He looks to the guard for protection, but he can not hide from what he must admit. Follow me. All of you follow me."

Lief stormed through the crowd. He moved to the east, straining to find a silhouette in the shadows. When he spotted a lone figure lurking behind an old oak, he moved upon it with judgment in his mind.

Petiole immediately called for guards to his side. They seemed to take too long, but they reached him before Lief.

Lief scorned the sight. He ignored the guards. His eyes lit on Petiole with angry

purpose. The words dripped from his mouth like poison from a snake. “You dropped the seeds. You didn’t give us the time you promised. You broke your word, and you committed a crime.”

Petiole cringed. “I committed no crime!” The elder scrambled to find excuses. “I sought only the protection of my camp. You did not return. I had to think of the others.”

“You thought only of yourself!” Lief hissed. “And you are a criminal. The war was over! Yave was defeated, removed from power. The cliff behemoths saw to that. They declared there would be no further violence, but then the seeds fell. You dropped them after the battle was won!”

“I had no idea!” Petiole whined.

“You gave us five days!” Lief growled. “If you kept your word, you would have known.”

Petiole looked upon the crowd of elves, elves of his camp, elves that were supposed to follow his word. He saw doubt in their eyes. Lief was destroying his ability to lead - not just questioning his authority, but removing it. He fought back like a trapped animal with no way of escape.

“Do not tell me what my word was! Why would you need such time? How was I to know the cliff behemoths would intervene. The delver said they would not come. I was misinformed. I made decisions based solely on the safety of this camp.”

“Fire upon you!” Lief cursed. “You think only of yourself. And you spout lies. Don’t you think I know what has happened since I left? I have heard the news. The dwarf army was forced to retreat from Burbon. They suffered heavy casualties. There was no chance of an attack on our camp. You knew that. You dropped the seeds out of your own fear!”

The other elves considered the point. News had spread of the battle at Burbon. They all knew of the dwarf defeat. Petiole should have known as well. Why would he order the seeds dropped if he knew the dwarves suffered such great losses? More than one set of eyes fell harshly upon the elder.

Lief fed their anger, raised more questions. “Why would you even risk such a

thing? Did you discuss the action with other elf camps? Did you even consider it?”

Petiole fought to defend his actions. “Why must I consult with other camps? We are the ones that faced the danger. Other camps, elf or not, should have no say in our personal matters.”

Lief could not hold his fury, and had no desire to do so. “You imbecile! Have you no brain?! Dropping shadow tree seeds on Dunop is more than a reaction to a raid. It is an act of barbarism. Dwarves from all of Uton would hear of the deed. What do you think would be happening now if the delver did not save Dunop? Every dwarf city would be ready to raise arms against us. Another elf-dwarf war. That’s what you would have caused.”

The possibility rang true. Many elves cringed at the thought. All out war with the dwarves would be beyond disastrous.

Petiole wavered with indecision. He pained for a way out, an escape from the accusing mob. “What else was I to do? Yes, I heard the news of the dwarf attack on Burbon. I believed it meant you failed. That is why I dropped the seeds.”

Lief sent the dagger strike to Petiole. “You dropped the seeds because you are weak, because you are not like Mappel.”

Petiole erupted. “No, I am not Mappel! Every elf talks of Mappel. No one listens to me. Every time I make a decision, I face the same question. Is that what Mappel would have done? I don’t care what Mappel would have done! I am the elder of this camp. I make the decisions. Now, I order that you be banished from this camp. You have questioned my authority for the last time. I order the guards to escort you away from Dark Spruce.”

Lief glared. “I know too well the tradition and oath that binds the guard. I know it well enough to say that though they must protect the camp elder, they must also follow the law, the law you have now broken for all to see. You ordered the use of shadow trees when they were no longer needed. You broke your word and risked all out war. You failed to act in the best interests of this camp, indeed for the best interest of all the elves. You did so out of your own cowardly reasons. Do any of your advisors or counselors deny this?”

As Lief looked around, not one spoke out in denial.

“Does anyone refute the charges I have named against this elf?”

Again, silence.

Petiole stammered. “You cannot make any charges. You are banished. Guards, take him away now!”

The guards did not move.

Petiole stood aghast. “Take him, I said.”

The guards on the ground returned to the trees. Petiole cringed with horror and disbelief, stepped back with a weakening will and a festering fear.

Lief eyed Petiole with disgust. “The camp must decide what to do with you. You have committed a crime too atrocious to simply ignore. Dropping the seeds could have meant a greater war, it could have meant the lives of far too many.”

“He must pay for his crime,” an elf called from the crowd.

“He should be turned over to Dunop,” another stated. “It is the dwarves that must decide the just punishment.”

Lief nodded in agreement, as did many others.

#

“This isn’t right,” Sy grumbled. “Storms don’t come in like this. Not even in the growing season, and we’re just about at dormancy. What do you make of it?”

Ryson had no answer. He’d seen nothing like it before. Dark purple clouds rushed in from the southwest, raged forward like a rabid wolf, but then halted at the very edge of Burbon. Directly overhead, a clear border existed between the clear blue sky and the angry tempest. Lightning flashed, streaked to the ground, and hit the hills which bordered the clearing. Thunder exploded, shaking buildings, and startling nearly every member of town. Gale blasts creased the hill grass. Within the center of the tumult, the billowing clouds continued to ebb and flow, to undulate like a liquid in a boiling cauldron, but the storm itself ceased to move forward. It had simply stalled. Wind blown rain crashed against the hills, but not a drop fell upon Burbon’s streets.

“I don’t know,” the delver admitted. “It’s getting awfully warm. It’s like a hurricane.”

Sy questioned the theory. “Here? From the southwest? This time of the year?”

“I know. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“And why did it just stop? I’ve never seen a storm do that in my life. How long has it been just sitting out there? It’s like it’s watching us. Whatever this is, it’s not natural.”

“You thing this is more magic?”

“What else could it be?” Sy grunted. “Where’s Enin?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Blast. This has got to be something he can understand a whole lot better than us.”

“I can go try and find him.”

Before the delver could move, an angry voice held him in place.

“Send me the delver!” The tempest demanded.

Ryson turned pale. His vast memory linked the voice with one he had heard before. “Godson! It’s Yave.”

“The dwarf queen?” Sy gaped.

For Ryson, there was no doubt. “It’s her.”

The delver stared into the storm, stared in pure astonishment. He looked to the clouds with wonder, looked for something beyond the wind and rain which would link the tempest to the dwarf queen. He searched for an outline of a face in the clouds, but he found nothing. Only the acrimonious voice of the storm indicated Yave’s presence, and it prevailed her will once more.

“Deliver Ryson Acumen to me or I will destroy everything in my path. I will kill everyone in this puny human town.” To punctuate her threat, a bolt of lightning

struck the ground a mere two paces in front of the south gate. The thunder clap was deafening.

The town grew still with indecision. They had seen the great power of their own wizard, they knew there was energy beyond their previous understanding, but this went far beyond their expectations. They had fought with elves against dwarves. They had seen shags and goblins, met with monsters of different shapes and sizes, but now, the wind and sky shaped itself against them. Their leader professed the simple question which set upon nearly every tongue.

“How do we fight this?” Sy groaned to himself. “We have no way to defend. This is a storm!” He put a hand to his forehead as his thoughts wrangled over useless tactics.

“I have to go out there,” Ryson offered in a defeated tone.

Sy’s head swung about with astonishment. “What? Are you crazy? What good is that going to do? That storm will kill you.”

Ryson pointed out what was now obvious. “I’ll be dead either way. If I stay here, she’ll take the town apart to get to me. She’s coming after me. I don’t know how she became a storm, but that’s what she is. I know this is ludicrous, but what choice do I have? Where am I going to hide? Look at the wind. She can sweep the land clean of every building here.”

“You can run,” Sy offered frantically. “You move like nothing else in the land. You can run and hide.”

“I can’t outrun that. I can’t outrun the wind.”

“No,” Sy commanded. “You’re not going to just sacrifice yourself. We’re going to find Enin. He might have an answer.”

Movement at the south gate caught both their attentions. Unthinkably, the gate swung open. A single figure stepped forward, away from the wall and into the clearing.

“Enin!” Ryson whispered.

The wizard threw off his cloak, let it flutter to the ground carried by the border

winds of the storm. He folded his hands before him, and he stared blankly into the heart of the tempest.

Yave's voice bellowed over the scream of the wind. "I asked for the delver. I do not know you. You were not at Sanctum. Who are you?!"

"Your end," Enin replied softly. The whispered response was carried to the skies by the wizard's will.

Lightning struck in response. It was meant to disintegrate the wizard, but it was forced to bend away from the lone figure. It smashed harmlessly into the clearing.

Enin's eyes glowed restless. "You have not the power to hurt me."

A howl erupted from the storm. The clouds swirled, the tempest began to surge. It threatened to sweep forward to crush Burbon in one massive thrust, but the clouds again ceased their progress, this time not by Yave's will but by Enin's.

Enin swung his hands to his head. Two circles of white power weaved their way about his wrists. He called to Yave his understanding of the truth. "You are a dwarf with no magic of your own. Your power is limited, where mine is not. You have elected to mix your essence with this storm. An unwise decision."

The circles broke from his arms. They flew upward, but they left a line in their wake, a conduit back to the wizard. The two rings expanded, encompassing the full breadth of the storm. They wrapped about the clouds and they stifled any chance of escape. Enin took hold of the trailing band, pulled as if he was tightening a noose. And indeed, the circles of white magic shrunk in size, compacted the storm.

Yave fought against the tense grip. She struggled to be free, to loose her fury on all of Burbon, but the clouds which now held her soul could not breach the harness. She felt what was left of her spirit collapsing upon itself. In a fit of rage, a barrage of lightning exploded from her core. Streaks of electric energy knifed downward with the malice of her hate. Thunder clap after thunder clap resonated into one massive burst of a deafening roar. Still, the bolts of energy could not pass beyond Enin's will. They could no more hurt him than they could strike a single building of Burbon. Each strike crashed into the hills, burned tall grass and charred dark soil, but the assault did no other damage.

Enin willed his own might upon the long line of magic. He pulled as if joined in a tug-of-war with the powers of heaven. But this was no god. This was all that was left of Yave's crazed spirit. The rings closed tighter, shrunk until they pulled the storm clouds into one compact ball. With one last pull, the circles of energy tightened into a closed knot.

An explosion lit the sky. Enin's white magic vanished. The clouds of the tempest broke from their restraints. They spread across the sky in all directions, but the dark purple began to bleed from their substance. They no longer surged with power, and there were no more bolts of lightning. That which remained appeared as nothing more than an approaching winter storm.

Ryson ran at full speed to the side of the wizard. The guards at the south gate barely saw him pass. He came to a complete stop to face his friend.

"Are you alright?"

Enin smiled lightly. "Slightly tired, a little empty, but no lasting damage."

"What about Yave?"

"She is no more."

Ryson looked deep into the clouds hanging overhead. He could no longer hear Yave's angry threats, but the clouds would not vanish. "Could she still be up there somewhere?"

Enin shook his head. "What is left in the sky is the remnants of the storm, but what was left of Yave is gone forever."

Ryson looked to the sky and watched the clouds spread to a more natural formation. He could no longer sense anything unnatural about the storm. Yave was indeed gone, and in truth, he felt more optimism than grief. He hoped this signified the end of the madness which took far too many innocent lives.

With these thoughts, the delver watched the skies carefully. The raging purple faded away into a softer gray. The temperature dropped as the heat of Yave's anger no longer existed to fuel the storm. Any threat of lightning dissipated in the growing cold, and the last rumble of thunder faded off into the distance. The wind was cold, but now reassuringly light. With the anger of the storm

diminished, the land lulled into the soundless bliss of dormancy.

“It sure got peaceful,” Ryson noted.

“The dormant season is a time of rest,” Enin suggested.

Ryson considered the thought. He looked to the sky and saw the light gray clouds filling the heavens. As his breath was now visible, he rubbed his hands together to warm them against the cold. He did not wish to escape the chill. He welcomed it. He also welcomed a new hope. As he earlier recalled the blessings of the harvest season, he now reminisced about the hidden joys of dormancy. He put aside his worries over goblin raids, and serps with shags. He stopped agonizing over simply surviving and considered the simple pleasures of living. Maybe the dormant season would lead to harder times, but then again, maybe not. Maybe it was as Enin said, a time of rest, a time of peace. Right now, he could not remember a more quiet time. As the frustration and gloom vanished slowly from his soul, he whispered a silent wish, a wish that was granted.

It began to snow.