**PROLOGUE**

***Fourth day of the third month of spring, 2120***

**ODAY WAS NOT A HAPPY DAY FOR THE DEFAKIRAN FAMILY. It was sad because one of its members was being sent away. His Grace, the duke, had ordered Malakiah, his eldest son and also the Marquis or heir apparent, to leave their home in the town of Garend to commence training as a Perencian Knight in the distant capital city of Suena. This decision was not appreciated by all whom it involved.**

**The travel party met in the courtyard of Castle Graystone at the first light of the day. Its members consisted of seven individuals. The party’s leader was Captain Baylor Escard, the duke’s captain of the guards. He had sandy-blond hair, light-blue eyes, and a rugged but handsome, clean-shaven face. The next five men were soldiers personally selected by Baylor: his aide Sergeant Kellor, Derwyn Lohm, Xenthius Yunth, Adamis Bethan, and Herzan Dinex. As the party would travel through dangerous territory, the captain had picked only men he knew he could trust to fight fiercely. The seventh member was Lord Malakiah Defakiran, the duke’s son. The youth was muscular with short, brown bushy hair and piercing blue eyes. Baylor’s solemn responsibility was to ensure His Lordship’s safe arrival, and he never took his duties lightly.**

**This journey would normally have been one that all looked forward to. Baylor remembered fondly traveling to Suena eighteen years ago for knightly training. But because Malakiah did not desire to become a knight, the duke has ordered Baylor to convey the young man there. His Grace had even authorized the captain, should it become necessary, to tie the youth on his horse! And, if further warranted, in a very undignified position!**

**Baylor hoped such an action would be unnecessary. He liked young Malakiah. Nonetheless, Baylor had no choice but to follow the duke's will. Malakiah might be the duke’s son and therefore able to command in his own right, but the lad’s wishes could not override his father’s.**

**Baylor reflected further. As was Baylor, the duke was a Perencian Knight of the Bronze Order and perhaps had frequently considered having his eldest son become one as well. As the heir apparent, Malakiah would need superior training in the science of combat and the art of leadership, and, as a Perencian Knight, he could hardly receive better instruction. Baylor was certain of that! The duke and especially the duchess probably could not bear the thought of Malakiah being absent from them for five years and so had not pursued the idea. Instead, they clung to the notion they themselves, through tutors, could handle his training.**

**Over these last few years, however, Malakiah’s behavior had worsened; he was hardly the image of the son that his parents would have wanted. Instead, he was very arrogant and most conscious of his highborn birth. Baylor knew personally that the lad had frequently subjected anyone—soldier, servant, merchant, peasant, whatever—to physical abuse or legal action should they annoy him or fail to obey his slightest whim. And because he was the duke’s son, none would dare protest. Moreover, with Malakiah at the age when he was expected to practice knightly duties and study the materials that he would need to know if he was to reign someday as his father had before him, he had neglected these responsibilities. Baylor knew that while the youth relished sword fighting and wrestling and was extremely strong for one his age and size, he was prone to neglect his studying. Worse, he disregarded the worshipping of Adonai completely, shunning the expected daily prayers or attending temple services. Such irreligious behavior was unheard of for a member of the family of Defakiran and had much displeased his father and especially his mother.**

**At first, his father and Baylor had stretched themselves to make the youth take the harness. Their efforts had come to naught. Finally, the captain reckoned, his parents had realized that they had no other alternative—the youth’s behavior forced them to consider that perhaps the only means to amend his character was the heavy disciplining that being a member in the Perencian Order would ladle out to him. Still, had it not been for the business of the Shadowlurkers, Malakiah might have escaped being sent to Suena.**

**Baylor’s reflections were interrupted by the arrival of the duke and the duchess. His Grace was tall and muscular with brown hair; Her Grace was slender and black-haired. Her eyes seemed red. The men snapped to attention as the duke strode toward the party while the duchess stayed back. Malakiah, however, continued slouching against his horse.**

**The duke spoke a few words to each of the men and then had a short talk with Baylor, mostly exchanging words on which routes to take to Suena. Then he came to face his son. They stared at each other for a full minute. Finally, the duke spoke.**

**“My son, think not for one minute you have anyone to blame but yourself for making this trip necessary. Your mother and I will miss you and pray that Adonai keeps you safe. Learn your lessons well. Pray write your mother often—she will worry should you fail to. And, if you will permit him to be, you will find that my old friend, Sir Heddrick, the Duke of Suena, who is now the head of the Perencian Order of Knights, can be an invaluable help to you. Or your worst nightmare.”**

**Malakiah rolled his eyes and said, “The only thing I will miss about this place is my personal chef’s cooking.”**

**The duke’s eyes flashed. “Come back not until you prove yourself worthy to be a knight and my heir,” he snapped. He turned on his heel and swiftly left the courtyard.**

**Now the duchess came forward and seized Malakiah in a fierce embrace. Baylor could tell she only kept from crying with effort. “Why,” she asked, “angered you your father so just now? You wanted your separation from him to be in that way?”**

**“I only spoke as I felt, Mother.”**

**“I tried for hours to have your father reconsider his decision—to no avail.” Malakiah understood her difficulty there. His father never made rash decisions. And once decided, the duke would never change his mind unless presented with new evidence, or he could be shown that the course he had chosen was impossible.**

**His mother continued, still holding him tightly. “Your father just kept saying you had forced this course upon us. Still, it is hard for me to let you depart from us for so long. I will miss you every day.”**

**“Good-bye, Mother. May Adonai watch over you and Father. I shall miss you too.”**

**“Forget not your brother Alcham, my son.”**

**“Yes, dear Brother, forget me not,” came a voice from by the door. Malakiah looked in that direction. There stood a lanky lad with dark hair—Alcham, his younger brother by three years. He smirked. “Mother,” he said, “Father wants you to return inside now. Allow the great knight-to-be to take his leave.”**

**Malakiah’s mother released him reluctantly with one final squeeze and headed inside, obviously blinking back tears.**

**The two youths stared at each other. Alcham smirked again. “Better you than me, Brother. Going away for years, studying hard, drilling, learning to be a soldier. I will dwell upon you while I remain here living the life of a duke’s son. By the way, I think I will make the acquaintance of that chambermaid who is so taken of you. You certainly will not be around for a while!”**

**Malakiah was beside himself. He started to walk over toward his taunter, but Captain Baylor stepped between them.**

**“No, my lord, as much as the men and I would enjoy seeing you wish your brother *farewell*, I cannot allow it. It would upset your mother too much. Now, attend to your horse. We leave in a few minutes.”**

**Alcham sneered. “Behold, my brother, the future great warrior, held back by Father’s lapdog. Step around that cur and meet me!”**

**Baylor glared at Alcham. “This *lapdog*, boy, could bite your empty head off.”**

**Alcham ignored the captain’s response. “Be sure to have the maid in your room at the Fortress of the Perencian Order of Knights make up your bed each morning. And have your valet lay out your armor every day. And when they bring you your meals to your room on a tray, be sure they use the good silverware and linen napkins. And pay one of the smart students to take your examinations.”**

**Baylor looked at Malakiah. “I just may let you say *farewell* to your brother after all.”**

**The captain, however, was spared the decision. Joskim, the castle’s head steward, came to the doorway with a message from the duke. Alcham was to return inside immediately!**

**Alcham left the courtyard, smirking like a dragon who had captured a virgin princess.**

**Almost as soon as his brother left, another individual arrived. He was Adremius, an elderly, fat gnome who had served as one of his instructors; he had short, white hair, a long, wispy beard and mustache, and gnarled hands. He wore a blue robe with pants and sandals.**

**“Lord Malakiah,” he called out.**

**Malakiah turned and noticed the gnome. *What was he here for?* he wondered.**

**“My lord,” the diminutive one said, “I have brought you this book. Read it, pray, when you are able. It will aid you in your days ahead.”**

**The gnome handed Malakiah a small, leather-bound book; the youth took it and glanced at its cover. *Wisdom for a Young Man* was its title; he quickly thumbed through it. It contained sayings and short instructional stories designed to provide inspiration and guidance. *Reading it would be tedious and trivial*, he thought, but he respected his old instructor too much to express this opinion.**

**“Thanks, Master Adremius,” he said, “I will employ this book suitably.” *Probably to use its pages to start fires with,* he thought.**

**“I know your feelings about going to Suena—we all are. I regret your destiny has turned out so. All that I can counsel you is to try to make the best of the situation. Rail not against it—that will only lead you to frustration and despair. Instead, try to find something in it that brings you satisfaction. Dwell on that and nourish it! Farewell, my lord. May your Adonai keep you safe in the days and years to come, my student.”**

**“Farewell to you too, Master Adremius,” Malakiah replied. “I will try to apply your wise teachings. I only wish I attended to my studies better.”**

**“I am sure you attempted the best you could—for a human. Farewell again.”**

**The gnome now turned and strolled back into the castle. The youth reluctantly tucked the book into a pouch tied to his saddle.**

**Baylor called out for all his men to finish checking their gear and the packhorses; they would leave in a few minutes. During this time, Malakiah had another visitor. Unnoticed, a figure with a hood pulled down over his head crept into the courtyard and approached the youth.**

**“Mal,” the figure whispered.**

**Malakiah recognized the voice. It was Kaimen or Kame—his longtime friend. *What was he doing here?* They were forbidden to see each other, and Kame certainly was not supposed to be in the courtyard. “Kame? What brings you here? And why? You know you should not be here. You could get in serious trouble.”**

**“I just had to see you off. You will be gone for a long time. And here, take this.” The figure handed him a large leather pouch. “It is for you on the trip. Adonai keep you safe, Mal.”**

**“Thanks, Kame. Now go quickly. Before someone notices you.”**

**“Verily. Farewell. Till we see each other again.” They clasped hands.**

**“My lord,” Baylor called out, “who is that figure by you? He is not one of our party.”**

**When he heard the captain’s cry, Kame ran out of the courtyard. The guards looked to Baylor for a command to pursue the hooded figure.**

**Malakiah spoke up. “Captain, men, that was just a friend wishing to say farewell to me. He meant no harm and is now gone. There is no need to pursue him.”**

**The guards looked to Baylor. The captain just shrugged and said to finish their departure preparations. Malakiah looked inside the pouch. Kame had given him some food, useful tools, a journal, a few items to game with, and a money pouch containing coins. *Thank Adonai for a friend such as Kame*, he thought. He tied the bag to his saddle.**

**Malakiah had one more visitor, but she did not have to steal into the courtyard. She walked in silently, coming up behind the youth. Baylor saw her and she him, but they just nodded to each other. She tapped the youth lightly on the shoulder. He turned and saw her. She was quite a breathtaking sight—a young, comely Elven woman with white hair, delicate violet eyes, and tawny skin. She wore a simple floor-length white robe with long sleeves. She was a healer, someone blessed by Adonai with a gift to heal the injured.**

**“Ateena,” Malakiah said softly, “I never imagined you would come to see me off.” He had known this Elven female all his life. He was deeply smitten by her, but Ateena had turned him down his precocious proposal of marriage, both because of the differences between their races and her dedication to her faith for healers could not marry.**

**“Malakiah, how could I not see you off? You will be gone for many years. I have come to give you and the party Adonai’s blessings before you depart.”**

**“How can you bless such a misbegotten trip? Surely you must know how I feel about going to Suena—about becoming a knight! Blast my misfortune!”**

**“Mal, trust in Adonai to set the correct path before you. Battle not against your present troubles. Instead, seek the peace of Adonai to comfort you and ask that He grant you the wisdom to discern how you should proceed in the days, weeks, months, and years to come.”**

**“Teena, lack you ever for platitudes?”**

**The healer frowned at his mild insult, then smiled at him. “Malakiah, I forgive you for your harsh words because I know you are currently very upset. Again I remind you if you ask for Adonai’s aid, He shall never withhold it from you. May He be a bastion of strength for you as you go to Suena and undergo your knightly training. Adonai’s manifold blessings be upon you, Malakiah, son of Josias.”**

**“Pray leave my father out of this, Teena.”**

**The Elven lady smiled again. “I know you truly mean not that, Mal. You will soon forgive your father.” She then turned toward the others and clapped her hands together several times. Captain Baylor and the others stopped and looked at her in surprise.**

**“May it please you, Captain Baylor and you others,” she said, “but before your departure, I would like that we all join together in a song of praise to Adonai. Then I will give you a blessing. With your permission, Captain Baylor, I will proceed.”**

**Captain Baylor nodded, and the healer then led a familiar hymn extorting praises and thanksgivings. Malakiah mouthed the words but felt nothing. Ateena then began a prayer.**

**“Most merciful and great Adonai, we ask that you watch over these men as they journey to the far city of Suena. Guide their footsteps and protect them from all harm. And be it Your Will that all of them…” She paused, looking at Malakiah, then continued, “that most of them soon return safely home to us. May he who shall stay behind have Your guidance and comfort there. So be it according to Your Will, divine Lord Adonai.”**

**The healer was now finished and making to depart; Malakiah, however, had one last matter to discuss with her.**

**“Ateena, I pray you, before you go, there is something that I would ask you about.”**

**“Yes, Mal? What might it be?”**

**“Remember you that night I proposed to you?”**

**She gave him a quizzical look. “Verily, I remember. That proposal was most presumptive of you! And improper! You should have known full well that a union between us could never be! I have my duties as a healer! You will have your obligations someday as our future duke. And even if such were not so, what is more, my being an elf, as the years go by, you would grow old, and I would remain young. I would outlive you by perhaps two centuries! Surely then, you are not still determined to press your suit!”**

**“Verily, no, Teena. You misunderstand the thrust of my question. I remind you of that because the night before I so asked you, I saw in the sky a reddish-orange moon. And I saw the same the night before my grandfather, Gorgian…”**

**“May he rest in Adonai’s Abode,” murmured Ateena.**

**Malakiah continued. “Thank you. The night before my grandfather, Gorgian, died . . .” He paused for a second; then, he turned to face the healer. “I saw another reddish-orange moon last night. And now I am to head off to Suena to begin my knightly training. Ateena, what might this mean? Might this odd moon foretell that this journey—my training—forebodes disaster?”**

**Ateena smiled at the youth and took his hands in hers. “Verily, Mal, I cannot say. Signs such as you speak of defy interpretation. I cannot even say if these moons you saw are even signs! But my secure advice to you is this—look not for counsel or guidance from signs or omens. Instead, trust your faith in Adonai to lead you safely through life.”**

**Having said these words of counsel, she departed, favoring Malakiah with one final smile and a squeeze of his hand with hers.**

**The youth returned to his horse, checking the fastenings of his saddle one more time. Then he pricked up his ears. *What was that he just heard?* Listening carefully, he heard more. He walked over to the suspect soldier. He placed his left hand on the man’s right shoulder, spun him around, and punched the man squarely on the chin. The struck soldier, Xenthius, surprised, fell to the ground.**

**“Say anything such as that again,” Malakiah snarled, “and I will give you much worse.”**

**The fallen soldier rubbed his chin and looked up at the youth. “Were you not the duke’s brat,” he said, “I would pound your head on the stones of this courtyard.”**

**Malakiah replied, raising his fists, “You have my leave to disregard that fact, you oaf.”**

**Xenthius stood up and looked around. Baylor was nowhere in sight. He glanced toward Sergeant Kellor; the sergeant merely shrugged his shoulders and folded his arms across his chest. *Good,* Xenthius thought; he glared at the youth. “Verily, I am going to enjoy beating you senseless, whelp! Let us see what color blood you have!”**

**The two began circling each other. The other four men gathered around them. Xenthius was slightly taller and several years older, but Malakiah was more massive. Neither one had a clear advantage.**

**Several punches flew, but the fight ended before one could connect. The captain re-entered the courtyard; with him were the castellan of Graystone, Sir Wilek Dinsmore, and his immediate subordinate, Lieutenant Lander Westfield. When Captain Baylor saw Malakiah and the soldier battling, he positioned himself between the two combatants.**

**“What in the duke’s name is going on here? I leave the courtyard for a few minutes and chaos erupts. Xenthius! What possesses you to presume you may fight His Lordship?”**

**“Captain Baylor,” Malakiah replied, “that man is not at fault. I struck him first and then gave leave for him to engage me.”**

**“Most extraordinary, my lord. Now, pray tell me what provoked this fight?”**

**“That man, Captain Baylor, made a most disrespectful remark about Ateena.”**

**Baylor looked at Xenthius. “Soldier,” he growled, “is that true? Answer me!”**

**Xenthius looked down and said, “Perhaps.”**

**The captain asked again. “Soldier, I order you to repeat what you said about the healer. You have just one chance to comply.”**

**“I said, ‘My stars, I bet that Elven minx could keep a man warm on a cold night. And I would surely like to be the man with her in my bed!’ Or at least words to that effect, sir!”**

**Baylor glared hard at Xenthius. Finally, he said, “Soldier, that woman is a healer. She is dedicated to Adonai’s service and further sworn to chastity. She would no more be interested in your amorous attentions than you would be to those of a love-sick she-troll! If I ever again hear of you talking in such a manner about any respectable woman, your career in my service will take a turn more unpleasant than you could imagine! Are my words quite *clear* to you, son?”**

**The man snapped to attention, crying, “Sir, most clear, sir!”**

**“Excellent. Now, go and attend to your horse.”**

**Xenthius gave Malakiah one final glare and turned away. As he returned to his mount, one of his fellow soldiers cuffed him slightly and said softly, “You dolt! I could have told you not to say anything such as that where the captain might get wind of it!”**

**“Go boggle a troll, Derwyn,” replied Xenthius.**

**“Sergeant Kellor,” Baylor meanwhile barked to his aide.**

**“Yes, sir,” the sergeant replied, approaching the captain.**

**“Record that man’s infraction in the trip’s log. I shall decide later if any punishment in his case is merited.”**

**“Yes, sir,” Kellor answered. He took out a large leather-bound book and, using a sharpened piece of charcoal, started writing an entry.**

**“And, Sergeant, why made you no effort to prevent this fight?”**

**The man paused in his writing, obviously ill at ease. “Captain, the boy—eh, His Lordship struck Xenthius and then gave his leave to the man to fight him. I assumed the matter would be permissible.”**

**Baylor glared at his aide; then he said, “Further add this to the log, Kellor. If, in your judgment, His Lordship gives any command or takes any action that might imperil him, others, or hinder this trip to Suena, you may disregard the command or prevent his action by any reasonable means. Also, in your judgment, any action that would not meet with my approval! *Understood*, Sergeant?”**

**“Yes, sir. Understood, sir!” His aide resumed writing, faster this time.**

**Captain Baylor then turned to Malakiah and said, “My lord, I concur with you in this case. Nonetheless, in the future, you shall leave any disciplinary action involving the men to me. Pray resume your preparations for our departure as well.”**

**Baylor turned back to Sir Wilek and Lieutenant Lander who had watched the potential fight with some concern. Baylor reassured them that he could keep his men under control and also manage His Lordship. The captain then discussed with them the business that they had come out here to talk over—who would govern the castle’s guards during Baylor’s absence. Baylor told them he had delegated Sergeant Ephram to handle these affairs. He assured them that the sergeant was quite capable. His Grace, the duke, was furthermore present to assume command if any emergency happened. These words reassured Sir Wilek and Lieutenant Lander; they then left the courtyard, returning inside the castle to have their breakfast.**

**Finally, at a word from Baylor, all mounted up. Malakiah, however, defiantly chose to take his time climbing into the saddle.**

**As they left, he heard some final taunts from his brother. “Feel you safe now, Garend, Suena, and the rest of Perencia? My brother, the great and powerful knight, rides forth to save the realm! Let all ogres, trolls, and giants tremble in fear! Let them run for the hills! Cower in their lairs! For my brother comes to slay them one and all! Oh, glorious day!”**

Part 1:

The Cadet

**Chapter 1**

**SUENA**

***Fourth day of the third month of spring, 2120***

**AYLOR LED HIS PARTY DOWN THE MANY TERRACES OF THE CITY. THE HOOVES OF THEIR HORSES RESOUNDED ON THE COBBLESTONES. Few people were outside yet; the riders saw mostly farm laborers heading to their fields. They passed by the marketplace and finally exited through the city gate. Malakiah looked back at the portal with its ten-foot turrets on either side; he wondered when he would see them again. He glanced toward the battlements of Castle Graystone. There he thought he saw his mother. He waved and received one in return.**

**The party crossed gently rolling hills of farmland toward the talus-covered slopes of the Peridian Mountains. After several hours, they reached their base. Malakiah saw the treacherous curving switchbacks twisting up the steep, rocky mountainside; he knew they were the only way over the mountain. Despite the times he had traveled this route before, he never felt safe on it. His horse always seemed to want to see how close to the path’s edge it could walk. The youth looked at the others. Baylor seemed unaffected by being on a narrow path on a steep mountainside, but the others showed slight apprehension. Malakiah chose to look at the side of the mountain and let his thoughts wander.**

**Finally, they achieved the summit. The day had reached mid-afternoon, and Baylor ordered a rest once they discovered a stream where the horses could be watered. All dismounted, and they broke out their midday meal—rolls, sausages, and dried fruit.**

**Malakiah looked around. He recognized a familiar rock formation that had been nicknamed the Captain because of its resemblance to a sailor standing at the wheel of a ship. Similarly, the cliff below resembled, with a little imagination, the bow of a ship and was called Ship Rock. This area was where he, Alcham, and his father had often camped. The memory saddened Malakiah.**

**The youth felt little excitement. He desired not to join the Academy of the Perencian Order of Knights but knew he had no alternative. Escaping the party before he reached Suena would be foolhardy—he would be in the midst of the wilderness. *Perhaps, I could wait until I arrived in Suena and desert there, but again where would I go or what would I do?* He would be alone. He could expect no aid from his father. He had no money to live on and had no trade skills to earn a living. Malakiah smiled to himself. *I am a duke’s son, and all I know is living well on money not my own!***

**He reflected on his behavior of these last few years of his life—such had been the subject of a long lecture several nights ago by his father in which the duke had said he was arrogant and very conscious of his highborn birth. But, Malakiah thought, *why should he not be?* *He was to rule someday.* *Why should others not defer to his wishes? Let them protest his behavior. He was not accountable to them!*  His father had remarked on his indifferent attitude toward pursuing studies and acquiring military skills. *Nonsense!* Malakiah thought. *A ruler answered to no one! It was solely his right to decide what abilities he needed to acquire and what studies he should pursue.* Malakiah had undergone training in the areas of fighting, which he enjoyed, but saw no need to learn combat techniques. *When he succeeded his father as the duke, he would have advisors to guide him in those areas!* *Why learn them himself?* It was about religion he and his father were most at odds about. The duke felt Adonai personally guided every man in all things, and that one should pray for assistance regularly. Malakiah perceived Adonai as an indifferent deity; praying thereby accomplished very little. However, he dared not declare that belief to his father—such would seem heresy. Instead, he preferred to let his father see him as lacking in his observance of the faith of Shem-adonti.**

**Verify, he, his father, and Captain Baylor had battled over what they called his improper behavior for the last several years now with his mother sometimes forced into the role of mediator. Because he was the heir apparent, both they and he knew he must fulfill certain criteria to be a fit ruler, but neither he nor they could agree on what these were.**

**The final sack that had made the mule sit down and refuse to budge, his father had said, had been the disclosure that he was the ringleader of the Shadowlurkers.**

***The group had started innocently enough*, Malakiah thought. *They had not even actually called themselves the Shadowlurkers.***

**They had just been Malakiah and his friends: Kame, Olaf, Hubert, Duther, Luthius, Moyner, Larither, and Curtius. Kame was his best friend in the group while Olaf had been the one he had always clashed shields with. When he and the others had been younger, they had played ball games and fought mock battles; in the last few months, they had strived to find more sophisticated entertainment. These efforts had led to their downfall.**

**The group’s initial diversion had been playing pranks on one another. Each one drew a name from a jug and then devised a trick to pull on the one whose name he had chosen. This game had kept them amused for a while, but eventually, they had become restless. They had then decided to start playing tricks on others outside their group.**

**At first, their targets had been the members of the Town Watch. They would act suspiciously to incite the Watchers to chase after them, thereby leading their targets into an area where the others could then pelt them with rotten food and other foul objects. Another favorite trick had been to set a smoky fire in an empty building (although always contained in a metal bin), causing Garend’s bucket brigade to race frantically to put it out. They also had liked befouling the public washing pool the night before wash day! They had committed many such misdeeds.**

**Their first great prank had involved Alcham. He had not been a member of his brother’s group. Alcham disliked any activity Malakiah participated in, and none of Malakiah’s friends liked him. That had made him a perfect victim.**

**Olaf had proposed the misdeed: kidnapping Alcham and leaving him imprisoned in some location. Meanwhile, a note would be left telling of his capture and demanding a ransom. They would not seek such—they figured that would be too dangerous. Just letting his parents and the Town Watch go crazy searching for him was sufficient for them!**

**Several group members had successfully captured Alcham—they had come up behind him silently, thrown a sack over his head, and bound him. Then they had left him in the locked storeroom of a bakery. They had known Alcham would soon free himself of the sack and the ropes binding him; then, the boy, unable to escape, would just have to await rescue.**

**They next had left a note affixed to the door of the Town Watch. It had stated that the duke’s younger son was a prisoner of those who lurked in the shadows. He would not be released until an appropriate ransom was paid. Details would follow swiftly.**

**Their prank had resulted in immediate chaos. First, the captain of the Town Watch had inquired at Castle Graystone. A swift search of the castle and an inquiry of the servants had revealed that the boy could not be accounted for. Then the massive search had begun. The duke and Captain Baylor had each led a separate party. Malakiah and Kame had been members of one. The search had lasted an entire day until Alcham had finally been found. The bakery’s owner had been seized and interrogated, but he had been able to prove his innocence. The captain of the Town Watch had had no luck determining who had been behind the abduction.**

**Olaf had been thrilled; he had thought the turmoil caused by the abduction had been hysterical and was willing to devise another, even bigger prank. Malakiah had counseled they should wait. He had not been opposed, however, to discussing a plan for future mayhem. One of the other boys, Luthius, had suggested something.**

**“I have this powder. Mix it in a drink, and everyone who drinks it will have to void his or her bladder almost immediately.”**

**The others had been unimpressed. “So what?” Duther had scoffed. “One person forced to pee! That is hardly a prank!”**

**Then Luthius had added with an evil grin, “But what if it was not one person, but a whole room full of people?”**

**Thus the idea for the group’s second prank had been born. They only now had to await a suitable occasion.**

**A few weeks later, the opportunity had arisen at an annual festival honoring Malakiah’s father. The festival would be held in the town’s marketplace where the duke gave a banquet for the people of Garend. The meal would always start with a toast to the health and long life of the duke—a perfect event to prank. Malakiah had felt no qualms about spoiling this grand event; he and his father had just had a great row.**

**Everything that night had gone as they had desired. They had been able to find the cask containing the special ale for the toast, open it, and pour in the powder undetected.**

**The pranksters had attended the feast. Malakiah certainly had had to be there to sit at the High Table. When Archtheocrat Tamar Horsewood had offered the toast, however, the pranksters one and all had been careful to appear to drink only. Then they had watched delighted as the agent had begun its vile effect.**

**Despite Luthius’ claim, not everyone who had drunk the powder had been affected; what was more, those seated at the High Table had coincidentally received their beverage from a different barrel than the rest of the feasters. However, among those who had received the powder and were affected, the results were exactly as the pranksters had anticipated.**

**Some present had most unceremoniously and immediately raced toward the rows of privies. Only the first ones, however, had been able to get inside. The rest of the people, in abject distress, had done whatever they could. Men had soiled their breeches; women had ruined their gowns. Malakiah had noticed his mother’s older sister, Aunt Nomi, among the unhappy women. Her plight had brought no feelings of sympathy from him; Aunt Nomi was always stuffy and putting on airs.**

**The sudden flight from the table had effectively broken up the feast. The perpetrators of the misdeed had been later identified when a note was found affixed to the door of the Town Watch’s building stating, “Drink up, people of Garend! We have proudly spiked the ale for the toast at the duke’s festival for you. Wait to see what we render next! The Shadowlurkers.”**

**This note had been Olaf’s idea. Malakiah, when he had heard of it, had much disapproved of its posting.**

**The duke, Captain Baylor, and the captain of the Town Watch had met to decide what they could do to identify and apprehend those responsible. They had had, however, no clues. Malakiah, who had heard his father discuss the matter with Baylor, had been grateful for that. He had begun to hope that he could now persuade the others not to do any more pranks. They might not be so fortunate to escape undetected the third time.**

**Olaf, however, had had one last prank in mind. This one involved, he had explained to Malakiah and the others, disrupting a ceremony in the temple of Adonai by unleashing a horde of cats and dogs. The animals’ fighting would undoubtedly cause chaos, but hardly be as vile as causing people to soil themselves. Malakiah had had to agree and half-heartily consented to participate if this one was the last prank. Olaf had promised.**

**They had decided upon the temple service they would disrupt. One group led by Kame had been chosen to secure stray dogs and place them in boxes. Another group by Olaf had elected to round up stray cats. All the crates containing these animals were then hidden behind the temple’s altar in a backroom. They had drawn straws for who would release the animals, and Malakiah had pulled the short one. Once Malakiah had been selected, Kame loyally agreed to accompany him.**

**Malakiah, Kame, Olaf, and the others had carried the boxes into the back room through a seldom-used side door. Then they had placed them to open facing the room’s only door.**

**Olaf said, “The method is simple, my lord. You and Kame wait until you hear the words of the ceremony’s opening chant. Then open these boxes. When the animals come out, herd them toward the door. Next, release the dogs. They will give chase and cause the commotion.”**

**Malakiah nodded. “Understood. And then, when the fighting starts, we follow the worshippers out.” Kame nodded as well.**

**“I am glad that I will not be in this temple when those skunks let loose their smell,” one of the other boys said.**

**Malakiah froze and looked at the boy who had spoken. “‘Skunks,’ you said?”**

**“Yes, my lord,” the boy said. “Olaf obtained them—knew you not?”**

**“Olaf!” Malakiah cried, turning to confront his rival. “What means this trickery? We agreed on cats and dogs—not skunks! Skunks will cause a stink that will last for days, if not weeks! I forbid their use. We shall remove them from here at once!”**

**“Forbid what you want, Your Lordship. The prank goes on as planned.”**

**“Olaf, I order you and the others to remove these boxes immediately.”**

**“Or what? Will you call the civil authorities down upon us? We are all miscreants together. You cannot betray us without betraying yourself!”**

**“I will not take any part in this prank.”**

**“Then suffer the fate of the craven,” said Olaf. Suddenly, he had slammed the door, and as Malakiah had reached for it, he had heard the bar moved into place on the other side.**

**He and Kame had been trapped and faced eventual discovery. They would have to find a means of escape.**

**They had looked around the room. There had been a window. Fortunately, it had been unlocked; unfortunately, it had been only small enough for the more slightly built Kame to squeeze through.**

**“Kame,” Malakiah said, “through that window quickly.”**

**“I will not leave you behind, Mal.”**

**“You will not be. Go around the temple and then come back inside through the side door. You can then unlock the door to this room.”**

**“Verily. I shall be back in a few minutes.”**

**Kame had crawled out. However, a member of the Town Watch, Elithus, had seen Kame pass out the window. This constable had chased Kame who had eluded him. Then Elithus had returned to the temple and had found the Archtheocrat Tamar Horsewood in his office. Once the constable had described what he had seen—a youth escaping out a window—he and the archtheocrat had immediately investigated. They had found the back room’s door barred; when they had opened it, there had been Malakiah. Elithus and the archtheocrat had questioned him. Malakiah had claimed he had seen a gang of youths carrying boxes into this room. He had confronted them, and they had shoved him into this room and locked him in. One had been left in the room, but had escaped through the window. He had thanked them for rescuing him.**

**Elithus had questioned him further. “My lord, knew you any of the others? Were there any you recognized?”**

**“No,” Malakiah had lied. “I knew none of them.”**

**“Have you any idea what mischief they were about, my lord?”**

**“No idea. But their bringing boxes into the temple—such could not have been any good.”**

**“Verily. I would certainly wager on mischief.” He had knocked hard on top of one of the boxes. Startled barking erupted from it. “Dogs, obviously.” He had gone over to the other set of boxes and kicked one hard. No sounds had come for it. “I shall have to open this one up then.”**

**“That would be ill-advised, Constable. It contains skunks, and, if they are alarmed, they could spray, and their stink would overwhelm us all.”**

**Elithus had paused and looked hard at Malakiah. “Skunks, you say, my lord?”**

**“Verily.”**

**“My lord,” he had asked, his face grim, “how would you know this box’s contents? There is no obvious way you could. There is no way you could, unless…”**

**The youth had known then he had spoken too much. He had tried to bluster his way out.**

**“Constable, I have nothing else to say! I only wish to leave now.”**

**Had it not been for the archtheocrat, Malakiah would have escaped—the constable could hardly have ordered him to remain. Tamar Horsewood, however, had placed himself in the doorway. Then he had stood there, staring at the youth. Malakiah had felt very small.**

**He had looked up at the archtheocrat and asked, “Your Most Divineness, may I leave now? This whole affair has been most upsetting. I think not that I can assist you any further.”**

**“Malakiah Defakiran,” the archtheocrat had said to him solemnly, “I have known you since the day you were born. I recall when your parents called me to Castle Graystone to bless you on the day of your birth about sixteen years ago. I know that you are not perfect—none of us who profess to follow the teaching of Shem-adonti could claim such. I know further you have been less than faithful in your devotion to our Lord in recent years. Nonetheless, I would know now whether you have been truthful in what you have told us in this matter here. Therefore, swear to me and before Adonai that you have no involvement in this matter beyond what you have said. Swear such, and I will give you leave to depart. Otherwise, I charge you to confess to the true nature of how you have participated in this matter. Pray take not this matter lightly. Adonai will judge for any falsity. What say you, my son?”**

**Malakiah had found the decision that he had had to make the hardest one in his life. He had known either way he answered, he would deeply regret it. After standing before His Most Divineness for what seemed an eternity, he had admitted his involvement with the others. Tamar Horsewood had looked shocked; then, he had drawn himself up and said, “Malakiah, as Adonai commands, I forgive you. Yet you must now suffer the consequences of your actions. Constable Elithus, take him into your custody.”**

**Malakiah had been turned over to the Town Watch.**

**The captain of the Town Watch had known the civil courts would not have had any authority to try Malakiah. Instead, he had handed the boy over to his father along with a lengthy legal disposition stating the charges against him. The captain had, however, previously extensively questioned Malakiah about the Shadowlurkers. Malakiah had refused to mention any of the others.**

**Malakiah, confined to his room, had been terrified. With his behavior over the last few years and now this discovery, he had had no idea what would become of him. *Would his father hurl him into the dungeon? Or even disown him?* His mother had come to him and wept over his plight, but told him, sadly, his father alone would decide what his future would be.**

**Finally, his father had announced his decision—that Malakiah, to redeem himself and show one and all that he was fit to be the heir apparent, must become a knight of the Perencian Order. His first reaction to his father’s declaration had been utter numbness followed by a long period of total despair.**

***Now*, Malakiah thought sadly, *the joint of meat is burnt, the bride and groom have retired to their nuptial chamber for the night*. “What is done cannot be undone,” as the adage went. Within a matter of days, barring that a rider came charging up from Garend with a message from his father saying that Baylor’s orders were revoked and that he could return home—the chance of which the youth felt was about the same as that of Baylor marrying an ogress and becoming the proud father of twins—he would be undergoing knightly training in Suena. He felt miserable!**

**He heard Baylor calling. He turned and saw the captain beckoning him. The other guards were crowded around him. The youth walked over.**

**“Thank you for joining us, my lord,” Baylor said. “I would like to tell you and the others that, these next few days, we will be going through the western pass of the Peridian Mountains to reach Malva. This passage can be hazardous. We must be ever prepared for an attack. Always have swords at ready and shields in hand. And at night, two will be on guard duty at all times. No one is exempt from standing watch.” All the guards turned toward Malakiah to see his reaction.**

**Malakiah’s response was most vocal. “Captain Baylor,” he said, “I protest. I am the son of His Grace, the duke. I refuse to camp out. I will not sleep on the ground as should a common soldier. You will find me proper accommodations each night.”**

**All the guards turned back to face the captain.**

**Baylor favored Malakiah with a level stare and a smile that bore no warmth. “My lord,” he said, “I will still use that title for it is yours by right and birth. But let me state one thing most clearly. On this journey, I am in charge—not you. I have been empowered by His Grace, the duke, your father, to see you safely to Suena. However, your father has left to my discretion how I accomplish that charge. I decree there will be no beds until we reach Suena. We will camp out, sleep on the ground, and cook our meals over a campfire. That is my decision. And, my lord, I believe you have just volunteered for two shifts of guard duty tonight. Most generous of you, my lord. The men appreciate it.”**

**“Captain, I…” the youth began.**

**“Perhaps I hear you volunteering for the entire night instead, my lord?”**

**Malakiah, realizing he had no sword to fight with, fell silent. He looked down, not able to stand the amused faces of the guards. *I will remember this indignity,* he swore to himself.**

**“I thought not. To continue, men, this pass will take us several days to travel through…”**

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***Eighth day of the third month of spring, 2120***

**The passage through the Peridian Mountains was now behind them. During certain times the pass was hazardous because of the possibility of a snowstorm or an avalanche, but the time of the year was currently late spring. Various creatures such as goblins and trolls frequented these mountains and could attack any parties passing through, but Malakiah and the men escorting him had not encountered any. Human brigands also roamed this area, but, as he and the others comprised a heavily-armed party and not a tempting target that a caravan of wealthy merchants would be, any such thieves who might have observed them had ignored them.**

**They continued traveling west, driving their horses at a hard pace. Malakiah was unaccustomed to riding daily. His back, legs, and buttocks ached, but he swore he would never let Captain Baylor and the others know of his discomfort. Nonetheless, on the infrequent stops when they dismounted to eat or water their horses, he could not help how stiffly he walked. He further found bedding down each night on the hard ground with his saddle as a pillow and a blanket as his cover excruciating.**

**Eventually, they arrived at Malva, the largest city in the duchy on the pass’ western side. Its duke was a good friend of Malakiah’s father; they frequently consulted on various matters in their duchies, especially concerning the security of the pass. The town of Malva consisted of a massive citadel located north northwest of the Malva River. It had a sizeable octagonal stone keep on its eastern side; such was its duke’s original home, who now lived in an elegant residence beside it. The citadel itself was a large hexagon, each corner except for the one having the keep had a fortified tower. Within its walls stood the townspeople’s homes and businesses, the town’s civic buildings, a central marketplace, a merchants guild, a temple to Adonai, a monastery, and an academy for the children of the town’s wealthy citizens. South of the city was the dockyard, across from a shipyard. All around the city stretched fields currently awaiting the planting of the coming year’s crops.**

**To Malakiah’s surprise and relief, when they arrived, Captain Baylor told Sergeant Kellor that he had some business with the city officials that would keep them there for a few days.**

**“His Lordship is to be kept in sight,” he ordered. Then to Malakiah, he added, “My lord, try not to escape. Any such attempt will have severe consequences.”**

**“Captain Baylor,” Malakiah asked, “the duke of this town is known to me as is his son, Lepol. I insist upon being permitted to visit them.”**

**Baylor shook his head. “Unfortunately, Your Lordship, I know from your father they are away on a journey. Therefore, I request you stay here in camp and await my return.”**

**Malakiah was annoyed by the captain’s news, but he knew he could do naught. Instead, he used the time to rest and walk extensively around to try and stretch out his sore muscles. *He would have liked to have had his personal body servant present to massage his muscles!* When he had only limited success with walking out his aches, he decided to seek an apothecary in Malva to buy a salve. He wanted to make this purchase unobserved, but his guards would not let him out of their sight. He tried ordering them to let him do his will, but they just laughed.**

**“May it please your high and mighty Lordship, but we take our orders only from Captain Baylor,” said Kellor with obvious contempt.**

**This disobedience infuriated Malakiah. *Had they been back in Garend*, he thought, *he would have these men disciplined with a flogging! Truly, to be back in Garend*, he wished! *There, at least, he would receive respect!*  Not until Malakiah promised to buy his guards each a tankard of ale would they let him pursue his errand. After they had had their drinks—*and they spent considerable time consuming them*, he felt, in that noisy and smelly tavern they had chosen—they followed him as he searched for a shop and watched him obtain the unguent. He later discovered, much to his chagrin, even if he had been able to make his purchase alone, its usage would still have been apparent. The salve, although quite effective, was also very pungent. His guards now kept their distance. Malakiah did not mind them staying away.**

**Baylor finally returned, his business in Malva fulfilled, although he never spoke of it, and they set off again. Malakiah now found himself positioned downwind.**

**At a fork in the road outside the town, the party turned west and followed the route along the Malva River. They reached the large town of Elysian by nightfall on the second day. This city consisted of two parts. There was the small inner fortress, which was much older than the rest of Elysian; it was set up on a butte surrounded by heavily fortified walls and battlements. Beneath and all around the fortress was an outer community of homes, craft shops, streets, and temples. This part of the town was bereft of walled defenses—it had grown during this area's long peace.**

**Malakiah and the others stayed in Elysian only one day to obtain supplies. Then they took the southwest fork in the road on the other side of town toward Suena. Malakiah noticed the alternate road led toward Telaquaria Gandarlista and asked Baylor what that other location was.**

**“That route allows all travelers to pass through The Great Valley. That area holds the city of Gandarlista and Telaquaria, an elfish nation, my lord,” said Baylor with a shrug. “Telaquaria would be a grand place to visit, I am sure, but the elves care not for any outside their race.”**

**“Have you heard anything of their lands, Captain?”**

**“Only that their homes and everything there are most beautiful, but I have never seen the land myself. Nonetheless, many others have and they tell of its splendors. Therefore, I doubt those innumerable tales told by those who have visited it could all be mere fabrications!”**

**“Why do the elves choose to remain apart from other races?”**

**“They are a curious race. Few know what to make of them.”**

**They continued along the northern bank of the Elysian River, camping each night by its side. They crossed the Maliki River above its junction with the Elysian River. Then they crossed through the Madrill Plateau for four days. Eventually, they entered the Nakocia Pass, the eastern entrance to the Madrill Ring, a range of mountains surrounding Suena. Now, after the openness of the plateau, mountains once again towered over them on every side. Water came down in flowing streams that swept across the floor of the pass. Everywhere they looked, wildflowers bloomed.**

**At the end of the fourth day, in the late afternoon, Baylor halted the party in a glen near a brook. “We will stop here for tonight,” he said. “Dismount and set up camp.”**

**Herzan asked, “May I ask why here, Captain Baylor? Just a league ahead, the pass opens into the plateau of Suena. We could easily make it through to the city before nightfall.”**

**“Yes, Captain Baylor, why not in Suena tonight?” Malakiah demanded. “I, for one, am most weary of camping out. Of cooking food over a campfire and swatting at insects all night. If we have the opportunity of a proper meal and bed, why should we not precede on to Suena?”**

**Baylor looked hard at the youth who defiantly returned his gaze. Finally, the captain said, “My lord, we could continue, but I want you to have a full day to experience the plain of Suena. It is a most impressive area and not one to be hurried through. And, as you find cooking food over a campfire tiresome, you have not performed it enough. Tonight, you shall cook.”**

**“I, Captain? Cook the party’s meal? Truly, my father, the duke, shall hear of this!”**

**“Yes, I am sure he will. By now, you must have a long list of grievances that you wish to convey to him. You may feel free to inform him so when next you see him—years from now! Now, lad, you will either prepare the meal or go hungry this night! Make your choice!”**

**Malakiah, knowing he had no alternative but to submit to Baylor’s will, said nothing. The captain now addressed the guard who had spoken earlier.**

**“Have you ever been to Suena before, Herzan?”**

**“No, sir. This trip is my first time here.”**

**“Then, son, you are in for an adventure.”**