**INTERLUDE**

***Twenty-second day of the first month of summer, 2124***

**ALAKIAH ADJUSTED THE LARGE, EMPTY PACK WHICH HE CARRIED ON HIS BACK AND SURVEYED SUENA’S BUSTLING MARKETPLACE. Every time he came here, he was always impressed by its complexity and unceasing activity. The marketplace was laid out in a large, irregular grid of wooden stalls, canvas tents, rope corrals, and just plain open spaces with narrow, ill-defined corridors between them for buyers, sellers, and the products to pass through. Malakiah knew from past visits he could find all manner of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices; on previous trips, he had sampled wide assortments of soups and stews, savory roasted meats on wooden skewers, and tasty pastries and pies. Had he the need for such, there were booths from which he could select from a wide choice of weapons and armor of various styles and quality, but such items he could obtain from the Academy’s armory if he warranted such. Camping supplies, one thing he was in pursuit of today, also could be found here, and, off in a special enclosure, animals such as goats, sheep, rabbits, doves, dogs, horses, and oxen were for sale. Mingling among the merchants and customers, Malakiah was well aware, were many thieves waiting to steal items or cut purse strings to secure a mark’s coins. He had also discovered, much to his embarrassment, some of the women and even young boys lingering in the marketplace’s aisles were selling something which he, as a one dedicated to the service of Adonai, wanted no part of! He had learned to avoid any individuals who seemed too friendly.**

**Malakiah had spent the last few days finalizing the pages of his academic project. He expected to have that task finished to submit by tomorrow. Today, however, Sir Jacius Parianius, the instructor of his Wilderness Survival course, had sent him to the marketplace tasked to procure supplies for a possible quest. He had been given a scroll listing the items he might require, merchants from whom he should obtain them, and a purse containing coins with which to buy them. The instructor had further admonished the knight-to-be to consider every transaction carefully as his selections would be evaluated. His friend and fellow squire, Whithus, had been permitted to accompany Malakiah but only to lead their packhorse. He was forbidden to offer advice.**

**As he stood there, Malakiah also reflected on another concern—the small humanoid he had nicknamed “Little One” who had accosted him before: several times in the marketplace, in The Fiery Furnace tavern, and even in his quarters at the Academy’s Fortress. Nothing Malakiah had tried or said so far could persuade the little person to leave him alone. Malakiah hoped they could avoid that little nuisance today. He had mentioned this concern to Whithus. His fellow, although he had never seen the little being, had certainly heard about his visit to the Fortress; he, however, could suggest no solution to Malakiah’s problem.**

**Malakiah’s eyes swept the crowd again, scrutinizing patrons and vendors. No sign of the little annoyance. He sighed deeply and set off towards his first destination. He and Whithus had not made more than three turns before he heard a most unwelcome voice.**

**“Good day to you, Sir Knight!” called a small form, crawling out from under a cloth-covered table, apparently much to the surprise of the vendor standing behind it. “How may I help you this most pleasing market day?”**

**Malakiah continued walking. Perhaps a show of indifference today might discourage the little pest. It had not worked before.**

**The small creature ran to catch up with Malakiah.**

**“Again, I say,” the little person cried, “where shall you go to buy? I can help you; I know I can. I know all the merchants and their wares. I even know all their tricks.”**

**Malakiah, lacking any other choice, responded, “I have a list of supplies to secure but require not your help. I know from which vendors I wish to purchase.”**

**“Good Sir Knight, I know the best places for any item in this marketplace. I can guarantee you the highest value for the lowest price! No merchant can out-bargain me—or cheat me either!”**

**Malakiah halted. *By Adonai*, he thought, *herein lies an opportunity which may undoubtedly prove to my advantage! I shall put this little pest to the challenge! And if he fails it, I may be able to convince him to leave me alone! If not, I have lost nothing!* He turned and faced his accoster.**

**“Very well, Little One, I will accept your assistance—conditionally! The condition is, if you fail to live up to your promises, you will agree to leave me alone from now on! The first items I seek are camping supplies—dried meat, flour, ropes, saddle packs, and the like. Where should I go?”**

**The little person smiled. “Wabars’. He and his brothers have their shop just a few rows over there. Come, follow me.”**

**Malakiah consulted his scroll and frowned. “No,” he said. “My scroll advises me to purchase such goods at the stall of Spatan.”**

**The little humanoid looked aghast. “Spatan?! That son of a thieving goblin? His food will be ancient and spoiled! You will find his ropes and packs rotten. He will cheat you!”**

**Malakiah smiled to himself. *Could the task be this simple*? he thought. *Could he trip up the little pest this easily? Now to put him to the test.***

**“Little One, I challenge you! Lead me to the merchant Spatan and we shall examine his wares together! Prove to me his goods are deficient!”**

**“As you wish, Sir Knight! But a visit to that rascally Spatan is just chasing rainbows!”**

**They trekked for a short distance, making several turns. Malakiah could navigate the aisles crowded with people quickly, but Whithus, having to lead the packhorse, had to move more slowly. Finally, the three stopped.**

**“There, Sir Knight,” the little one said, pointing up to the left, “down this aisle, the tent with the red banner on the center pole is the business of Spatan—may an ogress claim him as her mate!”**

**Malakiah acknowledged the directions with a nod and then walked down to the tent with Whithus following him. The pavilion was open to the aisle, but a table covered with a cloth was across the front. Inside and underneath the tent stacked high in numerous rows were camping supplies. Various individuals bustled inside, stacking goods and unloading others from a wagon behind the tent.**

**Malakiah stopped before the table and rapped upon it with his fist; a large, bearded man wearing a colorful jerkin rushed up to greet him.**

**“Good day to you, most noble sir. How can Spatan, son of Ilse, help you this day? What goods seek you? None but the finest have I for sale!”**

**“Good day to you, good merchant! We wish to buy supplies for an extended journey—dried meat, flour, saddle packs, ropes, and others.”**

**“Most excellent, my noble sir. I have the best goods for you here—at the lowest prices in this square. But let me take your pack from you so I might fill it with your supplies.”**

**Malakiah slipped the pack off his shoulder and handed it to Spatan who set it down behind the table. The squire then read off each needed good to the merchant who would call for one of his assistants to fetch the item.**

**Malakiah carefully examined each product. He opened the barrel which the flour came in and, as his instructors had shown him, probed its contents with his dagger. The grain inside could have been spoilt by moisture, infested with mealworms, or even partially filled with rocks. The contents of this barrel, however, was filled with excellent quality flour. Satisfied, Malakiah pounded the end shut with the butt of his dagger. The other items similarly passed his rigorous examinations.**

**Malakiah began to think the little person who had denounced this merchant Spatan as a thief must have been mistaken. With that thought, he looked around. The diminutive one was nowhere in sight! He asked Whithus if he knew where the little pest had gone, but his friend shrugged. Malakiah shook his head. *Maybe he was finally rid of him. Having been shown up as a braggart and having accused the merchant falsely, maybe the little one had deserted them never to be seen again.***

**Finally, the last item was secured and placed in the pack. Then Malakiah and Spatan began the lengthy ritual of bargaining over the price. The merchant started with a very high sum, Malakiah countered with an extremely low one, and after an extended haggle, they finally met somewhere in the middle. Malakiah had never negotiated with anyone before who could be so animated while bargaining; the merchant even had a knack for telling jokes or little stories that frequently distracted Malakiah.**

**With the price agreed at, Spatan reached down and hauled up the heavy pack and set it upon the table. Malakiah reached for the coins he had secured deep within the folds of his tunic; then he heard a familiar voice behind him.**

**“Pray reach not for your purse, Sir Knight! He would cheat you!”**

**Malakiah turned. There behind him was the little humanoid who was now glaring and pointing his weapon at the astonished merchant.**

**“You dare try to cheat my friend? I am wise to your tricks, most villainous of merchants! You will not deceive us this day!”**

**Spatan stared back at the little being and flushed red. “Why are you lingering here, you base-born, son of a . . . I told you how I would beat you if I ever caught you near my shop again!” he growled. Then he looked at Malakiah and said, “Ignore the words of this nuisance, noble sir. He constantly spreads lies about me and my goods. The town marshal should have him flogged for the problems he causes honest merchants.”**

**“The goods you sell, vile merchant—their qualities speak for themselves; I have no need to resort to lies! Sir Knight, examine the contents of your pack. If you would, you will not want to purchase them!”**

**“But, Little One, I have checked them,” said Malakiah. “I examined every item as they brought it up to me. Their quality was excellent.”**

**“Yes, you may have examined each one, but those are not those in your pack now! They have been switched with bad others. That was why I left you when you went up to his shop. He would never have tried to cheat you—or even serve you—if he had seen me with you! Should you doubt my words, just check the supplies!”**

**“Noble sir, truly you will not give credence to the accusations of this street rat! I am an honest merchant,” pleaded Spatan. “Any of my customers will defend my name!”**

**“Perhaps those living in the city will!” the little being replied. “But any leaving on a long journey and discovering the nature of the supplies they obtained from you curse it!”**

**“Enough,” Malakiah said. “I will examine the supplies. If they are as Spatan claims, you, Little One, I would never see again; you say I need of you, but I have none of one who would waste my time with false claims. But if your charges are true, Little One, I will certainly consider your advice from here on.”**

**Malakiah reached for the pack and first pulled out the barrel containing flour. Spatan stood silently, but the merchant seemed to have paled considerably.**

**“Look at the barrel, Sir Knight,” the little person said. “I watched you pry open it with your knife. That container has not been opened!”**

**Malakiah looked. Indeed, this barrel was still sealed. He took out his knife, inserted it into a crack, and opened one end. The contents were small pieces of gravel. He glared at the merchant. Then he slowly searched through the rest of the pack. All the goods in there now were different from what he had examined before—the ropes and packs were worn and weak, the dried meat was rotten. The other items were similarly worthless.**

**Malakiah’s blood boiled. Had he taken these items back, he would assuredly have failed the examination and been roundly criticized. *How dare this wretch try and cheat me,* he thought. *He deserves a good flogging and I shall administer it to him!* He took off his belt and wrapped one end of it around his hand. Whithus, seeing his actions, rushed forward and grabbed his arm, but Malakiah pushed him aside. Spatan, who had cautiously backed away from him during his search, fearful of his reaction, now fell to his knees. His assistants, seeing the threat, ran out the back of the shop. A few spectators, recognizing a possible flogging, stopped to watch. Malakiah stepped around the table, approached the merchant, and raised his arm.**

**“No, Kiah, no!” Whithus pleaded. “You cannot undertake such!”**

**“Mercy, I pray, good Sir Knight,” the merchant begged. “Pray grant me mercy in the name of Adonai!”**

**Malakiah froze. Any Perencian Knight must honor such a request.**

**“Verily,” he said, quoting the Samacera, “‘those who ask for mercy in the name of Adonai shall receive it.’ Vile merchant, for I have ample proof you are vile, I forgive your attempt to cheat me. But, truly, the town’s authorities shall hear of your dishonesty. There shall be retribution for this action and for those against the others whom you have surely cheated. Seek not to run from your misdeeds; the consequences shall only be worse.”**

**Malakiah was still furious but could certainly not now injure Spatan. Yet he decided a little demonstration was permitted. He approached the table at the front of the tent. His pack—now empty—was still here, sitting among the rejected supplies. He tossed it to the little person. Then he ripped off the table’s cloth cover, flinging the now unwanted items everywhere. Underneath was a simple oaken board set on two trestles. Also was crouched a small, hidden assistant—obviously, Spatan’s confederate, the one who had switched the examined goods for the inferior ones. Malakiah glared at the wretch who backed away from him into the aisle, then stood up and ran off. *He is of no concern*, Malakiah thought; *the board alone is suitable for my purpose*.**

**Malakiah refastened his belt around his waist and then slid out his sword. He raised the weapon, took a deep breath, and swung at the center of the board. It split in two just as cleanly as if he had used an axe.**

**“Merchant most dishonest,” he said in a low voice to Spatan who still cowered among his goods, “look hard upon this board. Should you ever cheat another customer, he may cleave you in twain as I have split that!”**

**Malakiah glared once more at the trembling one, returned his sword to its scabbard, and left the tent.**

**All the while, Whithus and the little person had stood outside the shop awestruck. Malakiah just started walking up one aisle at random with the others following after him.**

**“Kiah,” Whithus called and then caught up with Malakiah; “I thought you had gone goblin-crazy the way you approached that cheating merchant. Had you attacked him, the consequences for you would have been most dire.”**

**“Sir Knight,” the little being asked, “would you truly have whipped him? Could you have even? I know he is a thief, but would you have?”**

**Malakiah took a deep breath and said, “Whit, Little One. Verily, I knew not what I was attempting. My rage simply took me. Truly, had I assaulted that accursed merchant, I could not have justified myself. I would have had to answer for it to the Perencian Order and the civil authorities. Luckily, he pleaded for Adonai’s mercy. Still, I must once I would not have controlled my anger; then, I undoubtedly would have whipped the man!”**

**“Kiah . . . Malakiah,” Whithus said, “I can understand how that man’s attempted trickery enraged you. But, whatever the cause, you must never let circumstances lead you to anger. For such is how the Evil One may lay claim to us and twist us to his vile ends. In all ways, in all things, strive to hold on to that peace and grace Adonai—blessed be His Name—gives freely to those who follow Him. I pray you to join me now in prayer—you sorely need its healing power.”**

**They bowed their heads and Whithus said a prayer beseeching Adonai to calm and grant Malakiah the strength to hold back his anger in future times. Malakiah did feel more tranquil when Whithus had finished.**

**Malakiah now turned to the little being who had stood there silently watching them. “My little friend, as now you are, pray forget that matter with that vile merchant for it is behind us now! You have proved your worth. Let us attend instead to my long list of supplies. I will trust your knowledge now as to where to buy them.”**

**“Thank you, good Sir Knight. I knew you would find that out if you would let me help you.”**

**“By the way, Little One, what is your name? I have never cared until now to learn it.”**

**“Kush Lightfingers, Sir Knight.”**

**Malakiah frowned. “Are you Elven, Little One? I recognize not such a last name from any particular tribe.”**

**“No; I am not elvish! I know not what race I am! I know there is a tribe of my people around this land somewhere, and I have been searching for them for around ten years. Have you ever seen any others such as me?”**

**Malakiah thought and then shook his head. “No,” he said, “I have never seen another such as you. Not here or in my home of Emerald Valley. Have you, by any chance, Whit?” His friend merely shrugged. “Sorry, then, Little One, we cannot help you with your search.” He paused, realizing an introduction was in order. “Little One, you have shown me you know my name; I am soon to be a knight candidate in the Perencian Order. Let me instead introduce my companion. He is Whithus Ridgelain, a squire of the Platinum Order who still has about a year of studies to complete.”**

**“Greetings, Whithus, friend of Malakiah,” said Kush. He turned back to Malakiah. “Let us attend to that list of supplies you spoke of. But, may I ask, why need you them?”**

**“For an assignment. My instructors would have me obtain supplies as if I was going on a quest to a far country and then evaluate my efforts.”**

**“A quest! What a glorious adventure that would be! Are you to be going on one soon? Remember, I have told you you need my services. By my stars, that must be what you need me for! Will it be to the desert such as I saw in my dream?”**

**“Kush, so many questions. Verily, I expect to go on one soon but know not where to. And, as for accompanying me on the quest, I cannot simply invite you along. Such would require obtaining permission. Besides, it might be a long, dangerous journey. You may not wish to undertake such a trip.”**

**“Sir Knight, the prospect of a long, dangerous journey would not deter me. Life should be an adventure—not boring!”**

**Malakiah could sense knowing Kush was going to be interesting. To divert him from continuing about the quest, he suggested Kush lead them to Wabars’. Kush readily agreed. Malakiah found these merchants’ wares and prices completely satisfactory.**

**Visiting the stalls and booths and making their purchases took several hours. Malakiah found himself amazed at Kush’s knowledge. He led the knight-to-be to obscure areas Malakiah had never seen before and probably would not have even thought reputable. Still, every booth they visited had wares of excellent quality and reasonably priced. The merchants all seemed to know his new little friend and greeted him warmly as he did them in turn.**

**Around midday, the three of them broke for a meal at a place the little humanoid recommended; it served highly-spiced dishes of rice and vegetables and goblets of fruit drinks.**

**While they ate, Kush rambled on to Malakiah and Whithus about his life. The little being revealed he was the only member of his race in this vicinity. Before he had come to Suena, he had traveled extensively trying to find others of his kind. Kush had only a few vague recollections of others such as himself from when he was younger, but these memories were not all good. He recalled being a prisoner. He had tried for a long time to escape that confinement and finally had done so. Then, for some strange reason, he could not remember much more about what had followed.**

**Kush had wandered until he had come to Suena. Here he had met an old man—a master thief named Tagan—who had made it his profession to find orphans and outcasts and train them to work for him. The man had befriended Kush who, in turn, had become his new pupil. Kush soon showed he had an uncanny ability for thievery, picking pockets, opening locks and doors, as well as hiding in shadows and moving silently. Now, Kush said proudly, he was one of the most accomplished thieves in Suena. He said his mentor also had him gathering information and spying for him. These tasks allowed him to talk to the many visitors who came into the city and ask them if they had seen others of his kind.**

**The two youths, listening to Kush’s tales, became very concerned. Both of them realized, as knights, they could ill afford to associate with someone whose livelihood involved thievery!**

**Whithus, taking the initiative, said, “Kush, I sincerely hope you have left the practicing of these skills behind you! Otherwise, neither Malakiah nor I will be able to be friends with you!”**

**“Why is that?” the little one said.**

**“We are both to be knights and must be faithful in our devotion to Adonai. We cannot perform unworthy deeds or keep company with those who practice them!”**

**“What deeds of mine are unworthy?” asked Kush.**

**“Anything that relates to stealing—taking property that properly belongs to another—is unworthy and an insult to Adonai. Similarly, if you use your talents to injure or otherwise cruelly take advantage of someone, that is an affront to the teachings of Adonai.”**

**“Most assuredly?”**

**Whithus nodded. “Most assuredly, Kush, such are wrong to Him.”**

**Kush shrugged. “I must admit, as much as I enjoy the challenge of it all, I have become bored with being a thief. And I have discovered I like not taking things from others—it makes them most upset. Still, I have to earn my keep from my master. May I still gather information for him? Would that be an *affront* to this Adonai whom you mentioned?”**

**“Not as long as the information you gain is not used to commit a crime or hurtfully.”**

**“And, by the way, who is this ‘Adonai’? Since I have come here, I hear everyone talk about him, but I have never met him. Is he the chief constable of Suena or something?”**

**Whithus and Malakiah exchanged looks. Obviously, Kush was a complete novice on the subject of Shem-adonti.**

**“Kush,” Malakiah said, “Adonai is similar to a chief constable. However, not for just a city or country but for everyone everywhere. That is what those of us who follow Adonai proclaim. Further, we believe He created us all and set down rules for us all to obey. When we follow such, we earn His love. When we disobey, we merit His anger. There is much we can instruct you about Adonai and we will gladly teach you so should you wish to learn.”**

**Whithus explained to Kush that what he and Malakiah had been doing earlier standing in the aisle talking with their heads bowed was praying or speaking to the great god Adonai. He continued explaining the worship of Adonai to the little being who listened enthralled.**

**Afterward, Kush said he liked the idea of singing songs and chanting to praise someone; he picked up on how praying was a means of communicating with Adonai; but he said he could not grasp why an entity who is all powerful and could be all places at once would be concerned with the needs of or the actions of any single individual.**

**Whithus replied, “Kush, just as flies cannot comprehend the abilities of a dragon, how could we understand those of Adonai?”**

**Kush’s only response was a puzzled expression.**

**Malakiah added, “He means, Kush, our duties should not be to understand the immensity of Adonai but merely to have true faith in Him.”**

**Kush scratched his head and said, “You follow a complex being whose ways you cannot completely understand? Now I know why you call it faith!”**

**Malakiah and Whithus both laughed.**

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**It was late in the afternoon when Malakiah and Whithus leading the now heavily-laden packhorse finally left the town and started up the northwest road toward the Fortress. Before separating, Malakiah and Kush had agreed upon a site for subsequent meetings in the marketplace.**

**They reached the road leading up to the Fortress and climbed its winding way to the gatehouse. They passed through the courtyard. There a thought sprite suggested an idea to Malakiah. *Perhaps he should find Kush work in the Fortress.* Then the little one would be allowed to sleep in the stables and obtain meals from the kitchen. *At least,* Malakiah thought, *such a situation would be preferable to him living on the streets.* However, before that could happen, Malakiah knew the matters of Kush’s intrusion into the Fortress and the note which Kush had left on the warden’s desk would have to be smoothed over. Otherwise, Haydian, the first time he saw Kush, would immediately recognize him from Malakiah’s description and have the little person seized. *Or, at least, attempt to have him seized!* Kush, if he could be persuaded to, would have to offer an apology to the man as well. And, Malakiah realized, to Scottius too, for the little one’s attack upon his private area!**

**Malakiah and Whithus unloaded the packhorse and then released the animal; she trotted hurriedly across the courtyard and over to the Fortress’ stables, eager to have the stable hands there unharness her, rub her down, and give her some feed and water. They then entered the common room of the academic building and laid their pack on the table. Malakiah waited there while Whithus went to fetch Sir Jacius. They both returned shortly.**

**Jacius seated himself at the table. First, he addressed Whithus.**

**“Squire Whithus, as a squire in the Platinum Order, your simple ‘Yea’ or ‘Nay’ would be sufficient; wish you still to make an affirmation?”**

**“Sir Jacius,” Whithus replied, “I have no desire to be set apart from another member of this Academy; I will make the affirmation.”**

**“Raise your right hand then,” Jacius ordered.**

**Whithus obeyed.**

**“Squire, affirm you, while Squire Malakiah was making his purchases today at the marketplace, you in no way helped or influenced him in the selection of any goods? Will you affirm you assisted only by helping him transport them back to the Academy? It this be true, state, ‘So I affirm.’”**

**Whithus answered solemnly, “So I affirm in the name of Adonai; verily, I testify truthfully and without willful evasion.”**

**Malakiah had to smile. It was typical of Whithus to add the extra embellishments.**

**“Dismissed, Squire Whithus,” said Jacius with a weary sigh.**

**Whithus nodded to the instructor and Malakiah; then he left the room. Malakiah thanked his friend as he left.**

**Jacius now requested Malakiah to unload the pack and spread the items out on the table. As Malakiah complied, the instructor read through the list and verified the items against those found there on the table. The instructor noticed some missing items and challenged Malakiah about their absence, but Malakiah could justify their omission or substitution.**

**Finally, having verified the list, Sir Jacius stood up and examined the quality of each item. He found none that greatly displeased him and only some that were slightly less than optimum. When he heard how much Malakiah had paid for all the items, he smiled and complimented Malakiah, saying he had done an excellent job procuring all the supplies.**

**At the end, the instructor asked Malakiah if he had any observations about the assignment. Malakiah used this opportunity to relate Spatan’s trying to cheat him. (He omitted describing his angry behavior toward the merchant.) Jacius nodded and said merchants frequently used such practices. Then Malakiah asked why this merchant, if he was such a cheat, had been on the approved list.**

**“Squire Malakiah,” Jacius replied, with a frown, perhaps annoyed by the question, “no list of merchants could be completely correct; it is also possible perhaps that dishonest one was placed on there to test you.”**

**“Sir Jacius, should I report that merchant Spatan to the town authorities?”**

**“Verily; write up the whole matter. Provide many details. Those officials love to read details. And submit it as you said.”**

**“As you have instructed, Sir Jacius.”**

**Jacius then stood up and said, “Congratulations, Squire, on an exemplary completion of the assignment.” He left the room.**

**Malakiah next ordered a passing cadet to help him to carry away the supplies and place them in proper storage.**

**Later, as the youth returned to his work on his academic project in his room in the Squires Quarters, he reflected on how Kush had been an unexpected blessing and decided he should surely remember the meeting in his prayer of thanks to Adonai this night.**

Part 3:

The Knight Candidate

**Chapter 21**

**MALAKIAH’S QUEST**

**HE QUEST CHOSEN FOR A CANDIDATE TO EARN HIS KNIGHTHOOD IN THE PERENCIAN ORDER IS SELECTED BY THE KNIGHTS COUNCIL WHICH EVALUATES THE POTENTIAL CANDIDATE AND STRIVES TO PICK AN ORDEAL THAT WILL DEMONSTRATE HIS STRENGTHS. The process can be as intricate and convoluted as any affair described by the political writer Niccolo Bernadi. Often the Council’s favorites will receive routine quests while non-preferred ones will be assigned harder challenges. Candidates in the bad graces of the Council will be set up to fail by being given nearly impossible tasks. Sometimes a high-ranking relative or patron will petition the Knights Council to assign his charge a specific or hard task so he may prove himself.**

**Malakiah’s patron, Sir Heddrick, the Duke of Suena, was the Grandmaster of the Perencian Order and thus the head of the Council; his father, the Duke of the Emerald Valley, while not influential in the Perencian Order, was despised by none. Malakiah, therefore, was given what was perceived as an easy quest. However, fate intervened. His simple, although extensive, quest to a far land would turn out to be a harsh ordeal. And have far-reaching consequences none could have expected!**

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***Twenty-fourthday of the first month of summer, 2124***

**The Duke of Suena’s obligations as the Grandmaster of the Perencian Order of Knights revolved mainly around his attending meetings—either those in which he presided over as the Order’s Grandmaster or those he served as its representative. His duties in such meetings could extend from hearing petitions or grievances from the lowliest of citizens to his receiving orders for the Perencian Order from His Supreme Divineness, the high theocrat himself. What the duke obtained from such meetings he would then customarily delegate to a member of the Knights Council, Eramius his chief clerk, or some other aide to work upon. Only occasionally would His Grace write proposals, conduct research, or draw up reports himself.**

**Among the most prominent meetings Sir Heddrick attended were those involving the entire Knights Council. They were usually held monthly on the twenty-fourth day and took up the entire afternoon. The participants rarely found their proceedings dull. Their minutes were always reviewed and retained for future reference. Each member’s reports were listened to attentively when presented and their details later securitized. Indeed, in these meetings, everyone present strove to impress all others there with their efforts on behalf of their assigned committee’s area of influence. All knew their hopes of eventual Council advancement depended on their performance.**

**Today being the twenty-fourth and presently it being just a few minutes before the fifteenth hour, the duke and Eramius were in the duke’s office on the second floor of the Perencian Order of Knights building. His Grace sat at his desk, reviewing and editing his report. Eramius sat at one end of the long table on the other side of the room. Behind him, sitting on a bench with a narrow table before them, were six scribes with their quills, inkpots, and sheets of paper at ready. They all awaited the imminent arrival of the remaining members.**

**These other members—the three ranking knights of the Gold Order, the Silver Order, the Bronze Order, the Steel Order, and the one selected by the high theocrat to represent the Platinum Order—arrived promptly. The duke was known to be intolerant of unexcused tardiness. With them came four other clerks—one for each Order—bearing their papers and writing materials. Once the last had arrived, the duke took the grand chair at the unoccupied end of the table; the other knights took their customary seats.**

**The meeting began with the Council members voicing a long recitation, partly a pledge and mostly a prayer. The grandmaster’s report followed it. Sir Heddrick told his fellow knights of his activities since their last meeting. He related the civic functions he had attended, the defensive sites he had inspected, and other events. Of particular interest to all was his recent audience with the high theocrat; he briefly summarized the instructions His Supreme Divineness Theodosiusian II had had for the Perencian Order, saying their compete details were in his report all members would receive after the meeting.**

**The next report was the treasurer’s, presented by Sir Alderan Festgiven, the second representative of the Silver Order. Sir Alderan reported the Perencian Order’s investments were currently providing a healthy return, their lands and businesses generated a hefty income through the rental fees and percentages, and their farms and ranches promised substantial sales with the harvest in the next few months.**

**All present murmured their approval at these optimistic tidings.**

**The Council next had brought to its members’ attention those matters previously reviewed in previous meetings but remaining unresolved. Eramius read such items from a list. As one was mentioned, the head of the committee to whom it had been delegated would then present his verdict as to what should be done about it. These verdicts were voted upon by the four Orders. Approved ones were** **implemented. Rejected ones were discussed; following such, the matter was then returned to the original committee or assigned to a new one. Occasionally, a matter would just be dismissed as unworthy of further concern.**

**Next, the Council would consider new matters. Such items were similarly either accepted and implemented or relegated to committees for further study and recommendations. Among such matters this day were two letters from Santos recently arrived. The first one was his request from the Monastery of the Mystic Yudeas to send an expert in defensive fortifications. The Council disputed whether this letter should be treated as a request of the Perencian Order and therefore be considered by Sir Zephius Xanthwen, the third representative of the Gold Order, who headed Council’s Requests Committee; or, as the letter concerned someone needing defensive assistance, whether it should be delegated to Sir Bellisan de Motarin, the third representative of the Steel Order, as he headed the Council’s Defense Committee. Ultimately, they gave the matter to Sir Bellisan to consider.**

**The second letter was Santos’ request for the jewels for Vesta’s and Alleia’s ransom. Its reading by Eramius to the Council caused considerable amusement. To the duke, however, this request was not humorous at all but of grave concern; he advocated the Council to act most urgently upon it.**

**The letter was discussed at great length. The duke, with others supporting him, managed to convince all of its authenticity. The members all were well aware any traveler journeying through the region of Rama in Verritan risked being kidnapped.**

**Finally, the Council agreed it should send the requested jewels to Santos and Alderick in Rama; it could not, however, decide how to obtain them. To hasten matters, the duke volunteered to supply the diamonds himself. Then the Council began arguing on how to convey the gems. Eventually, as it decided from the tone of Santos’ letter, as the ransom was a routine although extended task, it would use the delivery at an opportunity for the quest of some appropriate knight candidate. Accordingly, it tasked Sir Benarian Lesthian, the Head or first representative of the Bronze Order and the one in charge of the Knight Candidate Supervision and Quests Committee, to select a suitable individual for the mission.**

**This decision completed the Council’s consideration of Santos’ second letter; it then heard other matters. After hearing the last new matter for review, the members took the half-hour meeting break. The eleven committee reports which comprised the rest of the meeting would be heard upon their return.**

**The duke sought out Sir Benarian during the break. He had a squire in mind for the mission to Rama whom he wanted his fellow council member to consider. Sir Benarian certainly knew the individual His Grace put forth, yet was unsure of his suitability. In deference to his grandmaster, though, the knight said he would undoubtedly investigate his qualifications. Sir Heddrick then suggested when they could meet to discuss the squire’s suitableness. Discerning the duke’s interest, Sir Benarian was convinced his recommendation for the Council as to whom they should send to Rama had been decided for him.**

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***Twenty-fourthday of the first month of summer, 2124***

**It had taken Malakiah several days to redraft his academic project into its final form; he finally finished its last page on the day following his assignment to buy supplies in the marketplace. He was elated on the morning of the twenty-fourth to march into the Administration Building of the Academy and hand his satchel containing his project to a clerk in the office of the Academy’s Council on Academic Projects. *Finally,* he thought, *after four years, he had finished the academic part of his knightly training.*  *Only the quest remained*. But, before he would have to fulfill that, he realized, surely a celebration with his friends was in order. He knew many at the Academy had thrown parties to celebrate achieving their knight candidatures; he had even been fortunate to attend a few of them. *Now*, he thought, *he shall have his own.***

**Malakiah planned to celebrate that very night at The Fiery Furnace tavern, having reserved a backroom there the week before. To this event, he had invited the cousins, Whithus, Vidar, Randius, and his four friends from the Institute. He had also asked his old friend Gregian from the University, hoping the fellow would chance entering an Institute-affiliated tavern. To Malakiah’s delight, Gregian sent word back he would attend—cautiously. Malakiah sought Kush to invite him but he could not find the little one.**

**Malakiah arrived early at the tavern to check if the room had been prepared properly. He found it was pleasantly lit with numerous candles and had a long table set with twelve places.**

**Gradually, his guests made their appearances. The cousins all arrived together, followed by Vidar and Randius. Malakiah required little catching up with the cousins as he saw them regularly at the Fortress, and they shared the Squires Quarters. Vidar and Randius related how they, too, had recently completed their academic projects and were now eagerly anticipating their quest assignments from the Knights Council.**

**Whithus arrived next; he had been in Suena most of the day receiving instruction at the Temple of Adonai and had there attended a service officiated by the high theocrat. Consequently, he was most eager to tell all he had experienced.**

**Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, and Deiniol entered the room as Whithus was finishing his story. Malakiah introduced them to Whithus, whom they had never met. After doing so, Malakiah noticed a hooded figure had entered the room. He challenged him.**

**“It is just me, Mal,” said Gregian, removing his head covering. “This establishment is enemy territory for me. I must be cautious here.”**

**“Most foully met, Gregian, you lowly denizen of the University,” said Deiniol with a smirk. “Hopefully, you wiped your feet before crossing the threshold of this tavern.”**

**“No need to,” returned Gregian, “although I suspect I shall have to when I depart.”**

**Malakiah was unsure whether the two’s exchange was just playful sparing or the start of a verbal altercation; nonetheless, he desired to keep everyone friendly here.**

**“Well met, Gregian; I am, at least, glad to have your presence here. And I insist all others here consider you welcome. This gathering shall remain friendly. If not, I shall ask Scottius to convince you all to be so.”**

**Scottius bared his teeth and growled. “Let me warn you—I have not eaten yet. Therefore, I am especially hungry!”**

**Malakiah nodded to Scottius and then glanced around the table. “Are my words understood?”**

**“Verily so, Mal,” said Deiniol. “We will consent to eat with Gregian—provided he remembers to use utensils.” He glared at Gregian.**

**“Most assuredly, I shall not forget to,” answered Gregian, glaring at Deiniol. “Let us also hope those of you from the Institute refrain from choking on their food because they cannot stop talking long enough to chew it properly.”**

**Verbal barbs continued to be exchanged for the next few minutes, but, gradually, the conversation turned friendlier when Malakiah pressed Gregian to tell them all about some of his creations as an armorer. Soon everyone was listening. None of them had known how complex an armored gauntlet was to craft, and Gregian did a most thorough job detailing how its intricate pieces were fabricated and attached.**

**Eventually, Malakiah, as the host, called for their meal. Again, as the last time he had been here, he noticed the buxom Zandra was their server. When she arrived with their drinks, she stood next to Deiniol to set them down. He leaned towards her. Malakiah suspected he planned to place a surreptitious kiss on her cheek and waited with amusement to witness her annoyed response. Instead, to his surprise, she merely turned her head and accepted it fully on her lips. She smiled back at him.**

**Seeing Malakiah’s astonished look, Deiniol explained. “Mal, I perceive you knew not the news. The lovely Zandra is now my intended.”**

**“My congratulations to you, Deiniol. Truly, I knew not.” He then addressed their server. “Pray tell me, Zandra, what has prompted you to grant your hand to this ‘randy goblin’ as you once so called him?”**

**“My realization he was truly more than such. And, his receiving a professorship at the Institute; it would please me to have such a titled and learned man as my own.” She took his hand in hers and squeezed it.**

**“Yes, Mal, she also reveals to you my other news. Soon I will be an instructor at the Institute. I hope, though, that is not the only reason I merited such quality ‘merchandise.’”**

**He gently patted Zandra’s behind. This time she merely frowned at him for taking such a liberty.**

**“And after all the times she swore none of us would ever share her *delights*,” sighed Azariah. “Who would have thought Deiniol would be the fortunate one? Pray describe how *delightful* it is to *inventory* her merchandise—that is, when you know, Deiniol.”**

**“Perhaps I could tell you now,” smirked Deiniol.**

**Malakiah glanced at Whithus; he looked shocked upon hearing Deiniol’s risqué comment.**

**“Verily, he most certainly *cannot*,” declared Zandra, slapping him softly on the head.**

**“Yes, she speaks truly; I cannot,” replied Deiniol, meekly. “Still, wanting to keeps me awake at night as I lie in my bed, *alone*.” He looked at her and sighed. Now, all at the table laughed. He beckoned her to come closer and kissed her again. “Such samples of the future pleasures to come must keep me contented.”**

**After allowing them a suitable time to savor their drinks, Zandra next brought out to each one a platter containing several meat-covered ribs coated with sauce, roasted potatoes, and two kinds of vegetables. They all eagerly set to. When he had finished gnawing on a bone, each one at the table casually hurled it to a pack of dogs chained in one corner of the room.**

**When they had all finished, Zandra cleared away the platters and brought them all another round of ale. Then the toasts to Malakiah began. Whithus gave the first one, asking Adonai to grant Malakiah His guidance and aid so his career as a knight would be long and honorable. Then each of the cousins offered one. Gregian followed theirs with a comical one, involving many jokes about knights and armor. Vidar and Randius gave standard toasts, wishing Malakiah much success. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah offered a joint toast in the form of a complex and interactive recital.**

**Altogether, it was probably the tribute Deiniol gave Malakiah all found the most memorable.**

**When Deiniol’s turn came, Zandra nudged him. “May I, dear?” she asked.**

**Deiniol rolled his eyes; he whispered. “Again? Verily, you may. But only because you asked and I love you so. But try not to enjoy it *too much*!”**

**Deiniol stood up; all eyes were now upon him. Zandra, however, slowly walked over to stand beside Malakiah. Watching Deiniol, he gave her approach no heed. Then, to his surprise, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a passionate kiss. All at the table, after their initial astonishment, broke out into laughter and applause.**

**“Congratulations, Mal,” said Deiniol. “Just expect not another.” He sat down again.**

**“Verily so! Congratulations, Candidate,” she said after breaking her hold on him.**

**Malakiah could only stare at her in surprise; any thought sprites within his mind were dumbfounded.**

**“I so love congratulating you handsome candidates,” she added with a smile, walking away.**

**“Zandra,” said Randius, “I too am a candidate-to-be.”**

**“And so am I!” added Vidar, eagerly.**

**“My favors are intended not for you!” she smirked, looking in their direction. “Not unless the party is in your honor!”**

**“My dear Zandra,” said Jefhian, “we three shall be candidates in six months.” He indicated himself, Hathian, and Scottius. “Pray save some of your marvelous embraces for us.”**

**“Six months?” replied Zandra, “by then only if Deiniol still grants his permission.”**

**“Such could be possible,” said Deiniol, “for a small consideration.” He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together repeatedly. Zandra cuffed him on the back of the head.**

**“Best pray, Deiniol,” remarked Mishael, “she hits you no harder than that after you have married her!”**

**“If such a delight is the reward for becoming a candidate,” Hananiah commented, “perhaps I shall consider it.” He turned to Hathian seated across from him. “How many years would it take one to complete knightly training at your Academy?”**

**“Three for the very lucky; five years for most,” answered Hathian.**

**“By then, Hananiah,” said Zandra with a smirk, “any chance you would have of receiving any favor from me would be long past.”**

**“Except, perhaps, for a huge consideration!” quipped Deiniol.**

**Again, Zandra cuffed him on the back of the head. But this time, Deiniol, expecting such from her, pretended its force had been strong enough to propel his head forward and cause his forehead to slam against the table. The resulting thud as it struck made all at the table laugh most heartily.**

**Suddenly, Malakiah ceased laughing as he noticed four others had entered the room. Whithus, the cousins, Randius, and Vidar also stopped when they saw the uninvited ones standing by the door. The newcomers were individuals none of them liked—namely Drakos and his cronies Iland, Dreg, and Darrell.**

**Drakos had become a knight several months ago. Those others with him, though, were but third-year squires. In the last few years, the four of them had acquired a reputation for causing trouble in Suena, but never to the degree either the Knighthood or the Academy would discipline them. Malakiah knew not why they had chosen now to intrude upon his party or even how they had come upon it. He did, however, want them gone.**

**“Sir Drakos, Iland, Dreg, and Darrell,” he said, addressing them politely, “this party is a private affair. Pray leave as your presence is not requested.”**

**“Not requested?” repeated Drakos, mockingly. “How rude of you. Will you not even offer your fellow members of the Perencian Order a drink? That is most inhospitable to us, your brothers in the Order.”**

**Scottius rose from his chair. “Leave while you can still walk, you son of a troll,” he snarled.**

**Hathian placed a hand on Scottius’ shoulder to coax him back into his chair. “Verily,” he said, “we shall offer you four a drink—if you should care to join us in our next toast.”**

**“A toast?” asked Drakos. “And what shall you be toasting?”**

**“The Academy’s newest knight candidate-to-be, Malakiah.”**

**Drakos smirked. “Then how low the Academy’s standards must have declined to accept him as such.” He glared at Malakiah. “I shall never raise a mug to him.”**

**These words caused a murmur from those seated at the table. Malakiah, however, refused to let Drakos’ remark anger him. He knew a mere word or gesture from him could provoke a fight. Such, he was also aware, would end disastrously. They would all face discipline from both the Academy and the civic authorities. Best then, he knew, he should let the taunt just pass unaddressed.**

**“Sir Drakos,” said Malakiah, calmly, “since you decline the offered drink, you and your associates may depart. As I have said, this party is a private affair.”**

**“Verily, I shall not,” returned Drakos, now crossing his arms defiantly. “If the Academy would foolishly accept such as you as a ‘knight candidate,’ I have a will to stay and see if you could pass a challenge that shows whether you deserve such.”**

**Try as he might to avoid it, Malakiah felt Drakos raising his dragon. “Name your challenge, then, you oaf!” he cried.**

**Drakos smiled grimly. “The one called ‘The Twelve Drinks.’”**

**“I know it not.”**

**“I have heard of it,” said Jefhian. “The one challenged must down twelve short drinks of various types. After each one, he must recite correctly the next of the Twelve Commandments of the Perencian Order of Knights. The challenge continues until he gives all twelve correctly, says one incorrectly or misses it, or passes out.”**

**“What a ridiculous test!” protested Deiniol. “It reveals naught but a man’s ability to hold his alcohol.”**

**“Wrong, you dolt!” snarled Drakos, glaring at Deiniol. “It shows a man’s mettle.” Then he turned his glare upon Malakiah, saying, “I passed such; now, I challenge you, Malakiah, to show you can! What say you?”**

**Malakiah dwelt upon Drakos’ words for a moment; then he looked to the others at his table to assess their feelings. Whithus spoke first.**

**“Kiah,” he advised, “shun this vile challenge. You need to prove nothing to Drakos.”**

**Jefhian and Hathian, when Malakiah looked toward them, just shrugged. Scottius, who was never one to decline a challenge, nodded. Vidar, Randius, and the others just looked indecisive.**

**Consequently, the decision fell to Malakiah to make. He would never know why he accepted it. Perhaps it was the ale.**

**The stakes were agreed upon. Should Malakiah pass the test, Drakos would buy a round of drinks, offer a congratulatory toast to Malakiah, and then depart.**

**“However, when you instead *lose*,” Drakos said with a sneer, “you shall, knave, go up on the stage of this very tavern, dressed as a serving wench, and sing before all the patrons. And the song which you shall sing shall be, ‘Roll me over, in the Clover.’”**

**Drakos smirked. The song which he had chosen was most risqué. Word of Malakiah’s performing such should surely reach the Academy and subject him to discipline.**

**Malakiah now regretted having accepted the challenge. *Singing with Vesta had been bad enough. But standing garbed as a tavern wench before patrons and warbling a bawdry song—such was unthinkable!* He would dearly hate to lose this challenge. Then, to his surprise, he saw Jefhian stand up. *What might his friend wish to add?***

**“Drakos,” said Jefhian, “anyone who has known you during your term at the Academy would describe you using two words—‘ogre sphincter.’”**

**Drakos glared at Jefhian. Iland started toward Jefhian but Drakos held him back.**

**“Let the whelp talk,” Drakos said. “If he has the spine to speak to me such, I would hear his words. Then make him choke upon them.”**

**Jefhian continued. “You abused anyone whom you could while you attended the Academy. Now, I would have you make amends. Let us increase these stakes. If Malakiah wins, you, Drakos, besides the toast, must also give a lecture at the Academy to the cadets on proper knightly etiquette; such must meet the approval of Warden Haydian. And you shall illustrate it with horrible examples drawn from your past behavior. It will serve as your public apology to all whom you have mistreated.”**

**Drakos smirked. “Such a contrite display would amuse you, would it not? As I am assured Malakiah shall falter in his attempt, I accept that challenge. But now hear you the new humiliation he—and you all—must endure when he fails. All of you must join him on the stage, dressed as wenches, and sing as well. Each of you sings a verse alone and the chorus as a group.” He smiled. “The crowd may cringe, cover their ears, and run outside. But I shall enjoy hearing such a wailing.”**

**“All of us singing?” asked Deiniol timidly.**

**“I shall exempt any not of the Academy—you are beneath my notice.”**

**“I know not whether to be pleased or offended,” muttered Gregian.**

**“Think you could find a skirt to fit me?” growled Scottius.**

**“Use a tablecloth for all I care,” snarled Drakos, “but, when he loses, perform you shall.” He now turned to Malakiah. “So, you who would consider yourself worthy of being a knight candidate, have you the *stuff* to take this challenge? To cause your friends to be humiliated?”**

**Malakiah looked to Whithus, the cousins, Randius, and Vidar. “This matter now concerns you as well. Will you risk this endeavor with me?”**

**His friends all nodded. “All for one,” said Hathian.**

**Malakiah turned back to Drakos. “Bring forth the challenge.”**

**Zandra brought twelve short drink glasses (small ones designed to hold only two swallows of liquid.) She had been instructed to have the first three filled with apple ale, the second three with strong ale, the third three half with strong ale and half with a potent alcoholic drink, and the last three filled with the potent drink only. She set the tray bearing the drinks before Malakiah; to his surprise she gave him a quick kiss on the forehead and wished him luck.**

**Before he started, Hathian offered Malakiah some advice.**

**“Mal, I have heard in this challenge there is a degree of danger for those who drink too much too fast. Therefore, my friend, I counsel you to drink most slowly; take your time while you recite each commandment. Far better you pass out and lose than proceed too quickly—despite what the losing shall cost us.”**

**Malakiah nodded.**

**“Kiah,” Whithus added, “I cannot ask Adonai to grant you His blessing on this endeavor. I surely think He would not approve of what you are attempting. But I wish you luck.”**

**The others around the table did the same.**

**Then Malakiah began. He emptied the initial glass, turned it over, and, in a clear voice, recited the first commandment, “Study the teachings of Adonai and observe them always.”**

**Those around him cheered as he reached for the second glass.**

**Slowly, he progressed through the drink selections, finding the taste of the earliest ones more to his liking. He also appreciated his friends’ encouragement as he continued.**

**Half an hour later, he slowly and unsteadily turned over the last small glass. Then, smiling at the frowning Drakos, he recited the last commandment although his speech was now quite slurred. “Strive always . . . in all things for . . the benefit of all society—never just for . . . yourself.”**

**Malakiah was pleased. His friends slapped him heartily upon his back. He hardly felt their hands upon him, though.**

**Drakos, now in a foul humor, conceded. To his credit, though, the knight fulfilled the agreement; he offered the toast in Malakiah’s honor and then he and his associates left.**

**“And, Drakos, I remind you of the eighth commandment, ‘Your honor is tantamount; never lie or go back on your word.’ You promised, if Malakiah met your challenge, to give a specified lecture. We shall look forward to hearing it.” Jefhian shouted after him.**

**The party continued, but Malakiah remembered very little of the rest of it. He instead woke up the next morning lying on his bunk in the Fortress with no memory of how he had gotten there and glad he had had friends willing to convey him there. He was not pleased, however, to hear the sounding of the gong. He groaned and covered his head with his pillow.**

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***Twenty-fifthday of the first month of summer, 2124***

**Alderick awoke and looked about his dungeon chamber. Little had changed from last night. Little had changed in his small living area for weeks. He was still a prisoner in the warlord Rash Gul’s dungeon and had been for months.**

**His remaining men—those not kept in chains, at least—were gathered around him in this side chamber off the main one. Two were asleep on the cold stone floor; the other three sat and watched the opening. What they watched for were possible attacks from other prisoners—they were the only things dangerous in this dungeon. Alderick and his men had formed one society. The other prisoners had grouped themselves into similar ones. Each society was loyal only to its own and hostile by necessity to those in any other one. That was how people came to behave in places such as this. A lone prisoner unable to gain acceptance into any society never lasted a single night—he was killed for any possessions he had.**

**Alderick felt a little stronger this morning; he had contracted some illness that was steadily weakening him. Many mornings his men had had to help him to the privy hole. Today, however, he could push aside his covers and crawl over and relieve himself unaided.**

**When he returned, his lieutenant, Salymon, had breakfast for him—a crust of bread, a hunk of cheese, and half a sausage. Alderick noticed his bread even had some extra protein—maggots. He had grown to enjoy their taste. He washed the food down with foul-tasting water.**

**His men presented to him their morning reports when he had finished eating. Salymon told him five of his six men chained outside to the walls still lived—Jaynus had died. They were fed whenever he or someone else could do so without their jailer seeing them and whenever extra food was available. Another of Alderick’s men, Jessith, informed him of their efforts to exchange food for clothing from the other societies. Alderick needed such clothing as coverings to keep him warm.**

**“Bordaius,” Jessith said, mentioning the name of the head of the largest society in the dungeon, “is increasing his demands. He now wants twice as much food for each piece of clothing. The same for water.” Unfortunately for all not in Bordaius’ society, the dungeon’s only water source was controlled by them. “We may soon, I am sorry to say, have to count on more deaths so we can strip them for their garments.”**

**Alderick frowned; then, a thought sprite whispered to him. “Water is a vital resource down here; also, one easy to barter. Could we possibly find our own source? Dig or drill for some?”**

**Some of his men exchanged looks. Jessith said, “Yes, but where to look? What may we use for our tools?”**

**“Where to look?” said Alderick. “Anywhere. What to use for tools? Whatever we have! We have nothing but time. Nothing to lose and everything to gain. If we can find a water source, we can barter for more food from the other prisoners.”**

**Alderick and all his men knew whoever had food and water could barter for anything. But securing either was difficult. All their food was given to them. Some guards would hand out the chunks of bread, pieces of cheese, and links of sausage. Then all in the dungeon received adequate rations. Other guards, however, simply dumped their meal buckets on the dungeon floor, making the prisoners scramble for the contents and allowing the fastest and most agile ones to secure the most. A few guards, for their amusement, threw the food scraps in handfuls to the prisoners such as a man would feed a pack of stray dogs. This means again enabled those ablest to accumulate the most. Woe to any prisoner unable to secure his food or not having someone willing to provide him some!**

**The last report Alderick heard that morning was from Naison; his responsibility was to find some way for Alderick and the others to escape. His duty was most unenviable. Only occasionally would he devise a possible scheme, but so far, whenever he explained his plan, some flaw in it would be uncovered. Their dungeon had only one exit—up a steep and narrow staircase. To reach it, a prisoner would have to bridge a deep sinkhole. Should he do so and make it up the stairs, however, he would find himself prominently in the fortress’ courtyard in full view of the guards.**

**“Respectfully,” said Naison, with a weary smile, “I have no proposed escape to recommend today. I will try to devise one for tomorrow.”**

**“Thank you all,” replied Alderick, looking at each of his men. He then covered his legs again with the cast-off clothing. The benefit of their warmth was diminished by the vermin which infested them. *Still*, he reflected, *he must keep himself warm*. “Who wishes now to lead us in prayer? And I request whosoever leads—with no disrespect to Naison—may he please ask most strongly for Adonai to deliver us soon from this place. I, for one, would dearly love to be reunited with my son Santos and return home with him and my sweet Vesta. And I am sure each of you has a place you would certainly love to be other than here. It may be only Adonai may grant we see them again. Now, who shall lead?”**

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***First day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**Malakiah found himself in a quandary; recently, in a long discussion with the duke, they had discussed where his quest would take him and both determined, just as Santos had selected him two years ago, Malakiah should pick a staunch comrade to accompany him on his quest. His dilemma was he could not discern a suitable candidate.**

**Traditionally at the Academy, a knight candidate, when he chose a quest companion, picked a first- or second-year squire. A cadet was customarily considered too inexperienced and a squire advanced into his third year would be involved with finishing his courses or his academic project. Exceptions to this ruling, however, could be granted by petitioning the grandmaster.**

**Malakiah knew some junior squires through shared classes and work projects; unfortunately, he knew few well. Therefore, he had idly toyed with selecting one of his friends, thinking such ruminations would guide him in selecting someone else.**

**He considered Whithus and quickly rejected such a choice. Although he was a trusted friend, Malakiah knew Whithus’ frequent nativity made him unsuitable. Malakiah remembered his initial shock on Santos’ quest when he had found he would be escorting members of the Quicksilver Order. And how they had had to go many times into brothels to confer with informants from the same Order. Witnessing Whithus’ mild disapproval upon hearing the criminal life story of Kush, Malakiah could not imagine what the reaction of Whithus would be if he were asked to partake in marginal situations. Consequently, he discarded Whithus.**

**After Whithus, his choice would be all three cousins, knowing they would be a most formidable trio at his back. He doubted, however, the Knights Council would allow him to take *three* individuals. Typically, a squire could only take one other and perhaps a retainer or servant. And, in any event, the cousins were all third-year squires. Such were usually not allowed as quest companions. *But,* he thought*, if he could take one, which one?***

**Malakiah had known the cousins since his first day at the Academy; he appraised each. They all had differing appealing aspects. Jefhian was an excellent choice because of his outgoing personality and fighting prowess. He, however, tended to take command in situations; Malakiah saw, therefore, he and Jefhian could clash, and Malakiah needed to be in charge of his quest. The massive, soft-centered Scottius was a follower, loyal to those he called his friends, and, while not very intellectual, most shrewd and cunning in battle and devising tactics. He would surely watch Malakiah’s back. However, because of his size, Scottius could also draw too much attention. Malakiah decided he needed someone who would blend in, not stand out.**

**That left Hathian. Recently, Malakiah had come to discover he was most astute. Although he did not show off as did his two other cousins, he was also an expert fighter. Furthermore, Hathian was a reserved and silent individual. These traits frequently made people forget he was even present. He was always observing what was going on. Malakiah had noted, whenever Hathian spoke, the cousins and later Whithus and him would usually pay close heed to his words and consider them carefully. Malakiah shook his head. He had read in his history books of individuals who had ruled states by subtly manipulating their rulers. Hathian’s fate could easily be to become such an influential advisor! With him, Malakiah knew, he would have competent counsel and a staunch comrade. He regretted, then, Hathian was not a possible choice for his quest companion.**

***Who remained then?* Randius and Vidar were also senior squires and awaiting their own quest assignments. He knew some individuals he could eliminate immediately—Iland and his two henchmen, Dreg and Darrell. They had not changed much in their time at the school and Malakiah thought they would make poor knights. Yet, because their patrons had much influence, they would eventually become such. However, that was not his concern. And, anyway, they were also senior squires!**

**Malakiah thought further and eliminated some squires because he knew they had a strong sense of entitlement—especially if their fathers were noblemen or leaders in the Knighthood. He tended to stay away from such squires. He remembered well from Santos’ quest he would need someone to work with him in dealing with ordinary and even disreputable people and not feel inclined to look down on them.**

**Eventually, he began writing down the names of the first- or second-year squires. As he did, he arrived at one whom he decided might be his ideal choice—Lepol. Him he had known from even before either of them had ever arrived at the Academy. Malakiah felt, because of their long acquaintance and common backgrounds, he would make an excellent quest companion.**

**Malakiah sent Lepol a message, telling him he wanted to meet him at The Lions’ Den tavern.**

**Malakiah arrived early and found a booth beneath the tavern’s trademark giant stuffed lions which would provide them some relative privacy. He ordered a drink, knowing Lepol customarily arrived late. By the time he had sipped his brew nearly to the bottom, he spotted Lepol sauntering into the bar, acting as if he was there on time. He was as tall as Malakiah, had tightly-curled black hair, ruddy cheeks, and was dressed in his best garb, not wearing the uniform usually required of Academy members. Seeing him, Malakiah raised his hand. Lepol spotted him and came over.**

**Malakiah clasped hands with Lepol and they exchanged pleasantries as they sat back down at the booth.**

**“Well met, Lepol. It looks as if life at the Institute agrees with you.”**

**“Verily so, Malakiah. I am happy to be around academic people and again to have a room, howbeit small, of my own.”**

**“I too miss having such. But soon, we will be finished here and back in our duchies in our own rooms,” Malakiah agreed. “Buy you a drink?”**

**“I shall have no objections! The day is quite hot and, on my journey I have developed a substantial thirst.”**

**Malakiah ordered a refill of the apple ale and one for Lepol. Instead, Lepol declined the ale and ordered a glass of wine instead.**

**Malakiah frowned, considering the cost of the wine which Lepol had just indifferently put on his tab; then, putting the matter aside, he asked, “How fare your classes?”**

**“Exceedingly well. I find the level of instruction at the Institute is far superior to that found at the Academy. And, at the Institute, the instructors teach and challenge us—not just assign tasks for completion.”**

**“Granted, passing courses at the Academy was sometimes little more than just completing so many assignments, but I learned as much from them as I have from my classes at the Institute,” Malakiah replied diplomatically.**

**“I know, but also there were never opportunities to have intellectual discussions with our instructors at the Academy. Now I may have a class with an instructor and then continue the discussion afterward in his office or at a nearby establishment for dinner. Verily, I find such instances most delightful.”**

**Malakiah responded, “You strike the mark. I could not see having any discussion from Haydian that would not involve him yelling.”**

**“Verily, that man may serve well as the Fortress’ warden. He may be fit to instruct cadets in the details of guard duty but would never pass as a learned man. He is far from our intellectual equal. Indeed, few of the instructors whom I know are of my level. When I earn my knighthood in the Silver Order, I plan to become an instructor. My students will profit handily from my skillful teaching.”**

**The wench returned with their drinks.**

**Holding his mug, Malakiah said, “To our fathers, our families, and our duchies.”**

**Lepol echoed his sentiment and raised his glass. As he drank, Malakiah immediately noted this apple ale was much better than his first one and, seeing Lepol’s expression, noted he was surprised too by his drink.**

**“This wine is excellent! I can see why you come here!” said Lepol.**

**Malakiah recognized his ale as similar to the one he had had at The Fiery Furnace. This thought caused him to begin looking around for a particular person. When he did not immediately see him, he focused his attention back on Lepol.**

**“Verily, the drinks here are quite good. And so is the food too.”**

**“Good evening, Sir Knight; I would not recommend the fish here, though. They let it sit around way too long. The beef and lamb, however, are quite good,” came the voice of Kush.**

**The interruption startled Malakiah; one moment, no one was there, and the next, the small humanoid was standing beside the table. He must have been hiding behind one of the lions.**

**“Little One!” Malakiah asked, “what mischief brings you here?”**

**Grinning as if his surprising Malakiah had amused him, Kush said, “The same as always. Trying to persuade you you need my services!”**

**Seeing him, Lepol set down his wine glass and stared at him as if he was a new specimen. “Great thunder! What kind of freak are you?”**

**The ordinarily cheerful face of Kush suddenly grew angry. “Freak! How dare you call me such a thing! I cannot help the way I was born any more than you, you popping jay!” he shrieked, gesturing wildly with his staff.**

**Holding up his hands in a placating gesture, Lepol said, “My apologies, but I meant not ‘freak’ as an insult. It is just the term for a being such as you, a mixture between the races. Would ‘mongrel’ be any better?”**

**“Not particularly. Manure still smells just as bad if you call it another name,” Kush countered.**

**Chuckling, Lepol said, “Quite true, small one. But pray tell, what mix are you of the races? You are surely not an elf, a gnome, or a dwarf!”**

**Looking hurt and frustrated, Kush responded, “I know not what I am! I remember neither my parents nor any siblings! I have vague memories of being with others of my kind, being prisoners, and then escaping. But from where I know not!”**

**“Quite interesting,” Lepol said, staring intently at Kush. “From closer examination, I believe I know what kind of creature you are, but I thought you were all extinct. Are you interested in knowing?”**

**The gloomy expression on Kush’s face quickly transformed into wonder and joy. “Most certainly! Tell me! Please tell me!” He jumped up and down as would a little child, clasping his hands in front of him.**

**“I believe you are from a very rare race called ‘kelvin.’”**

**“Verily? I am a kelvin? Are they related to the elves?” Kush beamed.**

**“It is not known. Even the elves are not sure, but both races have many similarities between them.”**

**“Tell me more!”**

**Lepol answered, “I am afraid I know not too much about kelvins. I suggest you go to a nearby library and look them up. You may have to search through a few of them to find the information you are looking for. Such knowledge about kelvins is tough to find, so be not discouraged if it requires much effort.”**

**“The library! I know where the nearest one is! I shall go there now and find out all I can about kelvins!” Kush exclaimed.**

**He ran out of the tavern as fast as he could, almost colliding with a wench carrying a tray of drinks.**

**Malakiah watched him run off with some relief. Now they could talk without Kush’s distracting presence.**

**“It is fortunate you knew what race he is. He has been asking everyone around him if they have seen others of his kind or if they know what race he is. Now he knows he will not be a bother to us for a while.”**

**Laughing, Lepol replied, “The truth to be told, I sent him on a fool’s errand.”**

**“What mean you?”**

**“There is no such thing as the ‘kelvin’ race! I made up the term from ‘Cut off Elf.’ See how he has run off? He shall now waste his time on nothing!” He laughed again.**

**Malakiah felt cold going down his back and heat rising to his head; he did not laugh with Lepol. He stared at his companion, experiencing first shock, then outrage, and finally revulsion. Although Kush could be annoying, he did sympathize with his plight. However, instead of being sympathetic, Lepol had played a trick upon Kush and now laughed about having done so. For the first time since dealing with Iland or Drakos, Malakiah was tempted to challenge someone to a duel.**

**“I find not how you tricked him amusing at all, Lepol. Put yourself in his place. Imagine if you knew not who you were and being separated from others of your kind!”**

**“Why? He is just a freak, a mixture between races! Why concern yourself with him? You and I have dealt with dwarves, gnomes, and elves in our kingdoms. You know how vexing they can be, and we have to treat them as equals. They are bad enough. But imagine if they start marrying each other, creating mongrels such as him? Should we have to regard them as equals too? The next thing is we would be treating goblins, ogres, and trolls as such.”**

**Malakiah realized he was seeing the true Lepol and was repulsed. He now remembered how he and Lepol had bullied Alcham whenever Lepol had visited Castle Graystone. Malakiah may have been cruel. Lepol, however, had had a sadistic streak to his teasing—such as throwing Alcham’s favorite toys into the fire and then giving the burnt remains back to him. He abruptly concluded Lepol, with his cruel, malicious nature, would be ill-suited to go with him on his quest.**

**He tried to muster control over his emotions—he recalled how he had almost overreacted in the marketplace just days ago. When he felt calmer, he replied, “That was not the point of my objection. He still has feelings and shall be greatly hurt when he finds out what you have told him is a lie!”**

**“What is he to you or me? You and I are noble-born; he is not our race and a commoner at that!” Lepol scoffed. “It is our privilege to make sport of such.”**

**Now fighting the urge to hurl the contents of his glass in other’s face, Malakiah responded, “Enough of this, Lepol! I had desired to meet with you because I had thought to have you come along with me on my quest. Instead, I have weighed you and found you most lacking. You may be a proficient fighter and scholar and well thought of at the Academy. But I find you are cruel and have little compassion for those who are not such as you. When I am on my quest, I need someone who will not look down on everyone around him. Yes, we are both marquises, but, even as such, we have to have regard for all the subjects in our duchies, not just the ones of noble birth. In seeing you, I observe what I was many years ago and now understand why my father sent me here. You, Sirrah, need to learn this same lesson. If I had the authority, I would have you work in one of the monasteries or the ministries of the temple—feeding the poor, tending to the sick, or giving hope to those who need it—desiring that such would temper your attitude. Instead, I shall pray for you and hope Adonai changes your stony heart into one of flesh.”**

**Lepol tried to object, but Malakiah had risen from his seat and held out his hand to silence him. “Enough! I am too angry with you to speak any more. I am this close to challenging you to a duel for your careless disregard for someone else’s feelings! That ‘kelvin,’ as you have just called him, may be a freak to you, but I owe him for helping me in the marketplace. I should leave you now before I attempt something I may regret later.”**

**Lepol replied indifferently, “No, my fellow marquis, I will depart from you. I will leave you in this dank tavern with these commoners since you love them so much. I will go elsewhere where I know I will be appreciated. And, as for not choosing me to accompany you on your quest, I fear that choice shall prove to be your misfortune. I would have had much to offer you. Yet, knowing you as I know you now, I fear I would have no desire to go with you despite any petitions you might make!” He stood and glared back. “Believe me, my father and your father will hear about this meeting.”**

**He now walked off without a backward look at Malakiah.**

**Malakiah finished off his drink, which now tasted bitter to him. He debated what to do next—stay and eat or return to the Fortress. Fortunately for him, Deiniol came in and joined him so the rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough as they discussed their favorite topic—the writings of Niccolo Bernadi. Still, Malakiah was troubled about his interview with Lepol and wondered now how his upcoming ones with the other yet-to-be interviewed squires to be his quest companion would fare.**

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***First day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**Following her ordeal, Zeela remained in her room under the care of Ona, her elderly former nursemaid. There she lay, dealing with the injuries inflicted upon her body and mind by her captors. She could hardly sleep, eat, or bear the touch of any other than her mother or Ona. And, when she slept, nightmares of her violations plagued her. Falamina despaired her daughter would ever be herself again.**

**Saklish was unable to assist. The sight of him or even one of the male healers caused Zeela to scream in terror. It fell to Falamina and Ona to administer their healing draughts and try to calm the girl’s tormented mind. They sat for hours with her, telling her stories and singing.**

**Finally, after several weeks, Zeela seemed to have calmed. She could take food, sleep untroubled, and leave her room without becoming terrified. Once again, her father could see and hold her, which pleased him greatly. Her parents rejoiced, hoping her recovery had begun.**

**They never questioned her request one day to walk upon the battlements of the stronghold’s walls. She had often strolled there before as she enjoyed the view the walls provided of the caravan route and the land below. She, her mother, and her nursemaid planned to go there after the evening meal as the sun was setting and the day cooled.**

**Saklish was devastated later when Falamina came running into his study, crying. She informed him Zeela had broken away from her and leaped from the battlements to her death on the rocks below. He set his head upon his desk and wept also.**

**The following sunset, he consigned yet another of his children to a funeral pyre. The memories of the last two for his sons were still most painfully fresh. They were for Falamina as well. That evening she insisted again her husband avoid further provoking the wrath of Rash Gul or any other warlord of Rama. And she argued bitterly her husband must turn out the foreigners recovering within their house as they had brought these misfortunes upon them.**

**Saklish could only deny her demands. He must, he said, continue to oppose the vile warlords who had brought such despair to their land. As to the foreigners, Santos and Florian, still recovering from their wounds, to turn them out could spell their deaths. And in any case, the customs of their lands forbade such an action. He told his wife so. His continued denial of her requests further fueled her fears for their family’s lives.**

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***Fifth day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**“Squire Malakiah,” asked Sir Benarian, “know you why you have been summoned today before this session of the Knights Council?”**

**“Verily so, Sir Benarian,” answered Malakiah, looking back at him, Sir Heddrick, and others. They were currently in the duke’s office. “His Grace the Duke, my sponsor, has previously informed me I shall be examined here today regarding my fitness for the quest which the Council has debated entrusting upon me.” He stood up straighter. “It is my firm desire I meet the Council’s expectation.”**

**Sir Benarian smiled. “Excellent, Squire. Now, pray to repeat what His Grace has told you.”**

**“That I shall journey to the city of Ilohtar in the Rama region of Verritan. The purpose of such a journey is to take to Lord Alderick, brother of His Grace, and Sir Santos, nephew of His Grace, jewels to pay the ransom of two kidnapped women, one being Vesta, the daughter of Alderick, and the niece of His Grace. And, after having achieved such, to assist Alderick and Santos in any way necessary to convey them and the two women safely back to Suena.”**

**“Well summarized, Squire. Now, I understand you know Sir Santos well?”**

**“Verily, Sir Benarian. I have been acquainted with Santos since my first day’s arrival in Suena four years ago. I was also his companion on his quest which took us to the Nyxein Empire. Accordingly, we traveled together for several months.”**

**“Know you also Lord Alderick? And His Grace’s niece, the Lady Vesta? And her current companion who is also a captive?”**

**“I have met Lord Alderick once. And the Lady Vesta and her friend Alleia are quite well-known to me.”**

**“Squire Malakiah, this journey shall require extensive traveling. Are you experienced in such?”**

**“Sir Benarian, my accompanying Santos on his quest has left me quite seasoned. With him I traveled by horseback, ocean-going ships, barges up and down rivers, and caravans. The possibility of travel deters me not!”**

**“This journey also bears the distinct threat of danger,” Sir Benarian warned, giving Malakiah a fixed look. “Are you prepared to deal with such possibilities? Have you, lad, perchance been *bloodied* in battle?”**

**Malakiah grimaced; he was unsure how he should answer the man. Finally, he said, “Verily, in Nyxein, during Santos’ quest, I have fought in mortal combat. There I killed two men—one with my sword and one I strangled.” He paused, then added, “And I regret I had to kill them still.”**

**“Why, Squire? Often, to perform our duty, we knights must slay our enemies. Else it would be we who shall fall and they live on to work further evil.”**

**“Verily. In the first case, I had no choice; my foe would have readily slain me. In the second, though, I could have spared my enemy. I sought to, but failed.”**

**“Squire Malakiah,” spoke up the duke, “such mercy speaks well of you. It is good, in its place. But, should the need arise, should say goblins threaten those whom you are sworn to protect, would you shy from cutting down any foes before you?”**

**“Never, Your Grace; I would not shun my duty. I would without hesitating slay those who would harm innocents and those unable to protect themselves.”**

**Sir Benarian now resumed. “Are you familiar with the land of Rama? Its people, customs, and languages?”**

**“No, Sir Benarian; I only know what I have learned of such in the Academy.”**

**“We shall then assign you an instructor—one to teach you the main language. And, to provide you as much instruction as possible, he shall accompany you as long as possible. To the monastery should be feasible.”**

**“Your pardon, Sir Benarian. Which monastery might it be you have just spoken of?”**

**“The Monastery of the Mystic Yudeas. In the northern part of Rama on the caravan route just south of the Gran Chitas. Verily, it shall be your first stop when you reach the region of Rama. Because, Squire, you shall ... ”**

**“Sir Benarian, pray permit me to inform the squire of that information,” interrupted another knight at the table. He was Sir Bellisan, in charge of the Council’s Defense Committee. He now addressed Malakiah.**

**“Squire Malakiah, also accompanying you to Rama—at least as far as the monastery—shall be Sir Robart Vilar of the Bronze Order. He shall take with him Randius Norman and Jonir Haillez, two soon-to-be knight candidates who will also be undertaking their quests. The monastery's head, the venerable Abbot Tomasarine, has requested an expert in defensive fortifications to ensure his monastery may withstand future attacks. Sir Robart is such an expert; he shall travel with you; Randius and Jonir shall serve as his assistants. Their mission shall not be part of your quest, though. Those three will merely be your traveling companions. And, certainly, why not? The four of you must both travel to Rama. Why should you not journey together in fellowship and security?”**

**“Understood, Sir Bellisan,” responded Malakiah. Hopefully, these additional people would not be a problem. He knew Randius and Jonir well—he had even just seen them outside the duke’s office. Presumedly they were next to be interviewed for their quest assignments. Sir Robart, however, was unknown to Malakiah.**

**The duke spoke next. “Have we any further questions to put to Squire Malakiah to determine his suitability? If so, pray present them now.”**

**Several more were asked. Either Malakiah or the duke answered them. After the final one was submitted, Malakiah was asked to step out into the hall while the Council debated its decision. Several minutes later, he was called back in. He was told by the duke that, by a large margin, Malakiah had been chosen for the quest.**

**He was thrilled. Finally, he had his quest. *And it would be one to aid Santos and free Vesta and Alleia!* Verily, he was amazed at how such a coincidence had worked out.**

**With his consideration by the Council completed, the members now dismissed Malakiah. They thanked him for his time and he prudently thanked them for theirs.**

**As he stepped out into the hall again, the duke followed after him.**

**“Squire,” he said, “I would have a few words with you.”**

**“Yes, Your Grace?” asked Malakiah, a tad apprehensively. *Had he said something amiss earlier? Did the duke now seek to criticize him?***

**“Have you selected your quest companion yet?”**

**That simple question eased his concern. “No, Your Grace. I have had some trouble selecting a suitable one.”**

**“At least Santos had no trouble there—he was able to find an excellent one most quickly.”**

**“Thank you for your kind words, Your Grace. I shall continue reviewing choices.”**

**“Verily, then, lad; pray resume such. I eagerly await to see whom you will select. I am sure he will prove most suitable. We shall meet again on the thirteenth; pray have your choice to present to me by then.”**

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***Eleventh day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**The last week had been busy for Malakiah. First, he had had to prepare for his upcoming quest.** **Daily, many experts had lectured him extensively on the region of Rama, its cities, its peoples, their customs, and their history.**

**Second, he, Randius, Jonir, Vidar, and others, had undergone a grand ceremony in the Perencian Order of Knights Building. There, they and five others had been formally invested as knight candidates. Malakiah, Randius, and Jonir were the only ones in the Bronze Order. Vidar and one other were in the Silver Order. This transition meant Malakiah could have moved from the Squires Quarters to those designated for the knight candidates, but he decided, as he would shortly be leaving on his quest, just to retain his current room.**

**And, whenever he had had free time, he had interviewed squires to be his quest companion.**

**He had been able to eliminate immediately two as unsuitable: Gurth and Astonis. The first was still too inexperienced for his taste; the second was infected by the same attitude Lepol had had. Two others initially on his list, Hugo and Parthus, had agreed to accompany other knight candidates. Lynus, though he said he had been grateful for Malakiah considering him, had repeatedly apologized he could not go with him or any other candidate on a quest because of the directives of his sponsor. Malakiah had felt sorry for him, because he could tell Lynus had truly wanted to go.**

**Malakiah’s most recent interview with the squire named Dregorian had been very brief. As soon as Malakiah had begun, Dregorian had asked him bluntly if he was considering him as his quest companion. When Malakiah had answered yes, Dregorian had replied he had had no interest in joining him on such and had thanked him for the consideration.**

**Although the other had been coolly courteous, Malakiah had felt as if he had been slapped in the face. And because Malakiah had seen Dregorian frequently associating with Lepol, Malakiah suspected he knew the reason for Dregorian’s terse refusal.**

**Now, Malakiah was in a quandary—he had gone through his list of appropriate squires without finding anyone suitable. And he was to meet the duke again in two days!**

**Seeing he had a free afternoon and the day was hot and sunny, Malakiah decided to go to the Bathhouse of Suena. Once there, he had gone to the dressing room in the General Side, removed his uniform, showered, changed into the required loincloth, and headed towards the Cold Pool. Malakiah missed having Santos with him. In hindsight, he realized, he could have invited one or all of the cousins, Deiniol, or one or all of his three associates. But, as he knew their schedules were as hectic as his, his attempts to include them would most likely have been futile.**

**Unfortunately, since today was unbearably hot, many others had had the same idea. The Cold Pool was full.**

**Annoyed at the crowded conditions, Malakiah went to the Warm Pool. It was almost as crowded. He moved to the Hot Pool. It was almost too hot but slightly less crowded. The temperature felt good to his muscles—sore not from exercise—but from leaning over a desk all morning.**

**Leaning back, Malakiah closed his eyes, trying to imagine himself alone in this pool. Then, from somewhere, a mischievous thought sprite brought him the almost forbidden memories of sharing that private pool with the Quicksilver knights Delateri and Hatamari—something he and Santos had done in a bathhouse in Dalacour during Santos’ quest. Those two lovely ladies had been most pleasant associates and it had been two years since he had last seen them. He wondered what they were doing now. His thoughts strayed to what Santos might be doing in Rama and how poor Vesta might be suffering. Then suddenly, instead of having the unclad, voluptuous, dark-haired Delateri beside him, he thought how delightful it would be to share this pool privately with the blond-haired Vesta. He started imagining her in a wet tunic sitting behind him, rubbing his shoulders. Suddenly he felt her hands, small and strong ones. In fact, so strong they caused him to cringe.**

**“Are you enjoying the water, Sir Knight?” a familiar voice asked.**

**Malakiah’s pleasant reverie of the lovely and desirable Vesta was shattered by his seeing the grinning face of Kush.**

**“Little One! What are you up to?” he exclaimed.**

**“Merely trying to rub your shoulders—you look so tense!”**

**“My thanks, but you are not good at it!” Malakiah replied; he now felt repulsed. He looked about; other bathers were eying them both curiously. At least, there was no one present whom Malakiah recognized.**

**“My apologies, but I never tried it before. I have women seen massage men. I assume, then, such would be more to your liking. But this bathhouse does not allow women in here to rub men’s backs. Why is that?”**

**“Such is hard to explain, Kush,” he said, glaring at the small humanoid as he sat, crossed-legged, on the edge of the pool. He had hoped Kush would not have known about this retreat of his. *But, since he had found him in his favorite taverns and his quarters at the Fortress, why would he not know about the baths too?***

**Kush asked, eying the pool warily, “Are you sure it is safe to place yourself in hot water?”**

**“It is perfectly safe.”**

**“But why immerse yourself?”**

**“It cleans me and it relaxes me.”**

**“Verily? Every time I see you, you seem tense and angry.”**

**Malakiah replied, “It helps. And I am only tense because you have this annoying habit of showing up unexpectedly and at inopportune times.”**

**“I mean not to, but you know the reason why I keep showing up.”**

**“Little One, now is not the time to talk about such.”**

**Malakiah moved from the Hot Pool to the Cold Pool room.**

**Kush followed him. Malakiah noticed the other bathers staring at the little being accompanying him. He trusted they simply thought the other was some unusual servant or retainer.**

**When Malakiah had dipped himself into an open spot in the Cold Pool, Kush sat down on the pool’s edge and asked, “When is it a good time? You never want to talk about it!”**

**“Little One, it is complicated.”**

**“Only because you are making it so! I know you have been meeting with others, asking them to join you on your quest. And you have not found anyone to your liking. I know you need my help. And I have been saying so to you for weeks.” He paused. “Where will your quest be taking you to, Sir Knight? Know you yet?”**

**Malakiah replied, “To the region of Rama—such lies south of the Gran Chitas in the Great Red Desert.”**

**And, as soon as he had said it, Malakiah realized his mistake.**

**“The desert!” Kush exclaimed. “My dream showed us both in the desert! Now I know your quest is where you will need my help! Why then are you so reluctant to select me to go with you? I am most willing to accompany you!”**

**When Malakiah did not respond, Kush continued.**

**“Verily, I enjoy not annoying you. I am not some crazy person you see talking to himself on the streets. I have a life of my own, too. If it were not for that dream where I saw us both on this journey to some desert, I would not even be bothering you! Why will you not even consider me?”**

**Trying to stop this conversation, Malakiah asked, “I have not seen you since that evening in The Lions’ Den. Where have you been?”**

**“I am glad you asked. I have been researching kelvins. Your friend struck the mark—it is hard to find anything about them in the many libraries in this city.”**

**Malakiah realized he needed to tell him about Lepol’s cruel deception. He began, “Little One, he is not a friend.”**

**“He has truly helped me. I know now what race I am. I have a name for it. My stars, you know how exciting that is? I guess you would not because you know what race you are,” Kush replied, practically beaming.**

**Malakiah’s words now lodged in his throat. He realized he just could not take that excitement away from Kush. Asking Adonai to forgive him, Malakiah let the matter go as Kush babbled on.**

**Finally, when he could no longer bear the other’s chatter, Malakiah lifted himself out of the pool and walked over to the dressing room. He had hoped Kush would not follow him there, but this kelvin, continuing to talk, evidently felt no embarrassment about watching the youth dress.**

**After dressing, Malakiah went to the bar. There Maxem the bartender was operating his usual station. Seeing him, Kush stopped his narrative and said, “Well met, Maxem!”**

**Smiling, the bartender replied, “Greetings, Kush! Glad to see you are safe after hearing about the trouble in the Guild. How are you faring?”**

**The smile fading slightly, Kush responded, “I am holding up. I cannot say the same about the Guild—it is still in chaos. Therefore, I want not to be there at present.”**

**“I understand.” Seeing Malakiah, Maxem added, “Good afternoon, Malakiah.” Then he noted the different uniform. “I mean, *Candidate* Malakiah! The usual?”**

**Malakiah nodded and waited as Maxem poured him a mug of cider. Then the man whispered to the other, “Kush, I am sorry to hear about Tagan. Be wary! Turok has eyes even here. Are you watching out?”**

**“More or less,” Kush answered, rubbing moisture from his eyes.**

**Malakiah recalled Kush had once mentioned a Tagan had befriended him and taught him how to be a thief. Something must have happened to this Tagan, causing Kush to be so upset. Malakiah did not know who Turok was and why Kush needed to be wary of him.**

**“Still, I have no place to sleep for now,” Kush continued. “I truly would like to get out of this town until the unrest in the Guild dies down. Such is why I am trying to convince Malakiah here to take me with him on his quest. But he is as stubborn as an ogre.”**

**“You are? Then I wish you luck there, my friend.” Turning his face to Malakiah, Maxem said, “Verily, you have been assigned your quest? Congratulations! How long has it been since I first met you here with Santos—four years? By the way, have you heard any word from Santos? It has been ages since I have seen him.”**

**Malakiah shook his head. He had received letters from Santos from Bandon, Rion, and Gerencia. His friend’s last one had been from the Monastery of the Mystic Yudeas in northern Verritan, telling Malakiah they were heading further south. “Not a word, recently.” Then he purposefully changed the subject. “I knew not you knew Kush.”**

**“I know practically everyone in the city, and I have known little Kush here for five years now. Let me assure you, he may be a thief, but he is an honorable one—if there is such a thing,” he said, chuckling at his joke.**

**“Now, Sir Knight, will you explain to me why you will not let me accompany you on your quest?” Kush pushed.**

**Malakiah slowly sipped at his cider; he cared not for being put on the spot as Kush had just done. “Little One, the simple answer is you are not a fighter. Verily, I have noted your skills as a thief; certainly, you were able to hold your own against the cousins and me when we chased you out of our quarters. But I need a strong fighter to depend on for my quest.”**

**Kush snapped back, “Not strong enough? Let us see you take me now! I wager if you and I fought, I could defeat you! Maybe not every time, but I would be able to best you!”**

**Maxem ordered, “Kush, you know the rules. No fighting allowed in here! If you must, go and use the wooden swords in the exercise room!”**

**Bringing his staff down with a loud thud, Kush said, “Sorry, Maxem, but he started it! If this great knight thinks he is human enough, I will meet him outside on the street. There he can take me on with his sword and I him with my staff. There I will show him I can hold my own in a fight!”**

**Malakiah replied, “Peace, Kush. I meant no offense. There is another reason, too. Traditionally, knight candidates only take squires with them on their quests. And the last time I checked, you are not in the Knighthood.”**

**“That most observant of you, Sir Knight! Were you taught that in your training?”**

**“That is not true, Malakiah, Kush,” Maxem volunteered. “I know many knight candidates that have had someone other than a squire accompanying them on their quests. Some had cadets, guides, mercenaries, ordinary soldiers, or even a dwarf or gnome. All you need is the permission of the grandmaster. As he is your sponsor, Malakiah, obtaining such permission should be no trouble for you.”**

**Malakiah glared at Maxem; he had known of this possibility but had not wanted to reveal it to Kush.**

**“So what is your excuse now, Almighty Knight? I can fight. You have seen my abilities in action! I am willing to join you on your quest! You can get around that tradition of yours. What is your problem now? Is it you still doubt my abilities? Or are you one of these typical knights who act nice, but look down on everyone else not similar to them? Is it because I am a thief? Maybe it is because I am a *freak* such as your friend said? I thought you were made of sterner stuff than that!” Kush spat out.**

**Malakiah finished off the contents of his mug and slammed it down on the counter; the ceramic vessel shattered. He considered making many replies but discounted them all. He tossed a silver coin on the counter. Then he stormed out of the room without a word to Kush. After all the frustrations he had had for the last couple of weeks, he refused to be lectured to by this little humanoid.**

**Ignoring Kush’s calls to come back, Malakiah elbowed his way out of the building; its entranceway was crowded with people coming and going. He walked down the street. He hoped he had lost Kush, but, as he thought he could hear him yelling for him, he kept pressing on.**

**Malakiah had maneuvered himself out of a crowd when some rough-looking bearded fellow veered into him, bumped him, and then walked past.**

**Malakiah instinctively checked his side and noticed his coin purse had been taken; he turned around. He still spied the head of the man that had bumped him. Malakiah yelled, “Stop, thief!”**

**The bearded man glanced back. Then he faced ahead and ran as fast as he could. Despite knowing pursuing the man was not the smartest thing to do, Malakiah followed, hoping his training could help him catch him.**

**The man skirted a crowd and ran down a side street. Malakiah easily followed and began gaining on him. The man ran around a horse-drawn cart and turned into a narrow alleyway. Malakiah evaded the cart and pursued the man, yelling for him to stop. The man then turned into another alley, and Malakiah followed him, dodging garbage and boxes before something tripped him, and Malakiah tumbled to the cobblestones.**

**Stunned, Malakiah lay face down. His body hurt all over. Carefully, he tried to turn himself on his side and saw a crossbow pointed at him. Next he saw the bearded man he had been chasing standing next to a bald man behind the crossbowman.**

**“Looky what we got here, Ladro. A rich academy boy! Wearing a nice new uniform!” the man with the crossbow leered, his smile showing black teeth. The man was painfully thin and had thin strands of hair across his head and a raggy, unkempt beard.**

**“Nice fishing, Tolv; not only have we got his coin purse—we can get those boots, that sword, and that uniform too,” the bald man grinned. His head was covered with a red, ring-shaped rash. In his hand, he carried a rusted sword.**

**Tolv nodded. “I reckon he will not give such up too easy, Zlod. Just sink the arrow into his belly and get it over with.”**

**Malakiah raised his hands to show he would not attempt anything rash; still, he could not believe what had occurred. In his haste to get away from Kush, he had not secured his coin purse, making it easier for Tolv to steal it. Then, instead of letting the thief simply keep his prize, he had foolishly chased the man into this hole, allowing him to get the better of him. Now, he was at these ruffians’ mercy. He found it humiliating he, a trained fighter, could have been brought down by lowly thieves.**

**To stall as he tried to figure out a way out of this predicament, he said, "Pray shoot not. You may take anything you want!"**

**Zlod smiled, though the look appeared more of a grimace. "Verily, we will, but we also have to end this meeting quickly—just in case the Watch should stick its nose in!" He pointed the crossbow at Malakiah's midsection.**

**Tensing his body to twist, hoping to evade the thrust of the quarrel, Malakiah cursed his stupidity as he also prepared to scream for help.**

**Suddenly, he heard Kush yell, "Cease that, you diseased, filthy maggots!" Although his voice sounded akin to a little boy's, it carried enough authority to stop Zlod.**

**Looking up, Zlod said, "This be no concern of yours, whelp!"**

**"I contend it might, because I am a member of the Guild. Are you?" Kush countered.**

**Zlod slightly paused and then returned, "No, we are not! The Guild, however, has no authority over us, and we defy you! So leave us!"**

**"I thought not, since I fail to recognize you all. I saw that pull of yours, Tolv. It was not bad, but why failed you to have one of your partners with you? Once Tolv took this man's coin purse, he could have handed it to you, Ladro, or you, Zlod. Then, when this man went after you, Tolv, you would have been empty-handed when he confronted you. He would have had to apologize for accusing you and go on looking for the supposed genuine thief while you all would have gotten away. Instead, you kept the coin purse. Very poorly done! A novice pickpocket would have known better."**

**Malakiah could see the confusion on the faces of his attackers as they stared at Kush. Malakiah readied himself to swing his legs at Zlod’s.**

**"Then again, I perceive you had the wits to design an ambush, just in case Tolv was chased. It permits you to subdue our pursuer as you see fit. And, once so hindered, you would be able to take all his valuables. Not too bad. But what, novices, if your pursuer had brought the Watch along with him? Then you all would be forced to flee, hoping Tolv could escape his pursuers by himself! Otherwise, an adequate job, men. Just not up to the Guild’s standards."**

**"Whatta we care, freak? We are not of the Guild! Now, go boggle yourself!" Zlod spat back.**

**"But I am. I will have you know, most incompetent thieves, by an informal agreement, the Guild sanctions no pulls by the Bathhouse. It is bad for the city's business and the Guild. You, amateurs, violated that agreement. You had best cease your activities. Otherwise, either the Watch or the Guild will catch you. You had better hope the Watch finds you—the Guild will be less merciful."**

**"And you truly think you have any chance of stopping us?" Zlod countered.**

**"Not much. I just have this staff of mine which I will place against the wall. Then I have these two stones in my one hand which I cannot hurl at you from this distance before you shoot me with your crossbow. And then I have this piece of cloth in my other hand so there is no way I can attempt to stop you from killing that man and taking all his valuables."**

**Malakiah felt defeated as he watched the three thieves grin. Tensing, he prepared to roll himself toward his attackers. The eager grins suddenly faltered when Kush added, with a sinister tone, "Or can I?"**

**A stone struck Zlod upon his forehead. The man fell forward, his crossbow’s bolt shooting out and striking the wall. Another stone struck Ladro’s hand, making him drop his sword. He shrieked in pain.**

**As Malakiah tried to get to his feet, Kush ran forward and threw his sling in the face of Tolv, blinding him.**

**"Meet my sling!" the little one said.**

**Swinging with all his might, Kush then struck Tolv in the side of his head with his staff. "And now meet my staff!"**

**As Tolv tottered, Kush spun around and brought the staff against the jaw of Ladro, knocking him backward and then jamming his staff back into the stomach of Tolv.**

**As Tolv doubled over, Kush yelled, "Excuse me!" and turned around, pivoting the staff down hard on Tolv’s head, causing him to collapse and drop Malakiah's coin purse. Kush then struck Ladro hard on the head.**

**Glancing down, Kush said, pointing at Zlod, "I shall thank you not to call me ‘freak.’” Then he added, “This lesson is brought to you, courtesy of the Guild. Be thankful I delivered it; any representative from them may not be as merciful as me. Remember that!"**

**The small being now smiled impishly up at Malakiah, "Now, believe you me when I say I am worthy of accompanying you on your quest? Who was the one that got taken down by three thugs—me, the weak kelvin, or you, the mighty, trained knight? And who defeated them—you or me?”**

**Malakiah thought of a few sarcastic comments he could have made, but he had to admit he had been impressed by what he had seen.**

**"My apologies, Kush. You have truly demonstrated to me you are a good fighter and could be an important asset on my quest."**

**Dancing in place, Kush cried out, happily, "My stars! He has consented to let me come!"**

**Malakiah then stated, "I will need to get permission from the grandmaster to take you, though; that may take some effort. And, further, you need to perform certain tasks for me before I shall consent to let you accompany me."**

**“I know, but we have some tasks I must perform here,” Kush said, retrieving Malakiah’s coin purse and tossing it to him. He then picked up his sling and his stones and put them away. Moving over to the body of Zlod, Kush roughly kicked him over and pulled out his knife. Malakiah thought Kush would slit his throat, but he instead picked up Zlod’s crossbow and sliced the string.**

**Kush explained, “I am disabling his crossbow so this guttersnipe will not use it to rob another—at least until he can afford a bower to fix it.” Tossing the crossbow aside, he next picked up Ladro’s rusty sword. “Know you a way of breaking a sword?”**

**“Not one here. We can go to a smith,” Malakiah answered.**

**“No time; I will toss it somewhere. When these vermin wake up, they will crawl into the shadows to tend to their wounds. Let us go.”**

**“You are just going to leave them here?” Malakiah asked.**

**“How think you would have fared in their hands, Sir Knight? They would have either killed you or left you mortally wounded after they had stripped you of all your valuables. We are being nicer to them than they would have been to you.”**

**Malakiah had to agree.**

**“Compassion is good, Sir Knight, but save it for those who deserve it. These scums deserve not ours.”**

**Malakiah nodded. “My father once advised me of the same.”**

**“A wise man, he is. Let us go before someone sees us and start asking us annoying questions.”**

**They quickly moved down the alley, pausing so Kush could drop the rusty sword in a drainage hole. They moved out into the street and headed to the Fortress. Around them, the people went about their business, unaware of what had just happened in the nearby alley.**

**Malakiah slowed down so Kush would not have to run to keep up with him; then he remembered an idea he had had some weeks ago and had since forgotten.**

**“If I have heard correctly from your conversation with Maxem, Little One, you need a safe place to stay.”**

**“Yes, I have a place at the Guild, but there is a power struggle going on. Consequently, it is not safe for me there now.”**

**“What guild is that, Little One?”**

**“The thief guild.”**

**“I knew not there was one in Suena.”**

**“Why should you? And, Sir Knight, you are better off not knowing anything about it!”**

**Malakiah had many other questions, but the open streets were not the place for them, so he decided to change the subject. “I think I can manage to find lodgings for you at the Fortress, but you may have to perform manual labor to earn your keep if you stay there for more than a couple of days. Is this acceptable for you?”**

**“Verily, as long as it is not cleaning the stables. Such duty I would hate!”**

**“My little friend, all hate such a duty! I can make no guarantees you will not be asked to attend to such. You will also have to meet with Warden Haydian. To him, you must apologize for that note that you left him. You made him very angry.”**

**“I was not trying to be mean! I cannot help it if the security to his Fortress is lacking!” Kush protested.**

**“You miss the mark. You must apologize to him and act contrite; then I will plead your plight to him. After he lectures you, he will most likely let you stay, provided you behave yourself and make no more comments about his security being lacking. You will also apologize to some of my friends, especially Scottius, for hurting him as you managed to when you escaped from us. I would recommend giving him some gifts too. He is most partial to loaves of bread made from zucchini, pumpkin, and the like.”**

**They exited the city, taking the road up to the Fortress. When they arrived at the gatehouse, Malakiah talked to the guards, telling them he was taking Kush inside to see the warden.**

**Haydian cast a disproving eye at Malakiah, evidently still vexed with him for not reporting the intruder to the Fortress many weeks ago. He glared further when he saw the small person with him. He had quickly surmised who the other must be.**

**“Have you caught the intruder here again then, Candidate? What is his story?”**

**Malakiah went straight to the crux of the matter, explaining Kush’s plight, that he was the one that had left the note, that he needed a place to stay, and that he has specific unique abilities. As he talked, Malakiah had hoped he would see a softening on the expression of the rock-hard features of the warden, but he did not.**

**When Malakiah was done, Malakiah motioned Kush forward.**

**Instead of being intimidated, Kush bowed gracefully to Haydian and said, “My apologies for the note, Sir Warden, but I only acted out of my concern for my friend Malakiah and his companions. I wanted you to be aware if I could slip into here and leave you such a note, some spy or enemy could accomplish the same for sinister ends. I figured you, being in charge, would like to know this. I know I would.”**

**Shocked by Kush’s audacity, Malakiah braced for the warden’s stormy reprimand. Haydian, however, just grunted. Casting a side glance at Malakiah, he said, “Kush, you will be allowed to stay because Candidate Malakiah has vouched for you. Be advised, though, you must abide by our rules. If you step out of line, not only will I take it out on your hide, but the Candidate’s as well. Understand me, ‘short drink?’”**

**Facing the full force of the man’s presence, Kush nodded.**

**“Excellent. Starting now, you may sleep in the stables—just take any suitable area. As for meals, you will report to the kitchen for them with the rest of the Fortress staff. And, to merit your place to sleep and your meals, we will expect you to work. I know not what, but various jobs around here; Assistant Warden Francerian will inform you what tasks they shall be. But, before you start any of them, I have one job which I want you to undertake for me this very evening and I will brook no complaints from you about how long it will take. Understand me?”**

**Kush nodded again.**

**“You must show me how you managed to sneak into this Fortress. I want you to point out any weaknesses you have seen. Candidate Malakiah and I will follow you and learn them!”**

**His eyes brightening up, Kush said, “Certainly! I can easily show you them.”**

**“Good!” he thundered. “Candidate Malakiah, you may take ‘short drink’ here over to the dining hall—it is almost that time. You and he may take your dinner. Then, after the evening temple service, both of you report back here. Your little friend shall lead us all on an examination of this Fortress’ security. Depending on what he has to show us, we may find we have a long night ahead of us.”**

**Haydian’s prediction proved incorrect. Kush quickly revealed how he had breached the Fortress’ security and then repeatedly pointed out to the warden and Malakiah one deficiency in security after another as they walked along the Fortress’ walls. Haydian shook his bald head repeatedly as the little one revealed defects the warden had never even considered before.**

**When they were done with their walk, Haydian looked satisfied and dismissed them. Because of the late hour, Malakiah placed Kush in an empty bed in his room, figuring his little friend could wait and prepare himself a place in the stables later.**

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***Twelfth day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**That next morning, Malakiah awoke to Scottius roaring, “Why is it I find you in here again, pipsqueak?”**

**“My stars, it is true ogres wake up grumpy in the morning!”**

**Malakiah saw Kush running behind his bed as a half-dressed Scottius charged into the room, his hands flexing as if eager to strangle Kush.**

**Malakiah ordered, “Hold, Scottius! He is under my protection!”**

**Scowling, Scottius said dangerously, “And why is that, Mouse?”**

**“It is a long story, but what has he been into?”**

**“When I woke up, I found him in my room, going through my stuff,” Scottius accused.**

**When Malakiah looked back at Kush, Kush responded, “Yes, Sir Knight, while it is true I was in his room, I was not going through his stuff. I had gone to the marketplace and obtained some freshly-baked breads. I meant not to wake him up; instead, I put it beside his bed.”**

**Kush now apologized to Scottius. “I am sorry for coming into your room, Sir Ogre, but I wanted to make amends to you for earlier when I struck you in your ‘vital spot.’ Since I have heard you like breads and I knew not whether you preferred pumpkin, zucchini, or what, I got you an assortment. Just let me know which one you fancy and I will get you some more of it in the days to come.”**

**The angry look in the massive squire’s face swiftly passed away and was replaced by a hungry one. “Fresh bread? Zucchini bread? I will have to see about this. Thanks. But stay out of my room in the future, you little toadstool!”**

**Scottius left the room.**

**“You went into town to obtain that bread? How passed you by the guards?” Malakiah asked, almost dreading the answer.**

**“I simply avoided them. It is quicker than explaining my intent.”**

**Rubbing his head as he felt a headache coming on, Malakiah said, “I appreciate the gesture, Kush, but in future, please leave not the Fortress without letting me know first.”**

**“I normally would have, but I wished not to wake you up.”**

**“Most considerate of you,” Malakiah asked, realizing today promised to be a long day and he had not even left his room yet.**

**After Malakiah dressed, he took Kush over to the dining hall. They had to endure more curious stares and a few snide comments from other candidates just as they had had to the night before. Luckily, Kush was too hungrily devouring any food he could reach to respond to their jibes.**

**After breakfast, they headed for the stables. Once there, Malakiah left his friend behind, telling Kush he had to attend another ceremony in the chapel. He did not wish to take his little friend there again. Fortunately, neither did Kush want to go with him. He had found last night’s service most boring and had fidgeted the entire time.**

**When Malakiah returned, he found Kush had created for himself a bunk on a shelf among bales of hay he could easily pull himself up on.**

**Malakiah decided now was an excellent opportunity to talk.**

**“Little One, before I petition the grandmaster for permission for you to become my quest partner, we must speak on some matters.”**

**“Certainly, Sir Knight. Pray speak your mind,” Kush replied, smiling and bouncing upon a pile of hay.**

**“Seriously, I need to know about your situation with the Guild. Are you in trouble? Who is this Turok?” Malakiah pressed.**

**Kush’s smile faded; he stopped his bouncing and appeared hesitant to speak.**

**“Little One, I need not know the intricacies and the nuances of how the Guild is run. I am just worried you are in trouble and need my protection. I just need to know enough of what is going on so I can help you.”**

**Kush looked directly into his eyes. “Sir Knight, I may be in trouble because Turok and his associates are looking for me.”**

**“Why is this?”**

**“It is hard to explain. You must know something about how the Guild is run to understand. When Tagan, my guildmaster, he-he ...” Kush paused as if he was trying to keep his self-control.**

**Smiling gently, Malakiah said soothingly, patting him on the head. “Take your time, Little One. We are in no hurry here. I am truly sorry what happened to Tagan and I can see his passing weighs heavily on you.”**

**Taking a moment to compose himself and wiping his eyes, Kush continued, “As I have told you before, Tagan took me in and, seeing my abilities, trained me to be a thief. When I joined the Guild, he had me swear an oath of loyalty only to him. This is not typical. Usually, when a thief joins the Guild, he swears a primary oath of loyalty to the Guild and then a secondary one to his guildmaster. He chose to have such with most of the young children, orphans, and misfits that joined the Guild. Turok was one of them, too—along with his two associates, Radd and Orten. May a score of lovesick ogresses ravish them all—repeatedly!!**

**“Now Tagan is gone, the oath that binds me to him is ended. Such is why Turok and his followers are looking for me. They want me to swear an oath of loyalty to him such as the others in the Guild have. And I will not swear that! I remain loyal to the Guild and follow its tenets out of respect to Tagan. But I maintain no allegiance to Turok.”**

**“Why is this?”**

**“****Turok is a beast. I have seen him torture feral cats for the fun of it. I have found out through my contacts he was behind the ambush that killed Tagan and some of his allies.” Kush paused to wipe his eyes again. “I still understand not why Turok chose to get rid of Tagan. Tagan had told me he was planning to retire and move away. Yet he had not the money for such. He had been planning some risky monetary gambles to get the money. I advised him not to. That I could steal gems or jewels to help him. But he was determined to handle it in his way.”**

**“Was Turok the next in the line to succeed him when Tagan left?” Malakiah inquired.**

**“No, Olnar was. But I have heard he is dead too. Avegan would be next, but no one has heard from him since Turok took over. Knowing him, he is in hiding. Tagan wanted me to lead, but I had no interest in it.”**

**“It sounds as if Turok knew he was not in line so he took matters into his own hands.”**

**“Yes, but that is what I understand not.  Tagan practically raised** **Turok from a waif. And Turok repays him by betraying him and having him slain such as you would kill a goblin raiding your barn?”**

**“It is hard to understand why people commit such heinous acts,” Malakiah replied. Then a thought sprite whispered to him.  “Little One, with your abilities, you could have easily taken revenge on Turok.  How come you have not?”**

**“Why?  What is the point of that?  It still would not bring Tagan back.  I shall not shed a tear if Turok is killed.  If Turok comes after me, I will defend myself and kill him if I have to. But I have no interest in revenge.”**

**“I am impressed. Many people in your place would have done all in their power to hunt down and kill this Turok. Yet you choose not to. That is commendable.”**

**When Kush did not reply to this, he continued. “I have heard enough. Thank you for telling me this, but I have one more question to ask. Knowing the Fortress officials, they will want you to perform manual labor here. Still, I am going to inform them you would be an excellent person to fetch things from Suena for them—that is, a ‘hunter.’ Many of the instructors and officials here need a savvy person to go into town to find and buy old tomes, scrolls, and items for potions.”**

**“Certainly! I would love such tasks! I know where to find things in this town better than almost anyone!” Kush beamed.**

**“But, would not Turok and his agents be a danger for you? When you go into the city, they may seek to apprehend you.”**

**“They may try to, but they would not! I just have to be more careful. Their looking for me in town would make my efforts more fun!”**

**Hearing such sentiments gave Malakiah a reason to pause. “Little One, in some ways, you are like an adult; in others, you are as innocent as a child. And, in still others, you have this almost reckless side. You either have no sense of fear or have little regard for your safety.”**

**“Let me reassure you, Sir Knight. When I am on my own, I like a challenge—the harder, the better. When I am with you, though, my main concern will be for your protection and safety and to assist you.”**

**“Very well; I am satisfied, Kush. But even with your abilities, I may have you undertake some more training here. Hand-to-hand fighting, wrestling, horseback riding. I will help you with this and may ask the cousins—my friends Jefhian, Hathian, and Scottius—to help.”**

**“You are going to have me wrestle Sir Ogre?” Kush looked almost horrified.**

**“Once Scottius had calmed down, yes. And, I will have you know, in wrestling, he is most formidable and an excellent instructor. I know you are fast and agile on your feet, but you also need to know how to slip away if someone grabs you. The cousins would be good for teaching you that. You are good, but you still have much to learn, as even I have.”**

**“As you will; I will consent to that. But make sure Sir Ogre bathes first! He smells similar to a troll’s armpit!”**

**Chuckling, Malakiah responded, “No promises, but I will try! Finally, when and if you join me, you must swear an oath to obey me since I shall be in command. Once it is over, my oath will no longer be binding to you.”**

**Taking his staff, Kush saluted him in the fashion of a Perencian Knight. “I will obey and serve you to the best of my ability, Sir Knight. I will follow you to the remotest place on Tarn and lay down my life if I need to!”**

**Nodding, Malakiah said, “Very well, Kush; may it please Adonai neither one will be necessary. I must go now into Suena; I have dreary business to attend to. You need to stay here and see if the assistant warden has any work for you.”**

**“Must it be stable work?” Kush moaned, rolling his eyes.**

**“Unfortunately, it may—at first. You sometimes have to shovel a lot of manure to get the job you want.”**

**“That is a very apt way of describing life.”**

**“One we have both learned from experience. Please abide here and work as you are requested. I will summon you when I need you.”**

**“And what will you attempt this day, Sir Knight?”**

**Malakiah groaned. “I venture this morning to the Perencian Order of Knights Building. There I must learn what obstacles—in the form of many forms—I must overleap to gain the permission I shall require to have you as my quest companion. Verily, such a task may be most formidable!”**

**“Would you rather clean out a stable full of manure, Sir Knight?”**

**“Little One, this day I fear we may both be contending with a great deal of such!”**

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***Twelfth day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**Rash Gul believed he had been extraordinarily patient with the golden-haired foreign woman. He had demanded her submittal for almost a year. He knew, had he persisted much harder and applied the lash more frequently, he would have broken her resistance long ago. He had only failed to because, since he had held her, he had spent far too many days and sometimes even months away from her dealing with the activities of rival warlords—and in satisfying the affections of other women who had the good sense to consent to be one of his wives. He reflected, while he could easily remember how many residences he had, he had long since lost count of his wives. *No matter*, he thought. *Their number mattered not—they were only just an endless source of pleasure for him.***

**As he rounded the last bend in the road which zigzagged up to the plateau on which both Ilohtar and his fortress on its rocky outcropping rested, his thoughts returned to the golden-haired woman. *Too long*, he thought, *she has denied my will. Too long, she has refused to become my wife.* This time, when he had her in my hands, he would do whatever it took to force her consent. So resolved, he spurred his horse into a gallop; he headed down the road and then up the winding path to his fortress. His men followed closely behind him. He charged through the gatehouse and into the courtyard. He sprang from his horse and hurriedly entered the harem, not stopping until he was in his visitation room.**

**He clapped his hands together three times. His head eunuch appeared before his eyes as quickly as would any djinni.**

**“Fetch before me my golden-haired prize,” snarled Rash Gul.**

**His minion vanished and returned in seconds with Vesta.**

**Rash Gul stared at her, his hungry eyes appraising her unclad form. She defiantly looked back. His brazen inspections had long since ceased to annoy her.**

**“Woman,” he growled, “I order you to end your gross disobedience! Yield to me and consent to be my wife! I shall not ask you again!”**

**“Then, dreaded one, your words please me greatly. For if you ask me not again, I will no longer have to refuse you. And, if you will no longer be entreating me, perhaps you will release us. Pray oblige me so!”**

**Rash Gul’s face darkened. He backhanded her and then turned to his eunuch and ordered, “Prepare her for lashing—immediately!”**

**As she had been many times before, Vesta was forced to kneel on the floor of the harem’s common room. One eunuch tied a rope to her left wrist, and another tried one to her right wrist. They then stretched her arms out straight to either side. Vesta was commanded to bend forward until her face almost touched the floor. The lasher stood to one side.**

**The other women in the harem—Alleia included—reluctantly gathered around the edges of the room; they knew it was their master’s will they witness all such punishments.**

**Now, Vesta’s ordeal began. Rash Gul ordered the lasher to administer a full thirty-nine blows. Vesta whimpered through the first dozen, but, near the end, as the numbness set in, she let out not a sound.**

**When the lashing had ended, Rash Gul stepped forward. He grasped Vesta by the hair and raised her head up so he could glare into her face.**

**“Have you had enough now, my stubborn, ungrateful one?” he asked. “What more will you compel me to inflict upon you before you consent?”**

**“Most dreaded one,” she answered, “you may beat me, starve me, leave me bound and blindfolded for days. There is just one thing that will always be beyond your power—the ability to possess me!”**

**He released his grasp upon her; her head dropped. Now he glared at the other women. *None of them,* he thought, *had ever defied him so!* Then his eyes landed on the other light-skinned woman in the room. *Who was she—he did not recall her as being here.* Then, suddenly, he remembered her. *She was the companion of the golden-haired one—her friend even.* *And perhaps,* he thought, *her weakness.* *She may now prove most useful to him.***

**“Bring the other fair-skinned one to me,” ordered Rash Gul.**

**“No, pray, no!” cried Vesta. She tried to stand, but Rash Gul backhanded her on the cheek, causing her to crumple to the floor.**

**Two eunuchs brought Alleia to Rash Gul. He glared at her and said, “Now, kneel before your friend. Perhaps I have wasted my time lashing the wrong woman. Maybe I should direct punishment on *you* instead.”**

**The eunuchs forced Alleia down. They removed the ropes from Vesta’s wrists, tied them to Alleia’s, and then stretched out her arms. Alleia knelt, silently awaiting the lashings to begin.**

**“No, dreaded one,” Vesta begged. “Spare my friend. Beat her not!”**

**“Plead not for my sake, Vesta,” Alleia said in the language of Perencia. “Truly, if you can withstand their harsh blows, I shall prevail as well.”**

**“Converse not in your foul tongue, woman,” snarled Rash Gul. “I would have you speak your words so I can know them. What said you?”**

**“I told my friend, most dreaded one, I too can withstand your cruel lashings. She need not fear for my sake.”**

**The warlord shoved Alleia’s head forward so hard her head smacked the floor. He gestured for the lasher to begin. Rash Gul counted out a dozen blows. Then, he asked Vesta, “Shall I inflict even more upon your friend?”**

**Alleia replied before Vesta could. “Verily, truly dreaded one, I felt but twelve! I can endure more—if your puny minion has the strength to deliver them!”**

**Alleia’s bold words gave Rash Gul pause. Lashing the fair-haired one had not broken her will; neither had beating her companion. And their show of defiance was now making him look weak. *He must break this golden-haired one,* he thought. *Perchance he needed a more dire method of persuasion?* He mulled over one to employ. A most cruel thought sprite suddenly delivered an effective one to him. He whispered a command to two of his eunuchs and they left to fulfill it.**

**He turned to Vesta, declaring, “Now, defiant woman, perhaps my next attempt shall compel you to submit to me!”**

**His proposed means of persuasion shortly arrived. It was an iron brazier filled with red hot coals. Thrust into their center was one end of a short, iron rod. The warlord drew the rod from the heat; its tip glowed a dull red. Deliberately he passed the hot end near the faces of Vesta and Alleia.**

**“Woman,” he said to Alleia, “can you not feel the heat? Know you not that applying this rod to your back or your face would surely sear your flesh? What might occur should I hold the heated tip near to your eyes?”**

**“I know, dreaded one,” replied Alleia. All defiance had left her voice.**

**“There are certain places where I could insert this heated poker. Places that would have the direst consequences. I shall so insert this rod should your golden-haired friend not yield to me *now*. My patience has ended!”**

**At a gesture from the warlord, the two eunuchs grabbed Alleia’s arms; she could not move in any way. Rash Gul looked at Vesta, then at Alleia. He started to lower the hot tip down towards Alleia’s lower back.**

**Alleia and Vesta regarded each other. To Vesta, the thought of submitting to such a monster as Rash Gul was abhorrent, but the prospect of letting her friend be cruelly tortured before her eyes was also unthinkable.**

**Alleia, perhaps reading her thoughts, whispered, “Give in not to him. I would rather endure disfigurement or worse than let you suffer that.”**

**Vesta whispered back, “No; I cannot allow that; I will not!”**

**She grabbed the hand of Rash Gul holding the poker. He looked at her in surprise.**

**“Stop, dread one; pray hurt not my friend. If you spare her, I will consent to become your wife.”**

**The warlord smiled the cruel smile of a conqueror. He shoved the poker back into the brazier. In response to a gesture, the two eunuchs carried the brazier from the room. Meanwhile, Vesta helped Alleia remove the ropes from her wrists.**

**Rash Gul clapped his hands. “Let the golden-haired one be dressed in an elegant tunic. Let her marvelous hair be arranged suitably. May the archpriest be summoned and the wedding feast be prepared. I shall be married this very day!”**

**“Dread one,” pleaded Vesta, “I pray you. I am injured because—I have displeased you. Grant me a few days I might heal.”**

**“I shall not! Too long have you denied me! This day we shall be wed! And, this night, we shall *celebrate*!”**

**“Great and dreaded one,” ventured Alleia, “I must most sadly inform you your bride-to-be is almost in her time.”**

**Rash Gul glared. He looked at the head eunuch; the servant solemnly nodded. This news confounded the warlord’s desires for, by the laws and traditions of Rama, a man could have no relations with any woman during such times. It was an occasion when a woman would wrap her private regions in a heavy cloth, cover her body in a robe, and hide herself away from the sight of all men until the flow had ceased.**

**“That news displeases me—greatly. Still, I shall have the marriage ceremony performed this day, and the feast to celebrate shall be tonight!” He turned and leered at the now trembling Vesta. “The celebratory completion shall await your readiness.”**

**Vesta hoped her face did not show the black despair which now filled her heart.**

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***Thirteenth day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**Malakiah had no idea how the duke would react to him presenting Kush as his proposed quest companion. Consequently, he advised Kush to be most circumspect when meeting the duke. Show him any disrespect, he warned, and Kush’s chance of receiving permission to accompany Malakiah could be lost. He also told the little one to remain silent, speak little and only when spoken to, and not fidget. Next, he tried to indicate to Kush which things he should talk about and which ones he should refrain from. And, finally, he told the little one only to address the man as “Your Grace.” Kush looked overwhelmed by all these cautions but said he would try to remember all Malakiah had told him.**

**When Malakiah introduced Kush and said he was his chosen quest companion, the duke looked astonished.**

**“With all the possible squires in the Academy,” Sir Heddrick exclaimed, “you have chosen this . . . outsider! Pray tell me why?”**

**“Your Grace, I listed and examined all the squires at the Academy to no avail! Some are unavailable; others have declined my offer; several I felt were unqualified; a few I rejected because of their personalities. They felt themselves to be ...” Malakiah chose not to classify them further.**

**The duke chose to. “They felt they were ‘Adonai’s gift to the Knighthood?’”**

**“Verily, Your Grace,” replied Malakiah. He liked the duke’s phrase.**

**The grandmaster looked down grimly at the diminutive Kush. “Therefore, you went beyond the folds of the Academy and found this one. Where came you by him, lad?”**

**“He found me, Your Grace. In the marketplace several months ago. He followed me everywhere after that, saying I needed his help. Finally, I realized he spoke the truth. That is why I wish for him to accompany me on my quest.”**

**Sir Heddrick continued to scrutinize Kush. “Verily, he is smaller than most. And you might need a strong fighter at your back. Is he a capable one? Can he hold his own?”**

**“Your Grace, I saw him defeat three large ruffians. That feat convinced me of his prowess. Since then, I have had him undergo testing at the Fortress. His skills are most *unusual*. My friend Scottius—the Academy’s foremost wrestler—tried for ten minutes to seize and pin Kush; he could never hold onto him. Kush wiggled free every time. Sir Rodian had him tested by several proficient sword-fighters. With that staff of his, Kush could always hold his own. It was only Sir Rodian himself who could best him.”**

**“Impressive,” murmured the duke. He turned now to the still uncharacteristically silent Kush. “So tell me, little Kush, how found you the Academy’s weapons master?”**

**“Most tricky, Your Grace. The way he wielded that sword—I have never seen any move a blade that fast. Not even those in the Guild. And they were fast! Once I saw . . .”**

**Hearing Kush’s inopportune words, Malakiah raised his finger to his lips. Kush halted his banter. Something had caught the duke’s ears, though.**

**“‘The Guild,’ Kush? Was that what I heard you say?”**

**Malakiah groaned inwardly. *Would that disclosure seal Kush’s fate?* he wondered.**

**Kush looked to Malakiah, unsure whether to answer.**

**“Answer His Grace’s question, Kush,” Malakiah said with a sigh.**

**“Yes, Your Grace; I said the Guild.”**

**“And which guild is that, Kush?”**

**Again, Kush looked uncertainly at Malakiah. When he nodded, Kush replied, “The Thief Guild.”**

**Malakiah feared Kush’s chance was now gone. Surely the duke would never knowingly permit Malakiah to take a member of the Thief Guild as his quest companion. He was surprised, however, by Sir Heddrick’s next words.**

**“My condolences to you for the loss of Tagan. Through a thief, the man was honorable. Such I cannot say of his successor, Turok. I fear Suena shall have much trouble now dealing with the new Thief Guild.”**

**He smiled at Kush. “Now tell me honestly, Kush; how well did your former master, Tagan, regard you?”**

**“Most highly, Your Grace. Tagan thought I was one of his best. I can pick locks, climb walls, hide in shadows, move silently, . . .”**

**The duke raised his hand for silence. “You may say such, my friend; how may I know?”**

**“Your Grace,” Malakiah interrupted, “I can testify to that. Warden Haydian can as well. Kush was impertinent enough one day and night to point out various lapses in the Fortress’ security by slipping into it. The warden is now aware of these lapses and intends to amend them directly.”**

**Sir Heddrick shook his head. “Verily, then; I have heard enough. Candidate Malakiah, a member of the Thief Guild—with his renowned skills—shall be invaluable to you on your quest. I then most wholeheartedly approve of you taking him. Still, I advise you, Candidate, not to let the fact he is such be widely known. More so, I fear, when I fill out the request specifying his special skills and why you shall be taking him, Adonai forgive me, I shall need to write more creatively than the most duplicitous member of the Silver Order who has ever lived.” He shrugged. “But what is life without a challenge?”**

**Malakiah smiled at Kush. “Congratulations, Little One. You shall go with me to Rama!”**

**Kush’s only response was to dance excitedly around the room. The duke, seeing such, merely raised his eyebrows.**

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***Seventeenth day of the second month of summer, 2124***

**The next several days passed swiftly for Malakiah and Kush. Malakiah continued his meetings with his instructors. As he did, he was glad he now had Kush to delegate tasks to in preparation for his quest. The little one proved a most diligent and intelligent worker and quite adept at solving problems. He quickly managed to acquire the supplies they would need for their journey. One such task was finding a suitable gown of chain mail armor for Rama. Malakiah had been cautioned that plated-mail would never serve in the desert there!**

**He also managed to bid a farewell to the cousins, Whithus, and his friends from the Institute; they all met at The Fiery Furnace tavern two nights before he left. They drank several toasts to the success of his quest. Whithus also said a prayer, beseeching Malakiah and all those he was sent to rescue would return safely. Then Malakiah, the cousins, and Whithus recited in unison the traditional prayer said for a knight leaving on his quest. Malakiah had participated in this ritual several times before; *now,* he reflected, *it was being said for him*.**

**The afternoon before they were to leave, Malakiah and Kush went to Castle Blackspar. Then, after dinner, while Kush explored the ruined keep, Malakiah and the duke held a final discussion. The grandmaster lectured him for over an hour, giving him advice on how to travel and remain safe on the trip. Afterward, Sir Heddrick told Malakiah about Saklish, telling him this warlord was a friend of Alderick and a possible ally in that unfriendly land. Malakiah also learned Santos and Alderick had stayed at his stronghold. Towards the end of their conversation, the duke handed Malakiah a large belt. The youth thought it unremarkable, except its inside was well padded. Sir Heddrick revealed that sewn into such padding was a pouch containing the ten red diamonds, two carats each, which Santos had requested in his letter. Malakiah promised to deliver them safely.**

**Later that night, Malakiah lay in his bed, unable to sleep; he knew his wakefulness was because of his anxiety over the start of his quest tomorrow. Kush, unaffected by any such concern, slept peacefully upon his blanket on the floor; he had declined the offer of a soft bed.**

**Malakiah eventually arose to look out the window. He glanced at the horizon and saw something that chilled him—a reddish-orange moon. He remembered the previous times when he had seen one. And they had always preceded some momentous event in his life. He went back to bed and prayed to Adonai to grant him strength. He felt he would need it.**

**The duke met him again at breakfast. They talked even more. And, before he and Kush left, the duke and Malakiah both bowed their heads and said a prayer, beseeching Adonai grant success to Malakiah’s quest, allowing him to return safely from Rama with Vesta, Alleia, Santos, and Alderick. His Grace then gave a blessing to Malakiah.**

**Malakiah and Kush drove their wagon filled with supplies from the duke’s castle to the docks of Suena. They met Sir Robart, Randius, and Jonir by the barge which would take them on the first stage of their trip to Bandon. Also there was Heniriti who would serve as the group’s language tutor and travel with them to the Monastery of the Mystic Yudeas.**

**The five loaded their supplies onto the barge and left Suena just as the metallic figures on the back of the Bathhouse started their race down the side of the building. As Malakiah watched it—not for the first time—he wondered when he would see Suena again. Not for months, he knew, and hopefully not without his friends returning with him. He bowed his head and said another prayer, again evoking Adonai to grant him the strength to fulfill his mission.**

**“You certainly been praying a lot, Sir Knight—you and the duke,” observed Kush. “I know not why you are so worried. I believe your Adonai sent me to help you. And we are about to embark on a great adventure; most assuredly, nothing will stop us from completing it!”**

**Kush grinned at Malakiah and then gazed out over the river.**

**Malakiah wished he had Kush’s confidence. He should be excited, he knew, being he was a knight undergoing a quest. That they were journeying to a mysterious foreign land—a country which he always wanted to see. Still, he was not. Although his quest seemed straightforward, he was worried about Santos, Vesta, Alleia, Alderick, and the others. He was unsure why, but he felt he was venturing into a situation that would make his experiences with Santos in Nyxein pale in comparison.**

**Finally, he drove away the dark thought sprites, knowing such brooding would never help him. Instead, he smiled down at the kelvin, saying, “Come whatever fortune may deal out to us, I am just glad you and I are undertaking this trip together, Little One.”**

**As he and the others in the barge drifted down the Vernado River, Malakiah knew not Santos’ third letter—the one which would have advised the duke and the Knights Council the ransom demand was fraudulent—had arrived the previous day. However, this letter was fated never to be seen by either the Council or His Grace. The one who received it, after having his own trusted minion decipher it, read it and decided he wanted neither the duke nor the Council to know of its contents. He, for his reasons, preferred to have Malakiah venture down into the dangerous region of Rama on a possible needless mission and, hopefully, never return.**