**Preface**

***isten, my people, to the words of ADONAI:***

***Hold fast to the light and forsake the way of the darkness.***

***Stand firm for the truth and flee from wickedness for evil days are coming.***

***In those days, there will be floods, famines, and natural disasters all across the creation.***

***There will be wars and much speculation about wars. Men will desire evil over good and practice all sorts of lawlessness upon each other. They will seek to glorify and exalt themselves over ADONAI, and truth itself will diminish until it is almost gone. In those days, cling to the light and defy the darkness because the darkness will try to vanquish the light, but it will not succeed for the light will shine like a beacon in the night into the darkness of creation. So, when the moon turns to blood in the valley of emeralds, it shall be as a sign unto you that the time of evil is at hand.***

**An excerpt from the Book of Malakiah**

**The Samacara**

**Prologue**

***Fourth day of the third month of spring, 2125***

**he sun had set and the heavy curtain of night was quickly descending on the mountain valley. As he stood on the edge of a high precipice, a lone, armor-clad figure watched the remaining dusk become consumed by the oncoming darkness. Far below him, he could barely see the familiar outlines of Emerald Valley, the place of his birth and home. Down there, dotting the landscape with patterns similar to the stars in the evening sky, were pale yellow lights of lanterns and torches glimmering from the buildings in the vast valley. From his vantage point, the man could identify each cluster of light. The one just below him, his hometown of Garend, was situated near the base of the cliff; the great commercial city of Pinevale was that intense grouping of lights to his right; and the town of New Haven, which was barely visible through the rugged crags of Grandfather Mountain, gleamed on his left. Although he could not see it well, he knew the Emerald River sluggishly meandered its way down the U-shaped valley, occasionally tumbling through boulder-strewn rapids and cascading over misty waterfalls. Beyond the river, the massive, snow-capped pinnacles of the Narraconda Mountains towered high into the eastern sky and dwarfed everything else in the river valley with their immensity.**

**The tall, armored man was tanned and muscular with short, brown, bushy hair; a thin beard and mustache; piercing, blue eyes; and a distinct presence that exuded confidence and honor. He wore well-polished plated mail that covered him with steel from head to toe. A huge, long sword hung in its scabbard at his left side, its hilt bearing the Perencian Order of Knighthood's six-faceted seal. His helmet rested on a nearby boulder as he gazed entranced at the breathtaking panorama.**

**He was not aware of how long he had been mesmerized by the view of the beautiful mountain valley when an abrupt, sharp sound behind him brought him immediately to his senses. He turned and drew his sword in one swift motion. He carefully searched the woods while he held his sword ready. Dimly through the trunks of the pine trees, he could see the red-orange glow of the fire from his campsite and a gray-robed figure beside it holding a curved axe. The reddish light from the fire gave the figure and the nearby trees the appearance of blood. The knight watched the man lift the blade and repeatedly bring it down as he chopped wood. Setting aside the axe, the robed man put the cut logs on the fire and adjusted a spit of meat closer to the flames.**

**"Verily," the knight spoke softly in a deep voice, a little embarrassed at his overreaction to the noise, "it is just Lu fixing dinner. I need some rest. I am jumping at the sound of someone cooking!"**

**The cool evening breeze blew the smoke from the fire through the trees toward the knight, and he could smell the delightful aroma of roasting venison. His stomach rumbled, impatiently reminding him he was hungry. He carefully slid his sword back into its scabbard and picked up his helmet. After taking one regretful look back at the valley, he carefully trudged the overgrown, rocky trail to his camp. His armor noisily clattered as he struggled down the steep, dark path, occasionally sliding more than walking.**

**The trail slowly wound through the thick brush. Occasionally, the knight had to push aside branches and duck under tree limbs. He took comfort knowing it was still early in the growing season in this mountainous area; the vegetation would be even worse later in the summer.**

**The path slowly led him into a large stand of evergreens containing scattered underbrush and a small glen just a short distance off the main road wherein his campsite was located.**

**Suddenly, a shrill voice rang out. "Halt! Who goes there, friend or foe? If you be my enemy, prepare to meet your go." Although the voice was high-pitched as a young boy's, it sounded quite prepared to carry out the threat.**

**The knight was surprised but knew who was speaking and answered, "It is Malakiah, Kush. By the by, would not 'prepare to die' sound better?"**

**After a slight pause, the voice replied, sounding slightly offended, "Verily so! But that would not rhyme with ‘foe!’" Kush abruptly changed his tone. "How do I know you are the one called Malakiah?"**

**The man in armor sighed and spoke again, trying not to lose his patience, "Kush, you know who I am. We met a year ago. We journeyed together to the desert region of Rama in Verritan and back on my quest."**

**Well-hidden in the thicket, Kush, who could throw his voice, replied, "And how do I know you are not some chameleon man in the form of my friend Malakiah? If you are he, what's the password? Or perhaps you can sing that certain song I like."**

**"We have no password, Kush, and I'm not singing that bawdy ditty you enjoy to amuse you," replied Malakiah with a hint of steel in his voice.**

**"Verily then, figure of Malakiah, where did we meet?"**

**Malakiah sighed again and spoke sternly, "In the bustling marketplace of Suena. After we ran into each other, you began to follow me whenever I came to town, telling me I needed your help. You would not leave me alone whatever I did. We became friends when you prevented me from being cheated in the marketplace. Later you rescued me from three villains, one of whom I had foolishly chased for stealing my purse. You saved my life on that occasion. That experience also convinced me you should accompany me on my quest to Rama. On such, you proved your worth in many ways. Are you satisfied now, most vigilant of sentries?"**

**Kush, sounding quite pleased, replied, "Verily, I am. You may pass, Sir Knight."**

**"Thank you, Sir Thief,” the knight grunted and began to walk toward the campfire. "I was just about to lose—"**

**Suddenly, Malakiah stepped into a snare. A noose tightened around both his feet and pulled him off balance as the small pine tree to which the other end of the rope was attached partially sprung back into its normal, upright position, causing Malakiah's body to fall backward. His helmet slipped out of his hands, and his head hit the ground, luckily striking only soft pine needles. Because his plated mail weighed so much, however, the snare’s rope could only lift his legs two feet into the air while the rest of his body remained on the ground. Unable to straighten itself because of the heavy weight, the pine sapling was now shaped like a hook.**

**Kush immediately replied, "Sorry about that, Sir Knight. I forgot to tell you I set a few traps around the camp in case we had any unexpected company in this mountain pass."**

**Malakiah was only stunned. Regaining his senses, he yelled, "Kush, you crazy kelvin! Get me down from here!"**

**Quickly and silently, Kush ran to assist the fallen knight. "I'm sorry, Sir Knight," he giggled. "Are you hurt? I'm glad my trap worked, though, but it didn't lift you totally off the ground. I must work on that. Your armor must be pretty heavy."**

**Malakiah glared at him and ordered, "Kush, will you please cut me down?"**

**His firm voice broke the kelvin's babbling. Kush set his staff on the ground and began to search through his vest’s many pockets.**

**"Where is that knife of mine?" mumbled the kelvin.**

**Malakiah said, "Kush, it is on your left side next to your sling."**

**The kelvin pulled his knife out of its sheath, reached up, and began to saw the rope that held the knight's legs dangling. "I'm sorry about this mishap, great knight," apologized the kelvin. "I figured you could see this snare. A blind dwarf could have spotted it and—"**

**"Kush," Malakiah interrupted, "I can't see in the dark as well as you can. Remember?"**

**“I forgot about that. It must be difficult for you not to have good nightvision. By my missing tribe, this rope is hard to cut. Such tells me I need to sharpen my knife.” Kush had cut most of the rope by then. "Sir Knight, be prepared to..."**

**The rope suddenly broke, and Malakiah's armored legs fell to the ground with a great thud. The knight let out a muffled oath.**

**"... brace yourself," winced the kelvin belatedly. His eyes then widened as he exclaimed with a broad smile. "Sir Knight, I wasn’t aware you knew such words!"**

**Malakiah struggled to get off his back. He tried sitting up and then rolling onto his side, but could not regain his feet.**

**Kush, seeing the knight's predicament, asked, "What's wrong, Sir Knight? Can't you get up? If you didn't wear all that armor, you could stand up easily. Why do you have so much armor anyway? It must be awfully hot on warm days, and you do stink after you have worn it all day long."**

**Malakiah shot a stern look that prompted Kush to stop talking. "Little One, will you please help me up?"**

**"Verily, I will," replied Kush, grabbing the knight's gauntlet and trying to pull him up. At the same time, Malakiah futilely tried to place his feet underneath himself.**

**After a few moments, they both stopped, and Malakiah fell back to the ground. "It's no use," he muttered. This situation was rather embarrassing. When practicing in armor at the Academy, he had never mastered getting up by himself while dressed in plated mail. Others he had trained with learned how to do so, but Malakiah could never accomplish this one feat. Because most of the time in training, fights, and practice jousts, his fellow cadets and squires had helped each other up, he had managed to conceal this inability.**

**Kush, exhausted, walked over and sat on the knight's breastplate. He said, "I'm sorry, Sir Knight. I may be strong, but not enough to do this feat. You don't have, by chance, an ogre in your pocket?"**

**Lifting his head, Malakiah answered. "No, I do not, but I bet one of your pockets does."**

**"No, they don't. I've checked."**

**They looked at each other and began to laugh. Malakiah's laugh was deep and hearty while Kush giggled similarly to a small child. They continued to chortle until they were both out of breath.**

**After being quiet for a moment, Kush jumped up and exclaimed, "I know what to do! I'll get Lu to help us. Between him and me, we should be able to get you on your feet. Be back in a minute!"**

**Malakiah watched the kelvin run, his long, dual braids of hair trailing behind him, and disappear into the dark woods. The knight then laid back his head on the cold ground, looked up, and saw a few stars peeking through the gaps in the pine trees' dark branches.**

**"What a way to come home," he mumbled sarcastically. "If my father or my younger brother could see me now."**

**It had been just over five years since he had left his father's castle. Then he had been a rash and reckless youth—only concerned about the pleasures and benefits of being the son of a duke. *How he had changed since then,* he thought!**

**After several minutes, Kush returned, leading Lu. The knight noticed Lu carrying a lantern in his other hand. The sight was almost comic—the diminutive Kush pulling the much taller Lu as a child would tug on his father's arm to lead him to a nearby bakery to buy sweets.**

**Kush was trying to explain what had happened and Lu obviously could not understand much the kelvin was saying. However, when Lu saw Malakiah sprawled out helpless, he came over to the knight and haltingly asked, "What happened, friend?"**

**Malakiah knew explaining would be complicated and chose to be brief. Speaking slowly, he said, "I cannot get up. Help me stand, Lu."**

**Malakiah grabbed Lu's hand. Kush reached out to Malakiah's other hand and began to pull. Lu understood either the words or the action, and he and Kush both yanked. Malakiah felt himself being lifted as if he weighed very little and hastily placed his feet on the ground.**

**The knight turned to him and commented, "You strong, Lu."**

**Lu's eyes had an amused look, and he announced with a slight grin, "Come, friends. Dinner now. Eat."**

**After making this announcement, he turned around and headed back to the campfire, his long robe rustling as he moved.**

**Malakiah realized again he did not understand many things about Lu.**

**Kush tapped the knight's arm and enthusiastically stated, "That was unusual! It seemed you were as light as a feather. How come I could not pick you up by myself, and Lu and I did it so easily?"**

**Malakiah patted Kush on his head lightly and replied, "I do not know, and, at present, I am too hungry to care. Let us eat."**

**As they walked to their camp, the kelvin suddenly darted back. Malakiah whirled around and yelled, "Kush, where are you going?" There was no answer. Malakiah waited a few seconds and repeated, "Kush, where are you? I am not in the mood for games!"**

**As he intently scanned the surrounding area, he heard the kelvin's voice. "I left my staff on the ground."**

**Because the kelvin could move through the woods as quietly as a mouse, Malakiah had not even heard Kush approach. The knight spun and saw the grinning kelvin holding up Malakiah's helmet in one hand and his staff in his other.**

**"Sir Knight," announced the kelvin, "you dropped your hat back there too."**

**Malakiah took his helmet and replied, "Thank you, but it is called a helmet. I would not have lost it if it had not been for your traps."**

**"By my lost people, I didn't think of it at the time." The kelvin then gave him a serious look and stated, "I can't help it if you keep losing your things. I don't know how you and Lu would survive without me. If it weren’t for me, you would have lost so many of your things. You're just lucky you have me around."**

**The knight concealed a smile, knowing Kush meant well, but often the kelvin led them into as much trouble as he got them out of. He instead only replied, "As you say, Little One. Come. Dinner is getting cold."**

**As they walked, Kush broke into the knight's thoughts by exclaiming as he pointed toward the east, "Sir Knight, look at that!"**

**Malakiah looked. Through the silhouettes of tree trunks, he saw a full, reddish-orange moon had risen over the gigantic spires of the Narraconda Mountains. Malakiah felt a chill go up and down his body.**

**The kelvin continued to ramble. "Isn't that pretty? I've never seen the moon that color. It is almost the color of blood. And the snow of the mountains—it has the same color as the moon. I've never such a moon before. I wonder—"**

**"I have," the knight said ominously.**

**Hearing the tone in Malakiah's voice, the kelvin stopped talking. He looked carefully at the knight's troubled face and asked, "What's the matter, Sir Knight? You looked as if someone killed your dog, and you don't even have one."**

**Malakiah did not answer Kush's question, asking another one instead. "Do you believe in signs, Little One?"**

**The kelvin answered uncertainly, "‘Believe in signs?’ I see them all the time on trails and roads. I remember one in the town of Elysion. The smith there had a sign shaped similar to a forge, and there was that cobbler—"**

**"No, no," the knight interrupted, "I mean 'signs' as in 'omens.'"**

**"I know about them through stories," remarked the kelvin, "but why worry about such? Life's just one incredible adventure! Why pay heed to omens? Take life one day at a time."**

**Malakiah had forgotten Kush did not worry about much of anything. “In any case, my friend," he said more to himself than to the kelvin, "I am not very superstitious, but every time I have seen an orange moon, something significant has happened to me and those around me."**

**The knight remembered several occasions before when he had seen an orange moon. He had glimpsed one the night before his grandfather had died. He had noticed one the night before he had asked Ateena, an Elven healer in his hometown, to marry him, and she had turned him down. He had viewed an orange moon the evening before being sent to Suena to enroll in the Academy for Perencian Order of Knights. Finally, he had seen one before he had begun his quest. Yes, it could be a coincidence, but he felt deep within his spirit this orange moon indicted his homecoming might not be as uneventful as he had expected. He silently prayed, *Adonai, please give me the strength to endure this new ordeal.***

**Malakiah next said, with a forced smile, "This sight may indeed be nothing, but if some dangerous adventure comes our way, we will stare it in the eye and boldly confront it!"**

**The eyes of Kush beamed, and he happily exclaimed, "By my misplaced ancestors, I hope so! I love adventures. Your quest was a grand one! And I may this one be good too!"**

**The knight patted his friend’s head and murmured, "Be careful what you ask for, Little One. It may come true."**

**While they stood there, Lu, with a pot in his hands, yelled from their campsite, "Food now! Come! You come now!"**

**"We had better hurry, Kush," advised the knight, "Lu gets annoyed when we are not on time. And, considering how proficient he is with that staff of his, we do not want to make him angry!"**

**Chuckling, both kelvin and knight sped up their pace to the flickering campfire.**

**Chapter 3**

**The Nightmare begins**

***Sixthday of the third month of spring, 2125***

**alakiah abruptly found himself dressed in his plated mail and surrounded by many hacked and mutilated bodies in the middle of a field. Ahead, he could see a town that looked like New Haven in flames. People were fleeing from the conflagration only to be slaughtered. The knight could hear their shrieks of pain and terror.**

**Malakiah recognized many of the dead. One was Captain Baylor with a huge hole in his chest. Stepping carefully over the bodies, the knight finally found what he was seeking, although he did not know how he was sure it would be there—the lifeless form of Kaimin.**

**"By Adonai, I will avenge you both, Baylor and Kame," Malakiah swore aloud.**

**Moving as fast as he could, Malakiah approached the town. He saw a grinning goblin run his sword through the torso of a small child. The knight yelled a challenge, and the creature turned to face him. Malakiah suddenly realized he had no sword.**

**The goblin charged. Malakiah evaded his swing and slammed his shoulder into his opponent. The goblin dropped his sword and fell. The knight repeatedly punched the creature in the face with his armored fist until his foe was dead.**

**Malakiah grabbed the goblin’s sword. He looked up and saw that he was now surrounded. "Who is next to die, scum?" he yelled defiantly.**

**He began to attack the creatures. Although he was a much better fighter, he was hopelessly outnumbered; eventually, he was pierced by a sword thrust. He fell. The goblins, laughing, began to kick and mock him, but, despite being defenseless, he refused to beg for mercy. Finally, growing bored with this sport, the goblins cut him repeatedly on the arms and legs, trying not to hit a vital area so the knight would not quickly die. He began to scream, but the pain only grew worse.**

**Suddenly a bright light enveloped him, and the goblins disappeared. Malakiah was amazed he did not have to shield his eyes from the light’s intensity. A glowing, white unicorn with massive wings on its back and a horn that gleamed silver approached him. The unicorn looked at him with kind, gentle eyes and spoke in his head. *Malakiah*, *dark times are coming, but you must be strong. However, if you rely on your strength alone, you will fail as you did this time. If you rely on Adonai and your strength together, we will be victorious. Remember, you must depend on Him.***

**Malakiah next sat up in bed, its sheets sticking to his sweaty body. "It was only a dream; it was only a dream," he muttered to himself. After getting his breathing under control, Malakiah pulled back the curtain of his canopied bed and poured himself a drink of water.**

**Malakiah rarely remembered dreams and seldom had experienced a nightmare with details as intense as the one he had just had. Once before, during his first year at the Academy, Malakiah recalled, a unicorn had appeared in a dream, compelling him to confess to a transgression he had thought he had gotten away with. Such a memory convinced him, perhaps, he should consider the contents of this dream seriously. He tried then to remember what the unicorn had said to him, but could not. Malakiah decided he would go out onto his balcony.**

**The rain had stopped; the air was cold and damp. Walking over to lean against the railing, Malakiah noticed the sky was still overcast, preventing him from seeing the stars, yet he could distinguish the orange glow of lights from Garend through the light, morning fog.**

**Malakiah could not shake his dread. His anxiety increased when he noticed one glow from Garend had grown significantly. Such could not be a torch or a lantern. It could only be a burning building.**

**Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, Malakiah assumed it was Lu and asked, "Lu, is that what I think it is?"**

**Hearing no answer, Malakiah turned around, spying a dim humanoid shape. The figure thrust a short sword at his torso. Malakiah turned sideways and pulled his abdomen in. This move saved him; the blade barely sliced his side, drawing blood.**

**Malakiah, keenly aware he had neither armor nor weapon, drew upon the training Sir Rodian, his weapons instructor at the Academy, had drilled into him. He grabbed his opponent’s sword hand. Lifting the ceramic tankard in his left hand, Malakiah brought it down hard against the other's helmeted head. The drinking vessel shattered, but the blow stunned his foe and caused his sword to tumble to the ground. Now smelling a distinct aroma of dead fish, Malakiah yelled, "Lu! Kush! We are under attack by goblins!"**

**As Malakiah reached for the fallen sword, he saw another goblin with a raised battle axe charging through the doorway. Although he knew it was a risky maneuver, Malakiah dove forward under that falling battle axe, catching the goblin with his shoulder. Grabbing the other's waist, the knight then used his opponent's momentum to flip him over his back, battle axe and all. Malakiah’s flip fortuitously hurled his foe over the railing, and the creature fell screaming inhumanly to the ground of the second ward.**

**Before Malakiah could grab the dropped sword, the goblin he had hit with the tankard slammed him, knocking him against the stone railing. Malakiah grabbed the wrist of the goblin's hand that had a long dagger. As they grappled, Malakiah noticed he still had the ceramic tankard's jagged handle in his left hand, but his foe’s other hand held that arm down.**

**A hard thump of wood against steel was heard from behind the goblin, and a shrill voice rang out, "Knock, knock, you stupid goblin."**

**Enraged, the goblin loosened his grip on Malakiah and glanced back to see who had hit him. Seizing the chance, the knight, using the sharp, jagged handle, punched the goblin in the throat. At the same time, Kush twirled his staff and stabbed the creature in the back. The goblin fell against Malakiah, and the knight roughly pushed him away.**

**Pulling his staff out of the goblin's body, Kush lightly said, "Got the point?"**

**Checking his hurt side, Malakiah was relieved to find he was just slightly cut. The knight also contemplated scolding Kush for making such morbid jokes. Before he could begin, Malakiah saw a dwarf about to strike down the kelvin. "Kush, behind you!" he yelled.**

**The kelvin leaped out of the way while swinging his staff low. The staff caught the dwarf’s legs, causing him to fall at Malakiah's feet. Kush struck his foe’s head to make sure he stayed down.**

**Seeing three throwing stars of Lu’s in the dwarf's back, Malakiah shouted, "Lu, are you uninjured?"**

**"I not hurt," came Lu's answer. He lit the lamp near Malakiah's bed. Malakiah counted two bodies on the balcony, one he had thrown off the balcony, and three more within his room. Four were goblins while the other two were dwarves. Lu checked if each foe was dead and retrieved his throwing stars.**

**Knowing he was probably stating the obvious, Malakiah announced, "Lu, Kush, I do not think this attack was an isolated one." He added, "Little One, what do you hear?"**

**"Sounds of fighting, steel hitting steel, screams of terror and agony," he winced.**

**"In which directions?"**

**"In that direction," the kelvin pointed up the hallway, then down, "and that one."**

**"My parents’ bedroom is that way! Lu, go to the end of the hall and protect them! I will join you soon."**

**Lu ran out of the room.**

**"Come on, let's go, Sir Knight! Let's help them!"**

**"No, Sir Thief,” Malakiah ordered as he held onto the kelvin, "I have a special mission for you."**

**"What is it?" asked Kush eagerly.**

**"I want you to climb the outside wall above my balcony to the roof and ring the bell in the tower there to alert everyone in the castle."**

**"Why?" the kelvin asked, his enthusiasm diminishing greatly.**

**"There is a guard there who should have rung an alarm if we were under attack. He must have been killed. If you sound it, you will alert everyone in the castle of this attack, and the Watch will come to our aid. You will be a hero."**

**"That sounds like fun!" screamed the kelvin, his enthusiasm returning. He immediately ran to the balcony, strapped his staff on his back, and began to climb.**

**"And be careful, Little One! Our foes may still guard the tower!" shouted the knight. He then picked up his sword and shield by his bed and ran down the hallway.**

**Outside of his parents’ bedroom, Malakiah recognized the two soldiers who usually guarded the door lay dead with a goblin's body nearby. Malakiah kicked open the door. His father, dressed in his night robe, had one arm around his crying mother while his other hand carried a blood-smeared sword. Four dead goblins lay on the floor. Next to them was Lu who had two throwing stars set to hurl them in Malakiah's direction. When he realized who had just entered, he lowered his hand.**

**"Mother, Father, are you uninjured?" asked Malakiah urgently.**

**His father, still trying to comfort his nearly hysterical mother, replied, "Yes, we are undamaged. Thanks to your friend's help."**

**"That is good. Lu, I owe you," said the knight, casting a thankful glance toward Lu who bowed slightly back.**

**"What is happening, Son?" the duke looked around uncertainly. "Are we under siege? What's our status?"**

**"I am not sure, Father. I have sent Kush up to ring the bell to bring reinforcements, but we may be vulnerable here."**

**"I know. What do you suggest? Do we stay here and defend ourselves, or do we move somewhere better?"**

**Suddenly, three screaming female servants dressed in their nightclothes came running into the room with two goblins in close pursuit. Malakiah yelled at them, "Turn and fight, you goblin dogs!"**

**The goblins advanced. Malakiah swung his sword and scored a mortal wound on the first goblin's neck. The blood spurted out, and the creature collapsed to the floor.**

**Lu tossed two throwing stars. One missed and bounced off the stone wall while the other hit the back of the remaining goblin's shoulder blade, causing him to drop his sword. Desperately, the creature tried to force his way past the knight, but Malakiah, using his shield, bashed the goblin on the face, sending him sprawling. Malakiah pointed his sword at his foe’s throat, but the action was not necessary—the goblin was unconscious.**

**Malakiah heard the sound of many footfalls. "Brace yourselves, more coming!" he shouted. "Lu, help me defend this room."**

**Instead of foes, eight castle guards, Kaimin among them, came down the hallway. The soldier in front asked, "Lord Malakiah! We heard the fighting and screaming and came to help. Is His Grace safe?"**

**Malakiah breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, my parents are safe. I am injured but able. But you, are you loyal to my father and me?"**

**"Yes! Until death, my lord!" they declared loudly.**

**"Well said. My parents and a few servants in there need your protection. Guard them with your lives. Lu, Kame, and you," Malakiah pointed to a tall soldier with a ruddy complexion, "come with me. We must see if my brother and my guests are safe."**

**"Malakiah, wait!" his father yelled as he left.**

**"I need to check on Alcham!” Malakiah responded. As they cautiously walked down the hallway, Malakiah heard a bell ring and then sound continuously. For the first time tonight, the knight smiled. "Thank you, Little One,” he said, “I knew I could count on you."**

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**Kush slowly proceeded up the side of the castle. This climb would have been hard for a human but was not too bad for him. He knew how to find small footholds and handholds others would never detect. Kush was happy to be helping the knight as only he could have done.**

**He remembered just over a year ago, a unicorn had instructed him in a dream to seek out a squire named Malakiah and offer him his services. This experience had been very unusual for Kush because he normally never recalled his dreams, and he had never had one in which he had been told to do something. Kush had found he liked traveling and sharing adventures with Malakiah even though, at first, the knight-to-be was too serious most of the time. Kush was also particularly fond of Lu because the man was so different, and, although he could not understand their language well, he would always listen to his stories.**

**Eventually, the kelvin reached the top of the castle and immediately saw the bell tower; it was a two-story turret with openings on three sides. Behind the tower were many smooth domes.**

**Kush entered the tower and saw a pile of rope lying on the floor. Looking up, he saw the bell with a short strand of rope hanging from it.**

**"How rude," he spoke aloud, taking his staff off his back. "Why would someone cut the rope to the bell so you could not ring it?"**

**Hearing someone, Kush immediately spun on his heels and saw a dwarf wielding a battle ax advancing toward him.**

**"Excuse me," the kelvin asked pleasantly. "Did you know the rope to your bell has been cut?"**

**The figure swung his axe at the kelvin's head. Kush rolled to the floor, using his staff to trip the dwarf. Because his opponent had swung so hard, he was off-balance and fell easily.**

**Kush remarked, "Was it something I said? Alas, a pity. I hope you had a nice fall."**

**The kelvin next ran up the stairs while yelling, "Ugly dwarf! Bet you can't catch me, you slowpoke! Your mother was a gnome! And your father is beardless!"**

**The dwarf screamed and started chasing after him.**

**Finally, he stood on a small wooden platform with a rectangular hole in its center at the top of the tower. A huge bell hung just above the opening. Peering into the bell’s mouth, Kush saw its clapper was intact; a short rope hung from a wheel on one end of the bell yoke. He could have pulled the rope to ring the bell, but its end was too high up for him to reach. Kush struck the bell with his staff’s metallic ball, but his efforts only made a dull, clanging sound.**

**Hearing footfalls behind him, Kush realized the dwarf was about to catch up with him. The kelvin stood in front of the bell near the opening and yelled, "You again? Why don't you find a cave to haunt, you blind mole? You stupid lover of trolls, why don't you do Tarn a favor and jump off the nearest cliff? If you landed on your face, it could only improve your looks!" He gripped his staff with both hands as if to defend himself.**

**The dwarf charged, screaming, "When I get my hands on you, you're dead! But not until I cut off your ears, you Elven-brat!"**

**At the last second, Kush sidestepped and swung his staff at the dwarf's head. The dwarf slammed face first into the bell. The bell moved forward and caused the clapper to strike. The dwarf himself plunged through the hole.**

**"Thank you," the kelvin said politely, "I wanted to do that." He used his staff to push the bell's lip to keep its momentum going and continue its ringing. The kelvin remarked to himself, "I don't know who that dwarf was, but his face sure rings a bell."**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Malakiah, Lu, Kame, and the other soldier who identified himself as Stephus hurried down to Alcham's room. Finding the door to the room ajar, Malakiah immediately kicked the door open, hoping Alcham was unharmed. Although about the same size as his own, the room was much messier; the bed had not been slept in. There were no dead bodies or any sign of his brother.**

**"Alcham!” Malakiah yelled. "Are you in here?" There was no answer. "Come on, let us check down the hall."**

**Hearing some females screaming, Malakiah and his men ran towards the sound, knocked a door open, and found five goblins atop two servant wenches.**

**Quickly, Malakiah hurried in with the rest following and ran one goblin through. Not able to use his throwing stars because he might hit one of the servants, Lu jabbed his staff at the head of a goblin on top of a wench. The goblin rolled off in time and evaded the thrust.**

**It had looked as if these goblins were trying to rape these women. Yet when they got up, Malakiah could see the creatures still had their armor on. Kame shouted, "Mal! There are more behind us!" Malakiah realized they had been drawn into a trap.**

**"Stand back to back!" ordered Malakiah. A blow came from a goblin's mace. The weapon grated off his shield and grazed his right shoulder. Malakiah stabbed at the mace-bearing goblin, and his sword penetrated his foe's midsection. The goblin slumped to the floor.**

**Lu, guarding Malakiah's right, swung his staff upward at the goblin he had missed the first time and struck him soundly in the jaw. Several teeth flew out as the goblin stumbled back, knocking against one of his fellows. Both of them fell to the ground.**

**Kame faced three sour-faced, armored dwarves. Stephus stood at his right, protecting Malakiah's back. Kame sliced a superficial wound on a dwarf’s right arm who continued to press his attack. Stephus chopped off the head of another dwarf as his opponent sliced Stephus’ arm with a dagger. The dwarf's body convulsed and fell as his head hit the wall. Malakiah kicked away a body and raised his shield to block a dagger thrown by a goblin from the back of the room.**

**Lu yelled to the female servants, "Stay down!" He pulled out two shurikens and hurled them at the two remaining goblins. One star bounced off the first one’s chain mail harmlessly while the other struck the second squarely in the chest.**

**Kame scored a solid wound in a dwarf's shoulder. The dwarf, in return, tried to punch Kame in the jaw, but his blow fell short.**

**Stephus stepped over the dead dwarf's body to attack the next one only to have his legs give out suddenly, causing him to drop to the floor.**

**Frantically, Kame yelled, "Mal, Stephus is down! Your back's open!"**

**Although he had heard Kame, Malakiah could not turn his attention from the goblin in front of him. His foe tossed a knife at the knight's leg that sunk deeply into his right thigh. Malakiah slumped to the ground, still holding up his shield. He was now beset from the front and also vulnerable from behind. He muttered, "Adonai, please do not let it end this way!"**

**A goblin managed to pull out a short knife and hurl it clumsily. The knife flew way over Lu's head as he ducked, and Lu hurled two throwing stars at that goblin. Both hit him in the throat, nearly decapitating the creature. Lu realized Malakiah was in trouble, but could not help him.**

**Frustrated, Kame tried to move over to protect Malakiah's back, but the dwarf he thought he had killed still managed to raise his sword against him, and Kame had to parry his last blow.**

**The last dwarf, seeing one soldier was down and Malakiah was helpless from behind, stepped eagerly over bodies and raised his battle axe to kill the knight.**

**Suddenly, a flash of greenish-blue light struck that dwarf. He fell forward dead against Malakiah's back. That same flash of light temporarily blinded the remaining goblin about to toss another dagger at Malakiah. Lu flung his last two throwing stars. One hit the goblin in the arm while the other hit him in the side of his head, instantly killing him.**

**Another burst of green light struck the dwarf still engaged with Kame, and that warrior crumbled.**

**The three fighters turned to see who had aided them. At the door, they saw Ambassador Horafius holding a wand. The tall, blond elf said with a smile, "I knew this wand would come in useful someday."**

**Lu and Kame vaulted over to where Malakiah lay. Lu practically threw off the dead body of the dwarf as Kame turned the knight over and slapped his face lightly. "Mal, Mal? Are you uninjured?" he asked.**

**Malakiah said, "Lu, Kame? Most assuredly, I am. I just love a battle early in the morning—it whets my appetite for breakfast."**

**His face paling as he saw the knight covered with blood, Horafius yelled, "Guards! Watch! We need medical assistance here!" He prudently did not mention who was hurt because he did not want to attract any other enemy to come to finish the job.**

**Lu observed the knight was bleeding from his side, had a bruised and possibly broken shoulder, and a dagger sticking out of his right thigh. Looking to Kame, he said, "Watch him. I get medicine. Help hurt."**

**Lu ran quickly down the hall to Malakiah's bedroom.**

**Horafius asked politely, "Uh, Guard, what should I do to assist?"**

**Kame replied, "Please keep watch should any more goblins or dwarves show up. If such do, keep them back."**

**Malakiah now addressed the elf. "Many thanks, Your Excellency. I appreciate your timely arrival."**

**"Lord Malakiah," he responded, "I am glad I could be of some assistance." Hearing footsteps, the ambassador looked in that direction and recognized castle guards. "Guards, down here! Lord Malakiah is injured, and we need some bandages and a healer!"**

**The guards ran the rest of the way and formed a defensive position. Meanwhile, Horafius, Kame, and a sergeant continued to assess Malakiah.**

**"How is Stephus?" muttered Malakiah.**

**"Dead, my lord," said Kame sadly. "He died protecting you."**

**"He shall receive a fitting funeral and made an honorary Knight of the Realm," affirmed Malakiah, trying to cheer up this gloomy group.**

**"Aye, milord," replied the sergeant who then ordered one of his soldiers to leave and find a healer.**

**Suddenly, a hawk carrying a pouch flew into the room and landed by Malakiah's feet. The hawk shimmied and transformed into the shape of Lu, wearing just a loincloth. Both Kame and the sergeant drew their swords while the ambassador readied his wand.**

**"He's a witch!" yelled one of the guards.**

**"No shoot!" replied Lu, putting his hands into the air. "I here. Help Malakiah."**

**Malakiah recalled an incident two days ago and began to laugh lightly until he grimaced. As Kame, the sergeant, and the ambassador looked at Malakiah with concern, the knight, gritting his teeth, ordered, "Do not hurt Lu. He is a shape-shifter of some sort. Let him help me because he has some skills in healing."**

**Lu began to search his bag, pulling out various items and potions.**

**"Now I know you were that strange bird that helped me in that riot two days ago. Verily so, Lu?” Malakiah asked with a grin.**

**Lu pulled out some bandages and a knife. "Need cut shirt off," Lu announced. "Please move dead.”**

**"Do as he says!" Malakiah ordered. "Go ahead, Lu. I did not like this shirt, anyway. Speaking of clothes, have a guard fetch Lu’s robe. It must be in my bedroom.”**

**Lu cut away Malakiah's nightshirt and placed an ointment on his side and then his shoulder. Next, Lu put a bandage on Malakiah's side and a brace on his shoulder. Lu donned on his gray robe again when it arrived.**

**Suddenly, they heard a familiar female's voice. "Let me through. I am a healer."**

**One soldier scoffed, "Healer, there has been a battle in there. There is blood, gore, and bodies everywhere!"**

**"I understand, Soldier," the voice replied firmly. "I have seen more bloodshed and more battles than you could ever imagine."**

**The guards parted and two females walked in. One of them was Ateena, dressed in her usual white robe, and the other was Jettie, wearing a dark blue robe. The anxious looks of the many soldiers around turned into gazes of appreciation and desire. Jettie looked around in distress at the men before following Ateena into the room.**

**Malakiah felt a little embarrassed to be half-dressed in front of the two ladies, but his discomfort faded when he wondered if he smelt smoke.**

**Kneeling, Ateena, with Jettie standing beside her holding an opened pouch, examined the bandages Lu had wrapped and nodded. Meanwhile, Lu, obviously puzzled, studied the dagger's handle in Malakiah's leg while looking at a similar one he had found on the floor.**

**"What's wrong, Lu?" the healer asked. "Why have you not removed the dagger from his leg?"**

**Lu showed her the loose dagger; it had serrated edges on both sides and a clear brown liquid running along the blade. "Dagger go in easy. Pull out bad. Make hurt worse when pull out. Brown liquid, bad. Kill other man." Lu pointed to the fallen body of Stephus.**

**"Poison?" Ateena took the dagger and looked at it closely.**

**"Yes."**

**"I don't understand," said Kame. "If the knife is poisoned, how come Stephus is dead while Malakiah is alive?"**

**Horafius spoke up, "Possibly Lord Malakiah's body has a better resistance to poison. Maybe he has built up an immunity to that toxin, or maybe the dagger did not have any in it."**

**"Quiet, please," commanded Ateena. "This dagger is made so if it is pulled out, it will do considerably more damage. We may have to extend the wound more to remove it." Puzzled by a strange ridge on both sides of the blade and two holes on it, the healer squeezed the hilt and a brown liquid squirted out of the holes.**

**"Uh oh, dat could be trouble," commented the sergeant.**

**Ateena asked, "Sergeant Efren, do you know what this blade is?"**

**"Aye, milady," he answered, "dat be an assassin's dagger. If it hits its target, and you squeeze its hilt, poison is spit into de wound."**

**"Do you know how to take it out?"**

**"Not truly, milady. I've only heard of dem."**

**The ambassador stated, "Verily, I know! If grabbing the hilt releases the poison, then you need to get some string, tie it below the hilt, and pull the dagger out of the wound without squeezing the hilt.”**

**Kame affirmed, "That could work."**

**Ateena nodded, "Yes, it would, but Lu must first cut around the dagger before we may extract the blade. Proceed, Lu. I will assist. I need people to hold Lord Malakiah steady while Lu is cutting. The rest of you, watch quietly and pray."**

**"This plan sounds as if it is going to hurt," spoke Malakiah. "Someone, please give me something to bite upon, and I will bear it."**

**Kame gave him one of his gloves. Kame, Jettie, Ateena, and the sergeant grabbed Malakiah's limbs to hold them down.**

**Lu poured one of his potions over the knife wound, and Malakiah felt the pain slowly disappear. Lu next carefully cut around the stuck dagger. Malakiah felt little pain as he watched, fascinated. After widening the hole, Lu pulled a thin rope from his pouch, wrapped it around the hilt's points, and slowly yanked the knife out cleanly. Everyone gave out a sigh of relief when Lu placed the dagger on the floor.**

**Laying her hands on both sides of the jagged wound and pushing them together, Ateena prayed aloud. "Adonai, if it is Your will, and You have more work for this knight, please, in your Holy Name, heal this knight's wounds, and renew his strength."**

**Malakiah prayed as well and felt a strange, tingling sensation traveling up and down his body, but mostly where his wounds were located. The pain in his shoulder and his side slowly dissipated.**

**Ateena, who seemed in a trance, released Malakiah's leg and lifted her hands upward. Lu, meanwhile, had been preparing another bandage and a potion for the knight's leg. When he looked, though, he discovered the wound had closed and was now only a thin, red scar. Lu stared at Ateena with wide-eyed astonishment.**

**Malakiah smiled at Lu and commented, "That is her power, my friend. A power that she received from our God Adonai. Occasionally, He gives me that power." By now, Malakiah smelt smoke and thought he could see some in the air.**

**"Help me up," asked Malakiah. Kame and the sergeant pulled Malakiah to his feet, and he slowly began to walk stiffly around with Kame supporting him.**

**Malakiah picked up his sword and his shield. "What is our status, Sergeant Efren?"**

**"I'm not sure, milord, but as far as I know, a company of dwarves and goblins somehow entered de castle and tried to assassinate His Grace’s family. Quite a few guards have been killed too. Patrols have been sweeping de castle and de courtyard killing or chasing off de remaining enemy."**

**"Where did they come from? It is impossible to invade this castle."**

**"I'm afraid I'm not sure. Dey seem to appear and disappear as if they were ghosts."**

**"Greetings, everybody!" yelled a familiar voice.**

**Turning in its direction, the group saw Kush crawling through a secret door. Malakiah frowned; he had never known a secret door existed in this room, although he was aware of a few in some areas of the castle.**

**"Did you know secret tunnels run throughout this castle? An extensive web of them. I have seen a few goblins and dwarves moving through them. It's obvious they came into the castle using them."**

**"How did you find us, Little One?" asked Malakiah curiously.**

**"What? You have to speak louder; I've been ringing a bell. I can't hear very well."**

**"How did you find us here?" shouted Malakiah**

**"As I said, I was ringing the bell for a while, but that was hurting my ears so I stopped. While I was on my way back to your room, Sir Knight, some soldiers spotted me. A few even shot arrows at me. I ran and discovered a secret door on the roof and started exploring the secret passageways. I mean, these tunnels and secret doors are everywhere! I just happened to be walking by this one and decided to come out. To my surprise, I find you! Before I rang the bell, I encountered this dwarf who tried to kill me, and I can tell you how we fought. He came at me with a battle axe, and—"**

**"Later, Sir Thief!" ordered Malakiah. "I smell smoke. I think we better determine what's going on."**

**"Fire!" came a shriek. A panicked guard ran into the room. He approached the knight and stammered, "Lord Malakiah. The kitchen's on fire. His Grace and Her Grace are evacuating the main castle."**

**Malakiah barked, “To attention, Soldier.” The man immediately straightened. Then Malakiah said firmly, "Calm down, Soldier. Let us all slowly walk to the stairs and then leave the castle. We do not need to panic."**

**The soldiers lined up, surrounded Malakiah and his group, and walked out of the room and down the hall.**

**As they moved, Kame said to Malakiah, "Mal, the kitchen is next to the castle. If it goes up in flames, so does everything else!"**

**"I know that, Kame. Let us get everyone to safety, and then we will concentrate on putting out the fire. Does anyone have a magical spell to extinguish the fire before it consumes the whole building?"**

**The ambassador volunteered, "I have an ice wand that could help."**

**"We can try it.” Malakiah thought for a moment. "Teena, if I remember properly, you can create water."**

**"Yes, I do, but not in the way that would quench a blazing inferno."**

**"I was afraid of that."**

**As the group approached the stairs, the acidic smoke became much thicker. It stung their eyes and made it hard to breathe. Some people started to cough.**

**Ateena commanded, "People, this smoke can hurt or kill you if you breathe too much of it. Get on your hands and knees. Crawl to and down the stairs."**

**"Do it!" Malakiah ordered. "She strikes the mark!"**

**Everyone complied.**

**Kush commented to Malakiah, "Crawling on our hands and knees is slow and no fun. We can go to a balcony, lower a rope, and climb down that way. I think I will. Anyone who wants to follow me can." He ran off.**

**"Kush, wait!" he yelled, but the kelvin was gone. Malakiah moaned inwardly; he hated it when Kush did things on impulse. Then he reconsidered. "Ateena, Kush’s idea has merit. We could all go that way."**

**Ateena objected, "No, you don't! You just recovered from some serious wounds, and that kind of exertion will aggravate them. You should not even be crawling around, but we have no choice!"**

**"I thought they were healed!"**

**"The wounds are closed, but you need to rest for a day or two for complete healing."**

***Rest, she says, in a situation such as this one,* Malakiah thought.**

**Someone nudged his other shoulder; he turned to find Lu, who, holding his pouch, informed him, "Have something put out fire. Must change."**

**"Go ahead, Lu, I have people watching me," replied Malakiah, not understanding what Lu wanted to do.**

**By now, thick smoke billowed up the stairs, and it was hard to breathe even down low. Malakiah's thigh, where the dagger had struck him, was becoming sore. The knight turned himself around and started to slide down the steps on his butt, one step at a time.**

**"Gently!” Ateena ordered beside him as she mimicked his method. Malakiah thought it better not to reply to that last comment.**

**Setting the pouch down, Lu transformed himself into a huge, black panther, picked up the pouch with his teeth, and leaped down the stairs with great bounds. His robe was left behind, which Malakiah gestured for the wide-eyed Kame to pick up.**

**"By the Great El, what was that?" yelled the ambassador who felt the animal jump over him.**

**"That was Lu in another form of his," replied the knight. "I wonder how many of them he has."**

**"This man is most interesting," commented the ambassador. "Is he a siren or a chameleon man?" He had to stop talking because he had a bad coughing fit due to the smoke.**

**"I think Lu may be something different, Your Excellency. We better stop talking unless we have to." Malakiah noticed the smoke became thicker as they moved down. "Ateena," he whispered, "How is Jettie? She may get lost in this smoke."**

***I am with you, and I can see fairly well even in this smoke,* came a voice within Malakiah's head.**

**"Who? What?" Malakiah stopped and looked around, confused.**

**"Move!" ordered Ateena. "It is only Jettie speaking to you. We will explain later!"**

**The smoke was less thick nearer the floor at the bottom of the stairs, but very dense halfway up to the ceiling. The soldiers helped Malakiah and his group get partially to their feet, and they walked stooped over through the steward's quarters to the back entrance. When they had made it outside into the cool, damp night, many of them were coughing out of control.**

**Immediately to his right, Malakiah could feel heat and see smoke and flames were pouring out of the windows and the roof of the kitchen. Castle Graystone had a serious fault—its kitchen adjourned the back of the castle. Other castles typically had their kitchens built a good distance away from the other buildings so, should such catch on fire, the blaze would not necessarily consume the rest of the castle. Due to the lack of space in Castle Graystone’s rear courtyard, the kitchen had been built attached to the castle itself.**

**The sergeant informed him, "Milord, de fire's so blessed hot we can barely get close to it to get water on it."**

**"I realize that, Sergeant. Still, we must find another way to put the fire out."**

**"I can still try my wand, Lord Malakiah," the ambassador offered.**

**Lu, who had changed back to his normal form, came up to them. "My friend," he said, gesturing with his hands. "Move people away from fire. Have potion. Help put out fire. May hurt people if they close." Lu then made gestures and noises, acting as he would toss something, and made a sound while spreading his hands apart.**

**"The word is ‘explosion,’ Lu," the knight informed his friend. Malakiah next addressed the others, "Everyone, move away from the fire. The ambassador and Lu will try to put out the blaze." When everyone was clear, Malakiah said, "Go ahead and try your wand, Your Excellency."**

**The ambassador pulled out his wand, pointed it at the fire, and said a word in the Elven language. A white shower of snow shot out and covered the nearby wall of the main castle and the kitchen area with a thin layer of ice. The fire, while not put out, was greatly diminished. The heat from the flames began to melt the ice, sending up clouds of steam.**

**Lu moved closer to the ambassador to stare curiously at the wand.**

**The ambassador apologized, "Not the success I had hoped for."**

**"Try it again, Your Excellency. It is slowing the flames. The fire on the outside is out; just the fire within the building is still burning. This time, get closer."**

**The blond elf moved as close as he could, aimed his wand at one of the windows where the tongues of fire lashed out, and fired. More ice formed, coating the walls and around the window, but the flames continued unabated inside.**

**The ambassador shook his head. "I am sorry, Lord Malakiah. The ice wand does not have the power necessary to extinguish the fire."**

**"Do not worry, Your Excellency, you have slowed it.” Malakiah now tapped the shoulder of Lu, informing him, "Lu, it is now your turn."**

**Lu instructed, "Please move away; get down." Then, advancing with three bottles in his hand, Lu got as close as he could to the roaring fire, which was slowly rebuilding in strength. Malakiah and the ambassador watched, unsure of what to expect.**

**"What is that strange humanoid doing?" asked the elf.**

**"Watch and see, Your Excellency. You will be impressed."**

**"Did you notice how he looked at my wand? It was as if he had never seen magic before."**

**"Possibly, he has not."**

**"We have seen his transforming ability. That has to be magical."**

**"Or it could be a natural ability of his race."**

**"A fascinating theory. I would love to discuss that with you sometime."**

**Lu combined the contents of the first and second bottles into the third empty one and then heaved the third bottle as hard as he could at the burning building, yelling, "People, down!" He fell to the ground.**

**When it hit the side of the kitchen, the bottle exploded with such intensity it extinguished the fire as a person would blow out a candle. The kitchen's remaining walls fell over on themselves, while pieces of the building’s roof were thrown all over.**

**Both Malakiah, the ambassador, and others, lying on their backs, felt the concussive wind blow over them. Amidst the shower of debris, the ambassador slowly regained his feet.**

**"Great El! Verily, that was an experience! How did he generate such an explosion with such little liquid?"**

**Malakiah looked over to see Lu had regained his feet and seemed to be holding another bottle. Malakiah turned to the elf. "We better stay down. He looks as if he is about to throw another one."**

**The knight and the ambassador flattened as Lu hurled the second potion. As it hit the smoldering debris, this bottle emitted a loud poof and released a fine, white powdery substance that spread out similarly to smoke and covered the rubble of the kitchen. The air immediately around became abruptly colder as the white powder continued to fall.**

**Rising, the ambassador commented, more to himself than to Malakiah, "Interesting, that second potion works on a similar principle to my ice wand. It produced an endothermic reaction that absorbed the fire's remains and then smothered it with this powder. That is why the air became so abruptly colder. If I could have concentrated my wand into the building, it would have done the same thing, but I was too far away."**

**Shivering, Malakiah realized he was only dressed in his pants and had merely bandages on his upper torso. He wondered how Lu must feel as he was currently only wearing his loincloth.**

**A female's voice spoke into his mind. *Here, Lord Malakiah, take my robe.* Jettie put the covering around his broad shoulders. Gratefully, he accepted his gift and wrapped it around him, noticing it was a little short and small for him. He saw Kame had also handed Lu his robe, and Lu was putting it back on.**

**"Thank you, Jettie," the knight responded, gratefully looking at her, "but won’t you be cold?"**

**Dressed in nightclothes, Jettie looked up at him gently. *Do not worry. As I am used to living in frigid water, the cold does not affect me. I am only wearing this garb now because Ateena tells me it is expected of the people here.***

**A question arose in Malakiah's head, but he decided not to ask it and instead inquired, "Can you talk as we do?"**

***I am physically able to speak your language, but I would have to learn how to make its sounds. What you call telepathy is how my people normally converse with one another. Moreover, to answer your other question—no, my people do not wear clothing. We do not need to.***

**Blushing, Malakiah realized she had read his mind.**

**Changing the subject so the knight would not be embarrassed, Jettie thought, *I have heard from Ateena you have saved my life. Thank you; I owe you.***

**Nodding, Malakiah answered, "You are welcome. It is my honored duty as a Perencian Knight to rescue people in distress. I was glad I could defend you from that mob. You may consider me your protector as long as you require one."**

**Ateena came over and said, "I am sorry to break this conversation up, but, Malakiah, you need to get inside before you become chilled. Also, people require your guidance."**

**"I understand, Ateena.”**

**Malakiah could not locate his parents, but they could have gone out the front entrance of the inner castle. He announced, "My people. The fire is out. We must go inside as it is still dark. Sergeant Efren, organize the guards to search the castle for any more enemy marauders. Soldiers and servants, we need to remove all the bodies, treat any wounded, and clean up the place. If any of these assassins are still alive, confine them so we can question them. Sergeant, I need a list of casualties when you get the chance. I know we have been through a lot, but we have our tasks to perform. So, let us get moving."**

**Sergeant Efren started to round up his men and lead them into the castle. Kame and a few other soldiers were ordered to stay around Malakiah to protect him and his friends. The servants began to shuffle back slowly into the building.**

**Malakiah next addressed the Elven healer. "Ateena, I have heard your counsel. Know you, I cannot rest presently. I have work to do, and you have wounded to tend to. I will rest when I know where my family is and have placed someone else in charge. Go!"**

**Ateena looked as if she would say something but stiffly walked away, motioning Jettie to follow her, and they went inside the castle. At the door, Jettie glanced intently at Malakiah once more before she entered.**

**Malakiah stood with the Elven ambassador, who seemed amused at the exchange between the healer and Malakiah. Together they waited as Lu walked up to them.**

**"I did good?” the man asked.**

**"Excellent, Lu! A bit excessive, but you did put out the fire. Someday, when we get a moment, you and I are going to have a long talk about these abilities which you have and of which you never told me." Glancing at the ambassador, Malakiah added, "Well done, Your Excellency. If it was not for both of you, I think this night would have turned out very differently."**

**Lu bowed slightly while the ambassador replied formally, "I was glad to be of service, Lord Malakiah."**

**"You have. And, please call me ‘Malakiah’ when we are in informal settings."**

**"As you wish, *Malakiah*. You may also use my given name as is your human norm if you would prefer to.”**

**Malakiah announced, "Let us go inside. The fighting is the easy part. The hard part is figuring out what in Adonai’s name happened here tonight. I may need both of your help to discover that!"**

**A voice rang out behind them. "Sir Knight, wait for me!"**

**The group saw the kelvin running toward them. "Unbelievable, Lu!” Kush exclaimed, "How did you make such a big explosion with such a small bottle? I've never seen such a thing. The force from it knocked me off my feet. And how—"**

**Sternly, Malakiah glared at the kelvin, stuck his finger out, and placed it on his lips. Kush fell silent and looked meekly at Malakiah with his green eyes, expecting a lecture.**

**"Kush, do not ever run off such as that *again*," he said firmly.**

**"But I thought you were going to follow me," the kelvin objected.**

**“I was injured. I could not climb down the rope. Next time, wait for us to follow. Do not run off. Understand? There are times when you must follow orders—such as on my quest!"**

**"Yes, I'm sorry."**

**"Don't worry too much, Little One. You did a good job ringing the bell." He patted the kelvin. "Now, let us go inside. I am getting cold."**

**"Sir Knight?"**

**"Yes, Sir Thief?"**

**"Nice outfit, but I don't think it is your color, though."**

**Malakiah realized he was still wearing the blue robe Jettie had given him.**

**"Very funny, Little One," Malakiah muttered as he heard the ambassador snicker beside him.**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Unfortunately, Malakiah spoke truly because the night did seem to last forever. After going inside the castle, Malakiah put on a suitable robe and looked for his parents and brother. One of the guards informed him his family was safe and standing outside in the inner courtyard, reluctant to enter. Malakiah went outside to inform them all was well and the fire had been extinguished. It took him a few minutes to inform them what had happened to him since he had last seen them. After hearing this news, his father graciously thanked Kush, Lu, and the ambassador for their help, and told Malakiah and Alcham he and his mother would want to talk to them in private.**

**Inside the front hallway, guards scurried about carrying dead bodies and picking up discarded weapons while the servants cleaned up pools of blood with rags and mops. Malakiah's mother paled when she saw the carnage but did not say a word. Alcham seemed indifferent.**

**Figuring the throne room would be empty, the duke took his family there and asked the guards to guard each door and let no one in unless he had an important message. Except for a few torches at the entrance, the room was almost pitch black. When the duke pulled out his sword, its light lit up the room dimly. Excusing Malakiah's friends, the duke gestured for his family to stand around him.**

**His father did not say anything at first. As if he was gathering his thoughts, the duke stared intently at Malakiah for a moment, and then at Alcham. This silence made the knight nervous, and for some reason, he sensed he was going to get a lecture.**

**"Malakiah and Alcham, I must thank you and scold you at the same time." Neither brother spoke. "Malakiah," the duke continued, "I thank you for sending your friend to help your mother and me. He probably saved our lives. I thank you for sending your short friend up to the roof to ring the bell, alerting everyone in the castle and the town. Finally, I thank you for taking charge and getting your friends to put out the fire, thus saving our home. I must add, though, you took a stupid risk by running off with only two guards. You nearly got yourself killed!"**

**"Yes, Father," Malakiah added, "but I must protect others!"**

**"I know that!" the duke snapped. "But you also have a duty to the Duchy of Emerald Valley to stay alive and not run off as if you were a young, vainglorious squire when danger beckons. Remember, you are my heir, and I would thank you to think a little of that before you go off to save someone. You have a duty as a Perencian Knight and a duty to your people as Marquis. There is a balance there you need to realize and work upon. Do you understand me?"**

**Stunned, Malakiah nodded and meekly replied, "Yes, Father."**

**Seeing his youngest son smirk, the duke lashed out at him. "Alcham, you have no reason to be proud of yourself! You did seek us out when we evacuated the castle and located guards to watch over us. However, I heard you were not in your room again because you were probably cavorting about as would a crazed satyr. What were you doing this time? Drinking, gambling, carousing, or in the arms of one of the castle’s female servants?"**

**Flushing slightly, Alcham looked down at his feet.**

**“This stunt may have accidentally saved your life, but it nearly cost that of your more responsible brother. He almost got himself killed trying to save your libertine arse! I hope you spend some time thinking about that, young man."**

**The duke changed his tone. "Now, we must take charge. People need our guidance and help. We must ensure the castle is secure from all remaining enemies. Malakiah, that is your job. Find out how they got in and how to prevent a similar attack from happening again. Alcham, your job is to supervise the remaining guards and the Town Watch and have them supplied and readied for a possible second attack. Mirram and I will handle the administrative duties here."**

**"Your Grace!" a young soldier timidly interrupted the group.**

**"What is it, Soldier?"**

**"Captain Baylor is outside and wants to see you."**

**"Thanks be to Adonai he is still alive," the duke said. "Send him in." The soldier left. “Alcham, you and the captain will work together. We all have work to do—let us do it."**

**Malakiah led a patrol of soldiers in a systematic search. Using Kush's uncanny ability to find secret doors, the young knight had his guards check out every one. Malakiah was astonished to discover how many existed. Some had been unknowingly and fortunately blocked by furniture, preventing entry. The heavy bed in his parents’ room had blocked its secret door and probably spared their lives. The dwarves and goblins had had to resort to an alternate one and attack the duke and duchess from the outside. The bed in the Elven ambassador's room also had blocked the secret door there.**

**Malakiah had Kush mark every secret door found and then either lock or jam it. Any that could not be secured were guarded.**

**Finally, before dawn, Ateena sought Malakiah out and insisted he sleep to let his wounds heal. The knight went back with his friends to his cleaned-up room, collapsed on his bed, and fell asleep immediately. While Malakiah and Kush slept, Lu watched over them while two soldiers guarded their door. The ambassador went to his room to rest.**

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***Seventhday of the third month of spring, 2125***

**A few hours later, Malakiah was awakened and informed, within a half-hour, an emergency leadership meeting would take place in the auxiliary conference room. The knight felt as if he had not slept at all. His body ached everywhere he had been hurt in. Malakiah let his servants dress him in a mail shirt and other suitable attire just in case of battle.**

**He went out on the balcony. The sky was steely gray with clouds that hung oppressively low over the mountains, but the visibility was good. No fires were burning in Garend.**

**Malakiah noticed a few columns of smoke near the north end of the valley. "That does not look good," he said to Lu and Kush, seeing they had followed him. "I think these attacks may be a prelude to war."**

**Kush asked, as he looked at the city, "What fun adventure is going on today?"**

**"Nothing too exciting, Little Thief," replied Malakiah. "A meeting to discuss what actions we are going to take after last night's attack."**

**"Sounds boring."**

**"It probably will be," the knight affirmed.**

**"Then, if you don't mind, I'm going back to bed."**

**"Quite acceptable, Little One. Get some sleep for me."**

**"I'll try to," replied Kush who lay back down on his makeshift bed and fell asleep almost immediately.**

**The knight ordered one of the guards to watch the kelvin. The other followed Lu and Malakiah as they walked to the meeting.**

**The auxiliary conference room was located in the middle of the castle; it had no windows or doors except for the one by which Malakiah had entered. Unlike the more elegant conference room downstairs used for ceremonial or official meetings, this room was plain and where the castle's official work was done. The room’s furnishings consisted of one long, wooden table surrounded by high-backed chairs, a few bookshelves, and some maps of Emerald Valley and Perencia on the walls. Some lanterns were lit along the table to brighten the gray, stone walls.**

**At the table, many people were seated. Malakiah's father sat at the end of the table with Captain Baylor standing next to him. They avidly discussed some subject. Alcham slouched in a seat to the right of his father. He looked bored as he rolled a pair of dice repeatedly. Next to Alcham sat Horafius who looked rather calm and collected.**

**Two whom Malakiah did not recognize had their backs to him. One man was tall and stout with pale, red hair while the other was much shorter, had black hair, and burly arms. Seeing the seat between the short, black-haired man and his father was empty, Malakiah chose to sit there. Lu stood at the door and watched over the table.**

**After Malakiah came Adremius, dressed in a gray robe, shuffling in with two servants, each carrying a large stash of books and scrolls. Seating himself at the opposite end of the table from the duke, Adremius pulled out a feather, a bottle of ink, and began to write.**

**Malakiah looked to his left and noticed the short, burly man there had a long beard and was a dwarf. Seeing his eyes on him, the dwarf grumpily sneered. "Yes, Yur Lordship, I am a dwarf. But don’t ask me—I have no idea what is going on eider."**

**Malakiah had not meant to stare but had noticed this dwarf did not have the bulging forehead or any of the other deformities such as those who had attacked him. He looked more like the other dwarves whom he had seen. The young knight also observed this dwarf was dressed in the uniform the soldiers of Garend wore, so he concluded this one was in the service of his father.**

**Malakiah replied, "I was not going to accuse you. I was just surprised to see a dwarf here."**

**"Ya sure looked as if ya would, ma lord," the dwarf retorted.**

**Malakiah’s father abruptly brought the meeting to order by picking up a smooth, polished rock and striking it against the table. Everyone immediately quieted. Baylor went to his seat. Even Alcham put away his dice.**

**The duke started the meeting by saying, "Good day, everyone. I am sorry to bring you here on such short notice, but lately, I have been informed of some rather disturbing news from across the valley. The first thing I want to point out is the people here are all that remains of my Ruling Council in Garend.”**

**"What?" gasped Malakiah as those in the room murmured.**

**"Yes, Son. The attack on this castle and Garend was not an isolated event. As of now, we know there were also others in Pinevale and Collumberry. There may have been attacks in the other towns, but we have not heard from them yet." The duke paused to let that bit of news soak in. "Captain Baylor, would you please present your report?"**

**The captain announced, "The rumors of an army of goblins, dwarves, and other races massing to our north with hostile intents toward us must now be considered *confirmed*; undoubtedly, these forces instigated last night’s attacks. Furthermore, these attacks were not random but instead were mainly focused on the military and religious leaders in command in each town. In Castle Graystone, we were fortunate. I survived an assassination attempt, but we lost our Castellan Sir Wilek Dinsmore, my lieutenant, and quite a few soldiers. All of His Lordship's family was attacked; luckily, no one was killed. In Garend, the Archtheocrat Tamar and most of his assistants were slain. The captain of the guard in Garend, Hezzik, is dead." Pointing to the dwarf next to Malakiah, Baylor announced, "Lieutenant Augen Blackhammer was his second and will now command in his place."**

**"Convenient," muttered the red-haired man to the left of Augen.**

**"What was dat, Lander?" asked Augen with an infuriated tone.**

**"I said," repeated Lander, looking directly at Augen, "it's rather convenient so many were killed except for you, dwarf, especially when we were attacked by *dwarves* working with goblins. Those are your people!"**

**"Ya dare accuse me, ya carrot-top?" roared Augen, standing on the chair so he could look eye-to-eye at Lander. "Why I oughta—"**

**"Enough!" snapped the duke, banging the stone hard against the table. "We have enough troubles! I do not want us fighting amongst ourselves. Pray continue, Baylor."**

**Baylor continued, "Our town hall was burnt and destroyed. A few buildings such as the temple, some theocrats' homes, and others were set on fire, but all these blazes were put out. Luckily, it rained yesterday; the fires did not spread as quickly as they could have had those sites been dry. We might have lost a bigger portion of the town.**

**“A messenger rode in from Collumberry and reported all the leaders in that town were killed last night. Another one came in from Pinevale with a message from Penrod, the captain of the guard there. He informed us a few leaders in his town were also assassinated. Luckily, he survived an attempt on him. No word has come in from other towns in this area, but I predict they will report the same."**

**"It is a well-conceived plan," added the duke. "The enemy strike forces kill the leaders first, causing chaos, and then their army comes marching in to conquer next."**

**"But, Ya Grace," Augen interrupted, "goblins are too stupid to come up wid such a sophisticated campaign. Dwarves would not fight dat way either. If we dwarves were to attack ya, we would announce it, march out, and attack ya on de field."**

**"I noticed you said ‘we dwarves,’" accused Lander.**

**"Look here, Lander. I have been serving de army of Emerald Valley since long before ya were gumming ya own food. I know de dwarves of Ferrokken well enough to state dey would not fight ya in such a way widout warning. Besides, de dwarves would not strike unless dey were first attacked. It is not deir way!"**

**"Then why did they have all these secret tunnels built into the castle?" asked Lander belligerently.**

**"My best guess is, when de dwarves originally constructed dis place, dey probably built in weak points and secret entrances dat lead to tunnels dat head straight to Ferrokken. Dat way, if de humans or anyone else went to war against Ferrokken, using dis castle as a base, de dwarves would have an easy way of gaining entry and taking it over. By de great Iron Gates of my former kingdom, I would not be surprised if de dwarves have not employed dis same arrangement in many other strategic sites around here. Dey have an extensive web of tunnels under dis whole valley and de surrounding mountains which lead from Ferrokken into every town in Emerald Valley."**

**Alcham blurted out, "And now they are using them! The dwarves aligned with the goblins have begun an attack on us!"**

**"Dat's impossible!" roared Augen. "De dwarves and goblins hate each other so much dey would sooner attack each other. Why, even I would slash in two de next goblin I saw."**

**"Maybe, dwarf, they have put their differences aside because they have found a common enemy—us," suggested Alcham.**

**Augen responded, "Dose differences are so long standing dey could never go away. Look here, whelp! Stop dinking wid yer sword! Ya shouldna jump to conclusions widout good evidence. If ya can’t—leave us, and go chase one of dose servant wenches ya amuses yerself wid."**

**Alcham placed his hands on the table and stood up; his cheeks were red with anger, and he looked set to pull out his sword and run the dwarf through. Augen stood to face him.**

**"Son, sit down! I need not remind you Lieutenant Augen is our trusted officer," ordered the duke firmly. "And, Augen, you mind your tongue! You are speaking to *my son!* You remember that!"**

**Alcham stood there rigidly staring at Augen. "I won't forget this insult, dwarf," he muttered and sat down slowly. Augen stared back at him until Alcham looked away. The dwarf looked very pleased with himself until he saw the fire in the duke's eyes and his face fell.**

**Ambassador Horafius meekly raised his hand and said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. May I ask some questions?"**

**"Yes, Your Excellency," spoke the duke. "What are they?"**

**"I do not know much about war tactics or strategy, but I have a couple of insights. One, if the dwarves have tunnels that lead into this castle and to all the towns in Emerald Valley, why would they attack with such a small, scattered force with the help of goblins? The population of Ferrokken is estimated to be about a million. Why not just invade and overwhelm everyone at once by using these tunnels?"**

**"Good question," Malakiah affirmed.**

**"De elf does have a point," Augen commented. "As I said, if de dwarves of Ferrokken were to attack, dey would come in force to dis land through de tunnels, declare deir intent, and meet ya on de field of battle. Not kill de leaders and den run off. Dat's not de Dwarven way."**

**"Lieutenant Augen," the ambassador continued, "could it be possible the goblins discovered these tunnels *accidentally* and *they* are using them to attack us?"**

**Augen uttered a Dwarven obscenity and then declared, "Never! Dese tunnels have many traps in dem. If de goblins used dem, dey would lose a good part of deir army to dese traps. Only dwarves familiar wid de tunnels could use dem. Also, de web is very extensive, and it would be easy for dem stupid goblins to become hopelessly lost."**

**"Could a few renegade dwarves banished from Ferrokken have joined up with a goblin tribe and shown them how to get through the tunnels and into this castle without triggering the traps?"**

**"Possibly. I stake you, dere would have to be a few dwarves among de attackers to guide dem around de traps. However, dere are not dat many such dwarves. And, among dose dat are, why would such want to attack Emerald Valley? Most likely, dey would rather show de goblins de secret ways of getting into Ferrokken and assault dere instead."**

**A thought sprite brought an idea to Malakiah. "Could the aim of these attacks be an attempt by someone using goblins and dwarves to initiate a war between Emerald Valley and Ferrokken?"**

**Augen whistled in amazement while the others looked stunned.**

**"But who would do such a thing?" stated Lander.**

**"I am not sure, but that could be possible," said Baylor, berating himself. "Why have we not considered this option before?"**

**"Do not be so hard on yourself, Baylor," reassured the duke. "We should have all seen this possibility."**

**"Could the goblins plan this deception?" asked Alcham.**

**"Naw, dey are too stupid to organize such a plan," scoffed Augen.**

**"Lieutenant Augen," the ambassador stated, "for some time, my people have tracked the goblins and other vile creatures all coming together to a valley in the mountains just north of Emerald Valley. Our observations have led us to one conclusion. Goblins of warring tribes, trolls, and ogres have banded together for war. How such a contentious collection of creatures could work together, however, is a great mystery."**

**"That could be trouble," replied Lander.**

**"How sure are you about this report, Your Excellency?" asked Malakiah, wanting the elf to explain himself more to the others.**

**"Verily; my people are expert woodsmen and trackers."**

**"Then let us suppose this situation. Their leadership has somehow built an army by banding together diverse, normally hostile creatures. It is also attempting through subtle means to trick Emerald Valley and Ferrokken into declaring war upon each other. What a brilliant tactic! Rather than fighting our nations separately or together, they get us to battle each other instead! Then they need only to wait until one is victorious and also weakened. At that point, they attack the spent victor. Niccolo Bernadi described such tactics.” Noting a few confused looks around the table, he added, “He was a political theorist back in Perencia’s classical period. I read his works during my studies at the Academy!"**

**"That is a good theory, Lord Malakiah, but there is a big mystery in it," the ambassador suggested.**

**"And what is that?"**

**"How to make dwarves fight alongside goblins! Not with them!"**

**"Perhaps through bribery. Or that the dwarves are mercenaries.” Malakiah offered.**

**"Never!" yelled Augen. "Dere is no way a dwarf would betray his clan or kingdom. I don't care how much gold or silver ya can offer him—a good dwarf holds his loyalty foremost to his kingdom."**

**"As you did, dwarf, when you deserted it?" suggested Lander.**

**Augen stood up on his chair and addressed the others. "As most of ya know, I am a member of de Blackhammer Clan. Dat is one of de lower clans in Ferrokken, and we are treated badly by de other Dwarven ones. After I became of age, I went out into de top-siders’ realm and discovered I liked it much better dan my clannish home. Derefore, I chose to enlist in de army of Garend. Dat is why I am no longer associated wid Ferrokken.” He then turned and faced Lander, yelling, “And if ya make one more insinuation such as dat, implying I have deserted ma kingdom, I will take ma battle axe, chop ya open, and see if yer blood is de same color as yer ugly hair!"**

**"Try it, mole!" replied Lander, his hand going for his sword.**

**"That's enough, you two!" shouted the duke as he slammed the rock against the table a couple of times. "Both of you, *sit!* One more outburst, and I will have you both broken in rank! I need you two to work together. I cannot afford to have you battling with one another when we may be preparing for war itself."**

**Slowly, Augen and Lander each sat down in their seats. As he saw the two pull back, Malakiah breathed a sigh of relief. *This development is not good,* he thought. *The presence of dwarves with the goblins in these recent attacks is making everyone suspicious. If it were only an attack by the goblins, we would be working together to fight against those foul creatures. Instead, we are at each other’s throats.* Glancing at his father, Malakiah noticed the man now looked much older and very tired.**

**The duke spoke, "Captain Baylor, please inform us what has been done and what you suggest we do next.”**

**Baylor announced, "We are unaware of the full extent of last night’s series of attacks. All we know is we were attacked through these secret passageways that led inside the castle and the city—and what was reported to us by the messengers dispatched to us from the other towns."**

**"Captain, what has been done about those sheol-accursed Dwarven passageways?" asked Lander.**

**"With the help of Lord Malakiah's friend, Kush, we have sealed, blocked, or stationed soldiers to guard every secret door we could identify. I have doubled the guards throughout this castle’s corridors. That covers the situation here. For the town of Garend, all available guards and soldiers have been called in, and all posts are now manned. Our city is on full alert. We know Collumberry and Pinevale have been attacked. The status of the rest of Emerald Valley, however, is *uncertain*. There are smoke columns to our north—some area is burning there. I have sent some small patrols toward New Haven to gather information and return as quickly as possible with reports. Until I hear more, I will reserve taking any actions to protect Emerald Valley itself."**

**"Have you begun to mobilize the army?" questioned Malakiah.**

**"Yes, I have, Lord Malakiah. I have a few sergeants bringing together the Watches, enlisting young, male civilians for war service, and other soldiers gathering supplies. I have also sent some messengers to neighboring provinces and Suena requesting military help. Unfortunately, such aid will not come for a few weeks. We are on our own for now."**

**"Why don't we arrest all dwarves, string them up, and interrogate them? Let's find out why they have turned against us," stated Alcham.**

**"I have got a better idea," spoke Augen quietly in an ominous voice. "Why don't we tie a gag over a stupid brat's mouth?"**

**"Silence!" ordered the duke. "I weary of these foolish accusations! Pray continue, Baylor."**

**"Thank you, Your Grace," affirmed Baylor. "May I add for the record I do not believe the Dwarven nation has allied itself with the goblins. Some disenchanted dwarves, however, may have."**

**"I shall never believe it," muttered Augen, shaking his head.**

**"As of now, we have a few working theories and little other than circumstantial evidence to back any of them up," Baylor finished with.**

**Adremius, who had been scribing the whole exchange on parchment, spoke up, "Excuse me, Captain. I may have something to add to this discussion."**

**Baylor’s face showed surprise for the sage rarely spoke up. "Master Adremius, pray speak then," he requested.**

**"As you all know, I am a historian and have many references on the Dwarven race. Although it has been quite a while since I've studied Ferrokken in detail, I can give you some interesting information about their ways, culture, traditions, and the clans themselves.**

**“Ferrokken, as you all know, is rather extensive in size and rumored to stretch a great distance along the Narraconda and Peridian Mountains. The main part of the kingdom is under Hawksbill Mountain. Its many levels descend far down—how deep is unknown. The dwarves, as Lieutenant Augen mentioned, also have numerous tunnels that give them access to all the areas in Emerald Valley and beyond.**

**“The dwarves, as you know, are a patriarchal society and have a strict system of clans. The ruling one is the Rockhill Clan; they have been in power for the last thousand years. Its head is Khaleb Duth Rockhill. I've met him a couple of times; he is a shrewd, intelligent, and charismatic dwarf. He is well revered among his people. His clan consists mainly of scribes, administrators, sages, and other governmental officials.**

**“Below that clan is the Ironweaver Clan; this clan is well known for working and designing with all types of metals and especially in fabricating weapons of war and armor. They are a proud and haughty clan and act as if they are the rulers. The third clan in ranking order is the Steelgrip Clan; they are also designers of armor and miscellaneous metallic weapons of war such as catapults, ballisticas, battering rams, and so on. The fourth clan, and I might add the biggest in population in Ferrokken, is the Coldsteel Clan. They also make weapons, but usually work with iron and steel to create items for everyday uses. The fifth clan is the Pickaxe Clan, and they–."**

**"Excuse me, Adremius," said the duke with an irritated voice. "Most of these facts, we know. Can you get to the point?"**

**"I'm sorry, Your Grace. I tend to ramble at times."**

**"You don't say," mumbled Alcham.**

**"Just interrupt me when I do that, please," suggested Adremius, looking apologetically at the duke but giving Alcham a quick, cold stare. The gnome then paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. "What I am doing is confirming Captain Baylor's suggestion some dwarves, maybe a clan, have joined up with the goblins for some reason to try to start a war between Ferrokken and Emerald Valley."**

**Augen snorted.**

**Adremius continued, "Some clans have always been rivals. For example, the Ironweavers and the Coldsteels were once bitter enemies and still are rivals. The Pickaxe and the Stonecarvers were too. Some of these grudges take forever to die down. Some of the lower clans, the Ironforge, Brandstetters, or," Adremius paused to glance at Augen nervously, “the Blackhammers."**

**"Never!" shouted Augen. "Dere is no way even for all the gems in Ferrokken my clan would ever betray de kingdom and align demselves wid de goblins!"**

**"I do agree with you there, Augen," spoke Adremius soothingly to calm down the dwarf. "I do not think the Blackhammer Clan by their reputation or personality would betray their kingdom, but the Brandstetters and Ironforges could."**

**"Good, I'm glad ya trust me—no one else does."**

**"I do, Augen," Baylor affirmed.**

**"I do, too," said both Malakiah and the duke at the same time. As they looked curiously at each other, the duke winked at him.**

**"Anything else, Adremius?" asked the duke.**

**"Nothing else, but I need to do some more research," the gnome added. "There is something important here I am forgetting."**

**Baylor announced, "I suggest for the immediate present we prepare to meet that northern army in battle while trying to open diplomatic channels to the Dwarven kingdom. Talking will accomplish nothing with those infernal goblin hordes, but it may determine Ferrokken’s involvement."**

**"Captain Baylor, what are we telling the townspeople?" Malakiah inquired. "We certainly do not want them to panic."**

**"The truth, Lord Malakiah. I've had town criers going through the streets informing people goblins have sneaked into the town during the night and tried to kill the city's leaders. We have told them Hezzik and many theocrats are dead, but everyone else is alive. We are also telling them to prepare for war."**

**"Is it prudent to tell them Hezzik and Tamar were killed?” Lander asked. "Did you tell them who is in charge?"**

**"Yes, I did think about that. Many soldiers involved in the fighting would know Hezzik, Tamar, and the other theocrats were killed and would tell the townspeople; I thought it best to confirm that fact. Also, I have declared myself as the temporary captain of the guard in Garend."**

**"Are you sure that is wise, Captain?" asked Malakiah. "Who is in charge of the guards here in this castle?"**

**"You are temporarily in charge, Lord Malakiah."**

**"Me?" choked Malakiah, feeling his face redden in surprise. "Why? I just arrived here a few days ago. I am not familiar with the people in the castle and how day-to-day operations are done now."**

**"You will learn. Not much has changed in how this castle is run. After yesterday's attack, there might be some major changes, and I need you to implement them."**

**"How about my father?" Malakiah pressed.**

**"He has other duties to attend to such as making his presence seen among the soldiers and the people of Garend and encouraging them by giving speeches. Malakiah, you certainly impressed the townspeople by breaking up the riot in the marketplace and saving the innocent Elven girl. Many people think if you would go so far as to help an elf, they know you would do your best to serve them. There are other reasons too, but you and I can discuss them later."**

**Malakiah looked awkwardly at all the people sitting with him at the table. He felt very inadequate to lead under the present, unfamiliar circumstances but could see in most of the faces of those seated they did believe in him. The one exception was his brother. *Better you than me,* Alcham mouthed silently. Apparently, a duty he had not wanted had been passed from him.**

***I do not want this responsibility,* Malakiah thought and started to object, but stopped, realizing he had to set the example of being a leader. He would talk about his reservations to Baylor and his father later. "As you request," he declared with a firm voice that surprised him with its determination, "I will accept this temporary position."**

**Baylor said, "Thank you, Malakiah, your father and I knew we could depend on you."**

**Baylor then issued certain assignments and duties to the other leaders. Alcham was appointed to help organize the militia in the town and check on the distribution of necessary supplies; the youth merely shrugged and accepted this duty.**

**After a few more assignments were given, and routine questions were answered, the duke dismissed the group and warned them to be alert and prepared to meet at any time for new information was coming in constantly.**

**Most everyone in the room immediately left except for Baylor, the duke, Lu, and Malakiah. Malakiah, once the others had left, looked questioningly at his father.**

**The duke, sensing his son’s unspoken concern, replied, "Please do not object to this appointment, my son. I need you for this important command."**

**"Why me, Father?” Malakiah asked.**

**"Malakiah," Baylor answered, "you are the only one we could appoint to this position. Although we trust him, many others would not follow Augen because he is a dwarf. Lander is too quick to judge and too biased. He would declare war on both dwarves and goblins. You know how Alcham is. Castellan Abelard would have been a possibility, but he has recently retired for his mind is slipping and is thus unsuitable. His nephew Wils is watching him. Everyone else is incapable or not trustworthy. Yes, you are new, but you have not taken sides. You show good judgment and have your Academy training to draw upon."**

**"But who could I trust to assist and advise me?"**

**"Lander can, but remember he holds many strong opinions about everything and everyone. Augen will help you too. You can ask assistance from soldiers such as your childhood friend, Kaimin. He is knowledgeable about the daily routines of the castle and the men who work there. I am sure your silent friend back there, Kush, the Elven ambassador, and others can assist you in other ways.**

**“Your duties will at first only be concerned with the defense of the castle. Eventually, your father and I will require you to organize our soldiers into two groups: a force that will stay and guard the castle and an army that will engage the enemy in defense of our valley. The army may be sent out in two divisions. You may well lead the advance one which will be sent to support New Haven if the army to the north invades our valley."**

**Malakiah was stunned; he could not believe the faith these two men had in him.**

**"The proposing of such plans might be premature, Malakiah. Nevertheless, if they should prove necessary, we are confident you could carry them out. We know through Sir Heddrick there is something about you that makes people want to follow you. For instance, your silent friend, Lu. Any can see he is loyal to you. The kelvin would be a hard person for anyone else to manage, but you do well with him. I have noticed the Elven ambassador, the healer Ateena, and the ocean elf seem to follow you. They, Lu, and Kush make up a rather diverse group. Yet, you command them well, showing you possess the traits of a natural leader. Such is what we require now."**

***So much for my hopes of taking it easy on my return home,* thought Malakiah, *but I cannot abandon my family, friends, or people.***

**"Very well," he announced aloud, "with Adonai's help, I will serve you and aid you in this war."**

**Smiling proudly, the duke replied, "We knew we could count on you, lad. Now, let us get to work.”**