## Prologue

***Twenty-eighth day of the third month of spring, 2125***

**he early morning air was cool and damp. A thick veil of fog oppressively covered the land, practically transforming the landscape into myriad shades of gray. Through this still bleakness, four figures, dressed in black, rode their horses purposely across the barren land.**

 **The lead silhouette led his group silently. The fog effectively prevented anyone from seeing them ride, which suited him. He also cursed this enveloping shroud for making it impossible for him to know exactly where he was and in which direction he was going. He practically felt smothered by its cold, wet embrace. He declined, though, to ask for assistance from the others. He felt such would make him look weak and would sooner die than appear so.**

 **Typically, this adverse weather would not bother him, but he had an appointment and did not want to be late. If he took too much time getting there, those waiting might not stay. Since the end of the battle against the goblins, those others had become increasingly nervous, and he needed to calm their fears and show them he still was in charge. And such required his finding their rendezvous somewhere in this gray soup.**

 **A large shadow gradually emerged from the mist—a tall structure with a slanted roof and two low windows on both sides of a large door. He also heard the nearby gurgling of the Emerald River swollen with the recently melted snow from the mountains. He sighed as he recognized the building as his intended destination.**

**He stopped his horse. Without a word, his men dismounted. They scouted stealthily around with their weapons drawn to make sure they would be safe. As their leader watched their progress, he noticed four horses tied to a post just to his right. Seeing such told him his associates most likely waited for him inside.**

**Once his men were satisfied they were alone, his second in command, Radd, with his crossbow cocked, knocked softly. The door slowly opened and a flickering light appeared from within. A tentative, scruffy face looked out and a short, whispered conversation took place before Radd went inside. After a tense moment, Radd glanced out and indicated with a hand gesture for them to come in.**

 **The leader dismounted, letting one of his men secure his horse. As he waited, he absently rubbed his sore shoulder which had been recently injured by a crossbow bolt. Although it had been healed, it ached terribly on this damp morning. He swore he would get revenge on who had shot him. *Most assuredly, he would make that elf pay!***

 **After his men had clustered around to protect him, they walked cautiously to the door. He allowed his men to go in first. After they had entered the building, they spread out and guarded the doors and the windows.**

 **Next, his eyes quickly scanned his surroundings. He was in the main room of a gristmill. He noticed three robed figures gathered around a small fire. They stared warily at him. The other figure stood imperiously behind them, noticeably looking annoyed.**

 **“It is about time you arrived here, Zardyl,” the imperiously-looking one stated ominously.**

 **Shrugging, the man named Zardyl approached the fire and replied mildly, knowing it would annoy the person who had spoken to use his name while omitting his title. “I’m sorry, *Telmar*, but we were a little delayed. You know how the weather is today.”**

 **“I know that!” Telmar snapped. “I had to travel in it too. Do you know how hard it is for a man in my position to get away from New Haven? I had to avoid the watch and the duke’s soldiers to travel out here.”**

 **Zardyl responded, “It was not easy for us to get here either, Telmar. We also had to stay clear of the duke’s patrols, the rangers, and the Sevarnista. The last thing I wanted was to be captured by them.”**

**He flung his cloak at one of Telmar’s men who awkwardly caught it.**

 **“We could have met in a comfortable setting within New Haven,” Telmar snarled. “Zardyl, I do not like being summoned to come out here on this wretchedly cold morning. Don’t you know who I am?”**

 **Zardyl frowned. He had killed men for speaking as rudely as this insolent merchant had just done. On the other hand, Telmar had only met him a couple of times and evidently did not know what was expected of an individual subject to Zardyl’s authority. Zardyl was reasonably sure Telmar had to have heard the stories about his brutality, but this merchant might just be foolish enough to be testing him now. He decided he would be merciful—this time—and merely show this merchant he was in charge. He knew just how to.**

 **Zardyl said, with a toothy smile, “My regrets, Telmar. I could have sent you a message. However, our current situation required us to meet and discuss our next plan of action. May I offer you my most sincere apology for inconveniencing you?”**

**He reached out his hand.**

 **For a moment, the merchant stared at Zardyl to determine if he was serious. When he was satisfied, he extended his own hand and Zardyl engulfed it with his grasp.**

**As he slowly squeezed Telmar’s hand, he added, “You should also know I cannot come into New Haven. Too many people might recognize me. I am fairly sure Renn Skyhawk and his associates have given my description to every guard and soldier in New Haven. I cannot take that chance. Do you now understand why you had to come here?”**

 **He pleasantly smiled as he increased his vise-like grip upon Telmar’s hand. He now watched with amusement Telmar’s face as the merchant struggled to keep his composure. Zardyl’s hard and rugged life had enabled him to develop strong hands; he used them often to kill or torture people. Now, he enjoyed the sensation of leisurely crushing Telmar’s hand despite the merchant’s attempts to withstand the pressure. Telmar’s men had realized what Zardyl was doing, but could not assist their master because Zardyl’s men had their crossbows pointed at them.**

 **The battle of hand strengths continued for almost a minute. Telmar’s face began to grimace as multiple popping sounds from his hand were heard throughout the room.**

 **“I understand! I do understand! Please forgive my rash words!” the merchant gasped with almost a shriek. His knees began buckling.**

 **“Excellent; as long as we understand each other,” Zardyl said with satisfaction as he released Telmar’s hand.**

 **Wincing, Telmar cradled his injured hand under his arm. Zardyl noticed Telmar valiantly kept on his feet. Any normal man in his state would be lying on the floor in tears.**

 **Zardyl glanced at the apprehensive faces of Telmar’s men. They did not look as if they would try anything rash. They probably understood better than Telmar what had happened here and that Zardyl was in command. They were scum, but at least they knew their place.**

 **“Telmar, I’m surprised not to see Perm with us. You usually have him along when we meet,” Zardyl commented blandly.**

 **Grimacing as he inspected his hurt hand, Telmar spat back, “You know perfectly why he is not here. Your leader killed him for his supposed failures!”**

 **Zardyl indeed knew this but wanted to hear how Telmar would explain the man’s absence to him. He was also now aware the merchant was still defiant. Telmar’s hand may be broken but not his spirit. Zardyl realized he might have to make a further example of the merchant and looked forward to that opportunity.**

 **“Yes, she did,” Zardyl said with amusement. “I’m surprised she did not kill you too. She was not a forgiving person. Even with all of your agents, you still could not eliminate the key leaders of this valley and prevent Lord Malakiah and his army from coming here to New Haven.”**

 **“We did our best with the resources you gave us. Goblins and Agghar are not competent assassins,” Telmar countered.**

 **“We do not accept excuses. We were counting on you both. Yet you failed us *miserably*. Perm got what he deserved! You were lucky not to suffer a similar fate. The mirakum’s usual penalty for failure was death.” He paused to let his words sink in. Then he continued. “Regardless, she is gone now. Who has taken Perm’s place?”**

 **“I have,” said one of Telmar’s men. A withering look from the merchant prevented him from speaking further.**

**Telmar focused his attention back on Zardyl. “Yes, that is Casbian. Now he heads both the assassin and the thief guild.”**

 **Looking at Casbian, Zardyl noted he had met this man before. He was a disreputable, ambitious schemer with no sense of style. *If this was the best New Haven had*, Zardyl thought, *what were the others under Telmar’s command like? Perm, for all his faults, had been an adequate leader. It was a shame the mirakum had killed him.***

 **Snorting, Zardyl said, “Whether you shall keep that office, Casbian, shall depend on if you can complete a special job. I want you to direct some of your operatives from the assassin guild to kill two men for me. Their names are Malakiah Defakiran and Renn Skyhawk.”**

 **Telmar gasped. “You’re joking. You want us to get rid of the rangers’ new leader and the duke’s son, the man people call the ‘Emerald Knight?’ Two of the heroes of the Battle of New Haven? The people love them more than Archtheocrat Barjonas or me.”**

 **“I do not joke. I want you to eliminate them as soon as possible,” Zardyl ordered. “They could hinder someone’s intended desire. And Renn has greatly *annoyed* me.”**

 **“I shall order that for you,” Casbian announced, his feral yellow eyes looking eager. “I will even ignore the guild’s usual policy against assassinating ruling officials. I am just surprised you don’t want to do the job yourself.”**

 **“Come, come, Casbian,” Zardyl admonished. “You know how guilds—yours in New Haven and mine—operate. By a strict set of rules. You would not want my men to intrude on your territory just as I would look with disfavor at yours interfering in mine. It works better that way.”**

 **“And we are doing your dirty work for you,” Telmar pointed out.**

 **They both ignored him as Casbian responded, “I know that. It is just, from the stories I’ve heard, I would have thought you would want to take a personal hand in killing them. I would if I were you.”**

 **“As long as it is done, Casbian, it does not matter. You can make it as long and painful as possible, but I want them *dead*,” Zardyl declared. “Personally, I would love to cut out Renn’s heart slowly while he is still alive, but I cannot afford the time. I have other throats to slit.”**

 **“I assume if we do this for you, you will do something in return?” Telmar asked.**

 **“Certainly! We are all guild members. We honor each other’s debts,” Zardyl replied.**

 **Nodding, Telmar said, “We will help you with this. Lord Malakiah and Renn have been giving us problems since their arrival. We would be glad to get rid of them though it will be difficult to do. But what of the Elven mage? Should we eliminate him too? He *did* kill the mirakum.”**

 **Zardyl shrugged. “Horafius did us a favor. The mirakum was becoming unreliable. Rest assured, we are better off without her. Know you all now my orders from my superior are thus: to leave the Elven mage *alone* and *get rid* of Malakiah and Renn.”**

 **“Your *superior*? I thought you were in charge,” said Telmar, his face showing noticeable surprise.**

 **Giving him a level look, Zardyl said, “I command in his place. And know you this further. My superior wisely chose not to seek out the Orb of Kahlinor—if he had, he would have risked being possessed by it. Instead, he decided to let the mirakum find it and cause massive destruction. As you know, she surely did. Now, with her gone, those regions are under his control. And shortly my master wishes to add Emerald Valley to his new possessions.”**

 **“Who is this person?” Telmar asked.**

 **“I'm afraid I cannot disclose that information until you have proven your worth. If you are successful in your tasks, my superior might include you in his master plan. He needs good leaders. If you prove useful, your reward would be beyond your imagining," Zardyl said.**

**Nodding, Telmar announced, "Zardyl, Casbian and I will strive to prove our worth by eliminating Lord Malakiah and Renn Skyhawk. Yet I will admit I am surprised your master does not want us to kill the Elven mage. He possesses the merged Orb of Kahlinor and the Staff of Mallador. What if their powers return? Then he could be a threat."**

 **"My master gave implicit instructions to leave Horafius *alone*. Such gives me the feeling, soon, although he will not wish to, that fool Elven mage will serve our cause."**

 **"How so?" both Telmar and Casbian asked.**

 **"I know not. But I suspect—as does my master—that certain events shall work in our favor, especially when it comes to the Orb. We all know its history. All we have to do, then, is bide our time," Zardyl said with a cruel smile.**

**Part 1:**

**Journey to the Dwarven Kingdom**

**Chapter 1**

**Targeted for Assassination**

***Twenty-ninth day of the third month of spring, 2125***

**ight had long since descended upon the town of New Haven, but the city was far from asleep. Instead, it was full of raucous celebrations. Practically all the townspeople—from the merchants in their luxurious houses to the refugees living on the edges of the city—were singing, dancing, and drinking as they toasted their victory over the enemy army. Celebrations that began in houses and taverns spilled out into the streets. Soon entire sections of New Haven became large street festivals.**

 **From out of one of these galas, a man in armor, Malakiah Defakiran, emerged. The sounds of music and laughter still echoed in his ears as he quickly moved away from the celebrations. A few people called for him to come back, but he ignored them as he nearly fled down the street. After he had traveled a distance, he chanced a look back and was relieved to see he had not been followed. He felt near exhaustion and did not want to be a part of the festivities anymore.**

 **Malakiah slowly wandered with truly no destination in mind; he just wanted to get away from the nonstop parties and feasts being held in his honor. He was tired of people toasting him, trying to be his friend, striving to be seen with him, or requesting some favor from him. The last thing he desired presently were members of another victory party to recognize him and practically drag him to join in their revelry. This had happened twice this night.**

 **As he walked towards the northern part of the city, New Haven’s buildings began to thin out and disappear altogether. Those dwelling here, refugees from the war-torn regions further north, had built a ring of shelters out of whatever materials they could find in the open countryside surrounding the city. Malakiah's army and the city of New Haven had tried to provide for their needs, but there were simply too many of them. Currently, the city’s resources were almost exhausted. Even though the war had been won and New Haven’s leaders had encouraged them to go home, the refugees were extremely reluctant to leave the city's protection.**

 **Here outside the city, Malakiah noticed the atmosphere was more subdued. These refugees did not have that much to celebrate. They had lost everything except for their clothing and the items they had carried with them. Their homes and even their towns had been destroyed. Countless families had lost loved ones in the fighting. Yet they were celebrating with music, singing, and storytelling around campfires. Malakiah realized he would rather share this time of triumph with them than those in the city who still had everything.**

 **He did not know how long he had watched the refugees but suddenly realized someone was standing next to him. He frowned, consciously aware he had not heard this person approach him.**

**He warily looked to his right and saw it was Lu Zenti. Lu was also a refugee, but from another part of Tarn and a member of a shape-shifting race called the hanaki. He had also been the knight’s almost constant companion, bodyguard, and friend ever since Malakiah and those with him had found Lu near death in the Ramese desert six months ago and nursed him back to health. Lu had been a valuable ally and had even saved Malakiah’s life on a couple of occasions.**

 **Malakiah realized he could never have shaken Lu off his trail as easily as he had done his other bodyguards. Lu probably knew him better than he knew himself and had surmised where he would go and located him here. He was not that surprised Lu had found him first.**

 **The knight currently wanted to be alone but did not mind having Lu along. Lu had a comfortable, reassuring presence and, at times, was so quiet the knight would forget he was even around.**

 **The knight asked, "How did you find me so quickly, Lu?"**

 **Lu only shrugged. His thin goatee and mustache almost hid his amused expression.**

 **In groups, Lu would rarely speak. Only when they were alone such as now would they converse, and even then Lu did so grudgingly.**

 **Malakiah said, "Sometimes, Lu, I wonder if you truly know our language. The healer Ateena gave you the ability to comprehend it, but you speak so rarely. Every now and then, I would love to know what kind of dance the thought sprites are performing within that mind of yours."**

 **Lu softly said, "If people think I do not speak their speech well, they more open about what they say around me. Far better for one to listen than to talk. Why do you think we have two ears but one mouth?"**

**Shaking his head, the knight stated with a wry smile, "Lu, I never thought about it before, but you are one devious fellow. Your act allows you to be an extra eyes and ears for me. I am glad you were working on our side during the war with the goblin army."**

 **Lu did not respond. The only reaction Malakiah could read in Lu's face was a slight twitch of a smile and an amused twinkle in his eyes. This enigmatic man had a game face that would frustrate the most astute person. The knight knew he never wanted to play cards with Lu or face him in hand-to-hand combat. He was not sure who would win either contest.**

 **They were both silently stood there, contemplating the refugees. Malakiah now noticed, while some were still celebrating, others looked as if they were settling down for the night. He figured the partying here would soon cease while it would probably continue until early in the morning in the innermost parts of New Haven.**

 **Behind them, they suddenly heard the familiar sound of a winded, but excited voice. "By my stars, that was fun, Lu! I like this game you suggested. Since you found Malakiah first, do you want to run off now and see if we can find you?"**

 **It was Kush Lightfingers, Malakiah's other traveling companion. The knight had met him in Suena, the capital of their land and the site of the Knightly Academy which Malakiah had graduated from; Kush had been with him ever since. Kush was unique, the only member of a race called kelvin the knight had met. For around ten years, Kush had been searching for others of his kind. Before he, Malakiah, and Lu had come to Emerald Valley, he had been Malakiah’s quest companion, having gone with him to the desert region of Rama and back.**

 **Malakiah sighed; he had wanted some time by himself and now people were locating him. He liked Kush, but he was one of the worse people to have around if one wanted solitude. Kush could dispel quiet as a handful of thrown rocks would disrupt the calm surface of a still pool.**

 **The kelvin wormed his way between Lu and the knight.**

**Looking down at him, Malakiah patted him on top of his brown, braided hair. He knew it was pointless to become angry with Kush as he just would not understand.**

**"No, Little One, I am afraid it is a little late for games such as that. Instead, I would like to have some time alone."**

 **Kush glanced up at him. His mischievous green eyes sparkled from the reflections of the nearby campfires. "Why would you want to do that? Won't you get lonely without us?"**

 **Malakiah wondered how to explain his need for privacy.**

**"A little. But lately, I have been barraged by constant meetings, feasts, and parties. And I need a break from such."**

 **"Sorta like when Horafius prefers to be alone?" Kush offered.**

 **"Yes, just like him. Very good, Kush," the knight congratulated him. In the past, he had had to order the kelvin to leave Horafius alone when the Elven mage wanted to go off to meditate.**

 **"May I remind Lord Malakiah it is not safe for him to go out without his bodyguards?" came an annoyed voice from behind.**

 **Turning partially around, Malakiah recognized Sergeant Denak, the half-Elven soldier in charge of his personal bodyguard. Even though he had recently lost his left forearm in battle, Denak was a capable leader; he had helped Malakiah rebuild his decimated patrol of bodyguards. Denak had been placed in charge of the knight’s bodyguards after Kaimen Tenbrook, Malakiah's childhood friend, had died in battle. Seeing him, Malakiah felt a pang of sorrow. *How he missed Kame and the many others who had fallen in the war with the goblin army*.**

 **"What is this, a conspiracy?" Malakiah said gruffly. "I just want to spend some time by myself, and everyone decides to follow me."**

 **"I understand your frustration, Lord Malakiah, but you may not be safe out here *alone*. Even though the war may be over, people around may still want to kill you. It is my job to make sure you are safe. It is hard to do this when you ran off as you did," Denak explained.**

 **"I just want to go out alone," Malakiah insisted.**

 **"I cannot allow that. It is my job to protect you," Denak stated.**

 **Something about Denak’s manner made the knight angry.**

**"I know what your job is, Sergeant, but do you not realize I needed to get away from that town before I went goblin-crazy? I want time to myself without people constantly hovering around me, wanting something. I am sick of local politics and crooked politicians. I am tired of everyone celebrating when I feel wretched inside. The last thing I want to do tonight is to be at a party when I still mourn friends who have died in battle. Now, would you all *please* leave me alone?"**

**Malakiah stormed off without a look back.**

 **At first, Malakiah admitted it had felt good to tell them off, but as he moved on, he soon began to regret his uncharacteristic outburst. Those men were his friends and were only doing their jobs, the ones he had commanded them to do. They did not deserve the treatment he had dealt upon them. He considered going back to apologize but decided against it for he needed to take some time to calm himself down.**

 **He walked toward the field where the Battle of New Haven had taken place. He could detect the rancid aromas of blood, decay, and burning flesh. Grimacing, Malakiah wished he could get away from that stink, but the smell was everywhere, covering the land. He knew, regretfully, only time would eventually take away the stench.**

 **He realized the same could be said about his grief. *How he missed those who had died!* He knew they were gone, but did not want to move on with his life. He was afraid if he did, he would be betraying them and perhaps forgetting them. He wanted to keep their sacrifices inscribed in his brain. He knew he should not dwell on the past but could not stop. It still hurt too much.**

 **The knight walked on through the empty fields between New Haven and Tent City, the name given to the camp where most of his army resided. He had not seen anyone lately, but eventually he would run into a random patrol of his soldiers guarding the outskirts of New Haven. He had better be alert for that. The last thing he wanted was to surprise some of his soldiers and get accidentally attacked. He smiled. At the Academy, his instructors had referred to such as “an attack by allies.”**

 **Even though it was generally thought the war was over, he and the leaders of New Haven still had soldiers manning the outer fortifications for any signs of enemy aggression. There had been no further organized assaults on the city itself, but a few random skirmishes farther away. These attacks were just scattered groups of enemy troops looting and pillaging, but the Sevarnista and his patrols had driven them away. Since these minor battles, it had been quiet in the vicinity. It was commonly thought most of the enemy army had been driven out of the region, if not the whole valley.**

 **As he passed by a small grove of trees, he heard a voice softly challenging him, "Who's there? Is that you, Malakiah?"**

 **Malakiah recognized the voice as Horafius’.**

 **Examining the stand of trees beside him, he tried to locate the elf, but could not. The tall form of Horafius blended in perfectly within the dark foliage.**

**"Yes, it is me, Horafius," he addressed the blackness. "How did you know it was me? Why are you out here in the dark?"**

 **"It is not dark for me and your armor makes enough noise for you to be heard in my faraway homeland of Telaquaria Gandarlista. You are also one of few humans that wear full plated," Horafius answered. "I will make some light so you can see me. *Lumnos*."**

 **Among the tree trunks, a globe of light blazed to life, illuminating the blond-haired mage with a greenish-white glow. The wan light made the elf look pale and sickly.**

 **Impressed by the mage's command of the Staff, Malakiah whistled and said, "I did not know the Staff had that ability."**

 **"It originally did not. This is a new power it has gained since the Staff had merged with the Orb," Horafius explained.**

 **Nodding, Malakiah asked, "The last time we talked about the Staff, you told me it no longer worked. What has changed since then?"**

 **"I am afraid I do not know," Horafius confessed. "Just in the last day or so, I could feel something different in the Staff. With some careful experimentation, I have discovered the Staff had not only regained some of its minor powers but had developed some new ones such as this light we've seen. So far, none of the major powers such as Dragonfire, Levitation, or Passing through Walls have returned, but I believe, in time, the combined Staff will regain all of its old powers and perhaps develop some new ones. I hope I can determine with practice what these new abilities are."**

 **"Very interesting, Horafius. Please keep me informed of any other unusual developments with that Staff. Remember, you carry a potent weapon in your hands. Please be careful when you conduct tests with it. You do not want accidentally to alter the surrounding landscape with your experimentation," Malakiah advised.**

 **"I know. I learned that lesson well from Ateena. I am endeavoring to be very careful with this Staff. This is why I am out here."**

 **"Most commendable," Malakiah said.**

**They both knew the stories of the Orb and the Staff. The individual powers of each were beyond belief, and the many battles waged between them had devastated regions and killed many thousands. During the most recent war against the goblin army, the battle between the Orb and Staff practically had taken off the top of a nearby mountain and flattened the trees all around it. The shockwave from the final explosion had nearly knocked everyone in Malakiah's army over while they had been engaged in battle with the goblin army. Having felt the Orb's power many times now, Malakiah did not want to experience it again. Indeed, when the knight had read about the Staff and the Orb back in his Academy days, he had never believed he would ever encounter them.**

 **Since Horafius had told all the Orb and Staff had merged, everyone concluded the two artifacts had neutralized each other and hoped the destructive battles between the Orb and Staff would be ended. This was another reason people were celebrating though they still were wary of the Staff and stayed away from the mage.**

 **Now, hearing from Horafius about the Staff's returned powers, Malakiah realized the newly-merged Staff promised an uncertain future. *Would the new combined Staff’s nature be good, evil, or neutral? Could anyone—including Horafius—discern the answer to that?* Malakiah now wondered whether Horafius could handle this great responsibility.**

 **"Horafius, I would highly recommend we keep your discovery of the Staff's new abilities to ourselves," Malakiah advised.**

 **"Agreed. I would not want to worry the people any more than I do at present," Horafius replied.**

 **"Excellent," Malakiah said, happy the mage did not argue. "I have not seen much of you lately, Horafius. Why are you out here alone?"**

 **Smiling slightly, Horafius responded, "I could ask you the same."**

 **"I am out here because I am tired of being cooped up in New Haven. I just need some to get away from all of those people for a little while," Malakiah confessed.**

 **"Interesting. What you are avoiding, I would love to have. Even though I am considered a hero of the Battle of New Haven, no one wants me around them. I believe New Haven’s people are terrified of me, and I do not feel welcome there. But I must concur with them. I think it would be better for them and me if I stay away from them."**

 **"I am very sorry, Horafius. If it be any consolation, my friends and I are not scared of you. We know about all of the hard work you had to do to wield the Staff. If it were not for you, we would not have won this war," Malakiah said.**

 **"I know that and I appreciate your kind words," Horafius responded as he stared off into the night.**

 **A thought sprite whispered to Malakiah. "Horafius, long before the battle, you told me about how all nature was silent due to the Orb's presence. Has that changed? Does the forest still seem too quiet?"**

 **For a brief moment, the mage was silent, his fingers repeatedly drumming on the Staff. Then he spoke.**

**"When I go out to meditate, I can now hear birds and other woodland creatures. I can tell you the ominous tense feeling we sensed out there is gone, but the woods do not feel completely normal. I do not know how to explain it any better. Perhaps over time, I could. I wonder…." Horafius' voice trailed off into a whisper.**

 **After a moment of awkward silence, Malakiah said, "Horafius, tomorrow I plan to leave for Ferrokken with Ambassador Chavol and the rest of his dwarves. They are carrying the remains of Kharic and the other dwarves slain in battle back to their kingdom. I also need to talk to the archthane about what had happened here and may have to stop a war with them. Will you come along? I will need your help with this."**

**Malakiah had sent a couple of messages to the mage about this, but the elf had never answered him.**

 **"I know. I plan to go with you," Horafius answered, looking somewhat distracted. “And, now, I am just a tad introspective. I would prefer to be alone if you do not mind."**

 **"As you prefer. I shall continue my walk. Good night, my friend."**

 **"Thank you, Malakiah, and good night to you, too," the mage replied.**

 **As the knight walked away, he heard Horafius say a strange word, "*Duros.*" The Orb’s light winked out.**

 **The knight resumed his walk. He reflected how his whole realm, the Duchy of Emerald Valley, owed so much to Horafius, yet the people had made Renn, Bird’s-eye, Captain Karn, and him the heroes of the Battle of New Haven while the mage had only been mentioned in passing. Malakiah was at a loss as to how he could grant the mage his deserved recognition.**

 **There was another matter which the knight currently despised—people had recently begun referring to him in ballads and songs as “The Emerald Knight.” He recalled his father, the duke, having said he had once considered calling himself such in tournaments. And Malakiah had later oddly found himself referred to so by someone during his quest. More recently, the mirakum, the goblin army’s leader, and the Orb's former holder, too, had called him the Emerald Knight. So had the Theocrat Jondalin. Somehow, that title had become attached to him.**

**Malakiah had heard some of those ballads written to honor him; they made it sound as if Malakiah had taken on the mirakum and the Orb single-handedly, which was far from true. He marveled at how quickly recent events have been distorted. And, for some reason, they had labeled him as a hero. He certainly did not feel to be one.**

 **Malakiah had stood on the platform where they all had celebrated their victory over the enemy army almost two weeks ago. He had moved to the spot where he had watched the bonfire burning the bodies of Captain Baylor, Kame, Denaric, Kharic, Mica, and so many others. He remembered seeing the vision in the flames of his friends saying good-bye and that strong feeling of peace he had had at that time.**

**Although he had been so thankful for that experience, he just wished he had that satisfied feeling now. Although he had been happy knowing his friends were now at peace, he admitted he selfishly missed them. He wondered how he would ever live the rest of his life without them.**

**"Adonai, what am I going to do?" he whispered.**

 **A strange light attracted his attention. Over the Narraconda Mountains' rugged crags, a full red-orange moon peeked out and stared at him. Then it slowly rose.**

 **The knight felt an ominous foreboding. The last orange moon he had seen was just before the invasion of Emerald Valley by the mirakum's army twenty-five days ago.**

 **"By Tarn, not again," the knight muttered; his voice slowly rose to a shriek. "Why can I not have a quiet life? Just when I think everything is going back to normal, this omen comes back to haunt me. Why does this keep happening to me? Who are these foul entities that write my miserable life story? Am I truly cursed to be an ‘Adonai’s Weapon on Tarn? And to suffer as one of those described warriors did? Will my life be recorded as a dismal history in the Samacara?"**

 **Malakiah heard someone approach him from behind. Thinking it was Lu again, he asked, "Lu, do you see it?"**

 **When he heard no response, Malakiah felt his warning instinct suddenly go off. He pulled his sword out of its scabbard and just barely evaded a dagger thrust to his midsection. Malakiah did not know who was attacking him but could see several dark humanoid shapes surrounding him. He brought the pommel of his sword down on an attacker's arm, making his foe drop his dagger.**

 **Malakiah's victory was short-lived for several dark forms tackled him. One, almost ogre-sized, knocked him off his feet. Another shape grabbed his arm and wrestled his sword from his grip.**

 **Malakiah managed to yell before a hand covered his mouth. He bit down as he kicked and flailed his arms. He heard a yelp of pain before someone slugged him, and another hand thrust a scented cloth under his nose. He tried to fight, but his limbs went limp. Before he blacked out, he saw flashes of light streak past him and wondered if they were the lights he heard people see as they went off into the afterlife.**

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**Malakiah awoke to a rancid smell, someone slapping his face, and a voice saying, "Sir Knight! Sir Knight! Wake up!" It was not the voice of Kush that brought him back to consciousness, though. Instead, it was a sharp smell, which probably could arouse the dead.**

**Opening his eyes, the knight saw the concerned faces of Kush and Lu looking at him. Kush was the one lightly slapping his face while Lu held a cloth to his nose.**

 **"My friend, you better?" Lu asked.**

 **Malakiah wearily pushed the cloth away from him. "Lu? Kush? Yes, I am. What happened?" he groaned, his throat feeling raw.**

 **"You attacked. We stopped them," Lu said.**

 **"Yes, we did. Those assassins did not have a chance against Denak, Lu, and me. Lu practically sliced a couple down with his shooting stars while Denak and I overcame the rest. You were lucky we all followed you. We spotted those men sneaking up on you. We knew they were up to no good," Kush explained.**

**The knight could barely follow the kelvin because his mind was still foggy from the attack.**

 **"The moon?" Malakiah gasped, recalling that he had just seen it.**

 **"What about it?" Kush inquired.**

 **"Over there!" Malakiah responded as he tried to point in its direction. He glimpsed it hovering over the mountains. It was now a lighter shade of orange because it had risen higher.**

 **"Yes, I see it. Orange moon rising," Kush stated.**

 **Malakiah looked at Kush strangely. Almost a month ago, the kelvin had uttered that very phrase while in a drunken state and then warned them all about pending attacks on Emerald Valley. His drunken ramblings had come true.**

 **"I am curious, Sir Knight. The last time we saw an orange moon, you told me it was a sign something significant would happen. After that, we all got involved in this whole big war. I thought it was exhilarating. Now, since we won the war, why are we seeing an orange moon again? What does it mean?"**

**"It means still enemy to fight. Such we shall face together, my friend." Lu smiled at him encouragingly.**

 **The knight hoped Lu’s prediction proved wrong. The enemy army was in total disarray. They could not be a threat. *But, if it was not them, who was the enemy now?***

 **"Lord Malakiah, are you recovered enough to travel?" asked Denak.**

 **"I think I am undamaged. Would you please help me up?" Malakiah asked. His heavy armor prevented his rising without assistance.**

 **They pulled Malakiah to his feet and he walked around rather shakily.**

**"I still feel somewhat woozy," he stated.**

 **"Liquid they used still affecting you. Have healer check you," Lu suggested.**

 **"I plan to do that. Denak, status!" Malakiah ordered.**

 **"You were attacked by six men. Luckily, Lu, Kush, and I were close by. They look like common thugs, but their weapons are of excellent quality. Five of them are dead, the other gravely wounded. I checked around and there is no one else except for the mage, Horafius. May I point out if we had been able to stay with you, this whole incident might not have happened," Denak pointed out, sounding similar to Kame.**

 **Malakiah replied, "I realized that now, Denak. I am fortunate you all were tenacious enough to stay with me after I told you to go. I am in your debt."**

 **"I am just glad we were able to help," Denak said.**

 **"You all did a remarkable job," Malakiah assured them as he noticed all of the dead bodies surrounding them. "Tell me. Why would these men attack me?"**

 **"I think I know, Sir Knight," Kush announced. "I've checked over their bodies carefully. They carry poison and all have the mark. These men were members of the assassin guild."**

 **"Why would they want to kill me? I have not done anything to them," Malakiah responded.**

 **"It may not be personal, Sir Knight," Kush explained. "Someone may have paid a lot of money to have you eliminated. What is more curious, though, is somehow that person could persuade the guild to ignore their policy against killing government officials—namely, you!"**

 **Horafius strode up.**

**"Lord Malakiah, I'm so glad to see you are unharmed. If I had not been so wrapped up with the dilemma of my Staff, I perhaps could have seen your attackers and helped you. I am sorry about that," Horafius spoke with evident relief in his voice.**

 **"Do not worry, Horafius. I am mostly uninjured. A little annoyed at being attacked, but unhurt," Malakiah said.**

 **"Why would someone try to kill you?" Horafius asked. "You are a hero to the people of this city."**

 **"Good leader make many enemies in life. Surely Malakiah has many of them. And we must investigate them all," Lu stated.**

 **"Sir Knight, it could be someone from the enemy army, a rival in New Haven, or an old enemy of yours. Anyone not happy about your victory over the goblin army may have done it," Kush explained.**

 **"Whoever it is, we still may not be safe out here. There may be more attackers out in the dark, and they may come at us in greater numbers. I suggest we go somewhere safer and then discuss who is behind this attack on Lord Malakiah," Denak pointed out.**

 **"I agree with you, Sergeant. We need to move out."**

**A thought sprite came to Malakiah. He ordered, "Denak and Lu, I need you to carry my injured attacker into New Haven. There is a certain person there we need to speak to. If anyone would know anything about this attack or my attackers, it would be her. Let's go."**

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**Renn Skyhawk was miserable. He would rather be lost in a cold, frigid wilderness with a whole tribe of goblins hunting for him than where he was now—in the middle of a crowded room of loud, obnoxious people at the house of the wealthy merchant Gregoran. Many of them were New Haven's leaders and he trusted them as far as he could throw them. Renn was willing to determine such a distance if necessary.**

 **Usually, his mentor, Denaric Weston, would have gone to parties such as this to represent the rangers, but he was dead. Renn, now in charge of the rangers, had to attend the official functions.**

**Renn paused to reflect over who—other than him—might represent the rangers. The most likely candidate would be a human. One ranger leader so qualified was Addin Goodman, the blacksmith, but he was too painfully shy and reserved for such a position. Surr Mandared would be an excellent choice, but he had been injured in the head when captured by the goblins and left simpleminded. The gnomish ranger leader, Carnellian Diddlesworth, had the grasp of etiquette to handle social functions. However, their relationship had become strained lately, and Renn did not know if he could trust him. The Dwarven ranger leader, Marl Stonecarver, had leadership skills but was too dour and taciturn. Since their failed rescue attempt of Denaric, Marl had also developed an intense dislike toward Renn. Even if they had been still around, Renn doubted if the other leaders, Mica Coldsteel, who had been slain in battle, and Selena Silverfrost, currently missing, could have served. Regretfully then, Renn realized the thankless task of representing the rangers would remain his for the present.**

 **Currently, he was listening to a very drunk Bird’s-eye tell a highly-embellished story, which he had heard too many times previously, about how his archers had prevented the enemy horde from overrunning the front line and thus saving New Haven. From Bird’s-eye’s account one would conclude he had been manning three bows at once.**

 **Renn did not like Bird’s-eye, although he respected his archery skills. The archer’s gregarious personality would have made him an excellent choice to represent the rangers, but he had never officially joined their force. For some reason, that human had always kept himself separate from the group.**

 **Another problem was Bird’s-eye’s tendency to drink. Because, when he was drunk, Bird’s-eye was loud, vulgar, and obnoxious. He also tended to be physical and Renn usually did not like to be touched. Now, as Bird’s-eye told his story, he would frequently ask Renn for confirmation and then roughly pat him on the back when he agreed with him.**

 **"It was glorious!" Bird’s-eye proclaimed. "The enemy was stretched out endlessly before us, but we were prepared to take them on. Remember, Renn?"**

 **Renn nodded and then cringed when Bird’s-eye slapped him on the back. It did not matter to Bird’s-eye Renn had not even been there when this battle had been waged. He could have disagreed and Bird’s-eye would have happily gone on with his story.**

 **"As I was saying, the enemy army practically spanned the horizon! They marched steadily toward us, willing to spill our blood. But we waited and waited until we could see the eager, gleeful expressions on their faces. Then I issued the command to release sheol upon them. Many of those stinking goblins did not even know what hit them. We kept firing and firing until the enemy advance practically evaporated before us. The whole first wave just broke before it even got close to us. Remember, Renn?"**

 **Sighing, Renn agreed and received another slap on the back. He was getting set to punch Bird’s-eye but doubted the blond-haired archer would feel it as drunk as he was.**

 **Suddenly, across the room, Renn saw one of his people, a Sevarnista warrior, plowing his way through the crowd towards him. He was dressed in a camouflaged outfit as his people wore when on patrol. Renn knew his face but could not recollect his name. The warrior handed Renn a message and then departed.**

 **Opening up the letter, Renn read:**

 **Renn,**

**I need to speak with you immediately. I have some news about Selena. Please meet me at the healers’ house.**

 **Erek**

 **Renn recognized his brother's writing and signature. And realized his reason for sending a note rather than coming himself was because Erek detested crowds worse than Renn did.**

 **Renn now had an excuse to depart. He announced to the group around him, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have a matter to deal with. I should not be gone long."**

 **He felt a hand clasp onto him.**

 **"Where are you going, Renn? You haven't heard the end of my story," Bird’s-eye protested.**

 **"I'm sorry, Bird’s-eye, but it is important ranger business," Renn apologized, trying to extract his arm from the archer’s grip gently.**

 **Bird’s-eye stubbornly held onto him, saying, "Now, I must insist you stay to the end."**

 **"I have to go, Bird’s-eye," Renn insisted, using more force to free himself from him, but the archer had powerful hands.**

 **"Renn, you must stay. You owe me that," Bird’s-eye held fast.**

 **Finally, all of the frustrations Renn had gone through in the last few weeks just erupted. He did not want to be around this drunken braggart. He violently jerked back his arm to remove it from Bird’s-eye's grip. When the archer still would not let him go, Renn struck out. Using his free hand, he slugged Bird’s-eye in the face. The archer fell hard.**

 **Renn felt a great sense of satisfaction but then noticed the horrified looks of the people around him. Renn quickly said, "I'm sorry; he would not let me go. And I have urgent business to attend to."**

 **Elkoim, who was in their group, moved over to Bird’s-eye. Setting down his drink, the dark-skinned healer inspected the archer. Looking at those around him, Elkoim said, "He has just been knocked out. He should wake up by morning. Renn, why in Tarn did you do that?"**

 **Renn, apologizing some more, quickly withdrew.**

 **Approaching the door, he encountered Carnellian, Marl, and Addin. He noticed they intentionally blocked his path.**

**Crossing his arms, the gnome stared. "Renn, it was not necessary to ogre punch Bird’s-eye. If this is how you treat your friends, I hate to see how you treat your enemies."**

 **Renn apologized again. "Carnellian, you know I did not mean to do that, but you are aware of how Bird’s-eye can be when he is drunk. He would not let me leave."**

 **Carnellian did not look convinced. "There are better ways to deal with a drunk, Renn. This incident does not make you or the rangers look good."**

 **"I know that and I regret my outburst, but I need to leave here," Renn insisted.**

 **Carnellian's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You are not normally this agreeable, Renn. Why are you in such a hurry?"**

 **Renn decided to tell them the truth. "Erek sent me a message he has important information about Selena. I was going to the healers’ house to meet him and see what he has."**

 **"He did? I still wonder what happened to her. Did you abandon her when she was no longer necessary such as you did Marl and me?" Carnellian accused. "At least, your brother allowed us to fight the enemy."**

 **Renn replied, "If you come with me, you can find out."**

 **The gnome looked aside at Marl. Seeing the stony-faced dwarf nod, Carnellian turned back and said, "I think we will. We hope Erek has not found her *dead body*. Or you will have to answer some serious questions, Renn. Remember *that*."**

 **Renn fought to keep his anger under control. He did not like Carnellian directly threatening him. Still, the savage elf knew lashing out in anger as he had done with Bird’s-eye would not help him here because he needed all their help to lead the rangers. Although Denaric had named him as the leader, the matter had not been agreed on by the other rangers. Renn was only serving as the temporary one until the others could evaluate his performance and vote on him.**

 **"Let us all find out what Erek has for us. Then we will discuss what we will do next. Agreed?" Renn asked politely. "May I pass?"**

 **At first, the dark, agate eyes of Marl simply stared hard at him. Even Addin looked unconvinced. However, Carnellian looked at the dwarf and then at Addin behind him and nodded. Finally, the three moved aside. Relieved, Renn walked by them. His fellow rangers fell in behind him.**

 **Renn was not happy. He knew Carnellian and Marl opposed his leadership. He had always thought Addin had been on his side, but evidently that had changed. And the three had just witnessed his rash incident with Bird’s-eye. Renn had to be careful.**

 **He pushed and shoved his way out of the packed room.**

**Outside, the street was crowded. Renn tried to move fast, but those around recognized him and wanted to talk. He tried to extricate himself by saying he had important business and would be back.**

 **Eventually, he made it to the edge of the street party where he saw the familiar faces of his cousin, Erald, and his childhood friend, Olowyn, both of whom he had rescued two weeks ago from an enemy prison camp. Both of them were drinking and talking to some other rangers.**

 **Seeing him, Erald exclaimed, "Well met, Renn! How are you faring? Come join us!"**

 **Normally, Renn would not have minded, but he could not. Smiling genuinely for the first time tonight, he said apologetically, "I would love to, but I have urgent business with my brother."**

 **Chuckling, Olowyn said, "Poor old Renn, you always keep yourself so busy. You need to take it easy such as we are. If you are not careful, you will put yourself into an early grave as your father did."**

 **Renn replied, "I will bear that thought in mind. See you later.”**

 **Renn hurried down the streets of inner New Haven. He saw scattered groups moving about but steered clear of them.**

 **The night was clear and crisp. Ahead of him, he saw a full, orange moon, which had just risen above the mountains. Renn paused to look at its strange color. Usually, the moon was gray-white, but the smoke from the fires or the sky's haze must have changed its color. As the moon ascended into the sky, it would revert to its normal color.**

 **As he began to move again, he heard the whistle of an arrow just over his head.**

**Renn took cover as other shafts whizzed by him. With the soft light of the moon and the city on him, he knew he was an easy target in the open and had to get into the shadows. He winced in pain as an arrow grazed his left shoulder, but managed to dive behind a small wagon before others hit him.**

 **Renn pulled out a small, loaded crossbow and carefully looked around for his attackers; he could not see them. If it had been totally dark, his Elven nightvision would have helped him, but the nearby lights ruined that. Renn saw an occasional shadowy figure fire an arrow, but he was adequately protected from their attacks.**

 **He glanced briefly at his shoulder. The arrow had just cut his skin, making it bleed a little. It had also made a nice rip in his new black outfit. He planned to make sure his attackers would pay for that.**

**He was basically unhurt, but, when he thought about the circumstances that had led him here, Renn realized he had walked into an obvious trap. He silently berated himself for being stupid and wished he had held back for Carnellian and the other ranger leaders.**

 **He observed the nearby townspeople were also running for cover. One woman had been struck down. The scene before him reminded him of insects scurrying off in all directions after a rock that had protected them had been removed. Hopefully, Carnellian, Marl, and Addin were close behind, but he did not know if he could count on their aid.**

 **A crossbow bolt struck the wagon next to his head. It was a close shot and Renn concluded his attackers were professionals. If he was not more careful, they might get him.**

 **Reaching into the cart, he touched what felt like a small clay jar. He picked it up and threw it. The jar shattered as it hit the cobblestone street. Two heads popped up. Renn shot one bolt from his crossbow at each target. Renn heard the thunk as a bolt hit one and saw a figure slumped over the wall. He may have hit with his other bolt, but was not sure. He certainly did not see his second target again.**

 **He reloaded his crossbow while trying to observe his surroundings. Such was not easy while random arrows fell with impunity around him. He next removed a couple of throwing knives from his belt.**

 **When none of the arrows hit close to where he was, he finally concluded they intended to keep him pinned down until an assault by armed warriors could reach him. Looking at the buildings behind him, he could not discern any light coming from their windows or doors. Then, through one door, he saw the reddish outlines of humanoids, carrying swords, rushing towards him.**

 **He fired twice and two attackers fell. Setting aside his crossbow, Renn threw his two daggers. He noted with satisfaction another figure dropped; he next eagerly pulled out his sword.**

 **Usually, fighting would exhilarate him, but he abruptly felt slightly groggy. It then dawned on him the arrow that had struck him might have been drugged or, even worse, poisoned. He then realized he had to end this conflict quickly. He yelled the war cry of the Sevarnista, knowing even if he fell in battle, all of his people within the area would hear him and come at once to help and, if necessary, avenge his death.**

 **Renn ducked his first assailant’s sword and sliced his foe's throat open with his own. The elf then kicked his next attacker in the groin while parrying a thrust from another sword. Renn knew he was in trouble—his reflexes were slow and his limbs felt heavy and stiff.**

 **As he stabbed another attacker, Renn slightly smiled as he heard an answering war cry. He heard too the voice of Carnellian yelling, "Hold on, Renn! We're here!" The air was soon full of the sounds of steel hitting steel and the cries of people. Within a few more blurred moments of intense fighting, it was all over.**

 **Renn slumped over to a nearby wall and slid down. The world around became one massive blur and he could hardly perceive the many familiar voices talking at him.**

**"Renn, are you hurt? What's wrong?" he heard.**

 **"Ave been drugged. Need help," he said, his tongue feeling as if it was frozen.**

**Renn's vision was getting dim. His body felt so heavy. Someone picked him and began to carry him in their arms.**

 **"Don't worry, Renn. We'll take you to a healer," came the voice of Erald. Renn could feel his voice vibrate as his head rested against his shoulder.**

 **"Hold on, Renn. You got to fight," Olowyn said, his voice sounding disconnected and far away.**

 **Renn struggled to stay conscious, but this was the one battle he could not win tonight and he blacked out.**