

The **QUEST**  
of the  
**UNALIGNED**





THE QUEST  
OF THE  
UNALIGNED

A. L. Phillips

BORDERSTONE PRESS, LLC

2013

First Edition

THE QUEST OF THE UNALIGNED

Author: A.L. Phillips

Copy Editor: Kathy Griffith

Proofreading: Corrie Schwab

Cover Designer and Artist: Galadriel Coffeen

© 2013

[www.borderstonepress.com](http://www.borderstonepress.com)

Published by BorderStone Press, LLC, PO Box 1383, Mountain Home, AR 72654  
Memphis, TN

Senior Acquisitions Editor: Roger D. Duke

Editor-in-Chief: Benjamin Cripps

Supervising Editor: Brian R. Mooney

BORDERSTONE PRESS, LLC publishes this volume as a document of critical, theological, historical and/or literary interest and does not endorse or promote the views or statements herein.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law, or except for brief quotes or excerpts for the purpose of review or analysis.

Reasonable efforts have been made to determine copyright holders of excerpted materials and to secure permissions as needed. If any copyrighted materials have been inadvertently used in this work without proper credit being given in one form or another, please notify BorderStone Press, LLC in writing with sufficient information about the alleged violation so that future printings of this work may be corrected accordingly. Thank you.

Internet addresses (Web sites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers printed in this book are offered as a resource to you. These are not intended in any way to be or imply any endorsement on the part of BorderStone Press, LLC, nor does the publisher vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

ISBN: 978-1-936670-70-3

Library of Congress: 2013936660

For C.B., my treasured co-idea-tosser.



# CHAPTERS

## Pronunciation Guide

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1—Quest by Contract .....                             | 1   |
| 2—First Steps .....                                   | 17  |
| 3—Outsider at the Inn .....                           | 29  |
| 4—Stormy Encounters .....                             | 47  |
| 5—First Blood .....                                   | 67  |
| 6—Space and Time .....                                | 85  |
| 7—Behind the Barriers .....                           | 105 |
| 8—In the Dark .....                                   | 117 |
| 9—Fire Fighting .....                                 | 129 |
| 10—Baretz .....                                       | 143 |
| 11—On the Trail .....                                 | 157 |
| 12—Treachery and Truth .....                          | 171 |
| 13—Discoveries .....                                  | 185 |
| 14—Face to Face .....                                 | 201 |
| 15—Power Play .....                                   | 221 |
| 16—Beyond the Balance .....                           | 233 |
| 17—The Air Apparent .....                             | 249 |
| 18—The Crowning Confrontation .....                   | 265 |
| 19—The Prince’s Reception .....                       | 285 |
| 20—Illumination .....                                 | 299 |
| Glossary .....  | 311 |
| Afterword .....                                       | 313 |
| Discussion Questions .....                            | 317 |
| General Questions .....                               | 323 |
| Discussion and Essay Questions for Sociologists ..... | 327 |
| Bibliography .....                                    | 331 |
| Acknowledgements .....                                | 333 |
| About the Author                                      |     |





# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Typical Cadaerian names use the following simple pronunciation system.

**A:** ah as in guard

**E:** eh as in quest

**I:** ee as in machine

**O:** oh as in sword

**U:** oo as in rule

**AE:** long a as in mage

**AI:** diphthong, ah-ee as in spider

Specific name pronunciations:

*See page 311 for additional information about the people, places, and magic of Cadaeren*

**Alaric:** Al'-ar-ihk (beginning with a short a as in magic, and ending with a short i as in engine)

**Aretz:** Ar'-ets

**Baretz:** Bar'-ets

**Cadaeren:** Ca-dae'-ren

**Deshamai:** De'-sha-mai

**Gaithim:** Gai'-thim

**Hoshek:** Ho'-shek (beginning with a guttural h [h])

**Karetzina:** Ka-ret-si'-na

**Kethel:** Ke'-thel

**Laeshana:** Lae-sha'-na

**Naruahn:** Na'-ru-an

**Orah:** Or'-ah

**Peatter:** Pi'-a-ter

**Ruahk:** Ru'-ak

**Ruahkini:** Ru-a-ki'-ni

**Shamai:** Sha'-mai

**Tathilya:** Ta-thil'-ya

**Tonzimmel:** Ton-zih'-mel (beginning with a short o as in contract,  
and ending with a short i as in engine)

# I

## QUEST BY CONTRACT



OF THE THOUSAND NOISES, movements, and smells that fought for Alaric's notice in Peet's crowded bar, only one thing captured his attention: the man who had just materialized on one side of the room. Alaric slammed down his tankard of beer in shock, squinting through the garish colored lights that blinked on every wall. If it had been later in the evening, he would have assumed that what he was seeing was merely a beer-induced figment of his imagination. As it was, he had just raised his first tankard to lips. That meant that, impossible as it seemed, a long-haired and equally long-bearded man—wearing a robe, of all outlandish things—had just appeared out of thin air.

That was news on two fronts. While Alaric would have watched the man carefully under any circumstances, as per his responsibilities as a security chief of the Tonzimmel First Security Force, the newcomer's technology made him particularly interesting. Alaric mentally skimmed back through the past year's SecuriTech Bulletins even as he watched the stranger turn in bemused circles at the side of the room. No, he thought, there hadn't been even a single article hinting that researchers were developing personal transportation devices.

That meant that the technology was supposed to be a secret. A slow smile grew on Alaric's face. He could almost see the commendation letter being put into his file right now for being the

## 2 | The Quest of the Unaligned

---

first officer to identify a new, potentially dangerous technology in use. But then he stared harder at the stranger, watching the way the robed man kept turning as if he didn't know where he was, the way he cocked his head almost to his shoulder so that his beard stuck out at a forty-five degree angle from his body, and Alaric began rethinking his conclusion. The stranger wasn't acting like either a member of a covert government operation or a thief. But if he wasn't either of those, where had he gotten his transportation device? From outside Tonzimmel?

Alaric snorted into his beer. That thought was even more unlikely than his last: the only realm beyond the city-state of Tonzimmel was Cadaeren, whose population consisted solely of superstitious farmers and lunatic noblemen. But it didn't really matter, in the end, where the technology had come from. Whatever its origin, Alaric told himself, his supervisor in the TFSF would want a full report.

With that in mind, Alaric continued to watch the robed man, hiding his interest behind his tankard. The stranger slowly zigzagged out from the wall where he had first appeared, still turning in circles every once in a while, his head cocked at that odd angle over his shoulder. Eventually, a white strobe light flashed across the bar's flickering anti-grav tables, lighting up the bar's crowded interior for a few seconds. It lasted only long enough to give Alaric a glimpse of the man's clothing, but that was enough to make his eyes snap open even wider.

The stranger's white robe was trimmed with silver that nearly blinded Alaric as it flashed in the strobe light, and he wore a belt of the same color inlaid with gems that sparkled with inner fire. Alaric let out a silent whistle at the man's nerve. Even the wealthiest families he guarded all wore the sensible shirt and pants uniforms of Tonzimmel. If the stranger's jewels were real, he was openly flaunting more wealth than anyone in the crowded room could make in a lifetime. And if they were fake, then the stranger was just crazy.

Given everything he'd seen thus far, though, that might not be a bad guess. Maybe the man did come from Cadaeren. Alaric allowed

himself a brief smile, but didn't take his eyes off the robed man. He still held his head cocked at an angle, so that his hair—ash-blond, Alaric now saw—all fell to one shoulder. Every second or two, he twitched to peer off in a different direction, and each time, he took a few steps toward the bar where Alaric sat. Was the man looking for someone?

Just as the thought crossed Alaric's mind, the stranger pivoted directly toward him. His gray eyes went wide in his deeply wrinkled face. "Prince Alaric! It's you! Finally!"

Alaric had been in the middle of sipping his beer; he inhaled it instead, and coughed violently. "Excuse me?"

Even now, the man's eyes still moved back and forth constantly, as if he found it impossible to keep them fixed on one point. "Your Highness, I knew I'd find you! Their Majesties will be so glad. Though how you could end up in a horrid place like this is beyond me. But that's neither here nor there. What matters is that you're here! And I found you! I can just see the summer solstice now, and the Prince's Crown shining on your head like the sun! Except not as hot. Oh, Their Majesties will be so pleased with me!"

Alaric blinked. He looked down into his tankard, then up at the barkeeper suspiciously. He finally decided that Peet valued his continued patronage too much to spike his drink, and turned back to deal with the stranger.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, trying not to stare at the man's constantly moving eyes. "I think you have the wrong Alaric."

The old man shook his head twice. "No I don't. Not possible. Your magical potential is unmistakable, Your Highness. I felt it the moment I stepped in. Five times stronger than any of your unaligned cousins', just like your father's. You have his black head of hair, too, though his is more gray now, but don't tell him I said that, and your mother's stubborn chin. But don't tell her I said that, either. I don't know where you got those green eyes—perhaps from your great-grandparents? But it doesn't matter! They'll be so thrilled! Your parents, that is, may your ancestors rest in peace."

#### 4 | The Quest of the Unaligned

---

Alaric's throat tightened as the man babbled on, and slowly, deliberately, he set his tankard back down on the counter. He pulled his eyes away from the crazy stranger's face, focusing on the sights and sounds of the bar, fighting down the memories that he had successfully suppressed for years. He let his ears fill with the hum of the anti-grav generator that kept the countertop hovering in midair, with the whirl of other electronics and the babble of conversations around him. He let his eyes be dazzled by the brilliant flashing lights that were the backdrop of every street and skyscraper in Tonzimmel.

This shouldn't be bothering him, Alaric told himself sternly. He'd had fifteen years to get over his mother's death, and his father hadn't even lived long enough for Alaric to remember him. He swallowed against the hot feeling in the back of his eyes, pushed the memories away, took a deep breath. The other man might be rude and insane, but Alaric was neither, and so he, at least, would act as a professional. Once again in control, he turned back and looked the man straight in his wrinkled face.

"Listen," Alaric said, keeping his voice low and stiff. "I don't know what you're talking about, but my personal life is none of your business. What *is* your business is that I'm a level nine certified security chief of the Tonzimmel First Security Force, which means that if you continue making trouble or talking nonsense, I have the authority to get you tested for substance abuse. Understand?"

The stranger twitched his head so that it cocked over his other shoulder. "You mean, you don't know who you are, Your Highness?"

"What part of 'level nine certified security chief' don't you understand?" Alaric asked, jabbing his finger at the collar of his uniform's black vest, where five small pins—one red and rectangular, four white and round—flashed his rank for the world to see.

"Oh, Their Majesties won't like this." The old man frowned, his eyes still darting from side to side. Then they shot back up to Alaric's face so quickly it made him feel dizzy. "And if you don't know who you are, then you won't know who I am!"

Alaric just stared. "I know who I am. Who are you?"

“What an odd question. Everyone knows who I am. I suppose it’s time you joined everyone, then. Not that you’d ever actually be a part of *everyone*—you’ll be a part of the white-robés who *rule* everyone. But that’s neither here nor there. My name, Your Highness, is Ruahkini.”

The man bowed and made an elaborate motion with his hand. “Ruahkini, royal steward to Their Majesties Kethel and Tathilya, king and queen of Cadaeren, and the most skilled ruahk in the kingdom, if I do say so myself.” He paused, then pointed at Alaric’s chest. “And you are the Crown Prince of Cadaeren, who turned twenty-one years of age three months ago, and so must now complete the Quest of the Unaligned before your coronation on the summer solstice in the City of Balance.”

Alaric had stopped listening at the word “Cadaeren.” So that was the source of the man’s insanity. Not that that knowledge made being in his presence any less unnerving. Alaric took another drink, using the motion to distract any attention from the fact that he was slipping his left hand down to the on switch of the electric wand at his belt—just in case. “I’m not interested,” he said.

“Not interested!” A popping sound reverberated in Alaric’s ears, and Ruahkini immediately appeared on the other side of the counter from where Alaric sat.

“Hey! No customers behind the bar!” Peet’s booming voice suddenly intruded over the general racket. With a quick glance at the big man in the green barkeeper’s uniform, Ruahkini disappeared with another *pop*, then reappeared next to Alaric again.

“What the...” Peet approached, his eyes wide, clutching an antibacterial cleaning-cloth in his hand. “Is that a personal transporter?” he asked. “I’ve been hoping someone would invent one. Where’d you buy it, stranger?”

Ruahkini drew himself up stiffly. “I am a ruahk of Cadaeren. My magic is inherent to me and cannot be bought or sold.”

“All right, all right. Trade secrets, I get it.” Peet shook his head. “Everything all right here?”

## 6 | The Quest of the Unaligned

---

“No!” Ruahkini said before Alaric could open his mouth. “This man refuses to do his duty to his kingdom, his people, and his family.”

“Say what?”

Alaric shook his head at Peet, but Ruahkini had already launched into a rapid-fire explanation. Alaric looked longingly at the door—if he hadn’t already paid good money for his barely touched drink, now would have been the perfect time to make his escape. As it was, however, maybe the crazy old man would simply forget about him if he moved out of sight. Alaric’s gaze flicked to the side of the bar, where the daily knife-throwing competition was going strong. The crowd surrounding the site of the competition should provide enough cover to slip away from one crazy old man. Besides, he hadn’t placed a wager there in several weeks, and he had a few extra silvers to spare.

Slipping his tankard off the counter, Alaric stepped softly away from his seat and quickly wove his way through the bar’s other patrons toward the knife-throwing competition. As he went, Alaric sized up the two men getting ready to throw: a lanky redhead in a bank teller’s yellow shirt and khaki pants, and a broad-shouldered guard in the black long-sleeve shirt, pants, and thick vest that identified him as a fellow member of Alaric’s chosen profession. At the sight, Alaric suppressed a smirk. He didn’t even need to note that the guard only had three white circle pins on his collar or that the man’s official shoulder-patch read “Tonzimmel Second Security Force” to know who would win this round.

Alaric stopped next to a small table at the edge of the crowd and tapped the shoulder of the man seated there. “You know the odds on the current match?”

The other man—a commercial hover-car driver, according to his blue-and-white checked shirt and brass insignia—didn’t look up, but just continued buttering his slice of bread. “Three-one, in favor of the guard.”

“Excellent. Interested in business, my good sir?”

The man looked up. “Potentially. How much for a watcher’s fee?”



“Silver five, plus five percent of winnings.”

The hover-car driver put down the butter knife. They shook hands.

“Very good. And how much shall I put down?”

Alaric took a large, heavy coin from a pocket sewed inside his thick security vest, then a smaller silver piece, and held them out to the man. “This goldpiece on red-hair over there.”

“On red-hair? Not on the guard? No disrespect meant, of course, officer,” the hover-car driver added hurriedly.

“None taken. Just place the bet. The name’s Alaric, when I win.”

The man took the coins and shrugged.

Alaric smiled politely and turned back to watch the match. He wasn’t about to tell an outsider that most guards couldn’t beat a ten-year-old boy in a knife-throwing contest. He knew—he had been a ten-year-old boy once, newly apprenticed to the Tonzimmel First Security Force, and eager to earn pocket money by competing against the more experienced guards. His smile grew smug: by the end of his first month there, he had earned enough to buy his first security uniform, while the other apprentices still wore the colors of their respective orphanages.

Not that he blamed his coworkers for preferring other weapons. Knives weren’t as interesting as electric wands, which briefly paralyzed anyone unlucky enough to touch their charged end, or laser trip-wires, which sounded an alarm only when an unapproved subject touched their beam. But then again, knives didn’t run out of solar power.

“So, you’re a betting man?” The voice was Ruahkini’s.

Alaric’s shoulders slumped. So the crazy man had managed to find him again. “Only when the odds are high and I know I’ll win.”

“That’s it! Ha! Just a moment, Your Highness.” There was another slight popping noise, and the old man brandished a multipage document and a long feather, which had also appeared out of nowhere. By now, Alaric was too annoyed to be surprised.

## 8 | The Quest of the Unaligned

---

“Contracts, they said,” Ruahkini muttered, as if Alaric couldn’t hear. “Everyone in Tonzimmel operates through contracts. Just got to find the right clauses and they’ll eat out of your hand.”

Alaric raised his eyebrows. “A contract, you said? And what makes you think I’ll sign this contract?”

“It’s a wager!” Ruahkini said. He flapped the document in the air. “A competition! Come, let’s try our skills against each other. Anything you want, I’ll play you at it. Dice? Cards?”

Alaric folded his arms across his chest. This man was crazier than he had thought. Then again, maybe that could turn out to be a good thing. “Knife-throwing.”

“Perfect! Let’s play. One round. If you throw better than me, I’ll pay your next month’s bar tab.”

Alaric’s eyebrows shot almost to his hairline. “In advance?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t stay in this place longer than I have to. Especially when the king and queen are waiting to be informed of my discovery!”

Alaric glanced back at the barkeeper, who was wiping down the counter with his cloth. “You want to throw away your money, I want a witness.”

He plucked the document from Ruahkini’s hand, tramped back to the bar, and spread it on the counter.

“Peet! I need your services as a witness to a contract.” He flipped the man a small coin; the barkeeper caught it in a large hand.

“My pleasure, officer.”

Alaric turned back to Ruahkini. “Just to make sure we’re clear—how much do I spend here a month, Peet?”

The bartender shrugged. “Oh, a hundred silvers or so. More, if someone else is buying.”

Ruahkini just smiled. “Perfectly acceptable. I’ll pay it, if you win. But if I win,” he continued, “you will go to Cadaeren on the ritual Quest of the Unaligned, in which you will retrieve the Prince’s Crown from its keepers at the Temple of the Elements and bring it to the City of Balance by the summer solstice.”

“Wait a second.” Alaric eyed the other man. Ruahkini might be insane, but he sounded decidedly pleased with himself, and that made Alaric uncomfortable. He shook his head. “Sorry, I thought we were playing for money. Never mind, Peet.”

The man shrugged; he had already pocketed Alaric’s coin.

“Wait, I’ll double the stakes!”

“I don’t think so.” Alaric shook his head. “There’s too many ways wagers can...go wrong.”

“You don’t trust me, my lord?” Ruahkini cocked his head in the other direction again. “It’s a sad day when the heir to the kingdom doesn’t trust his parents’ own steward. But I suppose we don’t know each other very well. Yet. So how to make you trust me...Oh, I know!” He clapped his hands. “I’ll let you choose the knife I throw. Pick any knife you want. One of yours, one of his,” he jerked his head toward Peet, “or any knife at all. Better?”

He pushed the contract across the counter toward Alaric, who looked down at it suspiciously. He still didn’t trust the man, but there didn’t seem to be any hidden dangers in the wager. Perhaps Ruahkini was simply insane. He flipped through the contract. “You seen one of these before, Peet?”

The other man pulled the contract over, flipped through it, and shrugged. “Yep. Standard Wager Form 23-F.”

Alaric looked back at Ruahkini, this time sizing him up as a potential opponent. He was an inch taller than Alaric, but far less muscular, and his eyes seemed to be slightly out of focus. That certainly wouldn’t help the lunatic’s aim. Add to it Alaric’s near-perfect knife-throwing record at Peet’s for the past three years, and there was no reason at all to refuse the bet. “All right. I’ll take your money.”

He extended his hand to the old man, who clasped it firmly, shook it once, then bowed again. Alaric stared. This was by far the strangest night of his life. Hopefully, after he won this bet, the old man would leave and he could enjoy his free month of beer. Additionally, Alaric realized, having an extra hundred silvers in his pocket would mean he

could afford to take a prep course for the Level Ten Security Certification. That was worth it right there.

Ruahkini handed him the feather. Alaric looked at it for a moment, bemused, then realized that it was dripping ink onto the counter. So it was a pen. Shaking his head, Alaric scratched his name onto the bottom of the contract. Ruahkini did the same, ending with an elaborate flourish.

Then the old man reached into a pouch in his pocket and pulled out a handful of golden coins. “Will twenty-five of these cover the bet?”

Peet’s eyes bulged at the sight of the gleaming metal. He nodded.

“Good,” Ruahkini said. “Then off we go to business!” The old man leaped from his seat, dropped the coins onto the counter, and almost bounced across to the side of the bar. He attracted a number of strange looks from the uniformed men at the tables around.

Alaric shook his head, then pulled his favorite knife from his belt, flipped it once in his hand, and followed his opponent.

“Hey, officer! Alaric! Here’s your winnings.” The hover-car driver with whom he had spoken before handed him a small, heavy bag that clanked loudly. “Wish I’d bet with you. That guard couldn’t throw worth pebbles.” Alaric nodded his head and took the bag. He smiled to himself—it was turning out to be a good night.

As he tucked the bag into his own pouch, he noticed the other man’s butter knife still sitting on his plate, white smears streaked across its blade. “You mind if I borrow that?” he asked.

The man shrugged and shook his head, and Alaric picked up the butter knife. He almost felt sorry for the crazy old Cadaerian. Not even the knife-throwing champion of the TFSF would be able to accurately aim a butter knife, much less make it stick in a target. But that was what the man would get for signing a foolish contract. Alaric’s smile grew wider, and he found himself whistling as he set off again. He soon arrived at Ruahkini’s side.

“Here. This is yours.” He handed the old man the butter knife, a triumphant glint in his eyes. “Would you care to go first?”

Ruahkini's eyes traveled from the knife to Alaric's face and back again while his eyebrows crept up his face. "No, no," he finally said. "You go first, Your Highness."

Alaric nodded his head in acknowledgement and looked around. The room was full of surprised muttering, but no coins were trading hands. He grinned. Everyone knew how this match would end. He looked at the target on the wall far in front of him, a simple set of painted circles within circles, marked with a miniscule black X inside a yellow cherry-sized dot at its center. Alaric held his knife loosely, eyed the target, and threw. He could tell it was a good shot even as the knife left his hand. It arced slowly, blade over hilt, and buried itself deep in the yellow center-dot, just a hair off from the black X. Scattered applause broke out from the audience.

"Your turn," Alaric said, sweeping his hand toward Ruahkini. The scattered applause turned into scattered laughter.

The old man, however, seemed not to notice. He stepped forward to where Alaric had stood, held up his hand to his shoulder, and shoved his entire arm forward, as if he were pushing away something heavy. The crowd's laughter at his horrid technique soon turned to shocked silence: the butter knife was floating slowly through the air toward the wall, where it proceeded to embed itself precisely into the tiny black X at the center of the target.

"Impossible."

"What kind of a gadget did he use?"

"I don't know. I didn't know that any kind of machine could do that."

"I didn't either. I want one!"

Alaric stood stunned for a moment as the river of commentary flowed past his ears. Then he shook his head. This was wrong. "Wait! Stop!" He turned to Ruahkini. "That wasn't knife-throwing! You cheated!"

"What? No I didn't."

"Don't try to deny it. I'm not stupid. We had an agreement to *throw knives*, not to have machines throw knives for us."

“And I told you, I didn’t. I threw the knife. You threw the knife. I won. You’re going on a quest.” Ruahkini beamed.

Alaric looked over his shoulder and jerked his head to the other guard in the room who had just lost a knife-throwing competition. “Guardsmen! Level two items search, if you please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ruahkini squawked as the broad-shouldered man efficiently patted down his robes in a standard search pattern. Alaric watched, his eyes narrow, not even looking away when someone handed him his knife back.

“All clear, sir. No devices present.”

“I say, Your Highness! That’s no way to treat the royal steward of Cadaeren!”

“No devices present?” Alaric shook his head. “That’s impossible. You saw what he just did.”

“Yes, he did,” Ruahkini said. “As did everyone else. He saw that you lost, and I won, and there was no foul play—at least not on my end. And now, my lord, let’s talk about your quest!”

He grabbed Alaric by the arm, his grip surprisingly strong, and led him back to the bar. “I assume you’ll need about a week to get ready. Cadaeren’s climate, of course, is completely different from what you’re accustomed to, and you’ll also need traveling equipment, and to pay off all your debts and your rent and quit your job, and say goodbye to all your friends, and whatever else you need to do before you move. The Quest of the Unaligned itself should take about a week, maybe two if you move slowly, and summer solstice isn’t until three weeks from now, so it should be a fairly easy trip. So is leaving a week from now at daybreak about right?”

Alaric felt as if Ruahkini had just thrust his winning butter knife into his stomach and given it a gruesome twist. “What? No. No, no, no. That’s not right. I’m not going anywhere. I got a good deal on that apartment. I have a good job. I can’t leave Tonzimmel!”

Ruahkini just raised his eyebrows, then pointed down to the contract on the counter. “You signed this,” he said. “I thought that people in Tonzimmel *honored* their contracts.”

That was a low blow. Alaric turned to Peet, who was still watching them out of the corner of his eye.

“Peet? Anything you can do?” he asked softly.

The man shook his head and backed away. “I’m not a lawyer, officer,” he said. “But you did sign it. And you know what they say—sign too quick...”

Fall for a trick. Alaric knew. He swallowed and turned back to Ruahkini, who was sweeping the last gold coin he had bet back into his pouch. “You can’t be serious,” Alaric said. “I can’t go on a quest! I’m not who you think I am.”

Ruahkini just turned back to him, picked up the contract, and pointed to Alaric’s signature.

Alaric let out an angry breath. “All right. Fine. You win. But I won’t need a week to get ready, that’s for sure. I’ll take off the day after tomorrow, do your stupid quest, then come back and never leave Tonzimmel again. Hear that?”

“I hear you, my lord. I’ll see you at dawn outside the city gates, the day after tomorrow.”

“Whatever. Fine.”

Then Ruahkini was gone, with only a faint popping noise to mark his disappearance.

Alaric buried his head in his hands and groaned. He’d lose his job, of course—no security chief position would give him four weeks off on such short notice. But he’d come back, and get a new job, with new coworkers, and a new apartment. No one would care that he’d disappeared for a month.

No, Laeshana would care. She’d wonder what had happened to him.

Alaric shook his head. Funny that he should think about Laeshana right now. Her family was from Cadaeren, though they’d had the good sense to move to Tonzimmel a long time ago. He wished he