

## *Foreword from the Author*

Throughout its history, the kingdom of Orofyld has been led by many great men. Most notably, the deeds of King Orofyld XV, who disbanded the Armed Forces in the name of peace, and those of his descendant King Orofyld XVII, who reamassed our armies and made allies of our dwarven and orcish brethren in the name of protecting that peace—theirs are the deeds which have guided us to this point, which have drawn depthless courage from our hearts, bracing us against trials insurmountable and opening the way to the era of hope and prosperity for which we have always dreamed.

As king makes way for king, and we are at last nearing the end of our reconstruction under the governance of our eighteenth ruler—Pelor preserve us—I have taken it upon myself to document the story of his rise to power, for he is both the likeliest and the unlikeliest of kings, and as such, there is something special about his tale that is worthy of consideration.

I have often wondered about the notion of heroism, and always it has put me at a loss. I have known neither what it means to be a hero nor what drives men to become such a thing. I have never wished it for myself. But now, as I reflect on the things I have seen during our war for survival and in the years that have followed, I cannot deny that the meaning of heroism has been shown to me as clear as day. I have seen it in a priest's stalwart compassion as he allowed the spark of divinity to transform him into the shield of our country. I have seen it in a mage's brilliant ambition as he brought his wicked father to ruin and refused to allow the most conniving of evils to corrupt his soul. I have seen it in the unconquerable determination of a holy champion whose fearless sacrifice ensured that the gods would give us our tomorrow. And I have seen it in the wild, flashing courage of a swordsman who bested foe after monstrous foe, became the stubborn rock which parted the hellish waters of our destruction, and accepted his burden as the first and truest hero to ever sit upon the throne of Orofyld.

Through the efforts of these men, I have seen that a hero is one who locks eyes with fear and, knowing that either death or glory might await him, advances towards it, letting his humanity fall by the wayside so as to better grip his blade. This is the tale of the heroes of the Kingdom of Peace, and of the glory that found them.

And to those heroes, I say with the full of my heart: thank you.

*Jonathon, Royal Steward to King Orofyld XVIII*

## Chapter I

*~ Which introduces two of our heroes and tells of their first honorable stand against forces dark and terrible, as well as the tragedy that befell them ~*

King Orofyld XVIII was born in the southerly town of Estrid to Mr. Balek Bida and his wife, Beth. Balek was, in his own words, “a damn fine swordsman, and don't you forget it, you lanky chap” in his youth, respected for the depth of his stance and the relentless, straightforward spirit of his strikes; however, though he was doubtlessly a deft warrior, he was not so deft at naming things, and he found himself puzzled by the task of naming his newborn son, which, it seemed to him, was the most important thing he had ever done.

Inevitably, Balek Bida plowed through the obstacle in his usual direct manner, thinking that, if his family name was good enough to serve as such, then it would serve just as well as a first name for his son. He was aware that “Bida Bida” sounded more than a little humorous to the ear, however, and so, out of his desire for his beloved son to grow into a warrior whose name would be both revered and remembered, Balek gave his son the middle name of “Bo,” a sort of pet name that would follow our hero throughout his life and, when recited in conjunction with his proper name, would no doubt help to establish him in the world as a very memorable individual, deserving of only the most profound and genuine respect.

Bida Bo Bida (hereafter referred to simply as “Bida,” for the sake of my sanity) had an agreeable childhood, save for one or two tragic instances—his mother died when he was very young, and his father was injured irreparably when Bida was in his adolescent years (these stories are not detailed here on account of His Majesty's reluctance to discuss them, and of my refusal to pry). His family was not wealthy by any means, but they ensured that he did not want for much. His father taught him the art of the sword from a very young age, and the discipline and strength he learned from his training shaped him into a young man who found favor among his friends and neighbors.

Of these friends, there was none truer than Rafael, an orphan in the care of the village priest. This priest saw the spark of the divine in the boy and did everything he could to instruct Rafael in the ways of the worship of Pelor the Great Redeemer, hoping that he would one day become an exemplary beacon of the faith. As he grew, he took to the scriptures and their virtues with a maturity beyond his years, but he was also the friend of a swordsman's son, and his boyish curiosity and competitiveness

compelled him to take an interest in Bida's training. So it was that the two of them trained in swordsmanship together from their earliest days onward, sharpening their souls and forging a friendship that would endure many hardships to come.

The first of these hardships befell their village of Estrid when they were sixteen years of age, striking unexpectedly like a bolt from the blue, as tragedy so often does. At this time, the kingdom of Orofyld had just recently put down the widespread Orc Raids that had been plaguing its trade routes, the first real threat to its security since the disbanding of the Armed Forces. In prior months, it had not been so uncommon to hear stories of roving orc marauders attacking merchant caravans on the road or raiding town storehouses, but by this time, such rumors had ceased circulating, and no orc had been sighted west of the Dead Pass for nearly a year.

It came as quite a surprise to Bida, then, when he woke one morning in his father's home to the sound of a terrible clamor outside his window, and when, looking out, he saw no fewer than a dozen bulky, green-skinned brutes clad in piecemeal iron armor, wreaking havoc in the streets below. Despite never having seen an orc in his young life, he knew them by the tusks protruding from their lower jaws, and as he watched, hastily donning his breastplate, he saw that one of the creatures was moving quickly down the road that led out of town, and that this orc had a young woman slung over his shoulder. She was Clara, daughter of the village headman, and Bida, seeing a friend of his being held against her will, felt anger swell within him. He took up his greatsword and flew down the stairs, his heart racing as fast as his feet.

(I should take this moment to mention that the orc absconding with young Clara was best described as “chunky.” I do not know exactly what His Majesty meant by having me use that word, but, were I to venture a guess, as I frequently must in my new line of work, I would imagine that this particular orc was perhaps taller or more muscular than his fellow tribesmen. At any rate, His Majesty was very insistent that I include that detail, and so I have.)

Bida burst out into the streets and rushed towards the invaders, trailing his blade behind him. Chunky the Orc was nearing the edge of town, and Bida would have gone straight after him had there not been eight orc warriors standing in his way. They had had an easy time disposing of the half-dozen town guards, and so they did not consider our hero to be much of a threat, young and alone as he was, and they merely palmed their axes and cast disparaging looks at him as he approached. They quickly realized their folly as Bida cut down the first of their number in a single stroke, meeting their gazes with the cold, blue eyes of a furious warrior and readying himself for a second swing.

Outraged, the orcs set upon him, and though he managed to fell a second and then a third, they would have overwhelmed him if Rafael had not appeared at that moment and joined the fray at his side.

The strength and numbers of the orcs would have been the end of lesser men, to be sure, but the swordsman's son and the orphan of the church were as brothers in battle, and they kept to each other's backs, letting the axes glance off their armor and lashing out viciously with their greatswords. By the end of it, the marauders lay dead in the street, and our heroes had suffered but one or two scratches for their efforts.

But Chunky the Orc, dastardly fiend that he was, had already escaped with Clara on horseback. With no able warriors remaining to rise to the occasion, Bida and Rafael immediately made preparations for the pursuit, pausing only to tell Balek where they were going. The grizzled swordsman gave the lads his blessing, complaining that he would go with them were it not for his injury.

Chunky had fled to the east, and, knowing that there is not much that lies east of Estrid, our heroes were relatively certain of the orc's destination even before they picked up his trail. They followed the tracks east for an hour or two, and they were ambushed several times along the way by orcs who were waiting for them in the tall, yellow grass that lines the roads and fills the fields of southern Orofylde, but each time they beat their attackers into the ground and continued on their way.

At last, the trail led them to Cemetery Point, that ancient and mysterious graveyard which rises out over the craggy eastern coastline of our land, where no prayers have been whispered and no flowers have adorned the tombstones for many years. As children, Bida and Rafael had heard numerous ghost stories involving the cemetery, and as they forced the rusted gate open and advanced up the hill towards the weather-beaten, decaying shack that stood at the top, they were astonished to find that some of the stories had been true. Through some foul curse, the skeletal remains of the dead began to rise from their graves, clawing their way up through the earth, their eyes aglow with red malice.

Rafael, chosen child of Pelor, felt his heart cry out in pity for these shackled souls, and he vowed that he would not rest until he had cleansed and freed them from their earthly bondage. Bida agreed, and they took to the task with vigor, cleaving bone from bone and scattering the living dead all over the hillside. When it was done, Rafael breathed a quick prayer, intending to perform the rites of eternal rest in full when the matter at hand was resolved, and the two continued to climb the bluff.

As they reached the top, a blur of movement from around back of the dilapidated shack caught their eye—someone was hiding behind the flimsy structure, watching and waiting for them to draw near. With a wordless glance at one another, they formulated a plan of attack and moved to carry it out. Bida advanced boldly around the left side of the shack where the figure had ducked out of sight, while Rafael slipped around the right side, hoping to surround their quarry. They both took care to watch their footing, for the shanty had been built dangerously close to the edge of the cliff, and the sea swirled menacingly around the jagged, unforgiving rocks hundreds of feet below them.

As Bida rounded the corner, the cruel edge of a greataxe came swinging around in a murderous arc, and had he hesitated even slightly in raising his blade to intercept the blow, it would have smashed its way clean through his chest. He recoiled, staggered from the force, and looked to see who had struck him with such ferocity.

It was none other than the villainous Chunky, that vicious, hulking brute of an orc, who stepped forward now to follow up with another swing of his mighty axe. This one came thundering down from above, and Bida stepped to the side, away from the daunting cliff, avoiding it and countering with his own fearsome pair of strokes. Chunky was forced to defend and give ground, retreating along the back wall of the shanty, and Bida moved with him so that both he and his adversary were confined to the narrow bit of earth between the shack wall and the deadly drop, which was surely no wider than five feet.

Chunky risked a quick glance over his shoulder, searching for an escape from this precarious battleground, but he instead met the gaze of Rafael, who stood brandishing his greatsword and issuing his challenge, for though he could have blindsided the orc, he was a proud and honorable servant of the Great Redeemer, and he would never take his enemy unawares. But now his presence had been made known, and he too moved onto the narrow, treacherous bit of land and swung hard at the enemy's throat. Chunky was forced to block the stroke, but he could not defend against two trained swordsmen on either side of him while maintaining his balance, and Bida, seeing an opening, brought his greatsword down on the orc's knees, biting through the joints of his armor and folding his legs like burlap. The orc bellowed in pain and was forced to lean upon his axe for support, but Rafael did not allow him a moment for respite—the knight of Pelor caught him with a rising slash across the chest that threw him back against the feeble hut, threatening to collapse it entirely. The combined assault was too much for the barbarous Chunky the Orc, and he pitched forward over the cliff, tumbling head over heels and meeting his end in the deadly waters below.

The two warriors took only a brief moment to celebrate their victory, for they still feared greatly for Clara's safety, and so, believing that the orc must have been keeping her captive in the shack, they raced back around to the rotting door and threw it open, allowing the light of day to spill over the threshold and reveal what waited inside.

Oh, Blasphemy, hated bile that rises from the Pit! A swift sword to the throats of all foul men and monsters whose hands are stained with the taint of your will! For our heroes were transfixed by the horror of what they saw within that seaside shanty—a circle of strange and cryptic runes had been carved out on the floor in white chalk, and sweet Clara, their friend of so many years, lay face-down and motionless in the center of this circle, her lifeblood pooling beneath her and staining her dress.

Beside her knelt a man with eyes and hair of the deepest black whose red-painted steel armor shimmered insidiously in the shadowy light of that detestable chamber. A figure garbed in crimson robes stood before the warrior, anointing his forehead with Clara's blood in some perverse ritual of baptism.

So confused and enraged were Bida and Rafael at the sight they beheld that, for a moment, they could do nothing but stare in disbelief. As they did, they heard the hooded figure speak out in a voice that resonated coldly and malevolently, proclaiming the kneeling man a Saint and ordering him to dispose of the intruders. The knight vowed that he would not fail in this, and as his red-cloaked master vanished in a flash of sulfurous smoke, he shrugged his heavy shield down from his back and stood, stating his name as Saint Rupert and issuing a challenge to the two young swordsmen before him.

Needing no further encouragement, Bida flew forth, bellowing in rage at Clara's undeserved end, and prepared to deal the dark-eyed warrior a blow that would split him in half. Ferocious combatant that he was, Bida was accustomed to his opponents hesitating and giving ground in order to avoid his intimidating strokes, but Rupert was a seasoned fighter, and he advanced on Bida with equal ferocity, catching the powerful blow of the greatsword perfectly on his shield and forcing the younger man back through the doorway. From the sheath at his side, he drew a longsword whose blade sprang alive with hungry flames, and he turned it upon Rafael, who only narrowly managed to avoid it by falling back from his foe. He and Bida quickly recovered from the shock of the offensive and took up their stances, preparing for a more tactical fight than they would have liked. Rupert stepped out into the graveyard, brandishing his flaming sword, and their struggle joined in earnest.

As is so often the case with those who call themselves brothers in battle, Bida and Rafael were something to be reckoned with when fighting side-by-side, but even together, they could not hope to match the expertise of Rupert, whose precise steps and tempered defenses thwarted their attempts to assail him. His shield deflected the most vicious of their blows, the others merely glancing off his armor, and always the threat of his fiery blade was there to counter and hold them at bay. Try as they might, our heroes could not find an opening, and soon Bida, in his frustration and his impatience, gave a swing of wild abandon. Rupert gave with the blow and sidestepped it, and as Bida lost balance, teetering forward, the Saint dealt him two telling slashes with his enchanted sword. The pain and heat of the flames overwhelmed the swordsman's son, and he fell back and collapsed to the ground.

Rafael, suddenly faced with the thought of losing his dearest friend to this villain, felt his heart swell with righteous fury. He quickly stepped between Rupert and Bida and invoked the might of the Sun God, and his blade and armor began to glow with a faint, virtuous light. Newly empowered, the orphan of the church rained a flurry of angry strokes upon Rupert's shield, battering him and forcing

him back. Without taking his gaze from his opponent, Rafael quickly knelt and, reaching behind him, grasped Bida's unconscious hand and passed the healing light of Pelor into his comrade, salving his burns and closing his wounds.

Angered by Rafael's efforts, Rupert closed with the paladin and brought his sword thundering down in a vicious overhead swing. But the mercy of Pelor would not abide this, and Rafael caught the blow on the hilt of his greatsword. He then lashed out with a kick to his opponent's leg, momentarily breaking his footing and allowing the holy swordsman to pin his flaming longsword against the ground.

By now, Bida had gotten to his feet, and though he was by no means fully recovered, the grace of the Great Redeemer imbued him with the strength to put an end to this battle. He took up his sword, circled quickly around Rafael, who had their enemy held firmly in place, and, seeing that the Saint was off-balance and could not make full use of his shield, crashed the edge of his sword into Rupert's shoulder, shattering bone with the force of the blow. Rupert cried out and his shield arm fell limp at his side, and as he desperately tried to free his weapon, Bida let his momentum spin him into a second slash that parted the evil knight's head from his shoulders, and the snarling fires of his sword softly went out—thus Saint Rupert, commander of orcs and servant to a fiendish and unknown master, met his end at the hands of Bida and Rafael, proud swordsmen of Estrid.

Their noble deed done, they raced into the shack and sank beside Clara, but their fears were realized, for they had arrived too late, and she had succumbed to whatever dark rituals she had been forced to undergo. The two young men were beset by grief, and as they said their heartfelt prayers for the safe departure of her soul, they made a vow that somehow, someday, they would find that red-robed man, and then their vengeance would be had.

Heavy-hearted, and seeing no reason why they should linger in this gloomy place, they made ready to return to Estrid. While Rafael went about the rites of purification for the graveyard, Bida dragged the corpse of Saint Rupert to the top of the bluff and threw him into the sea below, where he joined Chunky the Orc in eternal rest, head and all.

As a warrior's token of triumph, Bida kept only the knight's necklace. It should be said that the shape of the ruby that hung suspended from that chain defied description—it was a shape so distinctive that it could never be forgotten by those who chanced to look upon it, and all manner of sickening wickedness was quietly suggested within its contours. Our heroes disliked the idea of carrying it with them, but they would need something to show Clara's father when they returned, and so Bida placed it in his coinpouch where it could not offend their eyes. He helped Rafael to gather Clara's still form on his shoulders, and the two of them bore her back to Estrid in silence.

What happened upon their return several hours later is a matter of some uncertainty (due mostly to His Majesty's limited understanding of magic). Whether the red-robed sorcerer had followed our heroes invisibly and now decided to torment them for the murder of his underling, or whether Rupert's necklace possessed a will of its own—the truth of that matter is forever lost to us. What certainly and most tragically did happen was that, as Bida and Rafael were informing the village headman of his daughter's death, they took out the necklace of malicious and indescribable shape to show to him, and as they did this, the necklace floated mysteriously out of Bida's hand, hovering in the air like a spirit. Before anyone could react, the ruby began to glow with a terrible, red light, and then, suddenly, it flew over to a nearby cottage, deposited itself on the doorknob, dangled there for a moment, and then erupted in a consumptive fireball. The home was engulfed immediately, and the explosion sent gouts of flame racing through the air, setting half the town alight.

Despite the best efforts of the townsfolk, the fire was not easily contained, and by the end of the ordeal, all of Estrid had burned beyond repair, and twenty-seven people had perished, among whom were the headman and his wife, as well as the priest of Pelor who had raised Rafael from infancy. The sorrow among the survivors was overwhelming, especially in the hearts of our heroes, who felt the guilt of having brought the ruin of the cursed amulet down upon their village.

It was decided that the losses were too great to make the efforts of rebuilding the town worthwhile, and so it was that most of the survivors decided to try for a new start in a nearby village, which, they had heard, was so perfectly plain, ordinary, and generic that nothing so outlandish and terrifying as what had befallen them in Estrid could ever happen there. For their part, they did not fault our heroes, but rather they believed when the two of them said through their honest tears that they could not have known the foul nature of Rupert's necklace; when they begged forgiveness, they received it, and they were gladly invited to join their fellow citizens in their new village. Bida and his father, Balek, who, despite limited use of his leg, had managed to survive the fires, heartily agreed, for they could not bear to part from these remaining members of their community in such a time of tribulation.

But Rafael, by virtue of the teachings of Pelor and the code to which he adhered, could not allow himself to join them until he had atoned for what he perceived to be his negligence in guarding against the conniving schemes of evil. He told Bida that he would accompany the survivors of Estrid on their journey, for he could not, in good conscience, allow them to roam the lands unprotected, but that once they had reached their destination, he would take his leave and resign himself to wandering the countryside, seeking both the means of his atonement and rumors of the hateful, red-cloaked mage who was the source of their misery, for surely Pelor would provide both of these in good time.



Bida tried hard to convince him otherwise, but the holy knight would not be swayed, and so, when they reached the village two days later, these truest of friends parted ways, but not without the promise that they would reunite someday to wreak their vengeance at one another's side.

And so Bida and Balek settled into their new surroundings and, along with their fellow survivors, did their best to build new lives for themselves, while Rafael began his long and solitary journey through the kingdom of Orofyld, searching for the answers to the matters that troubled his heart and righting countless wrongs along the way (which, of course, were so numerous, varied, and well-known that I need not recount them here).