

Chapter II

~ Which introduces the third of our heroes, as well as the other fascinating persons who gathered at a certain party, and tells of the letter which interrupted their festivities ~

It should be noted that the village where Bida, Balek, and the other survivors of Estrid made their new homes, which has been hitherto described as being plain and ordinary, does not have a name. That is not to say by any means that it is a small, uninteresting hamlet, uninhabited by any distinguished persons and unknown for any outstanding establishments, for many who travel the highway between Riverview and the capital city stop off in a quiet town at the edge of the southern forests, and when these travelers meet in taverns across the kingdom, they always exchange praise of the modest inns, skilled tradesmen, and restful peace to be found in that town beneath the trees, knowing that they all speak of the same place and wishing for a name by which to call it. The truth is that this village does not have a name simply because it has never had one, and that, down the years, its leaders and their advisors, seeing no reason to do away with tradition, and not wishing to, as the saying apparently goes, “spook the heifer while she chews,” have decided with remarkable unanimity not to name it.

(His Majesty insists that this folk saying, included above at his request, relates to the notion of scaring away good fortune, and is still commonly used by the plainspeople today. I praise his creativity.)

Because we have need of some sort of name for this village—for it is a place of great importance in the story of His Majesty's rise, and the tale cannot be told without its mention—I will simply refer to it as the generic village, as it has already been described. Know then, dear reader, that when I speak of it, I speak of an unassuming village by the forest's edge, home to many kind and noble souls who are loyal to the throne of Orofyld and its ideals, and who will receive you warmly should you ever find yourself wearily wandering the road to Riverview.

The survivors of Estrid received such a welcome themselves, for when the mayor of the generic village heard of the terrible tragedy that had befallen them, his citizens did not have to plead with him twice, for he was a big-hearted man, and seeing how desperately these wanderers were in need, he ordained that new homes be built to shelter them, and he offered to take as many of them into his own home as he could until the construction was completed. The citizens readily followed his example, and

in this way, all of the survivors had rooves to keep them dry and good company to keep their spirits high. Bida and Balek were taken in by an elderly couple of farmers, who were only too happy to have some extra help with the chores, and they all got along quite well.

The survivors were eager to lend the villagers a hand in building the houses, and with their combined efforts, all of the displaced were housed in just six months' time. Everyone was pleased with the results of their hard work, the generic village abounded with feelings of geniality and camaraderie, and there was a rowdy festival to mark the culmination of the housebuilding project, during which everyone engaged in much drinking, laughing, half-naked dancing under the harvest moon, and other such enjoyable nonsense.

It was during this festival, which spanned three days but was surely so delightful that it felt like only three hours, that Balek began to have thoughts of leaving his son to live on his own, for he was twice the attentive father that he was strict, and he could not ignore the strong and reliable qualities that seemed to grow in Bida every day. He knew, however, that the loss of Estrid and the parting from Rafael was causing his son a good deal of grief, and that, admittedly, he was feeling it himself, and so he could not bring himself to compound that sorrow. In his wisdom, he decided that he would continue to live with his son and see if a year's time would not serve to sufficiently brace their hearts against the added hardship of being apart.

(At this juncture, I would like to say that, over the course of the three years it has taken me to compile this text, I have conversed with many individuals, some distinguished and some nameless, for the purpose of soliciting their memories and perspectives regarding the details of His Majesty's rise, and because he will soon be excusing himself from this history for some time, I would also like to say that, of all of these interviews, I think there were none I enjoyed more than those I conducted with Balek Bida, heir to the king. They were conversations of social grace, salient wit, and straightforward truth, and I can say that, having met and come to know this man, I now understand the means by which nobility can be birthed in a person from even the humblest of beginnings.

As it turns out, Balek Bida, who, lest we forget, was a damn fine swordsman, also became something of a poet in his aging years. I have had the distinct pleasure of reading most of his works, which, due to his love of the hunt, deal mainly with natural themes. As thanks for the pleasant banter he and I shared, and for your amusement, dear reader, I wish to include some of those works here so that they may be published and immortalized forever in the annals of Orofyld alongside the story of his son's triumph:

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*Now, a bird, she's a thing
who knows how to sing
and draw all the eager lads near her,
but she never does fail
to give a good wail
when nobody wants to hear her.*

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When I read this particular sextet for the first time, I interpreted it as being about a fair maiden from Balek's youth, one who had perhaps scorned his affections. He replied that I had missed the mark entirely, explaining that it had simply been inspired by the sound of a crow's incessant squawking which had awoken him from one of his midday naps. It was an enlightening discussion, to be sure.

The second of his works included here is a humorous limerick, which I praise for the light-hearted tone and the pun in the final line:

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*If you head to the woods, be wary,
for grizzlies are horribly scary.
Lost my leg to a cub,
might as well be a stub,
and it could've been worse, but just barely.*

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Truly, had His Majesty inherited such tactful mastery of words, the keystone would have dropped into the arch, and that single, missing grace would have crowned every other grace, of which none are absent in him, long may he reign. But Abadar smiles fortune upon us, for Her Majesty the Queen is both well-read and well-spoken, and we all maintain very high hopes for the education of the next generation of the throne. But now I will say no more, except to thank Balek Bida once again for his cooperation and his company, and we shall return to the generic village and resume the account of this great and accurate history.)

The year that followed was a year of many opportunities. There were opportunities for Bida to gain employment, which he rejected in the form of the town guard, disliking the numerous rules of conduct and unimpressive swordsmanship sported by the men-at-arms of the town (this should be understood with no detriment to His Majesty's character, who would have readily drawn his blade to defend against any threat to his new home and neighbors should the need have ever arisen). Instead, he

eagerly took to working as a farmhand for the elderly couple who had sheltered him and his father when they had first arrived, as well as by procuring pelts for one of the local blacksmiths, and by taking on odd jobs whenever he saw fit. There were opportunities for purchasing of candles and firewood, of rainbuckets, of reapers and rakes and shovels, and of birthday presents. There were opportunities to spend evenings at one of the noisy taverns in town, eating and drinking and laughing, and there were opportunities to spend them inside at the kitchen table, doing much the same thing. And there were opportunities for Balek and Bida to talk, to argue stubbornly, to listen begrudgingly, and to foster and strengthen the deep understanding which can only be known between a father and a son, so that, when the seasons had circled, they were able to part as men do, with no more words than are necessary and no fewer than can and ought to be said, and Balek was able to leave for the capital city, his heart brimming with bittersweet pride at having given his son the independence he had earned.

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It did not take long for the swordsman's son to grow restless in his father's absence, for although any of those good souls in the generic village who knew Bida would say that he was a dependable young man of fine and upstanding character, they would also say that he was easily bored, and that he had a bit of an impish streak in him, which drove him to seek out new challenges and amusements more eagerly than most, and that this occasionally proved troublesome for those around him.

(Balek once regaled me with such an instance, the details of which I have elected to omit from this history, but which was immensely illustrative and entertaining, and involved half a dozen chickens, several scarecrows, seven or eight fathoms of rope, and one very confused and angry barley farmer.)

So it was that, after two months of living on his own, Bida discovered that he did not like it very much, and, in his boredom, he decided to host a party to which everyone in the village would be invited. He went about the preparations joyfully, drawing up a few dozen fliers in his best handwriting (which was, at the very least, legible) and distributing them throughout the village, and as he went, he told everyone he met in the street about the party, which would be held tomorrow, and how much fun it was going to be.

In his excitement, however, Bida failed to foresee that one-thirty on a Wednesday afternoon would not be the most convenient time to host a party, as most of his fellow citizens would be hard at work during the day, and they could hardly be expected to clear their schedules on such short notice, though perhaps many of them wanted to. Thus, Bida found himself quite disappointed when two o'clock rolled around and no one had yet arrived for the festivities. Glumly, he sipped his fruit punch—the punch which had taken him *all morning* to prepare—and pouted to himself, wishing that his old friend Rafael would knock on the door, for if that were to happen, then it would be a real party, whether

one or one thousand others arrived.

As our hero sat brooding, there was a sudden knock at the door, and he leapt up to answer it, thinking for a moment that his wish might have been granted. Disappointment dealt him a second blow, however, for he threw the door open to see not the gallant and benevolent figure of that esteemed knight of Pelor, but the rather less inspiring figure of a man who was bent with age, though he was surely no older than thirty-five. His name was Mike, and he was known throughout the village for sleeping casually in the streets and for being something of a mystic, and the only other thing that people ever cared to remember about him was his limp, for his right leg was entirely lame. It is said, in fact, that he was so thoroughly lame that the villagers never bothered to ask to hear the story of how his disability befell him—they could only accept his lameness and leave it at that.

As Bida stepped aside to let the strange, hobbling man in, smiling anxiously at the thought of entertaining him for the next few hours, another person approached the doorstep. At first glance, he appeared to be an orc warrior, and Bida instinctively reached for his greatsword—for the swordsman's son was never without his trusty blade, if he could help it—but as the fellow drew nearer, Bida could see that his tusks did not protrude nearly as far from his lower jaw as might be expected of a full-blooded orc, and it became clear that he was a half-breed, the progeny of one of those unhappy and thankfully rare unions between man and orc. He said that his name was Hakak (pronounced huh-KAHK, I am told), saying that he was a wanderer who happened to be passing through, and though Bida regarded him with some mistrust, he was happily admitted, if only because of the interesting weapon he carried on his back—a simple blade mounted to the end of a seven-foot pole, commonly referred to as a glaive—and because Bida did not consider the idea of being alone with Mike the Lame an altogether pleasant one.

Bida and Hakak spent the following several minutes listening dubiously to Mike jabber on about his mystical visions, most of which were utter nonsense and are not included here. Hakak fiddled with the straps of his leather armor, wondering exactly what sort of party this was. Bida continued to stare with boyish curiosity at Hakak's glaive.

After a while, there was another knock on the door—a knock that was incredibly polite and cultured, if a knock can possess such qualities—and Bida excused himself from the conversation to answer it, gleeful that yet another person had shown up to join the party.

Standing on the other side of the threshold was a tall and graceful elf, one of the few remaining members of the fairest race to ever thrive in Orofyld. His robes flowed loosely about him, he spoke and moved with an air of the highest civility, and his bright orange eyes, though young, burned with the intelligent ambition of magefire, and he was such that any who knew the slightest whisper of the arcane

arts would have only needed to look upon him to know him for a wizard, one of those who are more spirit than man, and for whom the mysteries of all things eagerly unravel and reveal their purest truths.

As it happened, Bida was not the sort to pay much attention to whispers, arcane or otherwise, and so he greeted the pointy-eared man as he would have greeted any other, shaking his hand firmly and introducing himself. Somewhat surprised by the simple sincerity of Bida's manners and by the strength of his grip, the young elf gave his name as Aziel Trintior, of the noble Trintior line, who, they say, were once the greatest weavers of illusions in the kingdom. He stated that he had come from the capital on personal business, and that, from what he had managed to learn from the fliers posted all over town, there were to be festivities held here, and that he would be honored if the host would permit him to pass the time conversing with the gathered townsfolk while he waited for certain matters to come to fruition.

Bida did not fully understand Aziel's words, but he replied that he was welcome to come in and enjoy himself, although there were not very many people gathered just yet. Those that had gathered thus far, he added quietly, were not the sort of company to which Aziel might be accustomed, for even the swordsman's son could tell that the elf was clearly a man of taste and good standing. Aziel courteously accepted, assuring his host that he was accustomed to all sorts of company, and that there was no doubt in his mind that the good souls of the generic village, whose praises are on the tongues of every tavern-bound traveler in the land, would certainly prove to be a pleasant bunch.

As Bida closed the door behind them, Aziel made an inquiry about refreshments, to which Bida responded by escorting him to the large bowl of lovingly prepared fruit punch. Aziel then asked very politely if perhaps there was any mango juice, for he would prefer a beverage that matched the hue of his eyes, and there was no concoction in the world which scintillated so perfectly in this manner as the juice of a ripe mango. Bida handed him a cup of punch and laughed heartily at the joke, though Aziel failed to see the humor in the situation.

They reentered the conversation, where Mike the Lamé had been raving to Hakak without end about his mystical powers. Introductions were made, and the half-orc and the elf quickly recognized the spark of intellect in one another, for it is a privilege of the intelligent to know at a glance whether or not the luster of their own brilliance is reflected in another, and the two of them exchanged playful sneers as the invalid rambled on.

Lameness does not beget blindness, however, and Mike was keenly aware that he was not being taken as seriously as he might have liked, which encouraged him to give a sort of demonstration. With a flick of his wrist and his tongue, several gallons of water appeared out of thin air and, with nothing to contain them, splashed loudly onto the floor, soaking Hakak's boots and giving him quite a start. Bida

was astonished, Hakak cursed and made some unsavory threats, Aziel raised a bemused eyebrow, and they were all convinced that there might be more to the lame fellow than there seemed to be.

These and other diversions occurred in the course of that party, and although the differences which separated these men were not small, they did not seem to matter so much at that time, and it could even be said that the four of them got along famously, with no other desire than to be at ease and enjoying one another's company. It was not, Bida reflected, a bad party at all.

Then came the third knock on his front door.

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In Orofyld, there is a saying, one that is as old as the stones of His Majesty's palace and as true as the love of the Great Redeemer, and which was perhaps originally penned by a poet of days long past, one of those honorable persons who phrase so concisely the truths which befuddle the tongues of other men, and who, it cannot be doubted, are never sufficiently praised for the quality and value of their work. And it says that “the turning hand of fate reaches out not boldly, but with great modesty,” which is to say, of course, that the most important things that happen to us in this life, either to our betterment or to our detriment, approach us quietly and in ways we may never realize, or, at least, we certainly cannot anticipate. Such is the will of Abadar, our Prosperous Lord, who guides all fortune with great fairness and temperance.

It was with such modesty that a letter found its way onto Bida's doorstep that afternoon, and it was with appropriate naivety that he picked it up and opened it, not knowing that, in doing so, he had taken the outstretched hand of fate in his own, and that this letter—this small, yellow envelope, which was sealed with a blot of red wax and carried the distinct crest of a certain nobleman by the name of Lord Alexander Frelicton—would forever change his life and set him on a path that would end either in untimely death or in unequalled glory, though, at that time, only the gods could have said which it might be.

(It should be mentioned that this letter, the very one that engendered all of the events which comprise this most celebrated story, is a bit of a mystery, for it is not known how exactly Lord Frelicton would have heard of our hero or how he would have addressed the letter to him, for the swordsman's son was almost entirely unknown outside his village, and it is especially strange that whoever was responsible for delivering the note would merely leave it on the doorstep instead of formally presenting it to the intended recipient, as is customary with the correspondences of nobility.

Now, a lesser historian might be content to gloss over these missing facts, but I, dear reader, owe a greater effort than that to both you and this venerable tale, and if, after careful and methodical investigation, the story is found to be lacking important details such as these, then it is my duty as your

humble author to piece together as reliably as I can the verity of what I have found, or, if this is impossible, to insert events which could be true, or, at the very least, cannot be outright denied by virtue of the assumed, inferred, and altogether very likely truths contained within them.

I say, then, that the barley farmer was reasonably upset by the tormented state in which he found his chickens, which, if the reader will recall, were debauched, ruined, or in some other way victimized by our mischievous hero, and even after Bida apologized profusely for his antics and helped the farmer to secure and restore the poor creatures, the offense was enough to put the old man in a sour mood for a few days, and during this time his wife heard no end of his angry rantings about the situation. She listened patiently, and it seemed to her that this young swordsman, whom she had never met herself, must have been exceptionally graceful to catch so many flighty birds, and to do so in the darkness of night, and without waking a soul. She took the story with her to the market, where she shared it with anyone who would listen, and there were no small number of listeners, for it really was an amusing account, although the details are, as I have said, respectfully omitted from this history.

In short, questions were asked, details were misheard, and the story was so exaggerated that by the time one of Lord Frelifton's servants, who happened to be running an errand in the village that day at the request of his master's wife, caught wind of it, the facts were muddled beyond recognition, and he returned to Lady Frelifton that evening with rumors that there lived in the village a warrior whose swiftness and surefootedness were unparalleled, and who possessed an affinity for handling chickens so beyond belief that some said he might even have a drop or two of fowl blood in him.

Lady Frelifton was, of course, a very prudent woman, of good sense and upbringing, and she doubted very much that anyone from the generic village might have a common farm animal lodged somewhere in his or her lineage; she could believe, however, that Bida was perhaps as deft a warrior as her servant claimed, and that he might be, among other things, an expert cock-wrangler. At any rate, the story delighted her greatly, and it stayed with her for some time, so that, when she and her husband found themselves in dire need of a dependable swordsman some months later, she remembered the chicken-chaser she had heard of, and she entrusted her servant with the task of finding the young man and delivering to him a letter requesting his immediate assistance.

The servant returned to the generic village with every intention of seeing his duty through, for he was endlessly loyal to his lady, but he was also a timid and anxious sort of fellow, and he began to imagine what a man with chicken's blood in his veins might look like, not quite knowing what he would do if he knocked on the door of Bida's house and was received by some foul degenerate whose eyes stared sideways and not forwards, who bobbed his head and strutted about, who was covered in patchy feathers, or whose nose and mouth had melded into the horrific suggestion of a beak, or,

perhaps, possessed all of these monstrous traits. In the end, his nervous fear got the better of him, and, once he had knocked, he placed the letter on the doorstep and quickly scurried away, fearing for his life.

This, then, is the explanation I offer, and its truth cannot be denied, for in strangeness and impossibility it falls far short of other things, both true and false, which are often said and believed about His Majesty, may Pelor preserve us. Certainly, it is a far better clarification than none at all, and, therefore, it should be received with the same credibility as everything else in this most thorough and respected history, to which I now return you, good reader, and many thanks for your patience.)

Bida held the envelope in his hands and stared at it for a moment, appreciating the fine and precise penmanship, the neatly pressed wax, the perfectly emblazoned Frelicton crest, and the general niceness of the parcel. He then tore it open like a curious puppy, eager beyond measure to know what was inside. It contained only a single piece of high-quality parchment, and on it was written the following:

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Dear Sir,

Word has traveled to us of your skills, and we request your immediate assistance. Recently, our fair manor has come under a series of goblin attacks. During the most recent of these raids, our two children were abducted.

The goblins have taken them to their lair, which we suspect lies just north of our home. Please track the fiends down, rescue our children, and bring them back to our manor, which is located just off the road to Sleighton, at the westernmost bend in the Crestyl River. If you do this, we will reward you by whatever means fall within our power.

Go with all possible speed—we fear greatly for their safety.

Lord and Lady Frelicton

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Every swordsman lives for the day when he will be called upon to demonstrate the skills he has so diligently polished, and not since the tragedy which befell Estrid more than a year ago had such a day come for Bida. He felt the anticipatory thrill of adventure rush through him as he finished reading the letter, and for the second time that day, he wished that his trusted companion Rafael were there to stand at his back and help him to see this task through. Alas, they were apart, each brother with his own journey to undertake, and so Bida headed back inside to gather his things, prepared for a lonely and

perilous quest.

He returned to his guests and informed them that, unfortunately, he would have to call the party to an early close, for an important matter had come to his attention, and he had to set out immediately to see to it. The other three were somewhat disappointed by this, for they really had started getting along quite well, and they asked what matter it was that had come up so suddenly and that seemed to be causing their host such a great deal of excitement. Bida responded that a nobleman had directly charged him with rescuing his children, and he proudly showed them the letter, which Aziel read aloud to the astonishment of the gathered company.

The elven mage asked Bida if he intended to embark on this quest alone, and Bida said that he did, for he was skilled with the sword and well-equipped for the task, and so he was not afraid. Aziel replied that he did not doubt these things, but he advised the swordsman's son to take at least one other reliable person with him, for goblins are cowardly and dastardly creatures with little regard for a warrior's honor, and many a righteous arm have been undermined by their numbers and their scheming ways. Aziel even offered to accompany Bida himself if there was no one else at hand, for he was a proud mage of the Trintior line, one who carried in his heart all of the nobility that had once adorned his family, and he would consider it an honor to come to the aid of one of the king's trusted subjects.

Mike the Lame, not wanting to be outdone, cleared his throat and also expressed his desire to accompany Bida, for it was rare that he was ever taken seriously by any of the villagers, and rarer still for him to be invited into one of their homes for nourishment and entertainment. Bida had done both of these things, and Mike was grateful for this, and though he was poor and a bit eccentric, he was also wise, and he saw in the young man the simple benevolence, unflinching determination, and other wholesome qualities which so many would come to see in him, and he knew he was a man worthy of loyalty and respect.

Hakak, it should be said, was moved less by thoughts of goodwill or justice and more by the prospect of being richly rewarded by the assuredly wealthy Lord Frelicton. All the same, he too offered his assistance, for his sharp-edged glaive would undoubtedly be of use in vanquishing the goblin threat.

In short, Bida found himself in the company of people who were not only listening to and expressing concern about his problem, but were also in a position to help him with it, and were actually volunteering to do so, a phenomenon so uncommon among men that, when it happens, it is generally considered to be something of a supernatural experience. This was, of course, lost on Bida, who was always the first to help those in need, and thus was perhaps not as surprised as less virtuous men are when they receive the aid which they themselves would never have thought to give to another.

So it was that they all agreed to see the quest through to the end and split the reward between

themselves, whatever it might be. They plotted a course using Lord Frelicton's letter and a map that Hakak procured from his pack, and they estimated that, if no unforeseen complications arose on the way, they would be able to locate the goblin den in just a few hours. Bida suggested that they leave as soon as possible, for the lives of children hung in the balance, and goblins are impulsive and impatient creatures. Everyone was in agreement, and they moved quickly to gather their supplies, which delayed them no longer than it took to request and outfit several horses, which the mayor of the village, upon reading the details in the letter, was more than happy to loan them for their journey.

And so, on that warm summer afternoon, Bida, Aziel, Hakak, and Mike the Lamé set off from the generic village, heading west towards the Low Plains in search of the treacherous, kidnapping goblins. As they went, Bida smiled to himself, thinking that his party had really come together, and he was glad that he had decided to have it, in spite of Rafael's absence, the thought of which still left him feeling nostalgic whenever it crossed his mind.