

Chapter III

*~ In which our heroes brave the perils of the goblin den
to save the children of Lord Freliction ~*

It was Lord Elyrian Hammond of the illustrious Hammond line, renowned historian, poet, and faithful subject of King Orofyld XIV, who is purported to have said that “no matter how sharp his sword, a man is wise to keep it sheathed in the presence of a knight,” meaning, of course, that sometimes it is sensible to conceal the cleverness of our wits for the sake of preserving the cordial relations we strive to maintain with our peers and our superiors, in spite of how much amusement we might otherwise enjoy at their expense.

It brings me no small amount of joy to know that this chronicle is not bound by such stifling parameters, and that His Majesty, whose grace and liberality sustain me, is a just and compassionate ruler who has appointed me to be his steward and historian with the understanding that every detail presented in this chronicle is of the utmost necessity, and is intended either to clarify the astounding truth of the circumstances surrounding his rise, or to accentuate and enhance the pleasure offered by the telling of the tale. Let it be known that this humble hand of mine has not the audacity to pen so much as a single word in direct offense of King Orofyld XVIII, his subjects, or his kingdom, and this I swear by the glory of Pelor and Abadar, who preside over his reign together in the highest spheres.

(On an unrelated note, the renowned historian and poet Lord Elyrian Hammond was a vehement opponent of the heavy-handed, militant regime under which he and his contemporaries lived so many years ago, and it is from his persuasive and satirical writings that many of the throne's ideals regarding peace and nonarmament are derived. Sadly, he was a touch too outspoken for the times, and King Orofyld XIV ordered his execution, which is one of the ends reserved for brilliant writers by their countrymen, the others being either exile or posthumous acknowledgment.)

I will say nothing further, except that the illustrious Hammond line might have remained intact had certain swords stayed in their sheaths, and that I am immeasurably thankful to be not a brilliant writer but the modest servant of a king who so epitomizes and champions the liberty which is at the very soul of our nation.

And now, no more, for we return to our heroes as they begin their journey.)

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The vast forests of mahogany which swell up from the southern coasts of Orofyld to cradle the generic village do not, much like the village, have a name, for it is too much of an uncharted uncertainty to be named by any of the mortal races. Should one of the wild, bloodthirsty beasts which are said to inhabit its unplumbed depths ever come forth to provide a name for the mysterious, teeming groves wherein it dwells, it is safe to assume that most scholars and cartographers would readily accept it, make the necessary changes to their texts and their maps, and leave the matter at that. This, however, has yet to occur, and so the name of these sprawling woods remains a mystery to us, a source of endless bewilderment and debate among those whose profession it is to study and record the oddities of our kingdom's geography.

(Here, I should have very much liked to include Balek Bida's quatrain on the subject of the nameless forests, but it was rather unfortunately misplaced, and the poet of the hunt finds that his age has left him unable to recall the verses. Rest assured, dear reader, that they could have been nothing short of ingenious.)

Our heroes found themselves trekking through a small stretch of these nameless woods on that fateful summer afternoon, their righteous hearts fluttering in their chests with the thrill of the adventure that awaited them. After a short while spent riding at a brisk pace and engaging in merry conversation, they emerged from the trees and onto the royal highway. They headed north, planning to follow the road to where it began running parallel to the sweet, slow waters of the Crestyl River, for it was there that they would begin their search for the conniving goblins and the kidnapped children of Lord and Lady Frelicton.

It was by the will of Abadar, He Who Tends the Scales, that earlier in the day, those very goblins had put their ugly goblin heads together and come up with what seemed to them the most brilliant idea in the world—namely, that they ought to rob somebody. Emboldened and inspired by this idea, which they had no doubt invented half a dozen times before only to forget it later, they had eagerly set up their ambush a ways southeast of their den, along the highway that leads to the capital city, and there they had waited all day for some unsuspecting merchants or pilgrims to wander into their trap. They sat, whetting their blades and tugging their bowstrings in anticipation, and for hours no one appeared until, at long last, four men on horseback came trotting slowly up the road from the south.

The goblins hesitated for a moment, seeing the glimmer of the blonde one's armor and the strange spear-staff hanging from the toothy one's saddle, but it gave them only brief pause. They had, after all, been waiting patiently for a very long time, which is an even more difficult and aversive task for goblins than it is for men, and so they could not very well let their opportunity pass them by.

Needless to say, they leapt from the grass and set upon their victims with all the malicious fervor their hearts could muster.

Unfortunately for the ambitious monsters, Bida, Aziel, Hakak, and Mike the Lamé held many advantages over them. Our four heroes were on horseback, their equipment was in much better condition, they were men of strength and sound judgment who shared a noble goal, and—perhaps most importantly—they were not goblins. Thus, while they were initially surprised by the four short, scraggly, beady-eyed cretins assaulting them with flimsy arrows and chipped blades, they recovered quickly, and in a matter of seconds, those cretins lay dead in the road, bloodied by sword and glaive and thwarted by magic.

Now, in the moment before the attack, one of the goblins had given significantly more consideration to his hesitant impulse than the others, due to the fact that he was exceptionally meek and cowardly, even by the standards of his own kind. If we were inclined to speak more favorably of him, we might instead say that he was more thoughtful and patient than most other goblins, for he was still ruminating as the ambush got underway, and after witnessing the fate of his brethren, he determined that he had been very wise indeed in giving audience to his instincts. And so this goblin—whose name, it is said, was Meekus—was the only one of his ilk to survive the ambush, which illustrates, in a sort of way, Lord Elyrian Hammond's aphorism regarding swords and the sheaths in which they sometimes ought to remain, for cowardice and good sense are often indistinguishable from one another, especially if one happens to be a goblin.

Meekus elected to capitalize on his continued survival by fleeing in terror, scurrying off through the tall, yellow grass like a startled rabbit in search of its burrow. His luck was against him, however, for his footfalls were loud, and Mike the Lamé noticed him as he made his escape. He informed Bida, Aziel, and Hakak, and they decided to follow poor Meekus, for in all likelihood he would lead them directly to Lord Frelicton's beloved children.

The four of them dismounted, and Bida and Aziel led the horses along by the reins while Hakak and Mike wandered into the roadside fields in search of Meekus' trail. It did not take them long to pick it up, for the timid goblin had really been quite frightened, and, in his hasty flight, he had torn up the soft earth and mussed the grass in such a way that the roguish half-orc and the excitable vagrant could not possibly have overlooked the evidence of his escape, even had they wanted to.

They continued along like this for a short while—Hakak and Mike following the trail, which did not take them far from the road, while Bida rambled to a politely attentive Aziel about his greatsword, ensuring that the lanky city fellow would be able to understand the glory of the blade by restraining himself to the discussion of just a few of his favorite things about it. These were, in a word,

the sharp parts and the smooth parts, as well as the fact that it had belonged to his father, a swordsman (and poet) of the highest caliber. Aziel endured with his usual grace.

Presently, they came to the banks of the Crestyl, that wide, slow river whose countless, burbling branches flow throughout and vitalize the entirety of Orofyld, making our kingdom clean and prosperous beneath the gaze of the gods. Meekus' trail stopped at the water's edge, and when they found that they were unable to pick it up once they had crossed to the other side, it seemed to them that the feeble goblin had desperately flung himself into the river and had probably washed up somewhere downstream.

They traveled west down another offshoot of the king's highway that, had they kept to it, would have led them into the Low Plains, those rolling, windswept grasslands where farming is difficult and few have attempted to settle. Their journey did not take them so far, however, for as they made their way down the road beside the banks of the meandering river, they chanced upon none other than Meekus the goblin as he was hauling his wretched form out of the water, shaking silt out of his ears and clambering groggily towards the road.

It is uncertain how Mike the Lamé, whose vision, they say, was quite keen, could look upon this miserable, saturated goblin and come to the conclusion that he was not yet sufficiently wet or unhappy. But it must have been so, for as the story goes, when the company of four happened upon Meekus for the second time, the vagrant wielded his mysticism and conjured several gallons of water from nothingness, which appeared in the air above the unfortunate Meekus and sloshed down upon his already waterlogged noggin.

At the sight of our heroes and the sudden feeling of cold water storming his senses, Meekus panicked anew and ran off, dripping and whimpering, into the undergrowth, seeking some sort of refuge from the strange and cruel men-folk who tormented him so. Aziel suggested they follow at a leisurely pace, for surely they were nearing the goblin den, and they might frighten their quarry into fleeing in a direction away from its lair were they to follow too closely. Bida and Hakak were in agreement, and so was Mike, though he wanted badly to give chase with all possible speed, if only to batter Meekus with more of his aqueous summonings, a prank which he found to be terribly humorous and entertaining, and which, in many ways, was.

At a leisurely pace, Bida, Aziel, Hakak, and Mike tethered their horses to the dry trunks of some nearby trees and proceeded to follow Meekus' trail on foot through the thick, wild grass. His passage was as glaringly easy to track as it had been the first time, and in a matter of minutes, the four of them stood atop a hill which descended into a small, well-hidden valley dappled with crystalline ponds and beautifully flowering plants. Near the bottom of the hillside was a dark opening in the earth, which, if

the soggy, pathetic footprints on the ground were to be believed, marked the entrance to the den of the dastardly goblins who had absconded with Lord Frelifton's children.

Eagerly, though perhaps for slightly different reasons, Bida and Mike skipped quickly down the hillside towards the cave. The swordsman's son reached the entrance first, drawing his greatsword with gusto and heading boldly inside. Due to his lameness, Mike was lagging somewhat behind, though it should be said that he had never been known to move with such speed before that day, and that, having cornered the fleeing Meekus in his lair, he was no doubt invigorated by thoughts of the spirited dousing that was soon to follow.

It should also be said that despite this invigoration, his lameness did hamper his pace enough to save him from the misfortune that befell Bida, for as the valiant warrior stepped into the cave, squinting for sight in the damp darkness, he felt his foot slip into a yawning crevice in the ground, and were it not for his instinctive, chicken-wrangling agility, he would have tumbled heavily into a pitfall that might have ended very badly for him. Mike caught up with him shortly, and, whispering some words to his quarterstaff, caused it to glow like a torch and filled the rocky tunnel with light. Seeing the predicament that Bida was in, he did his best to help the armored young man up and away from the hole.

For his part, Bida largely forgot his embarrassment at suddenly and unexpectedly straddling the moist earth when he laid eyes on the bewitching, silvery-yellow light effusing from Mike's staff. It was beautiful, to be sure, and when Aziel and Hakak joined them a few moments later, Bida asked the elven mage if a greatsword could be made to shine in the same way. Aziel obliged, and Bida was most pleased.

While Hakak observed this exchange, arms folded and eyebrow raised, Mike slyly tapped the point of the half-orc's glaive with the end of his staff and muttered something, passing some of his mystical radiance into the weapon. This earned him a disgruntled look from the slightly annoyed rogue.

The three of them then looked expectantly at Aziel, who, after a moment, gave a polite sigh and gently touched his necklace, imbuing it with light as well. And so, after carefully stepping around the pit, the four of them ventured further into the cave, each sporting his own source of magical effulgence, which lent their quest an certain air of mystery and irreverence.

Newly illuminated, our heroes fought their way into the deepest bowels of the cave, leaving a trail of decimated goblins in their wake, for the guileful little creatures were no match for their combined might. At length, they reached the heart of the den, where they waged a splendid battle involving the shaman-warrior who led the goblin clan, two man-sized scorpions, and a hulking, hideously mutated goblin that spewed foul acid from its jaws, all of which they defeated handily and while sustaining minimal injury.

It must also be mentioned that Meekus, who had successfully evaded our heroes thus far, had made it all the way to this cavern and was caught up in the battle. Before he could find an opportunity to flee, he found himself drenched by Mike the Lamé and beaten about the head by the vagrant's glowing staff, so that he fell unconscious and was trampled underfoot by one of the massive scorpions as it skittered over him. Thus, poor Meekus met his end, and in truth he likely deserved better, for, as goblins go, he was surely one of the least reprehensible to ever live.

When the skirmish had ended and all of the goblins and the scorpions lay dead, Bida took up the longsword of the fallen shaman-warrior, which, much like his own weapon, was shining with a magical light, although this light was of an otherworldly blue color rather than silvery-yellow. Aziel informed him that it was an enchanted blade, that the light was eternally bound to it, and silently he hoped that Bida would take it so that the young swordsman would not pester him to brighten up his greatsword again any time soon.

Assuming, quite correctly, that Aziel was very knowledgeable when it came to matters of sorcery and enchantments, Bida deduced that Aziel wanted the sword for his research or his collections or other wizardly things, and he quickly laid claim to it, giddy at the idea of his compatriot's envy, which was, of course, non-existent. It became even more non-existent when the two of them discovered that the shaman-warrior had also been carrying a wand that, in the hands of a mage, could close the wounds of whoever it touched. Aziel demurely took the wand, and Bida assured himself that the sword was a much better trophy.

While this was happening, Hakak and Mike made a quick search of the cavern and found the cranny that the goblins had been using for storage. There they found Lord Frelicton's son and daughter, bound and gagged and huddled together amongst the crates and barrels, and they hurried to release them from their bonds. The children were in a nervous state, and they had been deprived of food and drink, but they were otherwise unharmed. They could not recall the events of their kidnapping, only that they had gone to sleep in their beds and had woken up in the captivity of goblins, and they wanted dearly to go home to their parents. Hakak and Mike the Lamé went about reassuring the children that they would be going home very soon, and that they need not worry, for everything would be alright.

It was at this point that Bida, who was greatly excited by the victory that he and his party had won, jubilantly rounded the corner, triumphantly waving his new blade through the air and raising a considerable ruckus. Upon seeing the hollering swordsman, his armor caked in gore and his wild blue eyes still frenzied from the thrill of the fight, Lord Frelicton's poor son and daughter, who were both no more than seven years of age and had just been through quite a traumatic ordeal, were so badly frightened that they screamed and sought shelter behind the tusked and not altogether appealing Hakak,

which should go a long way in illustrating the fearsome qualities of Bida's wartime visage. In this way, the swordsman's son came to be known as "childsbane," a name that, much to his chagrin, fit him almost too nicely, like a doublet that has been tailored so well that the man for whom it is made seems somehow incomplete when he goes without it.

While Mike the Lamé was doing his best to once more calm the children, and Aziel, who had joined them by this time, was properly admonishing Bida for his actions, Hakak was staring curiously at something he had noticed. Painted on the wall of the cave was a large, red shape. It had faded into the stone and was barely noticeable, but as he held up the light of his shimmering glaive and let his eyes wander freely over it, he found that its contours—or, perhaps, what was suggested within those contours—struck a rigid chord of fear in him. He found himself wondering if the shape had actually been painted, or if it had instead been splashed there with something more sinister. Chilled, he forced himself to look away and asked Aziel to examine it.

For all of his vast knowledge, however, the Trintior mage was at a loss. The shape resembled no arcane sigil he had ever seen, and if it held any historical or religious significance, he was unaware of it. Perhaps it was important in the worship of some obscure goblin deity? It was impossible to tell without devoted study, and, at any rate, the welfare of the children was a more pressing matter. They quickly made their exit from the cave, staying alert for any further ambushes, of which there were none, emerging into the red-orange light of the closing day, returning to the riverside, briefly washing up, untethering their horses, and setting off down the road towards the Frelicton estate.

Bida was glad that they had not lingered very long in the cave, for that shape on the wall had filled him with a very familiar sense of frightful loathing, and it seemed to him that he had seen it before, that he had, in fact, struck down the evil knight who had worn it suspended from his neck and had cast him into the sea. That shape—that hateful, maddening shape of sickening wickedness—was, he felt, the very same as the necklace that had consumed his childhood home in flames, and he was not sure what to think of the fact that it had appeared before him again. He hoped he was mistaken, that the similarity was unfounded or imagined, and because of this he did not speak of his suspicions to his new friends.

He thought of Rafael, of the insidious, red-cloaked man and the vengeance they had sworn upon him, and he gripped his sword tightly.

He knew he was not mistaken.

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The ride to Lord Frelicton's manor was slow going, for the rest of the company had to match the pace of Bida, who had kindly allowed the children to make the journey in his saddle and was himself

on foot, leading his horse by the reins. The children repaid his kindness by addressing him with such appropriate names as “blood-bather,” “scorpion-eater,” and “big red bogeyman,” and also by assailing him with a variety of boldly impertinent questions, as young ones are wont to do. To his merit, the bane of children endured this magnificently, choosing to sometimes ignore the young Frelictons and to sometimes respond with placid patience, and only occasionally, perhaps three times or four, did he threaten to unleash his wrath upon them, which, as any parent or caretaker would attest, is a praiseworthy feat indeed.

In between their playful exchanges with Bida, Lord Frelicton's son and daughter provided directions to their father's manor, which, in tandem with Hakak's map, led our heroes further down the road until, cresting a hillock, they beheld the Frelicton estate, reclining against the watercolor sunset in all its antiquated glory.

As they passed through the gate and drew up to the front porch, marveling at the sturdy masonry and general impressiveness of the three-floored, rural retreat, the children scrambled down from the horse and raced excitedly to the front door, rattling the knocker and loudly asking to be let in. Bida, Aziel, Hakak, and Mike the Lamé smiled and congratulated one another on a job well done as they followed the children up the steps.

A well-dressed young man answered the door, greeting them and inquiring as to how he might be of assistance. He then saw, much to his bewilderment, the children, who pushed past him into the foyer, where the sounds of a servant-girl's elated fussing and a dog's thrilled barking indicated that they were well-received.

The butler turned his perplexed stare on our heroes, and Aziel stepped forward, introducing Bida as the recipient of Lord Frelicton's request and explaining that he and the others here assembled had facilitated the rescue of his lordship's children from their goblin kidnappers. The butler was even more confused by this, for he had not been informed of any such request, nor had he been aware that the children were even missing.

Choosing to ignore the butler's negligence for the moment, Bida interjected, saying that he had received a letter directly from Lord Frelicton, which he now produced, and did so proudly. The butler took the letter and, after skeptically observing the writing and the wax seal for a moment, had to concede that it could only have been penned by his master. He handed it back to Bida, cast a final disparaging gaze around at the four men, particularly Hakak and Mike, asked that they wait just one minute, and promptly shut the door in their faces.

Two minutes later, the door reopened, and a man whose finely brocaded clothing and glimmering diamond ring revealed that he could only be Lord Frelicton himself stepped tersely onto

the porch. He offered them the most minimal and forced of pleasant greetings, and as he placed one large, heavy, clinking sack into Bida's arms and another into Aziel's, they glimpsed, for a few seconds, his face.

They glimpsed a face that was quite handsome and bespoke good breeding, as would be expected of a nobleman of Orofyld. They saw that it was made less handsome, however, by the dark circles of fatigue that hung about the eyes like the void that surrounds the stars at night, by the nervous pallor that bleached the cheekbones, by the worried, frazzled state of the hair, by the thin veneer of sweat glistening upon the brow. They saw that it bespoke a mind that was fraught with panic or dread or some other insufferable feeling, a mind that wished not to know what it already knew, a mind that was grappling with some truth or anticipated truth, horrible, and from b—

Once more, the door shut promptly in their faces.

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Several hours later, our heroes were traveling back through the small stretch of mahogany forest that separates the generic village from the southwesterly grasslands. The manner in which they had been received at the manor had left them wondering about a number of things.

Their reception had really been more of a dismissal, for Lord Frelicton's ignoble conduct had made it clear that their presence at the estate had not been desired, and though the sacks of coins he had given them were a welcome and thoroughly excessive reward—together they amounted to some five thousand gold pieces, which was enough to purchase a modest but tasteful home in the capital city—they had not been treated with any of the hospitality that is customarily shown to those who earn favor among the nobility of Orofyld. They had been thanked, but only superficially, and to profess gratitude in so false and tepid a manner is to offend good men and to cast aspersions upon their names and deeds. This, our heroes felt, was exactly what had happened to them.

They were further vexed by the laxity of the butler and by the apparent distress of his master, both of which begged a number of questions. How could the butler possibly have been unaware that the children of the house had been missing for more than a day? Had Lord Frelicton been concealing their disappearance from his staff? Had he not entrusted one of his servants with the task of delivering his request for aid to Bida's home? Perhaps not. Perhaps he had entrusted someone else with its delivery. Or perhaps he had not sent it at all. Had the letter been a forgery, penned by another hand? It was unlikely, for Lord Frelicton had made good on the promise of a reward, and why should he do that if it were not really and truly his signature and seal on the request? He had, however, paid them exorbitantly for their efforts, and he had certainly not invited them to spend any length of time at his manor—again, our heroes could not shake the feeling of having been dismissed, of feeling distinctly unwelcome at the

Frelicton estate. And Lord Frelicton had been so tense and anxious. It was almost as if he had been awaiting some great danger or misfortune, as if he had been expecting dark-robed Death to knock insistently upon his door instead of his children and their rescuers. What had the good man so worried, that he seemed to have forgotten the courtesy of his upbringing?

(On the matter of the letter: if the reader will recall from the previous chapter, it was decided that the letter had in fact been penned by Lord and Lady Frelicton and delivered to Bida by a nervous young servant, who was too afraid to confront the fowl-blooded swordsman of local renown and ended up leaving it on the doorstep.

The truth of this, as I have said, cannot be denied, and so we can be certain that the letter was not a forgery, and that it was in fact delivered by one of Lord Frelicton's trusted servants. This does little, however, to explain the good nobleman's strange behavior, and it casts further doubt upon the butler, who, if a servant in the house had been made aware of the letter and its importance, should presumably have known about its nature as well, or, at the very least, should have known that a letter of some sort had been written and sent.

All in all, the matter of Lord Frelicton and his letter is a befuddling one, and as your humble author, I will strive to shed as much light on its details as I am able, though I must admit that it is one of the greatest mysteries in this history, and if I am confounded in my attempts to unravel it, we may have to once more accept an number of explanations that are merely plausible or that cannot be easily denied, which, without doubt, are often superior to the truth, both in verity and in their propensity to produce amusement, and this you shall yet see, dear reader, as we return to the tale.)

At length, the company of four discussed all of these things and more, and in the course of their quibbling and squabbling, they all managed to agree for certain that something was possibly not quite right with the outcome of their noble quest. Although Hakak, gold in hand, was willing to forget the whole ordeal and move on, it was the others' concern for the children, their indignation at having been treated so callously, and, frankly, their curiosity and officiousness, shared by so many wanderers of the world, which moved them to turn their horses around and head back up the road towards the Frelicton estate. They did not know how they would be received upon arrival or what they expected to find there, but it was perfectly understood that they would not, under any circumstances, be leaving well enough alone that night.