

Chapter V

*~ Which concludes the chilling adventure of the Frelicton estate,
and introduces a certain dwarf ~*

Alas, as that wise and venerable gentleman Lord Elyrian Hammond once said, "...all things turn, and even Our Redemptive Father makes his rounded way through the heavenly aether, taking flight from our searching eyes, withholding from us that kind and merciful love which warms the tender flowers of our hearts, and leaving us to clutch and question in the cold uncertainty of darkened night, if only for a while..."

To be sure, our heroes did not think themselves fit to bluster where even the gods were inclined to show modesty, and thus they did no more to preserve either the memory or the physical integrity of Mike the Lamé than was necessary—a few words were said, and if a tear fell, then the surviving three had moved on before it had reached the floorboards at their feet. They left Mike there on the hallway floor among the flaking remains of the ghoulish-butler and ghoulish-children, knowing that the lovable vagrant and his eccentricities were now the concerns of those unfortunate beings who guide the fates and hearts of men, and they resolved to see to his burial once the matter of the haunted Frelicton estate had been resolved.

Hearts hardened, they scoured the remainder of the second floor, and at length, Hakak, venturing down the hall in the direction wither Lady Frelicton's apparition had floated, came upon a storage nook stocked with weathered barrels and crates, and there he spied the glinting handle of a trap door in the low ceiling. He pulled the hatch open with a sharp tug, and a rickety, wooden ladder slid down into the room.

The three quickly reconvened, and once he had safely tested his weight upon the thin rungs, Bida led them in their climb into the shadowy loft above. The stale, dust-laden air enveloped them heavily, and as they stepped slowly across the creaking timbers, they heard again the terrible moaning, the tragic, grieving wails of a grave-mother as they came whirling down from somewhere farther on, throwing the nervous light of Hakak's torch into timorous disarray with their passing.

Wary but not disheartened, the three proceeded across the room. A thin wall partitioned the attic, and they stood now before a doorway where a pair of long, purple curtains were draped, obscuring their view of whatever lay beyond. Bida drew them aside with one swift motion, rustling them sharply, and

their lights poured into the next room, a room which revealed quite plainly that Lord Frelicton had undoubtedly been quite a talented artist. His paintings, vivid in color and remarkable in detail, were displayed all along the far wall, and the corners of the loft were occupied by crates filled with stacks of fresh canvas, bottles of paint that ran the color spectrum twice over, and brushes of every conceivable length and finery.

An easel in the center of the room cradled an unfinished work, and upon the stool near this easel sat the spectre of Lady Frelicton, gazing between melancholy sobs at the painting before her. At the sound of the curtains being thrown open, she flashed our heroes a withering glare, fixing her white, weeping eyes especially upon Bida (knowing, perhaps, that he was both the chicken-chaser and the childbane of local renown, and that it was he who had riven her poor ghoul-children into so many pieces, returning them to their early and unearned rest). Offended by their presence, she did not linger long, and with a low moan, she left her seat and floated across the room, where, pausing for a moment's contemplation before one of the paintings on the wall, she drifted bodily through it and out of sight.

Our heroes did not flee, for although their stomachs turned and their throats ran dry upon viewing the apparition for the second time, they had been advised by Mike prior to his demise that the house had very possibly become the centre of a spiritual disturbance, and his timely warning, which was truly the last and greatest of the many favors and other industrious things he had ever done for his comrades, enabled them to sure up their courage against this fresh horror, which they had experienced once already. And so they advanced trepidaciously into the studio, alert and intrigued.

Bida and Hakak approached the easel and were somewhat shaken by the subject of Lord Frelicton's final work. It depicted a tall, red-robed, humanoid figure whose race was indistinguishable, and whose angular features might have been man, elf, dwarf, or something else entirely. Unsettling though the biological ambiguity of the thing was in and of itself, its disquieting nature was made more palpable by the decisions the artist had made in rendering it—namely, that he had pushed two gaping holes clean through the canvas where a pair of eyes should have been, and that he had dominated the foreground with a solid field of hateful crimson where an outstretched hand might have been otherwise depicted. The swordsman's son and the toothy thief felt a surge of revulsion as they looked upon the painting, and although neither of them could quite place it, Bida was aware that it felt terribly familiar to him.

Meanwhile, Aziel had sidled up to the painting through which Lady Frelicton had made her exit, and he saw that it portrayed a large, solemn-looking book bound by iron-wrought chains to a stone pedestal, and he too was deeply disgusted with Frelicton's artwork, though he could not say why. He lifted the canvas from its hanging place and was surprised to discover an alcove concealed behind it,

which was a shelf set no more than six inches back into the masonry and housed a small packet of parchment bound in loose leather, and this piqued Aziel's curiosity such that he immediately picked up the volume and began to read aloud from its pages.

(Unfortunately, Lord Frelicton's journal was lost due to a very particular set of circumstances, which has not yet developed at this point in this tale, and which shall be expounded upon when the proper occasion arises, and seeing as how the mental faculties of His Majesty and his distinguished comrades cannot faithfully recall the details of that diary's musings, I must regrettably content myself in providing you with mere generalities regarding its contents, which, as a historian, I find to be a distasteful and neglectful practice, one that I do not intend to take up as a habit, and this I promise you, dear reader.

Let me say, then, that the entries in the journal of Lord Alexander Frelicton bespoke a mind descending into obsessive paranoia, and they revealed, among other things, that the good nobleman had once claimed membership in a vaguely malevolent organization which he called, quite simply, "The Guild," that he and his acquaintances had stolen something important from this organization and had absconded with it, and that this organization, which had begun recently to grow in numbers, was still in pursuit of them. In those fevered, tremulous writings, so says His Majesty, Lord Frelicton expressed an overwhelming sense of regret, worry, and, above all else, fear. With his final words, he declared his intent to stand against The Guild to the last, and suggested that he had stored in his cellar a weapon that he hoped would be of use in defending his family when the time arrived.

Lord Frelicton said, in a word, all of these things, and others, and having now heard them, I return you, patient reader, to the tale, and let us see what becomes of our remaining three heroes.)

Crowded around the journal in that dusty, haunted attic, Bida and Hakak listened silently as Aziel finished reading the final entry, and the three shared a moment of silent respect for Lord Frelicton and his family.

Truthfully, the journal had raised more questions than it had answered, and our heroes wondered about the nature of The Guild and the potential value of the treasure for which Lord Frelicton had risked his life, but although these things remained as mysteries for the moment, the fate of the Frelicton family had, at least, been brought to light. Bida, Aziel, and Hakak, agreeing that there was little more they could do, took the journal and began their trek back to the first floor, intent on first investigating the cellar before taking their leave.

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It must be said, friends of Orofyld, that the horrors which befell the good Alexander Frelicton, his lovely wife, and his darling children was a grievous tragedy. It is the truest wish of this humble

author that their poor, departed spirits find befitting solace in the loving embrace of the Great Redeemer and His Heralds, and that the treacherous scoundrels who wrought such unwarranted destruction upon them be damned to the bleakest trenches of the infernal Pit.

And who, indeed, are these wretches? Who among mortalkind can claim to have smirched his soul in so dastardly a manner? Who smiles flames and doom upon his kin and brethren, reveling in their sorrow and agony? Enchanters! Sinister, conniving sorcerers, wielding their dreadful magics as sword and chain against our goodly kingdom! They are the baseborn, the spiteful lurkers who engender such evil against us! Do not doubt, dear reader, that the Frelicton house was blighted by a curse spun from the spindly fingers of one of these villains, for their schemes are the seeds of all misfortune in this world. A pox on them all!

Some would argue that those mages exist who are benevolent, and who work for the betterment of Orofyld, and to this I must assent—Aziel Trintior, as we know, is one so inclined. I will say, however, that the mage is especially predisposed to corruption simply by virtue of his craft (indeed, even Aziel Trintior is purported to have engaged in certain illicit activities in his efforts to protect Orofyld), and that for every pure-hearted wizard, there exist ten who are wicked to the core, and as such it is in our best interest to regard them *all* with prudent and tempered suspicion, so history has shown, and let us not be so unthinking as to forget our history.

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Descending the grand staircase and returning to the foyer, taking care to avoid the squirming leeches as best they could, Bida, Aziel, and Hakak noticed for the first time a door in the west wall of the reception hall, just to the left of the main entryway. They approached it hesitantly, uncertain as to whether or not it had been there when they had first entered the manor, and found that it opened into a narrow, stony staircase that trailed down into the darkness.

Slowly, carefully, they made their way down to the cold foundation beneath the estate. The ancient corridor yawned around them like a wet-mouthed beast, their footfalls echoing like the throaty gnashing of teeth, and they followed it around to the cellar proper, which was a single, enormous room housing dozens of barrels, boxes, crates, sacks, and other assorted storage containers. In the center of the chamber, an antique oak table stood, and something rested upon its surface, something long and thin, hidden beneath a tattered, white sheet.

Glancing curiously at one another, our heroes approached the table, but as they drew near, they were beset by a hoarse, disdainful voice that boomed forth from every corner of the basement, a voice that cursed them vehemently and thirsted for their blood. As they readied their weapons, a cyclone began to whirl around them, extinguishing the light of their torch and sending thick swaths of choking

dust billowing about the cellar.

Then, a figure appeared in the musty mist, and they beheld with their watering eyes the terrible sight that was the ghost of Alexander Frelicton, transparent, abhorrent, caked in the squalid decadence of visceral, wrongful death, his hair blown back by the winds of half-existence, his eyes afire with unrazored malice.

Their courage shook under the oppressive presence of this ghastly apparition, and Hakak, who was not known for his dogmatism, seized the moment and, turning on his heel, fled resolutely back down the corridor towards the staircase. Aziel stood his ground for the moment, observing the spectre studiously, and Bida, reckless as ever, sallied forth and assailed the tormented Frelicton with a mighty blow—but alas, his blade passed harmlessly through the ghost like a zephyr rushing through a field of flowering nightshade.

In response, Lord Frelicton gave a foul yet very refined snarl, and, imposing his will upon the room, caused several heavy barrels to rise up from the ground and hurl themselves through the air at the intruders. Aziel lithely ducked back out of the room in time to avoid them, but Bida was not so fortunate, and he was pummeled soundly, and one especially large barrel soon fell over his head, swallowed him to his waist like a uncomfortably oversize hat, toppled him to the floor, and barreled with alarming speed out of the room and into the corridor, where it splintered violently against the unyielding stone wall and deposited him, dazed and bruised, at Aziel's feet.

Following this, Aziel assisted Bida the Barrel-Chested as they promptly retreated, pursued by the unfriendly sounds of crashing barrels and furious, aristocratic howling. Hakak awaited them at the top of the stairs, and together they returned once more to the foyer, shaken, breathing heavily, and racking their brains to come up with a method of pacifying the vicious phantom.

Hakak was unsure of how to proceed, for he had never taken heed where ghost stories were concerned, though henceforth he would be sure to do so; and Bida, young and inexperienced as he was, had never encountered a foe he could not best with his trusty greatsword, excepting, of course, the dreaded Back Door, whose glorious defeat he had ceded to Aziel earlier that evening. And Aziel would return that kindness, for by this point the Trintior mage had recalled from his studies that while mortal weapons could never wound the incorporeal form of the risen dead, the power of an enchanted blade might suffice, if wielded deftly.

He was relaying this information to Bida when the ghost of Lord Frelicton, whose agitation had not subsided in the least, suddenly rose up through the floor, shrieking wildly and setting the house atremble with his psychic rage. His barrels, however, could not follow him in his ascent, and so he selected some three dozen of the fattest and sickliest leeches from the hundreds that were scattered

across the carpet and the floorboards, and he proceeded to hurl them in gobs of three or four at our heroes, who panicked and made every effort to evade the hideous things.

Hakak, thinking only of putting as much distance between himself and the ghost as possible, saw that Frelicton was blocking the front door, and instead bounded up the stairs, two at a time, seeking the shelter of the upper floors. He succeeded in drawing the attention of the ghost and quickly found himself besieged by a fresh salvo of leeches, several of which found homes in the cozy nooks of his leather armor and helped themselves to a warm meal, a presumptive gesture to which Hakak objected loudly.

In the midst of this, Bida reluctantly sheathed his greatsword and drew the ensorcelled longsword he had claimed in the goblin den, letting its otherworldly, blue light flood the air. As he rushed forward, preparing to rain down a rapid flurry of strokes upon his ethereal adversary, Aziel reached into his pack and procured a long scroll of parchment, and from this fluttering scroll he chanted aloud the series of arcane runes he had inscribed there, and cast a spell of transmutation upon Bida, which caused the swordsman's son to suddenly grow to twice his size as he was bearing down upon the ghost.

Consequentially, several things happened (and here we shall see how even the most well-meaning of wizards may have his hand in disaster before the day is out), the first being that Bida's sword grew in accordance with his own enlargement, so that it was fully seven feet long from hilt to tip. Unfortunately, the ceiling stood at a height of no more than nine feet, and as such it could not accommodate the now twelve-foot-tall, wild-eyed swordsman, let alone the additional reach of his distended blade, and thus, raising his striking arm, Bida splintered the wood above him with his burly shoulder and bashed his way clear through to the upstairs hallway, causing unthinkable damage to the antiquated estate and earning himself an impressive number of splinters.

The transmutation also had the effect of increasing Bida's weight in proportion to his size, and the burden of his embiggened breastplate and weaponry was such that he now very easily weighed fifteen hundred pounds, and while the floors of the Frelicton manor were sturdy, they could not be asked to bear so unfair a burden. The boards sagged beneath Bida's feet, then gave way entirely, sending him, Lord Frelicton, and some two hundred leeches plummeting into the cellar below, while Aziel and Hakak looked on in worried bemusement.

(You may be wondering, dear reader, how Lord Frelicton, being a spirit and, therefore, not bound to the laws of our world, managed to tumble into the basement alongside His Majesty, despite his ability to levitate and pass through solid objects. Indeed, this seems ridiculous, yet it is here recorded and must have been as such, so thusly we accept that the ghost of Lord Frelicton was so

befuddled by the folly of the intruders and so appalled by the resultant devastation wrought upon his family home, that he lost the will and awareness to suspend himself in midair and accompanied Bida in his spontaneous descent. Truly, undeath is a mysterious thing.)

In short, once the dust and the confusion had settled, the enlarged swordsman's son and the ghostly aristocrat picked themselves up from the debris and immediately rejoined in combat, for Lord Frelifton had been incensed to new heights of fury by the ruination of his manor, and Bida reciprocated this anger, not quite understanding what had just happened to either himself or his foe, but realizing that, in all likelihood, he should probably be upset about it. In this way, they continued their duel for several minutes, but although the ghost battered Bida relentlessly with a dangerous hodgepodge of jagged floorboards, cruel barrels, and thirsty leeches, the indomitable spirit of the towering warrior could not be snuffed out, and his massive, shimmering sword struck true, tearing at Frelifton's form and winnowing him away into screaming smoke.

Thus, Lord Alexander Frelifton, husband, father, and loyal servant of King Orofyld XVII, was brutally lain to rest by Bida Bo Bida, son of Balek, who destroyed both him and his children, and by Aziel Trintior, whose modesty might have otherwise prevented him from claiming due praise.

Alas, one final horror lay in store, for as Aziel and Hakak stood there in the foyer, looking down through the gaping hole in the floor upon the pitched battle unfolding in the cellar, they heard from behind them a hoarse, guttural moaning, and turning, they saw the shambling corpse of Mike the Lametrudging steadily down the grand staircase, and their hearts frowned in exasperation. In his final moments, Mike had succumbed to the ghoul-fever, and his feline eyes, yellowed incisors, and gore-stained claws all revealed that it had taken him quickly and completely, and that no vestige of the man remained in that unholy, hungering shell.

This, however, was not entirely true, for he still dragged one vestige limply behind him as he lumbered, and as such he approached slowly, almost cautiously, taking one step at a time. Aziel took the opportunity to blast him with a bolt of force, which caught poor Mike squarely on the forehead, arresting his progress and causing him to stumble, teetering uncertainly where he stood, and without his quarterstaff to steady him, he slipped and tumbled down the stairs in a flurry of flailing limbs and panicked hissings. The oaf landed in a broken heap at the foot of the stairs, and Hakak, sparing not a moment, plunged the point of his glaive into his comrade's chest and scattered him into ash—thus, Mike the Lametrudging, beloved vagrant of the generic village and tormentor of Meekus, met his second, less-gruesome end at the hands of his friends Aziel and Hakak, undone once more by his own lameness, which even death could not kill.

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The decision to burn the Frelicton estate to the ground was not a difficult decision for our heroes to reach, given the circumstances, and it might even be said that they took to it with zealotry, using dozens of torches and much too much oil to set the place alight. At any rate, it was only a matter of minutes before the entire manor was engulfed in flames, and with it went the bodies, the paintings, the leeches, and nearly everything else that could possibly remind our heroes of the harrowing adventure they had enjoyed within those walls, including the freshly baked bread, which Bida very deliberately recovered from the front lawn and pitched back into the house as the conflagration roared higher.

Aziel had salvaged two things from the estate prior to the starting of the fire, and as they were relocating the horses and establishing the campsite from which they would observe the blaze for the remainder of the night, he examined them. One of these objects of interest was Lord Frelicton's journal, and the other was the weapon to which the journal had alluded, which Aziel had found amid the rubble in the aftermath of Bida's duel—it was a staff, long and sleek, carved from white birch that had been scarred with swirling, blue runes, and crowned with a cone-shaped sapphire that glistened darkly in the firelight. Aziel needed only glance at it to know that it had been crafted by a capable wizard, needed only to be near it to feel the energies that marked it as a powerful instrument of destruction, though of the nature of that destruction he could say little without experimentation, and of the identity of that wizard he could say even less.

As they sat at a safe distance from the burning house, tending to their wounds and conversing idly, a lone rider who was passing by saw the flames from the road and approached them cautiously. Our heroes wondered what sort of person would be traveling the roads alone so late at night, and they beckoned to him, welcoming him to their camp.

The rider was a dwarf, one of the proud, stocky, bearded clan from the northern mountain kingdom of Ambrosia, whose craftsmanship and breweries are celebrated in all civilized places. His name was Rogar, and he was a wanderer, a rarity among his people, who seldom leave their homelands. He said that he was a bounty hunter (which would have caused Hakak considerable concern, had he not already been asleep), that he was riding from nearby Sleighton, where he had captured a notorious bandit duo, and that he was now seeking his next source of employment.

Thoughtfully, Bida suggested that he might find work in the generic village, which was but a few hours' ride east, and offered to travel with him, for they were preparing to return there in the morning. Rogar said that he had heard of this village beneath the trees, and seeing that the rumors of the hospitality of its citizens held true, accepted Bida's kind offer and made camp with them. He shared

with our heroes his skin of ale, which elated the swordsman's son, and from which the Trintior mage politely abstained, and as the three of them kept vigil over the burning estate that night, Bida and Aziel recounted to Rogar the strange and frightening things they had experienced therein, and although the dwarven rider was not entirely without his skepticism, he appreciated a good story, and he was convinced that, even if these men were not the valiant souls they claimed to be, at least they were likable enough.

By the morrow, the Frelifton estate had burned to its foundations with minimal damage to the surrounding area, and, satisfied, our heroes saddled their horses and set off for the generic village. There were many questions still unanswered—who (meaning, which villainous enchanter) had killed and cursed the Frelifton family? what exactly was The Guild? who were Alexander Frelifton's acquaintances, and what had they helped him to steal from this organization?—but before deciding how to best address these questions, the company of three were eager to return to the village for some proper recuperation, and their new dwarven associate was looking forward to finding his next job.

They were all terrificly disappointed when, upon their return, they discovered that the generic village was on fire.