

Chapter VI

~ *In which the generic village burns, and our daring heroes embark
on the very auspicious adventure of the pink ribbon* ~

I feel obligated to say, dear reader, that the image of the burning village is not a novel one—indeed, it appears with surprising regularity in some of the most highly praised literary works of our kingdom, both fictional and historical, among which are counted, to name a few, Lord Elyrian Hammond's acclaimed retrospective *En Memorium Fuegus*, as well as the beloved “Requiem for a Drunken Candle” penned and popularized by the famous bard Alistair “Hale” Sauterne. It has become such that the presence of a burning village is almost a canonical normality, that in every great tale or song we expect to see at least one poor, unassuming hamlet devoured by unmerciful fire, and I worry that the tendency for historians to overuse this motif may have the effect of callously trivializing the ineffable sorrow shouldered by those who bear witness to the violent ruination of their homelands.

Let me say as a scholar, then, that such lighthearted indifference has no place in this history, and that it is my intention to convey nothing less than the most honest representation of the heartache surrounding these incendiary atrocities as can be captured in words. To this end, I call once more upon Balek Bida, time-honored speaker of simple truths, and his short verse on the doom of his hometown of Estrid, which reads as follows:

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*When Estrid burned, I heaved and grieved
for ol' McNaver's tavern—
flames ate the wood with greedy speed,
but drank the liquor quicker.*

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We are drawn by the hunting poet's words to the very heart of the tragedy—namely, that the immediate sense of terror and impending physical harm experienced in the moment of crisis becomes almost a trifling sort of suffering when compared to the agony of loss which persists afterwards. In the wake of disaster, we are stripped of the familiar comforts of a stable home, and so deprived, we are charged with the unbearable act of reconstruction, an act that, despite our best efforts, will only ever reward us with the repurposed stones of an insufficient hearth, where we light the nightly fire whose

each separate, dying ember casts a feeble glow over our hearts and teases cruelly at the shadowed, lonely ghosts of our blackened pasts. Such is the pain that catastrophe rightly evokes in us, and let us not belittle its great import simply because it has struck so frequently in the lives of so many. The art of loss is an impossible one to master, no matter how often one may have the opportunity to practice—it is never really made any more bearable either by having lost previously or by knowing that others have grieved similarly, and every new loss brings with it a suffering so distinctly unfamiliar that we are ill-equipped to deal with it, yet so bitterly unexceptional that it dredges up every echo of long-dormant sorrow we have ever known.

As we return to the tale, gentle reader, take care not to forget the nature of this powerful loss, and treat our hero kindly as it seizes his young heart, for it will not leave him unchanged. Further, I beseech you to join us in carrying the memories of Estrid and its people, and of the other homes and persons we have lost, for they are yet kept alive by our fond recollections, whether those recollections be of tender love or of spiteful anger, or of the local pub.

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The sight of the generic village as it burned beneath the trees sent a wave of panic rushing over Bida, Aziel, and Hakak, who shared a moment of stunned silence. Also thoroughly alarmed was Rogar, who glanced around uncertainly at his three new associates and began to wonder if fiery destruction of property was the typical state of affairs where they were concerned.

Aziel was first among the company to speak, rousing them from their stupefaction and insisting urgently that they begin the search for survivors. Hakak agreed, pointing out that the greater portion of the town had yet to be engulfed by the flames, and as such there would still be time to reach those in need. Quickly, the elf and the half-orc dismounted and tethered their horses to some nearby trees, hastily preparing to enter the village.

They were interrupted by a startling bellow, a cry of denial and rage. It was Bida who was roaring, and he carried on doing so as, leaping from his horse, he swiftly pulled his greatsword from its saddle-sheath and ran forth at full tilt towards the generic village. Concern swept over Aziel and Hakak, and they hurried after their reckless friend, shouting for him to slow his pace, while Rogar, seeing no other course of action, tugged at his horse's reins and galloped after them into the thickening smoke.

(I must make mention of two things here, the first being that, while His Majesty could offer little detail when questioned about his memory of these particular events, he did recall that his mind had been clouded at the time by a host of grievous thoughts, and that somewhere within that emotional tempest had been couched the feeling that he was at fault, that he bore responsibility for the ruin that had descended upon his new home. He remembered as well the sense of worry that had been gnawing

persistently at him since he had seen the insidious, red rune painted on the wall of the goblin den, the worry that had grown into lurking suspicion when he had learned the fate of the Frelicton family—and when he had lain eyes on the generic village that summer morning, that feeling had boiled up inside him and blossomed into a moment of horrid realization, and he had known his enemy then and there, though he could not have said how.

The second thing I must mention, which is entirely unrelated to the first, is that Rogar was an accomplished equestrian, and so strong and true was the bond he shared with his horse that none among his people could match it. The name of his loyal steed was, curiously enough, Mick, a name Rogar had chosen in honor of a kind and personable innkeeper he had met and befriended in his travels. This horse was considerably older and skinnier than might be expected of a battle-hardened mount, and his gait was known to be hindered ever so slightly by a mild limp.

I will say no more on this matter, save that if Mick had trotted into town but a few days earlier, he might have met a certain man, and they might have claimed each other as brothers-in-spirit—but, alas, this could not be, for neither the will of Abadar nor the lameness of Mick the Nag would abide it, and so the opportunity was missed.)

Bida barreled into town, his breath ragged and panicked, his blue eyes anxiously scanning the smouldering streets for survivors. All around him, the familiar buildings were awash in flame. Crackling sounds split the air.

It was happening again. Estrid was burning anew.

The thought took him to new heights of anger, and he ran on through the thick clouds of choking smoke, searching for the hateful form of the red-robed sorcerer, who was undoubtedly responsible for this ruin, and upon whom Bida was all too eager to vent his fury and frustration.

He came to a crossroads where a battle had evidently taken place. The bodies of six village guards lay still and bloodied upon the cobbled street, while two men in dark-gray cloaks stood triumphant over the carnage, their long, pointed blades dripping with blood and dancing with wicked flames, and Bida saw that the odious, red rune was stitched into the backs of their cloaks.

The swordsman's son did not allow a moment's hesitation, flying forth in a wild charge that took both of his adversaries by surprise, and it was not long before they were in pieces at his feet. Quickly, he knelt beside each of the fallen guards, but all had perished save one, a younger man whose company Bida had enjoyed more than once at the tavern. Recognizing Bida, the young guard told him of the sudden attack, of how the cloaked men with flaming swords had arrived without warning and had commenced with their indiscriminate slaughter, and of how bravely the town guard had fought against the magic and monsters commanded by the enemy, and of how they had inevitably been routed. He

said also that the surviving citizens had been rounded up and taken to the town square, though for what nefarious purpose he could not say, and he implored Bida to liberate them if he could. Bida insisted that he not worry, for things would be put aright, and the village would yet be saved.

A loud, crashing sound interrupted their conversation as a nearby building collapsed, and from the wreckage rose a eight-foot serpent of living flame, slithering and coiling over the burning timbers and emitting a hissing sound not unlike that of a log snapping and popping in the heat of a fireplace. The fearsome creature lunged forward, and Bida moved to intercept it, batting its fiery jaws away with the length of his blade. The serpent struck twice more, and though Bida was a deft warrior, the beast was lithe and quick, and its searing fangs sank into his forearm. He yelled in pain and beat the monster back before the flames could catch him, and he wondered how long he would be able to hold it off on his own.

Fortunately, Rogar (who would have arrived sooner, were it not for Mick's lameness) rode up at that moment to join the fray, dealing the fire serpent a blow with his silvered axe as he cantered by. The dwarven rider was followed shortly by Aziel, who assailed the serpent with a hail of magical force, and by Hakak, who very slyly crept up and dragged the wounded young guard out of harm's way, and so together they vanquished the elemental and dispersed it into smoke and ash.

When the battle had been won, the other three asked Bida why he had blundered off so recklessly, to which he responded by recounting what the young guard had told him, and while he admitted that he had more information to share with them about the situation, he insisted that his comrades withhold their questions until he had secured the safety of the villagers, for nothing could be more important right now than acting to preserve the lives of the innocent. With this, they could only agree, and readily they offered their assistance, which Bida might have refused, if only to keep them from danger—but they had proven both capable and honorable, and he was thankful for their help, and so the company of four hurried onward towards the center of town, determined to put an end to the crisis.

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When our heroes came upon the town square, they found the surviving townspeople huddled together by the fountain, cowering nervously before the twelve gray-cloaked men who held them captive. The flaming rapiers of the evil interlopers kept them silent in spite of their fear, except for the children, who were all crying quietly.

Now, most men would be at least somewhat intimidated by the prospect of facing down a dozen foes armed with burning swords, but such sensible apprehension did not inhibit Bida, who advanced boldly into the square and challenged the scoundrels to combat, declaring that they might come all at

once if they so wished, for he would surely slay them to the last. His three companions considered this to be a bit foolhardy, and his enemies thought him a senseless braggart, such that one of the cloaked men, who seemed to be in charge, gave the order to attack, and four of the twelve villains strode forward to meet the young warrior, snickering in expectation of an easy and brutal victory.

As the first of his foes prepared to strike, Bida swatted him aside with a vicious stroke of his greatsword and sent him reeling to the ground. Rogar, having dismounted, hefted his greataxe and stepped forward to assist Bida, and when a second man fell to their combined onslaught, the enemy commander decided to change his approach. From behind the fountain, he had two of his men pull forth a wagon bearing an iron cage, and gnawing angrily at the bars of this cage was a small reptilian creature with a pair of stumpy horns on its head and a vengeful gleam in its yellow eyes. It was a mephit, a fire-spitting beast from the ever-burning plane of Ignea, and as the cloaked men opened the door to its cage, it took flight on a pair of leathery wings and, circling twice over the heads of the terrified townspeople, flew low along the street, bearing down upon our heroes.

Hakak spied the monster as it approached, and he readied his glaive, but Aziel, who was standing nearby, insisted that the toothy thief not trouble himself. (It need not be restated, of course, that the Trintior mage was a man of profound intelligence and awareness, such that he understood the current situation quite well, even without the benefit of whatever relevant information Bida had yet to share. It seemed clear to him that the men attacking the generic village likely belonged to The Guild that had been mentioned in the late Lord Frelifton's journal, or if not, they undoubtedly represented an organization of roughly equivalent destructive potential. Whatever the case, he suspected that the weapon he had acquired from the Frelifton estate would be of great use in opposing them.) With his right hand, Aziel raised his staff of white birch and pointed it at the mephit, and from the sapphire that crowned its rune-scarred length there shot a brilliant ray of howling, icy-blue light. The blast struck the creature, enveloping it in a thick layer of frost, and it dropped out of the air and landed in an unmoving heap, frozen through by the might of the staff's magic. Hakak, shaking off his surprise, rushed in to ensure that the thing was dead beyond all doubt, and Aziel lowered the Frelifton staff with a satisfied smile.

Perplexed and infuriated, the enemy commander pointed his fiery blade at Aziel and ordered his men to kill the mage (for if he had not known already the danger a wizard could pose, he was now very much aware). Eight of his soldiers yet remained, and they began to close in, forcing Bida, Rogar, and Hakak to take up defensive positions around their elven compatriot, and they might have been in for a troublesome fight indeed, were it not for the very strange and sudden thing that occurred.

For just then, a silver-haired man in a weathered, black traveler's cloak came flying gracefully

over the buildings to the east. Silhouetted against the sun of midday, he cast his shadow down upon the town square, and as he floated by, he reached out his hand and loosed a blinding arc of lightning from his fingertips, scorching the street where our heroes' attackers stood and scattering them with his terrible power. He then continued on his way, soaring over the buildings to the west, gone as quickly as he came.

In the silenced wake of the flying man's passing, the eight enemy soldiers lay charred and defeated, and their commander stood alone before the townspeople and their saviors, utterly stunned. (The townspeople and their saviors were also stunned, and they were quite right to be.)

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The assault had left the generic village damaged, but not beyond repair, and once the fires had been contained and put out, it was discovered that only a handful of lives had been lost in the chaos, including those of the guardsmen who struggled bravely in defense of their home—as far as burning villages go, it could have been, by all accounts, much worse, and praise the gods that it was not so.

The villainous commander surrendered without a word, and Rogar and Hakak saw to binding him and securing his weapons. Meanwhile, Bida and Aziel held discourse with the village mayor, who told them that the attackers had arrived without warning not an hour ago and had immediately begun destroying the village. The mayor was sure that he did not know who they were or from where they had come, and he was equally confused by the brief appearance of the unknown flying man, who, it seemed safe to assume, was a powerful sorcerer or a monster of some kind. Aziel recounted for the mayor their adventure at the Frelicton estate, and Bida shared the tragic story of his hometown of Estrid, but while it was almost certain that all of these events were related in some way (and indeed, some definite connections could be drawn between them, such as the omnipresent red symbol), the three men were at a loss as to what exactly it might all mean, or, more importantly, just what should be done about it.

It was then that Hakak gave a cry, for he had been mulling over something that he had noticed during the battle, and in the subsequent calm he had at last been afforded the opportunity to reflect and understand keenly what it was that was bothering him. It was the face of the enemy commander—the high cheekbones, the stout neck, the squared jaw, the short bristles of black hair, and the cold, soulless eyes which stared fixedly ahead in a sort of emotionless impassivity. Hakak knew that face, had seen it many times, and recently, for the commander's face was *completely identical* to the face of each and every one of his subordinates, so very much the same that although his men lay lifeless in the street, it could be said that they yet survived in the stony, unfeeling countenance of their leader, that his breath was their collective breath, for they were as one.

Shaken, Hakak shared this revelation with his comrades, and when they saw for themselves the

uncanny resemblance, they, too, were shaken, excepting Bida, who was more often angered or frustrated by the unknown than he was afraid of it. The swordsman's son promptly set about interrogating the captive (and here the childbane struck once more, for so fearsome were his voice and display that several nearby children were frightened to tears), but the gray-cloaked commander was unwilling to say anything more than his name, which was Kane.

Not to be discouraged, Bida continued his questioning relentlessly, and after a few minutes of stubborn pestering, Kane divulged that he and his men had come from the west—and those words added a final oddity to what had already been a decidedly odd day, for upon speaking them aloud, the man from the west who called himself Kane spontaneously burst into violent flame and perished instantly, horrifying all those who were present. Most upset among them was Bida, who fumed at having his captive taken from him by such cowardly means, and bitterly he cursed the odious, scarlet-cloaked enchanter by whose will he knew it had been done.

(Although King Orofyld XVIII was renowned as a taxing conversationalist—this was true even back then, gentle reader, before he gained sovereignty, and long before anyone would deign to consider his opinions on most matters, wise though he be—it is safe to say that no man has ever actually set himself on fire in order to escape a discussion with him, and that even the most desperate of listeners have consistently been able to gain their asylum merely by threatening the act, and so we must conclude, as His Majesty did, that the immolation of Kane West was orchestrated by that foul, red-robed sorcerer, whose ilk are the loathsome scourge of all things decent and pure in the world.)

Though our heroes were gravely concerned about Kane West and the mysterious, thundering sorcerer who had put a swift end to their battle, there was, for the moment, nothing that could be done to answer the many questions they had. They turned instead to helping the unfortunate citizens of the generic village as they buried their dead and disposed of the enemy corpses.

As the general cleanup got underway, Bida was approached once more by the mayor, who asked him if he would be willing to travel to the capital city and seek an audience with King Orofyld XVII, the purpose of which would be to deliver unto His Majesty the news of his people's plight and to petition him for aid with the village's reconstruction. Bida was thrilled and honored by this, and he heartily granted the mayor's request, promising to do everything in his power to secure assistance for the good people who had succored the survivors of Estrid when fortune had left them wanting. He resolved to set out immediately, and when he informed Aziel, Hakak, and Rogar of his intent to travel, they agreed to accompany him, for each man wished to travel to the city of Orofyld for his own reasons, and they were all quite curious about the king, for he was known to be a just and wise ruler, and a jolly sort as well.

Before he embarked, Bida remembered to notify the mayor of Mike the Lame's untimely demise, and in doing so he had roughly as much influence upon the older man's mood as he would have by forgetting to mention it entirely, for the gods know best, and what is must be—and so, gathering their supplies, our heroes did not tarry, but began their journey to the capital.

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The company rode west once more through the nameless woods and turned north along the highway, riding for several hours before making camp in a small coppice on the bank of the Crestyl River. The air was crisp and the sky was clear at sundown, and the four of them took their evening meal at ease, talking of the day's events, of how long it would take to reach the city at their current pace, of what they wanted to do once they had arrived. Bida said that he hoped to visit his father, and this steered the conversation toward talk of home and family, and of good friends far away, and Rafael was mentioned more than once, and a sense of tranquility and amiability pervaded the campground, and all was good.

This was all soundly spoiled when a group of seven ragged men carrying shortswords and plucking at bowstrings approached by torchlight from the road. Walking brazenly into the camp, they pointed their weapons at our heroes, and their leader, a short, snub-nosed man with a swaggering stride, smiled slyly as he explained to the company that they were squatting on his land, and that unless they wanted to force the issue, they would have to pay him an exorbitant sum of gold in order to spend the night.

These lowly bandits (whose filth-ridden kind are arguably as reprehensible and nauseous as sorcerers, if not more so) realized very quickly the blunder they had committed in attempting to shake down a band of travelers that counted among its ranks the chicken-chasing swordsman of local fame, the descendant of the greatest line of illusionists in the history of Orofyld, a practicing bounty hunter, and a very burly, mean-looking half-orc. What followed was a terrifically perilous battle that resulted in the deaths of all of the bandits, except for the snub-nosed leader, who managed to survive the ordeal by throwing himself at Bida's feet and groveling shamelessly for his life.

Rogar tied the man up and gleefully began browsing his collection of bounty edicts to see if his captive matched the description of any criminal on his list. The other three rummaged through the possessions of their bested foes, and they recovered some six hundred gold coins, as well as two peculiar items, which Hakak found stuffed into one of the fat, clinking sacks—a thick, blank book bound in silvery iron, and a pinkish-white ribbon trimmed with fine gold lace. When questioned, the bandit readily confessed that he and his underlings had stolen the valuables from a trading post a few miles to the northeast, and though he added meekly that no one had been hurt during the robbery, this

did not prevent Bida from intimidating him with threats of violence, a talent for which our young hero seemed to have a growing proficiency (in spite of the fact that the targets of his wrath were frequently older than seven years of age).

Rogar's list identified the man as Jingle, a treacherous highwayman with a long history of violent crime who had evaded the authorities several times, and the dwarf was tickled to report that they could claim a bounty of one hundred and twenty-five gold pieces for his capture, assuming they had the right man.

After brief deliberation, the four of them resolved to bring the bandit to face justice in the capital city, and they agreed also to return the goods to the post from which they had been taken, and in the morning they resumed their journey, riding slowly northeast along the road, deaf to Jingle's complaints as they dragged him mercilessly through the dust behind them.