

Chapter VII

~ *Which concludes the adventure of the pink ribbon, and recounts
our heroes' brave conquest of Peryton Pass* ~

In preparing to catalogue the next delightful part of this tale, I am reminded of a verse composed by none other than Alistair “Hale” Sauterne, that wandering minstrel whose words and deeds are the stuff of Orofyld legend, and who was a contemporary of the (posthumously) much respected historian Lord Elyrian Hammond. Sauterne was renowned for, among other things, his innovative mastery of the hendectet (an octet comprised of alternately rhyming lines, followed by a rhymed tercet, the first line of which is shorter than the following two by a measure of one iamb), and the poem which now comes to mind, his sultry “Nymph's Blason,” is a wonderful example of the form:

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*There, in that quiet coppice, I espied
a forest maiden, mild and demure,
whose beauty all reservedness defied—
her white legs, washing lurid water pure,
her eyes, inspiring, soft cerulean swirls,
her hair, the golden fire of Father Day.
Would that I were a ribbon in those curls,
for in her glimmering gold I'd gladly stay,
a flower flushed with ivy wine,
or burst, a swollen grape upon the vine,
to feel her fingers ribboning through mine!*

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I would draw your attention, gentle reader, not to the majestic euphony in Sauterne's words (his use of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme has been extensively examined and extolled by many accomplished scholars, and I need not reiterate here the opinions upheld by my betters), but to the metaphor of the ribbon, which begins in line seven and proceeds through to the very end of the stanza. Gazing longingly at the nymph, the speaker envisions himself as a ribbon pinned in her blonde hair, and from there he transforms, first into a wet flower, then into a turgid grape, smoothly evoking

ideas of natural beauty, drunken infatuation, and passionate intimacy as his underlying desires are brought out by the final image of their dovetailed fingers and the tactile reimagining of the word “ribboning.”

I cannot say just why I felt compelled to share Sauterne's celebrated verse with you, except that I was so pointedly reminded of it while penning the adventure of the pink ribbon, and that it is a marvelous poem, as worthy of being shared as any others in this history, such as those written by the hunting poet Balek Bida, who, it may interest you to know, also composed a brief verse on the subject of hair adornments. It reads:

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*Shave and behave, lad—
braidin's for maidens.*
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Although I was initially confused by this couplet, its meaning was made clear to me by a short conversation with Balek, who explained that it had been inspired by a bit of advice he had once been forced to give to a certain son of his. Evidently, when Bida was seven or eight years of age, Balek had happened upon him and Clara (who, if you will recall, was the childhood friend of Bida and Rafael so cruelly taken from us in the first chapter) as they were playing at dress-up, generously applying rouge to their cheeks and braiding one another's hair. Balek admitted that he had perhaps been a little negligent in his parenting, and that the incident might explain a number of things about his son, none of which he elected to expound upon, and he made a point of assuring me that the boy's hair had been kept short from that day forth.

(I have been charged with informing you, dear reader, that when His Majesty reached this point in the narrative, he became outraged that his father had not confessed to his own participation in what His Majesty referred to as “lovely lady time,” and he demanded that I include this annotation, which, to me, seemed a small price to pay for the privilege of preserving this part of history for our posterity. While I would never dispute the honesty of our sovereign king, I must contend that Balek's participation in his son's effeminate costume games is a dubious notion, for it is difficult to believe that he who sired the bane of children would go to such lengths to ensure the merriment of a young boy and girl, and now let us leave the matter at that, for the tale continues.)

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Three hours' travel found our heroes at the foot of the Peryton Pass, that winding thoroughfare which spans the mountains and leads into the resplendent Valley of the Sun where stands the city of Orofyld, the heart of our great kingdom. It was this road that Bida would need to travel if he hoped to

meet with King Orofyld XVII and secure aid for the good people of the generic village.

At the foot of the pass stood a small shack of a building, and as our heroes approached, they saw that a man was stepping out through the front door. Spotting our heroes, he called and beckoned to them, and as they approached, they saw that he was decked in stiff, leather armor and hefted a steel-tipped spear over his shoulder, and this piqued their curiosity, for the man was gray-haired and wrinkled with age, and it was much easier to imagine him tending a garden or reading chivalric novels by the fireside than partaking in armed combat.

They drew their horses to a halt before him, and he addressed them from his doorstep, asking if they had encountered in their travels a band of seven or eight armed, brutish men, for they had broken into his store last night and robbed him of some six hundred gold pieces, as well as several other items of personal importance, and he was presently heading out to search for them. He then took notice of Jingle, who lay in his bindings, bruised and dust-choked, at the feet of Mick the Nag, and upon recognizing him, the old man's face contorted with rage, and he advanced dangerously on the helpless bandit, calling him a lowborn scoundrel and demanding the return of his stolen property.

Jingle squealed and pleaded for mercy, and Rogar prepared to defend his prize from the old man's wrath, but Bida and Aziel quickly intervened, explaining that they had trounced the bandit and his men and were now taking him to the capital city, where he would face a lengthy jail sentence for his crimes. They also returned the stolen goods, and the old man was so delighted by this that he kindly decided not to exact retribution in full from the sniveling brigand, though he did allow himself the indulgence of one swift kick to the ribs, which everyone agreed was more than fair.

His name was Eril, and he was the owner of the modest trading post, which he and his six-year-old granddaughter Mina called their home. The company exchanged introductions and pleasantries with Eril, and he invited them to take their midday meal inside, insisting that it was the least he could do to repay their kindness, and they politely accepted, tethering their horses (and Jingle) in the backyard and proceeding into the store.

Between our heroes' provisions and Eril's inventory, there was ample food, and all who had gathered in that cramped dining area behind the store were amiable and in high spirits, especially little Mina, who was happy to have her pink ribbon returned to her. In short, our heroes passed a very enjoyable hour in Eril's home, joking and talking of many things, and when the child eventually went outside to play, they spoke quietly of the attack on the generic village and the urgency of their journey to the city. Eril questioned them further, and as they provided him with more details about the attack and the men who had carried it out, his concern grew visibly. At last, Bida brought up the insidious, red symbol, and a dark cloud seemed to descend over Eril's features as he guessed at the contours of that

shape. Dumbstruck by the man's words, the party replied that he had described the indescribable rune with startling accuracy, and they asked him to share whatever it was that he knew about the symbol and its connection to The Guild. Eril bristled at the mention of that mysterious name, and sweat began to bead upon his brow as he tried to collect his racing thoughts.

Before he could respond, the sound of Mina's panicked cries carried in from the front yard.

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Panic swept through the tiny room. Bida was first to act, getting to his feet and quickly making his way out to the front of the store, where the door had been left open to admit the warm, afternoon breeze. As the young warrior stepped onto the porch, however, he faltered, and his right arm froze as it reached instinctively over his shoulder for the hilt of his trusty sword.

Five men awaited him outside on the lawn, and Bida became furious when he saw that damnable symbol sported on the backs of their ash-gray cloaks. He was also mystified by their faces, which were perfectly identical to one another, their cold, stoic features in every way resembling the evil men who had raided the generic village—Kane West and his doppelgangers stood before our hero once more, as if returned from the dead, and one of them had little Mina in a loose hold, pressing close to her throat with the flat of his pointed sabre.

They called for Eril by name, and the old man appeared in the doorway, his face expressing the nervous anger he was feeling but dared not put into words. They called also for Bida to throw down his weapons, a demand to which the swordsman's son would *never* have acquiesced were it not for Eril's pleading with him to consider his granddaughter's safety. Though he fumed at the idea of being outdone by Kane West in the arena of childsbannery, Bida plodded reluctantly down the steps, lay both his greatsword and the enchanted Frelicton blade in the grass, and returned to the porch. He stood, arms folded, as the vile Guildsmen proceeded to ask Eril a string of strange questions about a certain book, and he watched intently for an opportunity to take control of the situation, though he was less than confident that such an opportunity would present itself.

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For all of the disparaging things to be (rightly) said about sorcerers, those low and treacherous villains whose hearts beat black with their sputtering lust for power, there are, on rare occasion, virtuous mages who rise above the cloying, infectious wickedness of their lesser brethren to serve the will of the kingdom and its people. If this history has not been expertly clear, Aziel Trintior is such a mage (though perhaps neither he nor every member of his line was always so noble, despite being nobility—a story yet untold, and one that shall remain untold for now), his placid cunning having never been found lacking by the trials he has endured, and so it is this humble author's opinion that Bida

should have placed more faith in his friend's ability to conjure opportunity, to forge from nothingness the mold of victory ready to be filled with the molten metal of heroic effort.

Deliberating quietly with Hakak and Rogar at the rear of the store, Aziel wove the mantle of invisibility over the dwarf and the half-orc and held open the Back Door, allowing the two of them to slip unseen into the backyard, past their grazing horses and their bandit prisoner (who dozed through the entire ordeal), and around the side of the building, making their way silently toward the front lawn.

Closing the door, Aziel turned and sidled into the front room, leaning calmly against the wall and waiting, his bright orange eyes furtively observing the standoff through an open window.

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Bida could hardly believe what he was seeing when, as the Kane Wests grew impatient and tensions mounted higher, the stocky, bearded form of Rogar suddenly appeared out of thin air behind Mina's captor. Wasting no time, the dwarf brought the edge of his axe down upon his target's shoulders, and as the unsuspecting man reeled forward from the blow, Hakak appeared beside him, knocked him to the ground, and scooped up the little girl in his burly arms, making a mad dash for the storefront.

(Many are those learned men who have questioned the unlikely relationship between Hakak and Rogar, quite correctly pointing out the contradiction to be found in any sort of cordiality between a thief and a bounty hunter. While I concur that the respective professions of the dwarf and the half-orc should necessarily put them at odds with one another, and that the cohesion demonstrated during their rescue of Eril's granddaughter is particularly deserving of scrutiny, I must admit that I, like my colleagues, have never been afforded the pleasure of making Hakak's acquaintance, and as such, I cannot speak with absolute authority on the dynamics of his friendship with Rogar. However, while I have not met the one, I have met the other, and I have spoken extensively with those who knew both men, and so perhaps my word on the matter is to be more readily accepted than that of others.

I posit, then, that there are two feasible explanations for the positive relations between the toothy thief and the dwarven rider, one being that Hakak was very careful not to speak of his trade around Rogar, and the alternative being that Hakak had not once in his career committed a high-profile crime and, consequently, had never earned himself a bounty. In a way, both of these explanations bespeak the thief's talent, and either is equally as likely as the other, equally as credible, and both must therefore be considered true, or at least as having been true, which, where history is concerned, must suffice.

On another note, this historian finds it somewhat intriguing that while Eril's granddaughter was indeed saved from the murderous clutches of Kane West, one of her saviors was undeniably a thief, and therefore her rescue arguably doubled as a kidnapping, and this would seem to infuse the image of

Hakak and Mina scampering away from the battle with an entirely different meaning, one that should not necessarily be discounted.)

Two of the Kane Wests unsheathed their burning swords and closed with Rogar, and he was forced to give ground, backpedaling along the road and fending off their combined assault. The remaining two pursued Hakak, and they might have caught up to him had Bida not charged forward from the porch, thundered past his half-orc companion, and checked the first Guild soldier hard with his steel-plated shoulder, barreling over him like a raging bull. The second man jabbed at him, but the thrusts of his rapier were harmlessly deflected by Bida's armor, and the young warrior was able to recover his greatsword and join the melee in earnest.

Hakak deposited Mina on the porch, and she ran whimpering into the arms of her grandfather, who consoled her gently as they moved into the building. Aziel brushed past them on his way out, assuring Eril that the situation would be resolved swiftly, and indeed it was, for the Trintior mage stepped through the doorway and, with a wave of his hand, made the ground disappear beneath the feet of two of their foes and dropped them into a pocket of extradimensional space, where they tumbled some thirty feet to their doom.

The chaotic battle was soon brought to an end, as Bida made quick work of the remaining enemies, save one, who Rogar and Hakak managed to subdue, stripping him of his weapons and armor and binding him with rope. Seeking to preserve Kane West from the horrid fate of spontaneous combustion which had befallen the last of his kind they had captured, Bida took up his sword and slashed the man's gray cloak until the evil symbol woven into it was nothing more than scattered ribbons of cloth, and this he did with the cloaks of the other four men as well, alert all the while for any encroaching sign of the magic of that infernal, red-robed sorcerer, which did not appear. (While His Majesty's behavior here seems excessive and superstitious, it was very likely not, for the wiles of sorcery should be approached either with great caution or not at all.)

In the wake of the skirmish, it became apparent that Bida and Rogar had suffered some grievous wounds, and once they made certain that Eril and Mina were unharmed, they set about treating their injuries. Aziel fetched his healing wand, and Eril brought out several flasks filled with bubbling, dark-blue liquid, which he claimed were potions that had been brewed by a benevolent alchemist to possess curative properties. The old man spoke true, and as our heroes sat on the porch, quaffing the elixirs while Aziel administered the magic of his wand, Bida promptly asked Eril to explain his knowledge of the Kane Wests, for they were the same men who had attacked the generic village, and his involvement with them would have to be lain bare.

In response to this, Eril's features became grim once more, but he was a wise and honorable

man who would not refuse a request from these young travelers who had in a single day defended both his property and the life of his granddaughter, and so he sat beside them on the front porch, and they listened to him as he tugged thoughtfully at his snowy beard and recounted for them his tale, which told, in brief, of how he and two of his dearest friends had been offered membership in The Guild several years ago, of how the cult had intended either to convert or kill them, of how they had refused the ultimatum, fled their homes, and decided to go their separate ways, and of how they had lived in constant fear of being found by The Guild, whose members were still hunting them.

Inquisitive as ever, Bida wondered aloud if one of Eril's friends had been a nobleman named Alexander Frelifton, and the old man answered with some surprise that yes, this was so. From his pack, Aziel procured Lord Frelifton's journal and showed it to Eril, and the company told him of the frightful adventure they had undertaken in the house of his late friend, and he was greatly saddened to hear of Alexander's fate, though he had not seen or heard from the nobleman in years and had presumed him dead or captured.

Aziel pointed out the passage in Lord Frelifton's journal suggesting that he and his accomplices had stolen something from The Guild, and Bida said that the Kane Wests had just moments ago been asking about the location of a book (at this their new prisoner perked up noticeably), and although Eril maintained that he knew nothing about a theft, he said that Kane West's demands might be in reference to a book that had been given to him by his second associate—the very same iron-bound volume that our heroes had recovered from Jingle and his bandit gang, as it were. It was a magical tome, and in the hands of an experienced wizard it could become an instrument of great power, much like the Frelifton staff, which, the old man added, had also been a gift from his friend to Lord Frelifton.

Aziel suspected that Eril's associate was an enchanter of incredible ability, and he pressed for more information, but the old man would say little more, except that he did not wish to reveal his friend's name, and that he was unsure of his whereabouts. He did, however, allow Aziel to take possession of the book, reasoning that it would be safer for everyone if he did, and that the young wizard might be able to make good use of it.

Alas, daylight would not last forever, and seeing that their host had nothing more to tell them of The Guild, they disposed of the dead, tied Kane West and Jingle jointly to the saddle of Mick the Nag, despite (and/or mocking) the bandit's protests, and prepared to be on their way. Old Eril thanked them for their deeds, and he advised them to take care traversing the Pass, for rumor held that a peryton (one of the vicious, predatory chimeras after which the thoroughfare was originally named—they were slaughtered en masse by the heroic Alistair “Hale” Sauterne during the height of his fame) had recently been sighted there for the first time in many years. Our heroes thanked him for the warning, and for the

hospitality he had shown them, and promising to visit him again soon, they rode onward up the dusty mountain path, dragging a very irate Jingle and a quiet, resigned Kane West behind them.

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There can be no doubt that His Majesty's valiant conquest of Peryton Pass shall be a subject of song for as long as the light of Pelor shines upon our kingdom, for it is a portion of history to be adorned with only the finest flowers of literary representation.

Who could forget the glorious battles our heroes fought with the earth elementals, those creatures of living rock who pushed young Bida into a ravine, where he slid and tumbled and won himself many bruises before ending his descent in the cold waters of a muddy creek?

Or the memorable struggle with the ram, that shaggy sentinel who would not abide our heroes' passage, and with whom Bida butted heads for some twenty minutes, each contender more stubborn than the other?

Or the gruesome fate of Kane West, who was crushed to death in an avalanche that was brought on, they say, by the voice of the swordsman's son as he very loudly recited choice bits of the poetry of Balek Bida, thrilled as he was by the anticipation of reuniting with his father?

Or, of course, the momentous war that was waged when, near the end of the Pass, they came upon the eponymous peryton, that savage stag-hawk-wolf motley, that amalgam of curling talons, feathered wings, yellowed fangs, jagged antlers, and hungry, canine eyes? Who could forget the way it soared and dove down upon them, snarling and slaving, hissing and cackling, its long, flat tongue flicking the air as if to taste the warmth of their still-beating hearts? Who could forget the courage of those four who tore the monster from the sky, who battered it with sword and spell, and who, at last, wielded the glimmering Frelicton blade and beheaded the loathsome beast at the shoulders, claiming its head as the trophy of their valorous quest?

But I shall stay my hand, for I am no poet, and there are greater minds than mine for whom the honor of properly immortalizing His Majesty's glory must be reserved. I leave this part of the legacy to the lyricists, for I know they shall do it justice, and I will merely say that the company descended from the Peryton Pass later that same day, beast-head and bandit in tow, and they looked out over the Valley of the Sun where the light of the approaching evening fell over the hushed farmland like a warm, red-gold shroud, and they beheld the great walls and ramparts of Orofyld in the distance, the white stone towers of the royal palace hoisting their pennants high against the horizon, where they fluttered like birds of hope.