

## Chapter VIII

~ *In which Jingle the highwayman faces Justice,  
and so do our heroes* ~

In his highly influential political treatise *Just Us: The Responsibility of Relative Morality*, the cherished Lord Elyrian Hammond expounds upon the ethical derivation of law (italics added):

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...if morality is to guide policy, and if policy is to be determined by rule of the aristocratic few, then it must be so that the determination of our kingdom's policy—and, therefore, the governance and fate of our people—is to be guided by the morality of these same few, and here there is no dispute to be had, for this is the rationale that sustains the throne of Orofyld. But give pause, for though it sustains, it is not sustainable...

...there are no moral absolutes in this world—indeed, the idea of a flawless, universal code of morality is laughable, not because the gods and their wisdom do not exist, but because we, with our limited powers of reasoning and perception, are incapable of ever discovering the true essence of divinity. We cannot hope to extrapolate meaning from something we cannot accurately observe, and we shall never possess all of the parts required to construct the whole, and therefore our conception of morality is necessarily lacking. Further, each man looks through the lens of his own life, and so doing, he acquires an understanding even more divided, a fragment of the fragment of the whole.

Such is the mortal condition, that the most enlightened minds, rich in experience and empathy, humble themselves by coming to know that absolute ethicality is beyond them, while common minds, heavy and sluggish with ignorance, commit the fatal blunder of assuming and asserting their own judgments and become doubly oblivious to divine truth, which their betters have acknowledged is unattainable—therefore, either by way of acceptance or denial, *mortal understanding of morality is incomplete, is defined differently by every man based upon the shape of his lens*, and rather than place our trust entirely in a purportedly elite collection of viewpoints, it is to our benefit to consider each and every interpretation, to piece together these hundreds upon thousands of lenses, and, although we inevitably fall short of ultimate justice, to construct it as closely as we can...

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In citing the good scholar's work, I hope to reiterate for you, dear reader, the powerful wisdom echoed in his words regarding relativity, for as he says, men are partial creatures, preordained to seek answers where there are none to be found, and to craft makeshift truths out of whatever fabrications and suppositions happen to be at hand, such that two realities may differ immensely without one being inherently better or worse than the other, both falling well short of “divine truth.” As we return now to our tale, remember that such things as truth and morality are not known but determined interpretively—by just us, as it were—and the teachings of Lord Hammond may yet be honored.

(Those familiar with the history of Orofyld will know that in the cited treatise, Lord Elyrian Hammond applies his ideas in direct condemnation of the authoritarian rule of King Orofyld XIV, berating his regime and identifying its blatant misappropriation of tax revenue, extortionate fines, and enforcement of racial hierarchy as natural extensions of its leaders' unchecked relative morality. Most historians agree that this particular piece of literature was largely responsible for securing the author's execution, which, in light of the bold and inflammatory diction used in some of the later passages, is really quite believable.

Fewer historians endorse the lesser-known rumor that King Orofyld XIV carried out the execution personally. As the story goes, before he let the axe fall on Lord Hammond's neck, the king haughtily addressed the citizens who had gathered to witness the event, asking if there were any among them who believed that the scholar had been wrongfully accused and should go free. He waited, savoring the prevailing silence, for to speak out against the king's judgment meant death, but then one man, a young elf, poked up his head, and in response to the tyrant's question, he courageously shouted, “Just us!” And when he did this, all who had congregated raised their fists and their voices in accord, for Lord Elyrian Hammond was loved and admired by the people, and they had not come to watch his demise but to protest it.

Unfortunately, the king, who was hard of hearing, misinterpreted the elf's outraged cry for “Justice!” and mistook the tumult to mean that the mob was eager for Lord Hammond's head to roll, which it abruptly did, much to the horror of the crowd. This, they say, was the catalyst for the violent revolution that marked the end of the reign of King Orofyld XIV and brought prosperity to the land, albeit at the cost of many lives, and it very well may have happened that way, friends of Orofyld, so long as some believe, and some do believe, even if it is just us.)

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Our heroes turned Jingle over to the guardsmen who stood watch at the city gates, and although he faced an extended stay in a jail cell, the disheveled, travel-weary bandit did not despair, for he had

no love for his captors, great men though they were, and he was glad to be rid of their company, and so his heart was light as he followed the guards into the prison district, almost skipping as he went.

Upon inquiry, Rogar was rewarded in full with the one hundred and twenty-five gold coins promised for Jingle's capture, but when he offered to share the bounty with his compatriots, they insisted that he keep it for himself, as they had been extravagantly recompensed by the late Lord Frelifton for their daring rescue of his children, and their riches still weighed heavily in their purses. Pleasantly surprised by their generosity, so different from the miserly ways of his own people, the dwarven rider thought not for the first time that continuing to travel with Bida, Aziel, and Hakak might yet turn out to be the most profitable venture the Scales had ever dealt him.

They stabled their horses just inside the city walls, and from there they did not tarry (except on account of Rogar, who spent fully fifteen minutes saying farewell to his beloved steed), but set about their next order of business, which was to gain an audience with the king. Aziel led them into the center of town, and as they strode down the wide, clean streets of paved stone, Bida, who had never before visited the capital, had ample time to take in the stunning sights of the city—the impressive three- and four-story buildings, the sprawling marketplaces where merchants trade in every commodity and service under the sun, the citizens traipsing about in their colorful clothing and seeing to their end-of-day errands, and of course, the spires of His Majesty's castle looming up in the near distance, faithfully presiding over the land like an alabaster angel.

(His Majesty would have me make mention of the fact that, at this point in the tale, he was in definite possession of the peryton head—indeed, he very rarely ventured anywhere without it—and so, as we proceed, you must envision him as performing his great deeds with his grisly trophy always in tow, dragging it along behind him in an unclean sack too small and torn to fully contain either its monstrous countenance or its hideous, ever-ripening odour. I shall assist you in remembering this, dear reader, for there are several moments in this unbelievable history which are greatly enhanced by the presence of the chimera's oozing skull, and when they arrive, fret not, for I, your faithful historian, shall remind you, being that I myself am unable to forget.)

Their destination was the Noble Court, the municipal forum where, by long tradition, the ruling king spends several hours every day, leaving the comfort of his castle in order to better hear the concerns of his people. When they arrived at the Court, however, they were stopped by a group of city guards who were descending the front steps. These warriors were led by a stalwart-looking woman whose short-cropped hair, glimmering plate mail, curious weapon—a thin, curved blade almost as long as a greatsword—and practiced grace bespoke her martial prowess, and she addressed our heroes, informing them that the Court had closed its doors for the day.

Intrigued by this person (and no doubt somewhat enamored with her, for she was ruggedly beautiful), Bida introduced himself and his comrades, saying that he had come on behalf of the people of the generic village, who were in dire need of the kingdom's assistance, and that he wished to petition His Majesty as soon as possible. He mentioned also that he was searching for his father, a man named Balek Bida who lived in the city and was a notable swordsman and a fine poet, and he asked if she could be of help with either of these things.

Humoring him, the swordswoman introduced herself in turn as Shodo Fair, Captain of the First Patrol of the Standing Guard of Orofyld, and she told him plainly that the king would hear their request if they would return to the Court tomorrow. On the matter of Balek, neither she nor her subordinates had ever heard of the fellow (not a well-read bunch, clearly), but the clerks at the Court, she said, would be able to provide the location of his residence. With that, Captain Fair and her men took their leave, and Bida was unable to ask her any further questions (which would almost certainly have been about the exotic sword she carried).

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Seeing that there was nothing to be done until the morning, our heroes began to explore the city in search of a tavern or inn where they might spend the night. Aziel suggested The Regent Squire, a fine establishment in the northern quarter, and Rogar knew of it, though he had never frequented the place as he usually preferred the cheaper taverns. He could certainly afford the stay this time, however, and there was no dissent from the others, so they headed for the inn, talking of the good food and drink they hoped to find there, and many other irrelevant matters as well.

And indeed, they would have made it to The Regent Squire without incident had Abadar not then tugged at the strings of fate, those viewless strands which suspend the dangling moments of our lives, and so doing, caused a crossing of glances that might not have otherwise occurred on the city street that evening, or on any street on any evening, were the Minister of Destiny more inclined to favor mercy over mischief.

In the red gloom of dusk, Bida met the eyes of a man leaning against the wall of a quiet alleyway, the hood of his faded-black cloak pulled back, his silver hair falling around his ears, his features relaxed in an expression of boredom, and immediately the swordsman's son came to a halt, for he recognized the man—it was the mysterious sorcerer from the generic village, the one who had loosed lightning upon the Guild soldiers and brought an end to the bloodshed before flying off without a word, and who had now suddenly appeared once more, standing some twenty feet away, arms folded, one eyebrow raised, returning our young hero's dumbfounded gaze.

(As any member of civil society will know, it is considered a breach of etiquette for him to stare

openly at passerby in the street, especially if the passerby in question is a stranger with whom he has never exchanged words, as such behavior so often puts the other at an uncomfortable loss. Any member of civil society will also know, of course, that if he finds himself the recipient of such a discourteous eyeing while out on the town, then he should not degrade himself by responding or in some way drawing attention to the awkward situation, but rather he should disengage from his offender entirely and leave with his own dignity intact.)

Seeing that Bida was staring slack-jawed in his general direction with every bit of subtlety that might be expected of one who acts in ignorance of social custom, the silver-haired fellow turned his back and walked brusquely down the alleyway, his cloaked figure fading quickly into the shadows.

Apparently, Bida took this to mean a challenge. The chase that followed, though brief, was wild and raucous, leading our heroes racing down the sidestreets and byways of the city, resulting in much stumbling, sliding, shouting, and toppling of crates and assorted patio furniture, and it was really quite amazing that no citizens seemed to take notice of the uproar, and that none of the city guards were called to stop it, especially when, in the escalating confusion, Aziel was struck by an errant bolt of lightning and collapsed to the ground, blackened and unmoving.

As the contemptible enchanter took flight, sailing over a cluster of tall buildings and out of sight, Bida, fearing for his companion's life, abandoned the chase and knelt beside Aziel. He fumbled in his pack for one of the healing elixirs that Eril had kindly given them for their journey through the Peryton Pass, and as Rogar and Hakak gathered round, Bida poured the potion down Aziel's throat, and soon thereafter the mage's chest began to rise and fall with an easy rhythm, and the beating of his heart could be heard faintly beneath the folds of his smouldering robes, and though he did not return to consciousness, it seemed he would survive the ordeal.

The three breathed a sigh of relief, and after some hurried deliberation, they agreed that transporting the wounded wizard across town to The Regent Squire would be unwise, deciding instead to spend the night at the nearest tavern. They were fortunate to discover a small, dirty pub called The Addled Knight a few streets away, and the owner was willing to rent them one of the rooms on the second floor, even though the smoky, unresponsive elf they brought in with them was the most outlandish thing he had ever allowed to cross his threshold (which, if you know the groggeries in the southwestern district, dear reader, speaks volumes about the abnormal circumstances in which our heroes now found themselves).

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Weary from their travels, the company passed the night in heavy slumber, and they awoke fully refreshed at first light, invigorated by the inherent promise of a new day and very much excited to

finally gain their audience with King Orofyld XVII.

Aziel slept most soundly of all of them, and he continued to sleep through breakfast and long after, and though they waited fully two hours, he gave no sign of waking, and no amount of noise they produced could rouse him. Determining that the elven mage needed more time to recover from the hardships of the previous day, Bida, Hakak, and Rogar opted to proceed to the Noble Court without him, for no time could be spared in securing aid for the generic village. So agreed, the three asked the innkeeper if he would monitor Aziel's condition and see to his needs during their absence, which the man was willing to do for a few extra coins, and having made this arrangement, they gathered their things and departed.

It was midmorning by the time they reached the center of town, and the city was bustling with activity. A long line had formed outside the Court, stretching down the front steps into the street, and they were disappointed to find that the citizens in the queue were, in fact, waiting for their turn to see the king. Bida wished he had arrived earlier, for he was not overly fond of being patient, but there was nothing to be done, and so he and his associates took their place in line, passing the time by chatting idly with the city-goers in front of and behind them, and by discussing many matters amongst themselves, the most important being Aziel's health, as well as the identity and nature of the powerful flying enchanter whose motives yet remained unclear.

It so happened that, after a while, their speculative gossiping was interrupted by a commotion that sprang up near the front of the line, and craning their necks, they saw (and it was really remarkable how they had hitherto failed to notice such a glaring threat) three men standing at the top of the marble steps. One of these men was an elf, tall and spindly even by elven standards, and his gaunt, angular features had the effect of drawing attention to his wide violet eyes, such that they seemed to dominate the landscape of his face with their bulging and swiveling—currently, he had them trained on the young nobleman with whom he was vigorously arguing, demanding that the king be brought before him immediately. The other two men stood at attention behind him, impassive and statuesque, sabres at their sides. All three wore shirts of light chain and ash-gray cloaks, and on their backs they bore the sinister scarlet symbol of the Guild, unknown to everyone present except the good representatives of the generic village, whose hearts thrummed with fear as they realized the danger of the situation.

Without hesitation, Bida bounded up the steps two at a time, making a beeline for the cloaked villains, and as he climbed closer, the elf's voice, which had already been loud enough to carry across the square, rose to a fever pitch. Raving ardently about “Justice!” “the Great Rod of Paradise,” the madman drew and held aloft a straight razor—the sort a barber might use to shave a customer's beard, with a hinged blade and a smooth wooden handle—that came alive with angry fire, and with a feral

shriek he swung it at the young noble, who tripped and stumbled backwards, narrowly avoiding the deadly weapon. Panic spread, the orderly line of commoners quickly scattered, and the lunatic elf advanced on the cowering aristocrat, his blazing knife raised with insidious intent.

Surely the poor fellow would have met his end then and there but for Bida, who at that moment finished ascending the stairs and unleashed a terrific blow with his greatsword that very nearly split the crazed Guildsman at the waist. The elf, however, heard the young warrior as he approached, ducked his mighty attack, and scrambled past him down the steps in a display of preternatural agility, and all the while he wore a look of indignant surprise on his ridiculous face, as if he could not imagine why he was being so unjustly assaulted.

On his way down the stairs, he ran headlong into Rogar, who was moving to assist Bida, and together they tumbled into the street, a confused and knotted tangle of beard, limbs, fists, profanities, and cries of “Justice!” Shoving the interloper away, Rogar got swiftly to his feet and readied his axe, and this frightened the gangly elf into continuing his retreat. Doing so, he nearly backed straight into Hakak, whose menacing glaive obstructed his escape, and he soon found himself trapped between the burly half-orc and the sharp-eyed dwarf.

Nervously snapping his gaze back and forth between his two opponents, he grew restless, and as Rogar and Hakak edged closer, his restlessness bloomed into mania, and his lips parted in an orgiastic grin as he gripped his necklace—the foul symbol of the Guild, wrought in heavy iron and suspended on a chain—in one hand, pointed his burning razor at the sky, and declared himself “the Saint of Justice!” vowing that he would fall like hissing rain upon the people of Orofyld, that the glorious will of his Master would decline upon their throats like a rough, slouching beast yearning to be born. With those words, he erupted with hungry malice, a dark, noxious light-smoke neither wholly red nor black surging forth from him in all directions, claw-drinking its way over the stony street, and though Rogar and Hakak did not succumb to it, four fleeing citizens had wandered too close, and they were swept up and cradled in its sulfurous grasp, and their souls dimmed, and they fell down dead as the evil enchanter threw back his head in laughter.

Vile sorcerers, most hated among men! Your detestable arrogance knows no bounds, that you think yourself fit to trample upon all that is pure and beautiful with your accursed witchery! May you be damned to the festering Pit, seed of all your machinations, and linger there until the end of days!

Bida's heart stormed with rage at this loss of innocent life, but he was preoccupied by the blades of the other two men—who had turned out to be Kane Wests, cold-eyed and same-faced—and this left Hakak and Rogar to oppose Saint Justice. Would that Aziel had been there to even the odds, for though it was two men to one, the wily elf's magic proved troublesome, and his misdirecting illusions thwarted

their every effort to subdue him. In short, they were unable to pin him down until Bida, having at length defeated the other two Guild soldiers, joined the fight, and they pressed the advantage, forcing Justice onto the defensive.

It was not long, however, before the tide turned against them once more, for when they finally seemed to have him cornered, the insane enchanter suddenly and completely vanished before their eyes. The battle came to a momentary halt, and they stood perplexed until Hakak, who had been approaching Justice from behind, felt a searing flash of pain bite through the leather at his lower back, heard a haunting cackle from over his shoulder, and, knees buckling, pitched forward and hit the ground with a thud. Invisible and silent, Justice had circled around to strike the half-orc and take him unawares, and he stood now over the motionless Hakak, admiring the charred wound he had wrought with his incendiary grooming tool.

Crying vengeance for their friend, Bida and Rogar rushed the Saint, and they resumed with gusto, but the illusive elf still had energy to spare—he evaded their strokes, slashed with his razor, and summoned up more of his wicked magic, and soon Rogar, his fighting spirit depleted, fell under one of the Saint's psychotic blows, and at that moment Bida deeply wished for Rafael's presence.

By this time, several of Orofyld's Standing Guard had arrived at the scene, but realizing almost immediately that they could not hope to survive an engagement with the gibbering elf, and not wanting to interfere with the tenacious young swordsman who was fighting so bravely against him, they kept a safe distance and focused their efforts on ensuring civilian safety, and in this way, Bida and Justice were left to face off in perilous combat.

A more splendid martial exchange the streets of Orofyld have never seen! How the bards will sing of that battle for ages to come, of how they danced before those marble steps, the one screaming with the euphoria of his maddening sorcery, the other driven to the brink of reason by the fury of war, of the impossible, grating clash of claymore and barber's blade, of split mail, gritted teeth, and unflagging persistence, of a truly magnificent duel that ended as abruptly and bewilderingly as it had begun when, in the midst of delivering a ruthless series of strokes that might have put an end to the swordsman's son, the elf recoiled from his opponent, retreated several paces, pressed the razor's edge against his forehead, and, with a final uttering of "Justice!" that slipped over his tongue in a serpentine whisper, carved a long gash of burning blood across his brow and sank into quiet unconsciousness, overwhelmed by the pain he had inflicted upon himself.

All were astonished by the outcome of the fight, and as the guards rushed in to apprehend the self-defeated Saint, Bida knelt beside his beaten comrades and grieved, for though Rogar still drew ragged breath, the struggle had been too great for Hakak—the half-orc lay where he had fallen, broken

and silent, his eyes glazed with the soft pall of death.

Thus, Hakak, mild rogue, benevolent abductor of Mina, and ender of Mike the Lamé, was bested by the deceitful blade of Saint Justice and overpowered by his unwholesome magic, never to know either the ill-gotten gains won by successful thieves or the adoration reserved for honorable warriors, though had he lived, he might have enjoyed both.