

Chapter IX

*~ Which introduces the fourth and last of our heroes,
and recounts the explosive interruption of a gallant banquet ~*

It is with considerable annoyance that I must now address a particularly distasteful myth surrounding our heroes and the untimely demise of their half-orc compatriot. History has shown that all great men are, by some measure, the envy of their lesser peers and the subject of their covetous rumors, and Bida Bo Bida is no exception to this rule, for he is among the greatest of men, and as such his legacy provides fertile soil for the malicious seeds so often sown against him. As the throne's appointed scholar, it is my duty to confront, disprove, and dismiss these jealous lies, and to only include in this history the most essential and factual accounts by which the king's tale may be known, and in my dedication you must place your trust, dear reader, for this is a task to which I am indescribably proud to devote myself.

On the matter of Hakak's death, then, I can say quite plainly that the rumors are untrue—His Majesty did not, in his haste to seek medical treatment for Rogar, simply wander off and forget entirely about his deceased companion, leaving him unattended on the public street. That our beloved, big-hearted hero could be so callous is an absurd notion, as is the idea that he would allow the body to lie for two days and nights in the cold rain, knowing that its presence in the town square would continually frighten the good citizens and offend the families of those who had perished at the hands of Saint Justice, and that the odor of decay would soon become so unbearable that a pair of city guards, their impatience winning out over their apathy, would at last drag Hakak off the street and drop him down the nearest sewer entrance, the loud splash that followed indicating that he was now effectively somebody else's problem.

It is further untrue, of course, that Hakak's body drifted lazily down the sewage canals for several hours, during which time it was set upon by hordes of voracious, diseased rats and other loathsome vermin, and that ultimately it spilled out into the Crestyl River where it was carried miles downstream through the narrow rapids of the Peryton Pass and onto the Low Plains. When it did not arrive there, it was absolutely not claimed by a villainous necromancer, most hated of enchanters, foulest of the foul, who wielded his unspeakable magic to turn the rat-eaten, filth-caked corpse into a shambling, undead monster. The revived Hakak was definitely not renamed Uncle Underbite by his

new master, and he was not present when a certain holy swordsman appeared to challenge the necromancer, and consequently he was not among the many zombified thralls who were cut down by that wandering knight before the evil mage was slain.

How such a colorful and unbelievable story could be espoused as truth by anyone is beyond me, dear reader—I am merely relieved to have been able to invoke the credibility of this esteemed history in censure of it. If there are faults to be found in the tale, they shall be recorded here in full and without fail, and when the time is right to discuss them, you may expect from me the same integrity and attentiveness to detail which my interpretation of His Majesty's mighty deeds has thus far demonstrated, and until then, do not lend your ear to the words of misguided muckrakers, but question their fabrications openly, for in their deceit, they do a disservice to king and country, and they are deserving of nothing but scrutiny and reproach.

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The guards moved hastily to secure Saint Justice, who lay unconscious and trailing spittle from his bloodied jaw, and once they had bound his arms tightly behind his back, they confiscated both his razor and his iron pendant, the conduit of his wicked power, and dragged him off in the direction of the city jail.

Hakak, of course, was dead, and Bida feared that his dwarven friend might presently follow suit. He was at a loss, however, as to how he might act to prevent this, for he was no medic, and he had used the last of Eril's potions in order to save Aziel's life the day prior. Applying pressure to Rogar's wounds and looking about in frantic desperation, he called for help, but although several guards came to his aid, they, in truth, could do nothing more to save the dwarf's life than could the swordsman's son, for blood is quick to be spilled but slow to be stemmed, and this is the burden shouldered by every man who would call himself a warrior—the trembling silence in the wake of battle, the absolute finality of the destruction wrought by the might of arms.

Let us be always grateful to the gods, for it is by their providence that among us walk those rare and extraordinary persons who are chosen to work miracles in this world, and let us also be grateful that such a remarkable person just so happened to be visiting at the Noble Court that morning—a blessed cleric, favored with the spark of the divine and loyal to the throne of Orofyld. The young nobleman, whose life Bida had saved and who had witnessed the battle in the plaza, summoned this man immediately and explained the situation to him, and together they hurried down the marble steps, the guards making way for them. The priest knelt beside Rogar and began to conjure up his holy magic, and the nobleman spoke to Bida and assured him that the dwarf would be alright, for he was now in the care of Drewry, prophet of Abadar and one of the most capable healers in the kingdom.

Bida did not relax just yet, but observed this priest closely. He was a tall fellow, young but wise-looking, and though at first glance he appeared human, his pointed ears bespoke traces of elven ancestry. He sported shimmering breastplate and a fine, silver cloak, a heavy mace hung at his side, and around his neck he wore the symbol of the golden key, sacred to all those who worship He Who Tends the Scales. His eyes held the light of honest compassion, greatest gift of the gods, and seeing it there, Bida was reminded of Rafael, his friend of many years, and this caused him to view Drewry rather more favorably, such that he eased himself back and, in good faith, allowed this half-elven stranger to salve Rogar's wounds.

Drewry quickly restored the dwarven rider with the power of his healing touch, and when he had done so, the nobleman implored him to tend to Bida as well, for he owed the young swordsman his life, and it was evident that the lad's injuries, which were only slightly less grievous than Rogar's, were causing him great pain. Drewry was glad to be of help, and while he administered his mending magics, the nobleman resumed his conversation with Bida, for he was convinced that the swordsman's son must be a warrior of some renown, and he was curious to know what business such a warrior might have in the city.

Still winded from the fight, Bida answered as coherently as he could, saying that he wished to make a formal request of the king, that relief might be provided for the generic village, which had come under attack of late by malevolent forces. He spoke of The Guild, of how the mad Saint Justice was no doubt tenured among their ranks, and he stressed the urgency of the situation such that his listener, terribly alarmed by the news, determined that the king must be informed at once. He offered to grant Bida an audience immediately, should he be well enough to give his report in person, and Bida readily accepted, for Abadar's divine magic had already stanchd his bleeding wounds and thoroughly revitalized him, and he was able to get to his feet without difficulty.

Bida thanked Drewry, having judged him to be a good and honorable man, and the cleric replied modestly that it was the gods' will that his support be lent to those who would so bravely defend the people of Orofyld. He promised to see to it that Rogar was made comfortable until such time as he regained consciousness, and he expressed his hopes that the generic villagers might soon be delivered from their suffering. Our young hero was, as might be expected, entirely oblivious to the cleric's code of altruistic humility (which, if the reader is also unaware, encourages one not to revel in the praise and gratitude received for good deeds done, but to respond with the enactment of further good deeds on behalf of the one who is praising), and so he simply repeated his thanks before taking his leave, following the nobleman across the plaza, up the marble steps, and into the halls of the Noble Court where the king of Orofyld awaited his appearance.

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When Aziel awoke, refreshed and rejuvenated, it was mid-afternoon, and he found himself in a small room on the second floor of a ramshackle tavern. He had been roused by a pair of voices conversing nearby, and sitting up, he was greeted heartily by Bida and Rogar, who were overjoyed to see him recovered at last. His physical condition was, by all accounts, perfectly sound, but he was quite disoriented, for two days had elapsed while he had slept, and he was anxious to know how things had progressed during his recess, and so Bida and Rogar, sparing no detail, told him of their thrilling battle with Saint Justice, the unfortunate end of Hakak, and the cleric of Abadar who had rescued Rogar from the jaws of death.

At length, Bida spoke of his meeting with the king, His Majesty King Orofyld XVII, who, upon being apprised of the fate of the generic village and its people, had shown a great deal of concern for their circumstances, and ordained that an adequate supply of food, clothing, lumber, and other provisions be made ready for immediate transport to the village. The convoy was to be accompanied by a skilled team of masons and carpenters, as well as a regiment of five dozen guardsmen, who would assist with the reconstruction efforts for as long as they were needed. His Majesty praised Bida for making the journey to bring news on behalf of the village, and for fearlessly opposing the forces of The Guild when the kingdom's soldiers were unable to act, and he told our young hero to be now at ease, for Orofyld would take the necessary measures to ensure the safety of its citizens. Further, he declared that a banquet would be held at the castle in celebration of their worthy deeds, and that our heroes were to attend as the guests of honor.

His ego soaring, Bida wholeheartedly accepted this reward, though he did ask an additional favor, that his father also be invited to the banquet, and when the king learned the identity of Bida's father, he was only too happy to grant this request (it is a little-known fact that King Orofyld XVII was a longtime appreciator of the work of Balek Bida, and read of it frequently, deriving countless hours of amusement from the huntsman's clever verses). In a word, Bida's conference with the king went very well, almost ludicrously so, such that their meeting more closely resembled a conversation between two friendly strangers on the street than a dutiful plea to a ruler from one of his subjects, and it did not seem altogether unceremonious when Bida described His Majesty to Aziel as “a real nice sort of guy.”

There was one more astonishing development of which Aziel was yet unaware, and which Bida now shared with him, and it was that the young nobleman whose life he had preserved from destruction at the hands of Saint Justice, who had summoned Drewry in the aftermath of the fight and had so expeditiously secured Bida's royal audience—that this nobleman happened to be the king's steward and trusted advisor, that his name was James Frelifton, and that he was the younger brother of none other

than the late Lord Alexander Frelicton. During his meeting with the king, Bida had been recounting for His Majesty the many adventures he and his companions had undertaken in their travels, and when he came to the part in his story involving that mysterious and fateful letter, James was surprised, and he informed Bida of his relation to the author of that letter. This made the telling of the tale rather more difficult, as the tragic news of Lord Frelicton and his family was not well-taken by James, who was shocked into utter disbelief. He demanded proof of the claims, whereupon Bida showed him the letter and presented him with the journal they had found in the attic of that accursed mansion. These things taken together with the story could not be easily dismissed, and after studying the journal and asking a few more jumbled questions, James grew flustered and, apologizing to the king, excused himself from the room in a terrible state of grief, and they watched him go in silence, for there are no words that can alleviate the burden of the bereaved, though there are many with the potential to augment that pain.

They told Aziel all of this, and he was amazed that he had missed so much in so brief a time. Hakak's death stirred sorrow in his heart, for the half-orc really had been the only significant intellect in the company other than himself, and he knew he would be longing for an escape from talk of swords and ale sooner rather than later. The Guild's presence in the city worried him tremendously, and he expressed doubt as to whether the kingdom would be able to effectively defend itself without a full-fledged army. On this, all three were in agreement, for they had seen firsthand the ruination of the generic village, and it was then that they reached a decision, one that, in retrospect, they were bound to reach eventually, being that they were all daring adventurers and conscientious individuals—to remain vigilant against the threat of The Guild and its infernal enchanters, and to continue to work in unison to support the kingdom of Orofyld until such time as this unholy evil was checked and defeated.

For the moment, however, there was a royal banquet to attend, and they had a whole list of preparations to be made—fine clothing to purchase, beards to trim, personal hygiene to be generally seen to. Bida and Rogar were guided through all of this (with a not insignificant amount of groaning and complaining) by Aziel, well-versed as he was in the tedious mannerisms of civilized society, and as twilight settled over the land, our well-groomed heroes ventured into the northernmost district of the city, where Castle Orofyld stood solitary and serene, nestled among its surrounding acres of pastoral fields and woodland parks.

When they arrived, they found that the courtyard and banquet hall had been splendidly decked. Hundreds of candles threw a warm glow over a space where everything was trimmed with sumptuous gold lace and accentuated by decorative fabrics of the deepest purple. Large, circular tables bearing plates and cutlery stood about the room, and at the far end, a long rectangular table with an ornate chair marked the sitting place of the king. Whole crowds of people had already gathered, and many more

continued to wander in, filling the hall and courtyard with their laughter.

Upon entry, our heroes were greeted by a round, red-faced man who approached them, shaking their hands and welcoming them by name. He looked to be about forty years of age, the first shades of gray showing in his auburn hair, and he was dressed in a very plush suit of plum-colored clothing. He looked on them with bright, appraising eyes and introduced himself casually as King Orofyld XVII, and by this Rogar and Aziel were quite surprised, for he wore no crown and carried no sceptre, and his disposition was so jolly and genuine that they could hardly have taken him for any sort of political personage, much less the ruler himself. Reactively, all three of them stooped to bow, but the king waved it off, saying that he would not allow his guests of honor to observe the usual formalities. As they followed His Majesty over to the royal table, a group of musicians began to play in the courtyard, plucking out the promise of a long night of jubilation on their lutes, and at that sound, the dancing commenced, and the festivities were fully underway.

The party was a grand occasion, and it proceeded as might be expected, with much feasting and drinking and dancing (here, Bida was able to demonstrate astounding skill, and one marvels at the parallels this suggests between the popular dances of the capital and the obscure, southerly sport of chicken-chasing) and innumerable displays of levity and silliness, and it went on for so long that this chronicle, for brevity's sake, cannot belabor itself to retell all of the wonderful events of that evening, but instead shall include only those which are indispensable to the tale of our young hero, the first of those being, of course, that Bida was not without his decapitated peryton head, but brought the offensive trophy with him to the castle that evening. He did this in spite of Aziel, who vehemently objected on the grounds that it would be gravely insulting to respond to the king's hospitality with such a disgusting gesture. Bida retorted that he knew the king better than Aziel, having actually met him, and in his experience parties were supposed to be merry, and how could the severed head of a chimera contribute anything but merriment to a party, and so on.

In the end, Bida reluctantly allowed Aziel to cast a spell on the head that suppressed its rotting smell, and Aziel declared that he very much looked forward to watching Bida make a fool of himself on account of his stubbornness. Unfortunately, he was disappointed (which is not necessarily to say that Bida failed to make a fool of himself that evening, mind you), for when Bida showed the peryton head to the king and some of the guests and told them the story of how the beast had been slain, they were at once delighted, and the head became the object of all manner of games and drunken mischief (one of the favorites was to place it on a chair as someone was in the process of sitting down so that the pointed antlers would prick inappropriately at his hindquarters).

The next thing to mention is the presence of certain guests at the party, for our heroes were not

the only distinguished persons in attendance. Balek Bida was there, utterly floored that he had been invited to a royal banquet—and by request of his son, no less!—and the two of them, happily reunited, spent a good deal of time guzzling ale and catching up, Bida telling his father of the quests and battles he had conquered, and Balek listening, smiling, unable to find the words to express his pride.

James Frelicton, too, made an appearance, though it had scarcely been two days since he had received the news of his brother's death, and his eyes were still freshly ringed with the bruised darkness of lost sleep. He was accompanied throughout the evening by a young woman of striking beauty who chatted and jested with him almost exclusively, and who was clearly doing everything she could to comfort and cheer him, and the smile poking through his sorrowful countenance told that her efforts were not wasted. When the feast was set and the guests began migrating to their tables, this young woman took her seat at the left hand of the king, and she was introduced to our heroes as Her Ladyship Princess Jessica. Her glinting, green eyes passed curiously over them as she greeted them courteously, saying that she hoped they found the banquet a worthy tribute to their brave deeds, and it is safe to say that the three of them (especially Bida) became instantly infatuated with her.

The seat at the right hand of the king was occupied as well, though by someone of considerably lesser beauty than the princess. His name was Rane, he was an advisor to the king, and as His Majesty introduced the man, our heroes were shocked to find that they recognized him, for although his silver hair was neatly combed back and he had discarded his traveler's cloak in favor of a subdued blue-and-gray ensemble, he was unquestionably the same man who had appeared in a storm of whirling winds above the generic village, whose wayward bolt of lightning had rendered Aziel comatose not three days ago—he was the mysterious flying enchanter who, having thus far eluded them, now found himself sitting across the king's dinner table from our heroes.

(You can imagine, dear reader, how uncomfortable that moment must have been, and we shall return to it, but first I must prevail upon you to permit me a short digression, for there was another memorable interaction happening at another table that deserves our attention, nay, demands it.

It was originally intended that Balek Bida, being the honored guest of an honored guest at this banquet, would be granted a seat at the king's table alongside his son, but that table ended up a sight more crowded than anyone could have foreseen, and so there was no place to accommodate him. Of course, Bida, paragon of sons, asked his father to be seated in his place, and His Majesty, paragon of modest intoxication, offered his own seat as well, but Balek would not allow them to trouble themselves, graciously insisting that he would be perfectly comfortable wherever he sat on account of the opulence of the banquet, and having thus assured them, he wandered off and plopped down in the first empty chair he came across.

He found himself at table with none other than Drewry, esteemed cleric of Abadar, as well as First Patrol Captain Shodo Fair and seven of her supporting officers. He had not a clue as to who these people were, but he reckoned they seemed decent enough, so he introduced himself, apologizing for interrupting their conversation and asking if he might join in.

As it turned out, the conversation had been quite dull before his arrival, and the others welcomed him openly, especially once he had given his name, for two or three of Captain Fair's officers counted themselves avid fans of Balek's poetry, and they were ecstatic to meet the man behind the pen. Their witty persiflage was endless and ranged across a wide variety of topics, and eventually, after three courses and several rounds of ale, the discussion turned to Drewry, who had been the most reserved voice at the table that evening. More specifically, Balek was intrigued by the golden key the cleric wore round his neck, and he wondered what in the world such a key might unlock.

Drewry explained that the key was a holy symbol of Abadar, and that it was intended to represent the influence of the Minister of Destiny, who guides the honest and loyal towards prosperity, who does not open doors in the lives of men but provides them the key, that they may open such doors themselves. Balek thought this was a pretty answer, but he was unsatisfied with it, and so he continued to speculate, much to the amusement of others at the table. What might the cleric's key possibly open? A chest of gold and precious gems, guarded by a fearsome dragon in some far-off, desolate corner of the world? The spellbook of an ancient elven arch-wizard, pages brimming with untold secrets of arcane power? His Back Door, perhaps?

In a sudden flash of inspiration, Balek had the answer—clearly, Drewry's key was a relic from the early years of the kingdom, during which, historians agree, the use of chastity belts, now widely considered an archaic and brutish practice, was commonplace. Along that line of thought, Balek composed a sestet on the spot, which, recorded at a later date, became one of his most wonderful works, cherished for its blatant and uncompromising vulgarity:

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*It seems to me
Drew keeps the key
to some poor maiden's virtue—
a comely lass
of higher class?
Or is it old Aunt Gertrude!*

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Needless to say, the poem won the hearts of everybody who heard it, including Captain Fair,

usually so stern and serious, and even Drewry himself, who, though he was a sensible gentleman, was not given to prudery and knew the importance of occasionally indulging in harmless fun. And now let us end this departure from the narrative and return to the king's table, and I ask that you please forgive my prolificity, patient reader, for I would be remiss were I to knowingly withhold from you such a diverting episode, as it truly serves to enrich this His Majesty's history.)

An awkward lull descended upon the conversation as our heroes and the mysterious enchanter stared at one another across the table, each wondering what the other would do. Undoubtedly, they would have been entirely justified in accusing him of violent assault and calling for his arrest, but, to their credit, they hesitated to do this, perhaps reading in his eyes a desperate plea for mercy and discretion. Rather, this might be said of Rogar and Aziel, but not of Bida, who, quickly overcoming his initial speechlessness, bolted up from his chair and, in a flurry of sounds and flailing gesticulations not unlike the death throes of a frenzied goblin, pointed a stupefied finger at Rane and babbled “Ah! The human storm-cloud rolls in again! Take shelter, Aziel, for I fear that noggin of yours shall not weather a second strike!”

This was met, of course, with uproarious laughter from the king and constrained chuckles from his daughter and his steward, for these good people, deprived of context and eased by alcohol, could not help but see the hilarity in Bida's sudden and inexplicable outburst. Indeed, His Majesty played into the joke, clapping Rane roughly on the shoulder, advising him that such rude commentary would not be visited upon him if he would simply smile more frequently and try to look a little less ominous and foreboding, and ordering him for the last time to stop going about the city beating on the heads of wizards, for that sort of unprovoked violence reflected very poorly on the kingdom. Rane offered his most sincere apologies, promising to be more careful in the future. Realizing that he was not being taken seriously, Bida prepared to reiterate his accusation more forcefully, but Aziel kicked him sharply and shot him a look, and Bida returned the look before he sat back down, folding his arms and shaking his head in bewilderment.

The royal banquet was clearly not the appropriate place to either interrogate the enchanter or question the king about him, so our heroes allowed the matter to drop for the time being, and the conversation resumed, interrupted here and there by the occasional peculiar moment—Bida and Aziel's kicking contest beneath the table, Rane inquiring after Aziel's health, Rogar, in reference to horseback riding, asking Rane when he had last felt the wind in his hair—but retaining, for the most part, the same quality of civil merriment as before.

And that is all there is to tell about the king's banquet, except for the singular and terrifying event that brought a premature end to the festivities, which occurred at the end of the feast, just as the

musicians were warming up for the second round of dancing. A haggard-looking dwarf, his clothes soiled and stained from his travels, barged into the hall, trailing guardsmen behind him, rushed to stand before the king's table, and fell upon his knees, begging for help in a voice that came in ragged, gasping breaths. Worried for the pitiable fellow, His Majesty had the guards stand down and bade him speak, and the dwarf said that he had come from his homeland beyond the Valley of the Sun, had journeyed days and nights without rest to bring word to the kingdom of Orofyld that the dwarven society of Ambrosia was under attack by orc raiders from the east. Before he could provide further details, however, exhaustion overwhelmed him, and his eyes rolled up into his head as he slumped forward onto the floor.

Our heroes were nearest to the dwarf, and they were the first to spy the faint, red glow issuing from beneath the fabric of his tattered tunic, the glow that was rapidly intensifying, that seemed almost to be taking shape, an indescribable shape, horribly familiar. Bida started up, visions of Estrid swirling about in his mind, and moved to protect the king, yelling for everyone to move back. A moment's confusion ensued as people stood by indecisively, looking blankly at one another, and then panic flooded the hall as the crimson rune on the dwarf's back shuddered, pulsed, and exploded in a deafening, earthshaking flash of fiery light.

Miraculously, no one was injured in the blast apart from the poor dwarf, whose blackened body lay smoking on the floor, and as the guards mobilized to restore order and sweep the premises for any additional threats, our heroes gathered around the king and his daughter, and they were joined by James Frelicton, Rane, Captain Fair and her men, Drew, and Balek, who were all concerned for the safety of the royal family. His Majesty, now quite sober, demanded that someone explain what had happened, whereupon Bida declared that the explosion had been the work of the evil red enchanter who was affiliated with The Guild, and was possibly its leader. Aziel, looking sidelong at Rane, affirmed that such an explosion was certainly within the scope of a mage's power, and he agreed that The Guild was likely to blame, observing also that the intent of the attack had apparently been to instill terror rather than to take lives.

These things having been related and considered, James advised His Majesty to send scouts to the dwarven lands in order to investigate the claim of orc raiders operating in the region. Captain Fair agreed, volunteering her squad as vanguard, but His Majesty denied her request, for this hitherto unknown Guild was quickly becoming a problem that could not be ignored, and he would need all of the Patrol Captains to remain in the city and assemble for a tactical council in the coming days. Still, James insisted that someone be sent to the dwarves, if only to be sure that the last effort of their brave messenger had not been in vain, and Rane concurred, emphasizing that accurate intelligence would be

required for the decisions that lay ahead.

It was then that Rogar proposed to go, saying that he planned to make the journey whether Orofyld sent men or not, and both Bida and Aziel announced they would go with him, for they had resolved to interfere with The Guild whenever the opportunity might arise, and the influence of its accursed Saints was surely at the heart of this matter. Drew offered to accompany them as well, for the priest of the golden key was chosen by the gods to combat such servants of evil as The Guild, whose atrocities he had already seen wrought in the city plaza—and in this manner, the company of three became four once again, and they stood ready before His Majesty, who thanked them for their willingness and their loyalty to the kingdom.

They set out the following day, well-equipped and sanctioned by royal authority, riding northwest towards the High Pass, bound for the dwarven city-state of Ambrosia and the adventures that awaited them in those perilous mountains.