

Chapter X

~ In which our heroes arrive at the dwarven city-state of Ambrosia, and embark on the adventures of the unsuspecting campground and the infernal temple ~

It is a wonder how easily the mortal mind may become fixated upon something it has perceived only by happenstance, how it may insist upon the significance of the most insignificant triviality or be otherwise drawn hopelessly and insensibly astray by the very sensibility that charts its course. I say this because while I have been hard at work writing this history—a labor of singular and profound difficulty, one that can only be truly appreciated by the scholar who has toiled for the realization of a similarly ambitious goal—I am approached intermittently by one or another of my colleagues who, having heard of this great chronicle, wishes to bring to my attention some flaw, oversight, or stylistic quirk he has detected within its pages, believing, no doubt, that he is being helpful, that by laying out the error for correction beneath the point of my pen he has contributed to the success of my endeavor, that by refraining from indulging his boastful impulses he has proven his gracious and gentlemanly modesty, and he is content to walk away having merely implied his own intellectual superiority rather than stating it plainly.

Let me first acknowledge that, yes, there are errors to be found in this venerable text—rare mistakes committed by a hand that works for the glory of gods, king, and country, accidental falsehoods conceived by a mind fatigued by endless meditation and made weary by the truth and candor it has brought to form. These faults in my scholarship are, I freely admit, a terrible shame, for they tarnish the majesty of both the tale and its heroes, and I would expunge them all by painstakingly redrafting the entire history were it not for the fact that parchment has recently become a very difficult commodity to acquire in the kingdom (a substantial portion of the national supply has been solely consumed by a certain court enchanter, who, in his efforts to stave off the boredom brought on by the pleasant monotony of our new peaceful era, has taken to scribing an absurd number of magical scrolls, such that no less than four spacious, high-ceilinged rooms in the royal palace are now reserved exclusively for the storage of his arcane writings—I believe it was Alistair “Hale” Sauterne who said, quite correctly, that “there are few things more frightening in this world than an idle wizard”). As it stands, however, I remain loyal to the throne and am sworn by sacred oath to tell the story of His Majesty's rise, and so I do not have the luxury of allowing a deprived escritoire to hinder me in my duty

—thus, the history is presented to you in a somewhat rudimentary condition, and for this I must apologize, dear reader, for while an errant tale is surely more pleasing than no tale at all, this kingdom and its greatest of kings ought to be better served, and verily they would be, were it in the power of your humble historian to make it so.

I will also say that if the errors must remain, then we are fortunate that they are few in number, and that they are merely structural in nature (it is true that any thinking person whose reading of the tale is impacted negatively by its slight mechanical infirmities is perhaps a sight too mechanical himself, and through rational temperance of his fixations might he find the means to occasionally relax his furrowed brow, recline his stiffened neck, and enliven what will otherwise prove to be a dreary length of years in this fleeting world) and do not extend into the realm of substance (it is also true that no thinking person would dare call into question the accuracy and authority of this history, for fear of being justly branded a knavish fool). In a way, I almost find it preferable to leave the errors in, if only because they will serve as a reminder that I, like you, dear reader, am nothing more than a mortal man, imperfect and deficient, and there has never been anything wrong with that.

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Now, the winding High Pass makes a dangerous journey for the common folk, but it was not so dangerous for our heroes, who had conquered the fearsome chimera of the Peryton Pass and triumphed over the mad sorcery of Saint Justice, and so they did not dally but went boldly on their way, heading northwest out of the Valley of the Sun and into the snow-capped mountains.

The open road offered much opportunity for conversation, and as they went they talked amongst themselves about the poor dwarven messenger and the words of warning he had spoken to the king in his final moments. They wondered what might induce an orc raiding party to assault the impregnable walls of the dwarven city-state, and Bida's instincts told him that this new threat had not emerged by mere coincidence, for he remembered all too well how he and Rafael had fought to defend their village against the orc warriors under the command of The Guild's Saint Rupert.

Aziel was suspicious as well, knowing that the explosion that had taken the dwarven messenger's life and plunged the royal banquet into chaos had undoubtedly been the work of a powerful enchanter, an evil man who was likely the same red-robed sorcerer whose magic had destroyed Estrid, and who might even have been responsible for the curse that had befallen the house of Lord Alexander Frelifton. Whoever this villain was, he was a fearsome enemy, and the possibility could not be ignored that they were dancing in the palm of his hand, that every step they took led them further down a doomed path, a path that had been methodically predetermined and laid out before them by forces more wicked and conspiring than they had yet to imagine.

Alas, they had been charged with this quest by the king himself, and so the matter of whether or not they were walking into a trap was of little consequence in the face of their resolve. After three days of traveling and camping along the rocky trails, Bida, Aziel, Rogar, and Drew arrived in the dwarven lands and stood before the towering gates of the mountain-city of Ambrosia, marvel of masonic engineering and the birthplace of all dwarvenkind.

Just outside of the gates, a tense confrontation was unfolding—a company of dwarven soldiers held their ranks against some two or three dozen burly, green-skinned warriors whose tusked faces and bare chests were streaked with black war-paint. These invaders stepped forward three or four at a time to batter the shield wall with their axes, but the stocky soldiers of Ambrosia, though dwarfed by the imposing stature of their adversaries, held strong and stood their ground, and each time the orcs attacked they were forced to fall back, unable to break through the barrier.

When our heroes saw for themselves that the orc threat had turned out to be legitimate, they paused for only the briefest of moments before drawing their weapons and leaping into the fray. The orc raiders were caught off-guard by the unexpected attack on their flank, and the dwarves, seizing their chance, broke formation and charged. What had been a cautious stalemate suddenly broke out into a tumultuous brawl as the Ambrosian legionnaires clashed with the brawny savages—steel swung and scraped, war-cries boomed through the canyon like the irregular beat of a great, angry drum, and the four men from Orofyld were caught up in the thick of it.

(Though a fierce and spirited battle it surely was, dear reader, I confess that there is very little to mention about it in the way of courageous deeds or heartrending losses, although there did occur one tragic misfortune at the height of the conflict, which was that Rogar, driven to recklessness by the desire to defend his ancestral home, challenged an especially fearsome-looking orc [described by His Majesty as “not quite as chunky” as Chunky the Orc, “but still really chunky...” {see chapter I for clarification of this bit of irreverence}] to combat, and while he was bearing down upon the brute, his trusty steed Mick, who had in the opening moments of the battle been uncharacteristically fleet of foot, now clipped his hoof upon a small jut of uneven earth and faltered in his step. This blunder caused him to stumble directly into the path of the orc barbarian's deadly, double-edged axe, which came down with all of its wielder's monstrous strength on Mick's backbone, split him clean in two, crushed him to the ground, and landed his rider, dazed and bloodied, in a heap several yards away, where he lay for the remainder of the battle—thus, Mick the Nag, beloved battle-mount of Rogar the Unseated, met a grisly end at the edge of a orcish greataxe, having been brought there by the will of Abadar and by the swift lameness of his own feet, and though it seems apparent that the one bore a heavier share of that weight than did the other, we must not question fate but give praise to its Minister, whose judgment preserved

many brave souls on that battlefield at the expense of one equestrian life, a ruling that any man must view as prudent and merciful, even if the life to be sacrificed is one of the most loyal and dependable to be found among beasts.)

When at last the fight had concluded, seventeen orcs lay dead, while only five dwarves (and one magnificent steed) had fallen. The surviving invaders retreated up the eastern trails, making for their far-off camps in the foothills, and our heroes did not immediately give chase but did what they could to help their dwarven comrades.

While Drew went about staunching wounds and consoling Rogar in his immeasurable grief, Bida and Aziel spoke with the dwarven commander, a hearty, black-bearded fellow. He was grateful for their assistance but was also confused by their sudden appearance on the battlefield, and when they told him they had come in response to the plea of a dwarven messenger who had arrived in Orofyld three days ago, his confusion doubled, for, to his knowledge, no such messenger had been sent—the orcs, he told them, had arrived only an hour ago and in no great numbers, and so there had been neither time nor reason to petition the kingdom of Orofyld for aid.

Bewildered, our heroes felt more certain than ever that they had become the subject of an enchanter's mischief, that the exploding dwarven messenger and his exaggerated warnings had initiated an insidious ploy to lure them into mortal peril. Yet still were they the king's men, sworn by oath to see their quest through, and so after replenishing their supplies (and giving Mick the Nag an appropriately tearful burial), they bade farewell to their brothers-in-battle and ventured east through the mountains, their noble hearts braced against whatever evil lay waiting in those orc lands.

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Onward they went, following the river through its surging rapids and steep ravines, and on their second morning out from Ambrosia, Rogar saw with his keen eyes the faint but telling signs of their enemies' passage—an unnatural scattering of rocks here and there, the suggestion of a footprint near the water's edge, and finally, the damp coals of an extinguished campfire. Judging by the freshness of the tracks, Rogar was confident that the fleeing orcs could not be far off, and familiar as he was with the terrain, he led the company upstream for several hours until, clambering up a particularly narrow and unsafe-looking gravel path, they came to the rim of a shallow valley hidden away in those foothills. Peering down into its depths, they let out a gasp and dropped to the ground, for they beheld a sight that struck them at once with awe and fear.

They had found the enemy encampment, to be sure—some thirty or forty tents dotted the valley below, clustered around the smoky heat of a dozen smoldering bonfires. Crawling forward carefully so as to avoid being spotted and squinting against the light of the midday sun, our heroes spied the bulky

forms of orc warriors milling about the camp, and it was clear from the first glance that the men from Orofyld were appreciably outnumbered. What had so surprised them, however, was not the camp but rather what lay beyond it, for in the shadow of the mountain across the way stood an imposing stone structure, half-ruined, reclining in its antiquity, looking out complacently over the orcish war-camp as a ruling lord might deign to watch over the peasantry of his lands. As they gazed upon that mountain-fortress, our heroes felt a deep revulsion swell up within them, a visceral sense of moral abhorrence urging them to fly from this place, as if those stone walls housed a hungry, desirous presence which, if they lingered here, they would soon be forced to confront.

Suppressing these ominous feelings as best they could, they retreated a ways back down the trail and began to deliberate their next course of action. Their odds of successfully mounting a frontal assault against the war-camp seemed slim (with this even Bida had to agree, though he still liked the idea of giving it a try on account of the fact that it would make for a great story, if they survived), and it was evident that a more covert approach would be needed. However, as Rogar pointed out, the task of slipping past a hundred orc warriors to reach the fortress would be a difficult task for even one skilled infiltrator, and so it would likely be impossible for all four of them.

It was fortunate, then, that as a wizard, Aziel was perfectly accustomed to accomplishing the impossible on a regular basis.

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Notwithstanding the awakening of cultural interest that came about as a result of recent events, little is known about the shamanic traditions of the orc race. From the accounts of the few scholars and wandering adventurers whose courage and determination have been sufficient to win the trust of these tribal people, we gather that it is common for orcs to engage in the worship of a diverse pantheon of nature spirits, and that spirits of fire are especially revered in this pantheon, a theological quirk for which experts have developed a variety of feasible attributions, the most widely accepted of these being Lord Elyrian Hammond's symbolic theory of orcs being "enamored by fire, by its consumptive and unyielding qualia, seeing in them a reflection or validation of the uncompromising and argumentative tendencies of classical orcish behavior" and, of course, Alistair "Hale" Sauterne's anthropological explanation of fire worship as "a logical extension of their (orcs') mastery of fire as a survival tool, reciprocated by the rich culture of storytelling, dance, and strong communal bonds that first bloomed up around the campfire on those ancient winter nights."

(As a sidebar, during one of our lengthier interviews, I presented Balek Bida with these two hypotheses in an attempt to solicit his opinion on the matter of the importance of fire among tribal members. He responded, "Well, between the dead guy and the elf, I think the elf's got it right, though

he should have talked a bit less about that dancing nonsense and more about how fire makes their food taste better. That's a good enough reason to worship it right there.”

For further elaboration, I refer you to the hunting poet's twenty-six stanzas written on the simple joys of roasting different assorted meats over an open flame, which I have neglected to include here for the sake of brevity, and because I fear that, if I were to include them, I would be tempted to claim such wonderful verses as my own, and of this I am reasonably certain, having been exposed to each and every one of those twenty-six stanzas by Balek himself, many of them twice or thrice, and having felt for myself the envy aroused by his prodigious talent. No, those scrumptious poems shall not be reprinted in this history, and for that, dear reader, you may blame my own jealousy, although you must not judge too harshly, for if you were to partake of their succulent genius, you would understand my inhibition all too well.)

Whatever might be the exact significance ascribed to fire by orcish culture, it was certainly evoked that evening when, about an hour after sundown, one of the larger fires in the war-camp thunderously erupted, swelling up to unnatural heights and taking on the form of a towering serpent of living flame. The spirit lashed its flickering tongue cruelly at the crisp night air and swept its flat, flaming head low along the ground to leer at the gathering of orcs seated beside the fire, who now fled in terror, stumbling and shouting excitedly like a gaggle of misbehaving children scattering before the wrath of their aggravated schoolmarm. As the quiet of the camp quickly splintered into chaos, several orcs took up their bows and fired arrows over the heads of their fleeing companions, but their attacks seemed only to anger the monster, and soon even these stubborn warriors joined the frenzied retreat.

Aziel Trintior stood some twenty feet from the “spirit,” guiding its movements with his hand from beneath the mantle of his invisibility. The amount of concentration required for the conjuring of such an impressive illusion was indeed tremendous, and he would certainly need to rest at the first opportunity, but the efficacy of his magic could not be denied, and he allowed himself a satisfied smile as he watched his enemies disperse before him.

While their elven friend was thus occupied, Bida, Rogar, and Drew were moving double-quick through the camp, silencing the few orcs who scampered across their path and avoiding the attention of the rest (it should be mentioned that Rogar took greater pleasure in dispatching these orcs than perhaps he should have, driven as he was by his vengeful impulses, for the loss of Mick the Nag still ached freshly in his heart). In this way, they soon put the orange glow of the camp behind them and raced onward into the darkness, and a few minutes later they stood before the stone ruins, the outer walls looming high overhead, the front entryway barred by a heavy portcullis of rusted iron.

Bida attempted to force the gate open, and Drew aided him, but even their combined strength

could not budge it. Drew suggested they search for a Back Door of some kind, which inspired Bida to redouble his efforts to lift the portcullis, and Rogar, growing impatient, announced that he was going to scale the wall, and to this end he fished a length of rope out of his pack and hustled off around the side of the building.

He had secured the rope and was about halfway through his ascent when the portcullis gave a loud creak and started to retract up into the wall. Bida and Drew readied their weapons and stepped into the courtyard where they were met by a group of four cloaked warriors with flaming blades and uncannily similar facial features. Bida was hardly surprised by the presence of Kane Wests in this place, for it essentially confirmed what he and Aziel had suspected—that The Guild and its evil, red-robed enchanter had indeed been responsible for the attack on the king's banquet, and that the purpose of that attack had been to lure our heroes to these very ruins, where they would ostensibly meet their demise—and so the swordsman's son did not hesitate but flew forth to meet his infernal foes, and the priest of Abadar followed him closely, both of them determined to rout these villains and foil whatever insidious plot they had conceived.

Meanwhile, Rogar was nearing the top of the wall, and looking up, he was alarmed to see a figure leaning over the crenelations, sawing away with a dagger at the rope that held him precariously twenty-five feet above the ground. He scurried up the rope as quickly as he could and, drawing his axe, swung wildly at the interloper. Seeing the chiseled face of Kane West grinning at him in the moonlight, he swung again, harder, but the Guildsman ducked his blow, and this went on for several moments—Rogar clinging to his lifeline with one hand and fending his enemy off with stroke after desperate stroke, Kane West evading and continuing to hack away at the fraying rope—until the dwarf finally felt his axe connect and was able to hoist himself up onto the battlements. A second Kane West was crouched several yards away, nocking an arrow to his bowstring and preparing to fire on the battle in the courtyard below, and Rogar quickly moved to intercept him.

Aziel rejoined them shortly, his illusory fire serpent having long since served its intended purpose, and it was not long before the Kane Wests fell beneath the ferocity of our heroes' might. Their foes vanquished, Aziel requested a moment of respite, for his demonstration had really left him quite fatigued, and the party took several minutes to collect themselves, during which Drew saw to their wounds, and when they felt rested enough, they ventured into the ruins, alert for any further ambushes and primed for whatever trials lay ahead.

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Ah, if only our brave heroes could have known what terrible nefariousness awaited them in that decrepit cathedral-fortress, they might have turned about and returned to Orofyld without a second

thought! Even now, I struggle to keep my hand steady upon the page, for though these events have been comfortably subdued by the passage of time, so wicked and venomous are they that I am loath to commit them to writing, if only because my mortal heart shivers at the possibility that an echo of their evil power might be somehow immortalized in my words, that by fulfilling my duty as a historian I might unintentionally provide the vehicle through which these horrors resurface to plague our kingdom anew. May Pelor and Abadar preserve us from such disaster, for it is a thought that I cannot bear!

How should I describe what our heroes found, what they saw by torchlight in the winding, narrow halls of that infernal temple at the bottom of a forgotten valley? What scholar draws breath whose pen would not quake at the task of representing the seething abomination that exploded up from a blotchy, glowing rune, filling the room with scarlet light and the overwhelming stench of sulfur, its greasy, matted beard twitching hideously as it slung its vicious, saw-toothed glaive into the helpless body of Kane West, whose bindings held him fast to his chair as the weapon plunged into him, and whose scream carried with it a haunting quality of rehearsal, as if this sacrificial scene had been enacted a thousand times before? How to speak of a low table in the center of an arcane laboratory, a figure beneath an off-white sheet, the figure rising, the sheet folding, sagging, finally falling to reveal—and the mind falters, and the fickle justice of sanity flails—the horrid patchwork of rotting flesh, jagged bone, coarse hair, bladed arms, the perfectly practiced flexing and relaxing of various muscles and skins strung together by unwholesome design as it stood from the table, the eyes bereft of iris or pupil, bereft of life, vacant orbs of painful white glinting purposefully without purpose, the smell of burning flesh, the sound of the gods crying out in protest at the existence of the thing that defamed the sacred script of intended creation, spilling ink over those rules and thoughtlessly tracing a new and uncharted path through their ghosts with every self-asserted step? What is there to say about the large vat of glass wherein a terrified orc, submerged in red liquid, underwent a dreadful metamorphosis—his face shifting, his fearful lips closing, his pointed tusks shrinking, his chin narrowing, his cheekbones edging higher beneath his tightening skin, his earlobes fusing with the sides of his shortening neck, his gray-brown hair receding into his skull and turning a deep shade of black, his eyes glazing over with cold, stoic acceptance—into an indistinguishable likeness of the Kane Wests who watched him with passive interest, slid open the glass door, placed a flaming blade in his hand, and then led him into battle, three having become four to become one? What is suggested by the labyrinthine of subtly descending hallways where hundreds of torches choked out their own light beneath a haze of aching smoke, where empty suits of armor awaited visitors at every turn, their helmets turning with sharp, metallic screeches to proffer wide-mouthed, golden goblets of sparkling, tantalizingly blood-red Milk of Paradise, their inner chasms sighing, hissing, insistently whispering when refused, and how many

times were they refused, and how many more times could they have been refused? What can be gained from remembering the eldritch tome discovered among flasks of tempting red drink and pouches of silver dust, the unspeakable names etched into its snickering pages in a tongue older than age and black as the Pit, the diagrams and incantations to be drawn and declared alongside those names, that damnable fate-strangler claimed by a certain wizard against his better judgment to augment his own suffering?

And what of the fear, the unutterable, petrifying hopelessness that seized our heroes' hearts when at last they flung open the doors to the sanctum, interrupting at its height the sermon being delivered by an impassioned young man, the gore-spattered altar behind him depicting in profile a hooded figure kneeling over its own upturned palm, his two hundred same-faced listeners standing in unison from the pews and drawing their fiery blades, the speaker giving the order, the unholy army rigidly marching to war, preparing to advance upon and crush down the four outsiders who had dared to intrude upon their dark worship?

What of our heroes' relieved amazement when Rane, the king's advisor, appeared without warning in the doorway behind them, enfolded in the swirling vortices of his arcane energy and primed for battle, when he strode forward, nodding curtly to them as he passed, floated easily into the air, held up his hands, and sliced the silence with a crackling bolt of lightning that arced across the congregation, split the altar into several pieces, and shook the room with a deafening bang that knocked the evil preacher to his knees?

What of the momentous battle that ensued, the carnage that was wrought when the five men from Orofyld stood fiercely against the onslaught of two hundred Guild soldiers, refusing to be overpowered by this enemy of their kingdom? What of the young preacher who took up flaming sword against our heroes, and who, though a capable warrior he may have been, was trounced handily by Aziel, his senses assailed and overwhelmed by the vivid, prismatic illusions of the Trintior line? What of his dying moments when, his body brought to ruin on the point of Bida's greatsword, he spoke defiantly of the glory of one he called "Master Tryst, the prophet, the word of the Prince," when he craned his neck to speak to a god that was not there, declaring that he had drunk the Milk of Paradise, that he could feel the Hand upon his shoulder, that he would soon feed on the honeydew of eternal recognition, when blood gushed freely from his every pore, when thickening swaths of steam began to float up from him, when blackish bile spurted from his eyes and nose and mouth with a terrible retching sound, when his robes caught with greenish flames, when these flames, burning his body clean of blood, quietly flickered and went out, leaving the mark of a human hand cauterized upon the dead man's shoulder?

And what of the moment when the battle ended abruptly for our heroes, when they fought their way across the chancel to assist Rane, when the flying enchanter, noticing that they were drawing near to him, held up a hand to warn them away, when four potent strands of electricity sprang from his fingertips, racing away from him as if of their own volition, when our heroes felt the sudden spears of heat run them through, turning their world black and raising so many questions in their dimming minds?