

## Chapter XI

*~ Concerning the thrilling pursuit of a madman through the sewers of Orofyld,  
as well as the long-awaited return of a gallant hero ~*

To the east of our fair city, just beyond the rim of the Valley of the Sun, there is a wild, desolate place unfit for civilization, a land of barren hills that is inhabited by an abnormally dense concentration of monstrous life. Few are the brave souls who have dared to explore this hostile realm, and fewer still are those who return, bringing with them incomplete maps of branching cave networks and tales of the ravenous beasts they encountered during their expeditions beneath the earth.

Boldest and most prolific among these explorers is, of course, none other than that beloved bard Alistair “Hale” Sauterne, from whose uncharacteristically chilling “Ode to the Waste” the name of that dreadful place is derived:

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*The Waste, a foul and foetid stretch of land!  
The jagged cliffs are restful beds of sleep  
for wretched things that walk but must not stand.  
The yawning caverns labyrinthine, deep  
are bloated throats whose whispers drip with doom.  
A venturesome soul toward some grand end employed,  
a child at the door of a dark room,  
might linger there, his derring-do destroyed—  
knowing his torch has burned its last,  
watching the dream-caves drown, the shadows vast  
birthing the nightmare creatures of his past.*

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Deserving of greater praise than it has historically enjoyed (a trend, I think, arising from the general truth that most Orofyld scholars, being incredibly intelligent, have never actually visited the Waste themselves, and as such they fail to fully appreciate the stunning accuracy of Hale's words), this hendecet renders the terrifying essence of its subject with a vitality that only the verse of a master bard could achieve. Sauterne's usual musicality rings darkly throughout the poem as he describes the

monster-infested cliffs and perilous caves, jarring dactyls slipping into his otherwise iambic metre as he evokes an image of a bold explorer who hesitates at the mouth of one of these caves, comparing him to a timid youth staring wide-eyed into a dark room, delivering the frightening implication that the terrors once conjured by his childhood mind—the ghosts of his grandfather's fireside tales, the bogeymen of his bad dreams, the beasts beneath his bed—all of them suddenly become real once more in the pits of the Waste, stalking about in the pooling shadows, waiting for him to descend among them. Such is the power of that evil place, that even the bravest of men become trembling toddlers when confronting it.

(As it happens, Sauterne is not the only poet to have familiarized himself with the Waste, a fact I came to learn during one of my lengthier interviews with Balek Bida when, as we were discussing the events which left our heroes stranded in those winding caves, the hunting poet mentioned that he himself had journeyed there many times in his younger days, and that he had always thought of it as a place where he could “get away from it all.” Dubious that we were speaking of the same haunted wasteland, I shared with him Sauterne's verse [which, I was quite surprised to discover, he had never before read] in the hopes of clearing up the confusion, but when I finished, Balek merely gave a sober nod of recognition before responding with his own impromptu verse, which I have taken the liberty of including in this chronicle:

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*It may be a haven for critters  
and lurkers and murderous traps,  
but if you can get a good sitter,  
it's a wonderful spot for a nap!*

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One wonders, dear reader, how both poets are to be believed, for it is difficult to conceive of the Waste as being both a pit of nightmares and a haven of peaceful dreams. If Balek Bida was able to find rest in such a place, then either he must be more monster than man, or so harrowing were his experiences as a parent that those savage caverns seemed tranquil to him by comparison, and being that either of these explanations is as likely as the other, we shall have to be satisfied with the verity of each and leave the matter there, for the tale continues.)

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When the swordsman's son awoke in the murky depths of those caves, his ears were greeted, strangely enough, by the sound of howling winds. Easing himself slowly up from the cold, hard ground and wincing with the ache of battle, he looked about for the source of the noise, and his eyes alighted upon an odd and worrisome scene indeed.

Aziel lay on his side some thirty feet away, clutching at his stomach and grimacing in pain as a storm of whirling winds billowed around him, tossing loose stones about the cavern and stabbing at the darkness with frequent flashes of bluish-white lightning. Panicking, Bida staggered to his feet and began to move toward his ailing friend, shielding his eyes from the squall as he went, but he was stopped by Drew and Rogar, who had been seated nearby in heated discussion with Rane. Shouting over the wailing winds, they explained to Bida that there had been an accident during the battle in the unholy sanctum, that the four of them had unwittingly crossed the path of Rane's magical lightning, and that this had left Aziel stricken with some sort of arcane affliction which, for some reason, had not affected any other members of their party. They assured Bida that it was not safe to go near the poor fellow at the moment, and as if to prove the point, an especially bright and vicious jolt of electricity suddenly sprang forth from Aziel's contorted form, spidering out along the rocky ceiling and dissipating into the walls with a frightful crack of thunder.

Bewildered, Bida approached Rane and demanded an explanation, but the mysterious enchanter was unable to provide one that was satisfactory (this author finds it unlikely that even the most ingenious of wizards could have conjured up the words that might have enlightened or pacified His Majesty, it being the case that both his temper and his stupendous ignorance of the intricacies of arcane spellcraft as well, both well-documented, were at play here). Of Aziel's condition he could and did provide few details—though Bida pressed him, Rane revealed only that the affliction was a product of his own curse, that Aziel had no doubt succumbed to it as a result of being accidentally exposed (twice now) to the fury of his elemental magic, and that he did not know of a way to reverse the effects, for he surely would have used such knowledge to cure himself long ago were it at his disposal. Aziel would survive, he attested, but the task of mastering the magical forces now raging inside of him would greatly tax his willpower, and he would likely endure a great deal of pain along the way, and for this Rane could only offer his sincere apologies, his voice quavering and his eyes growing misty at the thought that the curse, this hated brand he had hoped would die with him and him alone, had now been passed on to another person—this, his unhappy legacy, his greatest failure.

Renowned for many things but not for emotional discretion, Bida expressed his dissatisfaction with the enchanter's explanation by thanking him in a manner that was excessive, protracted, and entirely sarcastic, and for this our hero could hardly be blamed, so strong was his concern for Aziel's well-being. But words, unlike swords, may cut more deeply when mishandled, and so it seemed to be with Rane, who did not respond but stood and walked silently into the whirlwind, invulnerable as he was to the deathly touch of errant lightning bolts, and this put a prompt end to the conversation, for Bida could not rightly follow him. As Rane helped Aziel to his feet and wrapped him in a heavy cloak

that somewhat muffled the wild winds, Drew tried to console Bida, saying that the grace of the gods would preserve Aziel through this trial, and that if the knowledge of how this strange curse might be dispelled could be found, then Abadar would surely guide them towards this discovery. Bida had his doubts, but he hoped that Drew was right, for despite his ferocity in combat, the son of Balek was possessed of a kind heart, and he could not stand to see his elven friend in such agony.

With the winds reasonably quieted and Aziel able to move with some assistance, our heroes prepared to be on their way, for as Rogar pointed out, it would be unwise to linger in the Waste any longer than was necessary, hostile and unforgiving as it was reputed to be. The dwarven hunter led the way, Bida and Drew followed close at his heels, and Rane trailed a safe distance behind, for still the lightning leapt out from Aziel at irregular intervals—thusly did they press on through those wet and winding caves, braving the dangers of the darkness and seeking their escape into the light of day.

(Some scholars have wondered upon reaching this point in the tale how exactly His Majesty and his company, having fallen in their heroic battle at the enemy stronghold, came to find themselves lost in the Waste upon waking. The purported distance between the orc encampment and the desolate cave networks, they say, spans at least fifteen miles of treacherous badlands, and the circumstances of the narrative seem to suggest that Rane, being the only individual to retain consciousness at the conclusion of the battle, somehow managed to transport four men, three of whom were armored, across this distance, and that he was able to do this alone, without horses, a wagon, or any other sort of convenience—this, they argue, is highly improbable.

You need look no further, dear reader, if you wish to see the sorry state to which “scholarship” has been reduced in our kingdom. The notion that Rane, whose skill as an enchanter has been clearly evidenced, would be challenged by the prospect of moving a few slumbering adventurers to safety a handful of miles away is simply laughable. While I do not claim to be an expert in the realm of arcana, it is obvious that many of my contemporaries cannot claim to know even the first thing about sorcery, or they would realize that this task could easily be accomplished by one who wields such power. It should also be said that, as enchanters go, Rane was particularly accustomed to bearing burdens much heavier than those of four men, such that what may seem unlikely to some is really quite probable.

These brilliant minds commonly offer, in one form or another, the following rebuttal: “If Rane was so mighty an enchanter as to be able to magically transport people over a distance of fifteen miles, then why did he deposit himself and the men from Orofyld in the middle of the Waste instead of taking them back to the capital city where their safety could be guaranteed?” Truly, Lord Hammond weeps for the future of academia. Because this argument constitutes nothing more than flagrant speculation about the exact, measurable limitations of something so indefinite and boundless as wizardry (this speculation

is posited, I remind you, by men who lack any sort of arcane training or talent), the only response I feel inclined to give is that if our heroes had not ended up in the Waste, then the history of His Majesty's rise to greatness might not have unfolded in the proper manner, for in all likelihood the timing of crucial events might have been misaligned, or such events might not have occurred at all, and this possibility alone means that Rane's placement of the company in those incredibly dangerous subterranean was completely appropriate and perhaps even necessary. If this justification seems asinine, then I trade farce for farce, and alternatively, if the arguments of my contemporaries are sound, then so mine are in turn—on with the tale.)

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Now, a company of lesser men would have been doomed to wander those caverns without end, and would have inevitably been overwhelmed by the manifold and unrelenting perils lurking therein. But of course, our heroes were not lesser men, and so they went forth boldly, their spirits steeled against whatever adversity might find them. They were especially fortunate to have Rogar with them, for his senses were keen and the stonecunning of the dwarven people served him well, such that he was never disoriented by the twisting and turning of the narrow tunnels, and that his attunement to the natural rhythms of the surrounding earth seemed to guide him reliably as he led onward. As such, Fortune's favor did smile kindly upon the men from Orofyld, and their journey through the Waste was surprisingly free of danger, save for one brief encounter with a gang of kobolds (if you are unfamiliar, dear reader, kobolds are a race of small, hostile, bipedal lizard-people who, some scholars say, are distant descendants of dragons, yet their physical infirmity, glaring intellectual deficits, and general unimpressiveness casts any sort of relationship to their alleged ancestors into serious doubt), which they dispatched with little difficulty, and also for one frightening encounter with a collapsing tunnel (which, some scholars say, could be attributed to the volume of Bida's voice as he struggled to be heard over Aziel's wailing winds), which, quite luckily, did not bury any of them alive.

In the wake of these trials, and after several hours of meandering, a draft of fresh air could be felt, and the path took a sudden upward turn, and before our heroes were entirely aware of it, they were standing outside in the cool night air. They had emerged from a cave in the cliffs south of the city of Orofyld – at their backs, high mountains separated the southern plains from the Valley of the Sun. The moon was bright on the cloudless horizon, and a swath of its pale light gleamed off the waters of the Crestyl River, trickling and bubbling quietly two hundred feet below them. Dappled by shadow, the sloping hills rolled forth from the cliffs and gave way to vast flatlands where the clustered, orange light of small farming villages glowed like meek candles against the curtain of night.

At this sight of civilization, the men from Orofyld knew truly that the danger of their journey was behind them, and they breathed a sigh of relief and allowed themselves a moment's rest. Bida, Rogar, and Drew reflected upon the horrors they had witnessed in the temple, and all were in accord that the dark and infernal sorcery of The Guild represented a truer and more dire threat to the peace and security of the kingdom than they had originally realized. Aziel could scarcely contribute to the conversation, for he was still racked by the agony of the storm curse, and although the howl of his winds had been made tolerable by the heavy cloak draped over his shoulders, lethal tendrils of lightning continued to lance out from him at odd intervals, accompanied by the (somewhat muted) crack of thunder. Rane continued to tend to the elven mage, it being the case that he was the only one who could even approach Aziel in his current condition, for they shared the same affliction, and so the lightning did naught but scuttle over him harmlessly like a curious spider. He addressed the others, saying that talk of the temple was pointless now, for he had made certain to raze it to the ground before their escape, and that the company would be wise to keep moving in search of shelter and safety, for the Waste was still uncomfortably near, and Aziel was not faring well.

The tension and need for collaboration of the past several hours had faded considerably by this time, and at the enchanter's words, Bida felt his anger and suspicion towards Rane quickly returning. He became confrontational, demanding that the king's advisor reveal his motives, for trust was paramount, and there was no way that he could trust a man so shrouded in secrecy. Drew intervened, reminding Bida that Rane had done much to prove his trustworthiness by coming to their aid in the temple, and observing that he had clearly earned the confidence of King Orofyld XVII, and perhaps that alone should be sufficient to allay Bida's uneasiness. Bida argued that it was not sufficient, for it was Rane's fault that Aziel was suffering, and it was doubtful indeed that the king knew of Rane's arcane prowess, as evidenced by His Majesty's reaction to Bida's accusation at the banquet (see ch. IX). Bida wondered aloud what other important information might have been kept from the king, and what other unknown dangers might be posed by associating with Rane, and he reasserted his demands for transparency, and before the young warrior's stubborn determination, Drew could only concede that he too would ask Rane to state his intentions plainly.

In response, Rane provided very little clarification, except to say that it was true that the king and court of Orofyld were unaware of his ability as an enchanter, for it was a secret that he strongly preferred to keep to himself, though he would not say why – indeed, he flatly refused to say anything of his motives or desires, for they were deeply personal and largely irrelevant, except in the case of Aziel's affliction, for which he had already apologized earnestly, and for which nothing could be done save for Aziel himself to wrest control of the curse, and so nothing more needed to be said on the matter. The

important thing, he said, was that he was no enemy of the kingdom, and that he would do his part to combat and defeat The Guild, but that he would do so without revealing his identity as an enchanter, for the sudden discovery of a mage at the king's hand would only serve to diminish public confidence in the crown, which would surely be catastrophic in these times of impending crisis. For the good of the kingdom, Rane asked our heroes to swear to uphold his secrecy, and in return, he would lend his aid to their fight against The Guild, and if this arrangement was not agreeable to them, then all that could be said had been said, for the enchanter was possessed of stubborn determination to rival that of the swordsman's son, and his secrets were his own. Faced with such terms and with so much at stake, Bida could only reluctantly agree, and though this was surely not the end of his battle with this particular enchanter, there was peace for the moment, and they began their treacherous descent down those cliffs overlooking the southern plains, going slowly and cautiously to accommodate Aziel, seeking safe shelter beneath the stars, eager to return to their fair city in the valley beyond.

(At this point, goodly reader, I must address the oft-debated issue of the enchanted rings. It is well-known by historians and commoners alike that the heroes of this tale owe much of their success against The Guild to four magical rings, simple silver bands inscribed with arcane runes that allow the bearer to pass through fire unharmed. What is less well-known, however, is when and how His Majesty and his compatriots came into possession of these powerful artifacts – they may have been claimed as spoils of war from the evil temple, or from the treasure hoarde of the false kobold god, an adventure that you shall enjoy in the coming chapters, if you are not already familiar.

Another theory holds that the rings may have been a gift from Rane, that he may have enchanted them himself or taken them from the royal treasury, and that he may have offered them to the men from Orofyld as “aid” in exchange for their vow of secrecy. Now, to levy a charge of bribery against the reigning king and a royal advisor is no small matter, and let it be known, dear reader, that by addressing this issue, I am in no way declaring that His Majesty or any of his subjects would ever engage in anything so dishonorable as jobbery or embezzlement. That being said, even if Rane had offered these rings [each of which, it should be said, could have been fairly exchanged for a small mansion, such was their value] to our heroes as an incentive for non-disclosure, the events of this chronicle show quite evidently that he would have done so for a just and noble cause [the safety of the kingdom and its people, of course], which would effectively exonerate him from the crime such that he may as well have not committed it at all. At any rate, it may be easier, and arguably truer, to say that Rane did not, in fact, commit bribery, thereby preserving the sterling reputations of our former and current royal courts, without doubt and beyond reproach, and by His Majesty's grace may it be known as such, long may he reign.

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On they went into the dark and starry night, the men from Orofyld and their enchanting associate, keeping the looming mountains on their right and making their way west as the moon climbed higher and higher above them. With the passing hours, their travels eventually found them at the foot of the Peryton Pass, whose perils our heroes did not wish to brave at this exact moment, worn and weary as they were, and so instead they knocked on the door of the modest shack by the side of the road. Groggy, irritable fumblings could be heard from within, the weak glow of a candle playing underneath the door, which presently eased opened to reveal the aged, squinting face of Eril (the reader will remember this old man and his granddaughter from the daring adventure of the pink ribbon, see ch. VII), who, upon recognizing his midnight guests, was both delighted and surprised to see them again so soon, for it had been little more than a week since they had done bloody battle with Kane West on his front lawn.

They were welcomed in, and it quickly became apparent that Eril and Rane were already acquainted with one another, for the elderly fellow greeted the mysterious enchanter with the warmth of a familiar friend, and our heroes looked on with interest, for this was a development that they had not expected. Rane explained briefly that he had met Eril a number of years ago while traveling to the capital city for the first time, and they had been friends ever since. Rane assured Eril that the company would be on their way in the morning, and that they would try not to trouble him during their brief stay. Eril, gracious host that he was, replied that it would be no trouble at all, and that of course they would be welcome to stay as long or as often as they liked, for the rescue of his granddaughter had placed him soundly in their debt. Drew politely introduced himself, and this Eril reciprocated, although he did ask after Hakak (gods embrace him), at which point our heroes told him somberly of the half-orc's death at the hands of the villainous Saint Justice, as well as the other goings-on regarding The Guild and the state of the kingdom. The old man's countenance became grave and worried at the news, but while there was much to discuss, the hour was late, and it was agreed that further discourse could wait until the morrow.

Now, Aziel, in his current state, had opted not to enter Eril's home for fear of the destruction that might be wrought by the storm that raged within him, and he suggested that he would take his rest outdoors that evening for the sake of everyone's safety, and though it pained the others to see their compatriot isolated and exposed to the elements, the howling winds and intermittent flashes of lightning forced them to see the necessity. Rane gathered two additional cloaks, and Aziel wrapped them around his slight frame, and this had the effect of insulating him against the chill night air, and also of further quieting the curse, now little more than a distant rumble of breezy thunder beneath the



layers of heavy fleece. To his credit, Bida would not allow his elven friend to be completely alone in his agony, and so the two of them made camp in the backyard, although Bida did take care to set down his bedroll a safe distance away.

Sleep did not come easily to Aziel, for the lightning was like knives in his gut, and the winds (as well as Bida's snoring, which roared like the mightiest squall with the rising and falling of his barreled chest) were as fever in his head, and he became restless, pacing the yard, gritting his teeth as he weathered the pain, trying desperately to assert his will over this foreign arcane presence within him. In his pacing, he wandered close to one of the windows, and through the drawn shutters he caught the whispers of a hushed conversation, for Eril and Rane, it seemed, had decided not to wait until the morrow to continue discourse. His curiosity getting the better of him, Aziel pressed close to the wall and strained to listen, but while his winds were muted by the cloaks such that he could not be heard from inside the cottage (he thought as much, at least), still they billowed up from beneath his collar into his ears, and through their keening he could hear only disjointed pieces of the exchange, which included phrases such as "Project Kane," "The Guild," "Suppression," "that bird," "pursuing you," and "map," following by the sounds of shuffling paper and scribbling quill, and then nothing, signifying that the two men had finally gone to bed. Aziel stood there leaning against the house for a while, his mind struggling through his affliction to make sense of what he had heard, but he could only conclude that both Eril and Rane knew more about The Guild and related matters than they had yet disclosed, and although a time would soon come when this would need to be addressed, that time was not now, for fatigue was setting in at last, and so the Trintior mage returned to his bedroll, and he did manage to fall into a fitful but desperately needed sleep, in spite of the many forces conspiring to prevent him from doing so.

Of our heroes' brief respite at Eril's home, there is little more to say – morning came, breakfast was had, and all who were there said their fond farewells, for the company needed to return to the city with all possible speed, that His Majesty King Orofyld XVII should be informed of the events that had unfolded at Ambrosia and the remote temple. Up they marched into the Peryton Pass, and as they went, Aziel and Bida watched Rane with renewed suspicion, for the elven mage had spoken to the swordsman's son of what he had overheard in the wee hours, and they both were beset by worry and doubt, and certainly it should have been so, for an enchanter is a thing never to be fully trusted.

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Their journey through the mountain pass was neither long nor arduous, for having conquered it once already, they were wise to its perils and pitfalls, and these could pose no threat to the might of our heroes. This was truer still for the company of Rane, who used his magics to blast away at every earth

elemental they encountered along the path, such that the living boulders began to scatter at the sound of his approach, thinking better of their usual belligerence. Thusly, they were not hindered, entering the Valley of the Sun by midday and reaching the city gates by early evening, and the sight of the white stone towers of the royal palace holding up the reddening autumn sky was welcome indeed.

Their travels at an end, Rane eagerly made to depart, saying that he would return to the castle at once and speak with the king regarding the events of the past several days, and that the four of them should present at court tomorrow to deliver their account for His Majesty's consideration. They promised to do so, and Bida reminded Rane that he had sworn to aid their battle against The Guild, and Rane reminded Bida that he had done so contingent upon our heroes' capacity for maintaining certain secrets, and there was much reminding of each another's obligations to the agreement they had struck. At length, both sides were placated for the time being, and Rane stated perhaps not altogether ironically that he looked forward to their partnership, adding somewhat mysteriously that they would soon be in touch (Bida astutely observed that obviously they would see one another at court the next day, an observation that was deftly ignored by Rane), and then he took his leave, his weathered cloak trailing behind him as he headed down the cobbled street and out of view.

Glad to be rid of the troubling enchanter for the moment, our heroes eagerly headed off in search of a tavern or inn where they might lay down their burdens for the night, and Aziel was especially earnest, for his baleful winds were barely contained beneath the many cloaks that swaddled him so, and he was anxious to find a secluded place where he would not endanger others with his proximity, and where he could focus on devising a solution to his circumstances. It seemed, however, that the Minister of Destiny had in mind a different weaving of the threads, for as they entered the great markets of Orofyld that evening, they happened upon a platoon of city guardsmen who were passing through the district, and their paths crossed such that each party was made to stop and take notice of the other. These guards were headed by none other than Shodo Fair, seasoned swordswoman and Captain of the First Patrol of the Standing Guard, with whom Bida had enjoyed a chance encounter on his very first day in the city (see ch. VIII, p. 3-4), and who had been present in the banquet hall during the momentous adventure of the exploding dwarf (it is alleged that, upon running into our heroes in this manner, the good Captain did share a glance with Drew and smirk amusedly, no doubt recalling Balek Bida's poetic interpretation of the priest's holy symbol [see ch. IX, p. 7-9 for this delightful diversion]), but while she of course recognized the four of them, she and her soldiers could not stop for idle conversation, for they had been summoned in response to a crisis – Saint Justice, that mad, wicked enchanter of The Guild, who had been imprisoned after the frightful battle on the steps of the Noble Court, had somehow broken free of his bonds and fled into the sewers beneath the city, and this the

kingdom could not abide, for the vile sorcerer's crimes were too dire, and the ruin he might wreak if allowed to roam free would be unconscionable.

Our heroes were of the same mind, and so Bida and Rogar, thirsting for retribution, volunteered at once to help hunt down the illusive elf, and Drew, sworn as a cleric of Abadar to safeguard the common peace, quickly followed suit, and Aziel, despite his condition, nobly pledged himself as well. Captain Fair could hardly refuse their support, for the sewers were vast, and the quarry was dangerous and unpredictable, and these men were no mere city-folk – they were brave defenders of the kingdom and its people, risen to renown by the greatness of their deeds, and so she did not turn them away but led them forth through the markets and down into the sprawling sewers, those stifling, malodorous corridors of slick stone now haunted by the killing intent of a crazed and evil enchanter.

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(The history of His Majesty's ascension is still young, and yet so many and varied are the exaggerations, misattributions, and blatant falsehoods surrounding certain pieces of it that the task of establishing an official chronicle is made egregiously complicated, and all the more necessary [as a dramatic example, consider the outrageous tale {one that is endorsed, mind you, by several reputable members of the academic community} of His Majesty and his trusted companions doing battle with a house-sized spider that was, in actuality, the dessicated husk of a dead, house-sized spider being internally animated by thousands of less-than-house-sized spiders moving in concert via some sort of ill-defined psychic link, and perhaps this will remind the reader of the lamentable state of contemporary Orofyld scholarship]. Accordingly, accounts differ regarding the exact events that follow, and I have neither the parchment nor the patience to methodically set straight each and every wayward claim, and so regarding this part of the history, I shall relate only the facts which are unanimously understood to have actually happened, for it is a very important part indeed, and so the most precise and accurate version of the truth must be rendered, which is the truth itself – therefore, dear reader, if you hereupon observe a distinct lack of detail in the narrative, know that I have omitted such detail for the sake of loyalty to the truth, as outlined above, and onward we shall go.)

Led by the illustrious Captain Fair and her guardsmen, Bida, Aziel, Rogar, and Drew descended beneath the city of Orofyld to hunt the malicious Saint Justice amongst the shadows and the filth. It was agreed that two search parties should be formed in order to expedite the chase, and so at the first intersection, the Captain took her men one way, and our heroes wandered off down the other. The air was thick with the stench of stale excrement, and their senses were assailed to the brink of violent nausea, but they pressed forward, searching by the light of their torches and the Frelifton blade for any sign of the madman's passage.

Curiously, after perhaps an hour of navigating those stinking depths, those brave four did happen upon a madman, but it was not the particular one they were seeking. He was dressed in shabby, dirt-caked rags, appearing very much to be a long-time resident of his squalid surroundings, and he mumbled quietly to himself as our heroes tentatively approached him. He was largely unresponsive to their questions – of himself, he would say nothing – but when they asked of Saint Justice, his eyebrows furrowed and he pointed down a nearby tunnel, and a faint, wry smile played at the corner of his lips, and although he surely appeared old and addled, there was a certain shrewdness and youthful mischief glinting in his dark-blue eyes. No doubt there was more to this poor stranger than might be seen at first glance, but he seemed unlikely to say much else, and matters were pressing, so the company hurried off in the direction he had indicated, leaving the vagabond smirking and muttering to himself in the darkness as they pursued the fugitive Saint.

And the stranger seemingly steered them true, for the echoes of the villain's cackling soon reached their ears, and they followed the echoes to a large hub chamber from which a dozen different passageways could be accessed, and upon entering this chamber, Saint Justice sprang forth from beneath his mantle of invisibility as if the open air had suddenly spit him forth from nothingness, his wide violet eyes bulging maniacally in his head. He cried ecstatically and lunged for Bida's throat with a thin knife, but the swordsman's son would not be caught unawares, and with the Frelicton blade in hand, he knocked the madman's blow aside, and then the men from Orofyld joined with Saint Justice in terrific battle. The evil enchanter brought his underhanded magic to bear, but Aziel was prepared, and before the sophistications of a Trintior mage, the Saint's illusions frayed and unraveled like cheap cloth. He summoned up his noxious, red-black light-smoke, the same soul-dimming power that had slain Hakak, but Drew held aloft his holy key and let the silver-gold balm of Abadar wash over the company, and so the foul death-magic could not strike them down. Bida and Rogar struck hard with sword and axe, and it was not long before Saint Justice crumpled to his knees before them, clutching his grievous wounds, decisively and utterly defeated.

But then the Saint's resignation turned to relief, for crimson light suddenly flooded the room, and there was a flash of sulfurous smoke, and turning to face the source, our heroes found themselves confronted by a red-cloaked figure that had not been there before. As Bida gazed upon the apparition, he knew immediately that this was the same fiendish enchanter he had encountered two years ago, the same black-hearted cur who had killed his childhood friend and burned his village to the ground, the object of a righteous vengeance sworn between brothers, and now that vengeance flared anew in his heart as he stood there, observing every detail of his hated foe – the scarlet cloak whose ashen stitchings reflected writhing depictions of human figures suffering in the bondage of devils, the sleek,

black-stone sceptre crowned by a fat onyx gem and carved with screaming faces, the cowled head, the jaundiced eyes peering calmly out from sunken pits, the soot-gray skin, the two small, jagged horns protruding near the hairline, the smug half-grin, and of course, the blood-red ruby dangling from the neck by a glistening obsidian chain and fashioned in the shape of that unspeakable symbol, that malevolent seed from which had sprouted so much senseless death and destruction, and more was sure to follow, so long as that symbol and its Guild did thrive in this world.

Rage trembled in Bida's arms, his soul quaking.

The devil-in-flesh, his voice booming easily through the room, announced himself as Master Tryst, Prophet of the Prince of Paradise, before whom all of mortalkind would soon kneel, for they were as nothing before His wrath. Tryst had come to retrieve his brother, who had long overstayed his welcome in this miserable city and was needed at home, and his eyes fell with a fondness on Saint Justice as he said this, and the crazed elf shuddered and continued to gaze with awe upon his Master.

As the Prophet was speaking, the others watched and listened in stunned silence, but Bida was sure of purpose, and he sheathed the Frelicton blade, and then drew his two-handed greatsword, and before anyone else could act, he spun and swung into Saint Justice with all of his bellowing might, splitting him at the waist and dropping him to the stone in two broken halves, his innards pooling beneath him. Thus, Saint Justice, treacherous enchanter of The Guild, murderer of Hakak and many innocents, was brought to his end on the saintslayer's vengeful edge, his spiteful magics extinguished, no longer a threat to the good people of Orofyld – and Bida stared, proud and defiant, at the red-robed sorcerer who had dared to speak of family, letting Saint-blood run down the length of his blade, neither for the first time nor the last.

Tryst frowned, more annoyed than distraught, and pacing forward resolutely, he held up one gnarled hand, and from his outstretched palm there issued forth a horrid gout of greenish Hell-flame, and although the magical silver ring on Bida's finger preserved his life, the infernal spell was so terribly strong that it threw him bodily against the wall, and he sagged from the force of it, straining to remain conscious, flames thirsting at his forearms. Drew rushed to salve his burns, and Rogar interposed himself uncertainly between Bida and the devil-man, and in desperation, Aziel unslung the enchanted Frelicton staff and leveled its rune-scarred length at the approaching sorcerer, but Tryst merely waved his hand through the air, and the carved white birch was shot through with angry fire and destroyed, and Aziel shrunk back from him, for in that moment he saw clearly the disparity between his own magics and the power commanded by this wretched fiend, and he knew he could not hope to win. Tryst knelt beside Saint Justice and gathered up his bloody remains, continuing to speak to his fallen brother as if he were yet alive.

At this point, Bida had recovered, and he charged forward recklessly, brushing past Rogar and bringing down his heavy sword in a vicious arc, and Tryst did not move to defend himself but stared coolly as the blade bit into the hem of his scarlet cloak, and yet no blood was spilled, for the abjurations woven into the insidious garment were powerful indeed, and from the threads sprang forth a lattice of flame that rushed over Bida's sword and enveloped him as he tried to pull away, and though he struggled valiantly against it, the magic held him rooted to the spot. Smiling, Tryst turned and began walking back across the chamber where a smoldering arcane doorway was forming to facilitate his egress, and as he walked, he leisurely lifted the black sceptre in his right hand, and a large, red, glowing rune appeared on the ceiling where he pointed, and despair crept into our heroes' hearts as the shape of a hell-spawn did coalesce there, falling from the circle and bending the stone floor beneath it as it landed. Tryst cast a single glance over his shoulder before vanishing through his portal, leaving Bida, Aziel, Rogar, and Drew to face his summoned monstrosity, the ten-foot-tall fiend of iron and nails, a thing of hulking plate mail speared upon wicked spikes that hefted its long, barbed trident high in the air, trampling forward on six sickle-sharp, arthropodal legs like a grotesque horseman riding to war.

By the time Captain Fair and her men reached the hub chamber, drawn there by the deafening sound of the tumult as it carried through the sewers, the fiend had been slain, Aziel having managed to drop it into an extradimensional pit and conjure a massive, roiling orb of water to drown it, but it had been a fierce battle, and it had taken all four of them to confound, subdue, and finally defeat the monster, and they were all badly bruised and bloodied for their efforts. As Drew administered his healing touch, they explained to the Captain what had happened, and though the tale was extraordinary, she took them at their word, satisfied that Saint Justice had been dealt with. Although Tryst had escaped, the immediate threat of The Guild seemed to have been checked, and in short, there was nothing for them to do but gather themselves and return to the considerably fresher air of the city streets. Captain Fair assured them that she would promptly report to the king on their behalf, and they agreed to corroborate her account during their royal audience tomorrow, and so they parted ways, Captain Fair and her men bound for the castle, and our heroes bound for the nearest suitable tavern, where they washed themselves clean and allowed their aching bones a well-deserved rest.

But there is one more matter to mention at the close of this adventure, for as night settled over the city of Orofyld and thirsty patrons filed into the tavern, Aziel retreated upstairs to the privacy of his room, leaving Bida and Rogar to nurse themselves at the bar, and Drew joined them, for the events of the evening had been so harrowing that even the priest was in need of a strong drink. Another someone joined them as well, clapping Bida roughly on the shoulder as he eased onto the adjacent stool. Bida looked over and nearly fell out of his seat, for he recognized this young man whose breastplate and

greatsword were not unlike his own, whose long, brown hair fell in waves behind his ears, whose simple necklace proclaimed his proud service to the Sun God, and whose fresh scars and exotic, red-ink tattoos bespoke the many new tales he might have to tell, for he, like his brother in battle, had seen much in the two years they had been apart.

Rafael, knight of Pelor, sat down beside Bida in that bustling tavern, returned and ready at last to make good on their oath.

(As the first part of this esteemed history comes to an end, permit me to share this truly wonderful poem written by Balek Bida on the subject of Rafael, the blessed warrior whose reappearance marks a definitive turning point in the narrative. The reader will recall [see ch. I, p. 1-2] that Rafael grew up as an orphan in the care of Estrid's priest, and that he and Bida were all but inseparable in their childhood years. What this history has heretofore neglected to describe is the relationship between Rafael and his friend's father, and this neglect results from the fact that the hunting poet is, as you may have already imagined, not the sort of man given to easy displays of emotion [indeed, when I think back on the conversations wherein I first asked him to expound upon matters of childrearing and parental affection, the image of a grumpy boar comes to mind], and it was quite difficult even to convince him to speak openly of his love for his own son, let alone any sort of affection he may have felt for another child of the village. As our interviews progressed, his steadfast reluctance to discuss these things became increasingly apparent, and I admit that I thought him a cold and detached sort of person, until he surprised me one day when, in response to an offhand question about Rafael, he pushed a piece of parchment across the table, and on it were written the following six verses, and without looking directly at me [a speck of dirt or dust had become caught in his eye at that moment, I believe], he said that I should “put that in your damn book” if the memory of the holy swordsman was to be appropriately preserved:

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*This boy beside my own  
has been my other—  
before my days are done,  
he will have grown  
to be my child's brother,  
my orphaned son.*

~

In the damn book it has been put, dear reader, a touching reminder to us all that family is not bound by blood alone.

And now, let us continue with this, the second part of the history of the glorious rise of His Majesty King Orofyld XVIII, and all that it entails.)