

Chapter IV

*~ In which many extraordinary things occur at the Frelicton estate,
comprising one of the most memorable adventures of this tale ~*

Before we proceed any further, dear reader, I must provide you with a few words, for the events which I am about to recount are of an particularly outlandish and fantastic nature, and I worry that you will dismiss them as frivolous nonsense if I do not preface them in some manner.

I am reminded of a verse composed by none other than Balek Bida, that venerable warrior-poet whose grizzled wisdom speaks to the heart of the everyman, which reads as follows:

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*A haunting sight I saw, my friend,
that I have seen before
and never wish to see again—
the Taxman at my door!*

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This poem comes to mind because in the course of retelling this peculiar tale, I will affirm the existence of a great many unwholesome and unbelievable things. I caution you, dear reader, not to allow skepticism and bias to possess your heart and persuade you that this history is anything short of factual, for there are nameless entities lurking in the corners of this world which evoke a more primal and urgent horror in our hearts than even the local tax collector, and many of them feature prominently in the tale of His Majesty's rise. Believe in the truth of what is written here, and do not go searching for proof—if you are fortunate, it may not come searching for you.

(It may please the reader to know that the poem of the haunting taxman was inspired by an actual instance wherein Balek Bida was visited early one morning by an official of the king's court. As the story goes, the collector's face was apparently so gaunt and his demeanor so cantankerous that Balek believed him to be the restless spirit of a foe he had slain in his younger days who had now returned from beyond the grave to exact revenge. Convinced of this, he greeted the official by threatening him with a sword and daring him to attempt in undeath what he had failed to accomplish in life. Needless to say, the official was so badly frightened by Balek that he fled immediately, and in this way Balek was exempted from paying his taxes for several months until another collector managed to

work up the courage to travel to Estrid and get to the bottom of the whole misunderstanding.

As evidenced by the three verses included in the history thus far, Balek is frequently inspired to poesy by the more bothersome things in life. I once asked the poet of the hunt which of his sources of inspiration he had found most difficult to deal with at the time it had befallen him. Citing the three verses we have heretofore enjoyed, he replied that the crowing bird had really only been a passing nuisance, and although the bear had caused him considerable pain and left him unable to support himself, he observed that tax collectors are notorious for doing the very same thing. In short, Balek was unable to decide whether the bear or the taxman had caused him greater suffering, but he did note that they both could have done with an arrow or two in them.

And that is all I shall say about that, dear reader. Let us return to the tale.)

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The sun had long set by the time our heroes returned to the Frelicton estate, and the wide, gossamer eye of the harvest moon peered curiously down upon them through the cool midnight shadows as they drew up to the gate, dismounting and hitching their horses.

When they had left the manor several hours ago, they had secured the gate behind them, but in their absence it had somehow swung open. Had it been left ajar by another traveler who had arrived to pay Lord Frelicton a visit? Our heroes had not passed a single soul along the road that led back to the generic village. Perhaps that negligent butler had left it unlatched, then.

Pondering quietly, they advanced across the lawn and up the steps onto the front porch. The door stood there impassively, barring their entrance, and Aziel, always the paragon of sensible courtesy, lifted the knocker and let it fall back against the door with a heavy thud.

As they waited patiently for an answer, Hakak, mischievous rogue that he was, cast his eyes up along the weathered facade of the manor, scanning the ivied walls for an alternative point of entry, and his heart skipped in his chest when he saw the shadow—it swayed, staring soundlessly out of a window on the second floor, silhouetted against a pale, unearthly glow.

Hakak motioned to Bida and the others, and as they turned to gaze upon it, wondering who or what it could be, it crept shyly and quietly away from the window and out of sight, the ethereal light fading with its retreat. Before they could utter so much as a single word, a timid, orange flame sprang up in the porch lamp as if placed there by an unseen hand, and the front door, without encouragement of any kind, eased open on its hinges.

From beyond the darkened threshold, the smell of freshly baked bread wafted out invitingly.

(There is a point in even the best of harrowing tales, dear reader, when the hero sees an eerie light in the woods at night and, rather than resolutely stick to the road or head in the opposite direction

from the strange, sylvan radiance, he heads off to investigate it; or when he encounters a monster whose gentlest glance is sufficiently terrifying to make a fully grown troll soil itself, and he brashly concludes that the only thing for him to do is to challenge it to single combat; or when he reaches some similarly ludicrous decision that no sane person would ever reach, given the circumstances. When he does this, we find ourselves wondering just what exactly could possess him to behave in whatever foolish manner he happens to be behaving.

“By the gods, man!” we shout, unheard by the imbecile on the page. “Have you taken leave of your senses? What sort of addlebrained ninny would do a thing like that?” What we mean to ask him, of course, is, “How could you ever decide to do a thing like that?” or perhaps, “Why did the author have you do a thing like that?”

The answer is quite simple—necessity. However the silly dullard may have erred, if the tale is great, then his error is necessary, for without it there would be no tale at all, and by the end of it, he will surely have redeemed himself through astounding feats of bravery, charm, wit, or any of the virtues so commonly ascribed to those who are the subject of song. It is for this reason, dear reader, that we must forgive the lapse in judgment which our four heroes shall presently display, for the deeds to which they lay claim are perhaps the greatest in the history of our kingdom, and it would be unreasonable for us to allow such a true and glorious tale to be compromised by any faults in its heroes, however unbecoming, worrisome, or otherwise characteristic of the common dunderhead they may be.)

The air, though perfumed with the sweet heaviness of baking bread, had a distinct wrongness about it now, and our heroes knew that something was terribly amiss. They could not leave, however, without discovering exactly what it was—if anything, they became more determined to do just that—and so, Aziel and Mike pushed the door open and entered, while Bida and Hakak prepared to follow them inside, ready for whatever they might encounter within the walls of the manor.

The front door, apparently, was better prepared than they, and as the elven mage and the vagrant crossed the threshold, it suddenly slammed shut, separating them from the swordsman's son and the toothy thief, and giving all four of them quite a start. They were further surprised when, even under their combined strength, it stuck fast and refused to open. Things were quickly going from bad to worse.

Hakak unslung his pack and began rummaging for his lockpicks, for though he was less than optimistic about his chances of success, the nature of his profession demanded that he at least try his luck, for just as a bee cannot help but busy itself in the petals of a wildflower, so must a thief tease and tinker at a locked door when he comes across one. As Hakak knelt to begin his work, Bida, impatient and concerned for the well-being of his new comrades, rushed off around the side of the house,

announcing loudly that he would check to see if there was a back door.

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Aziel and Mike found themselves in a dark and spacious foyer. There were several doors leading out of the room, and a grand central staircase decked in tasteful mauve carpet ascending to the second floor. Save for the quiet clinking of Hakak's lockpick over their shoulders, silence enfolded the place like a cloak, and shadows seemed to swim about menacingly in the corners of the room.

Aziel suggested that they wait for their roguish acquaintance to ply the door open, but Mike was already on the move, holding up his glimmering quarterstaff and hobbling boldly towards the nearest door. Aziel sighed, set his necklace aglow, and followed cautiously.

They entered the kitchen, where the two of them discovered the source of the enticing aroma. A dining table stood against the nearby wall, and on this table sat a small wicker basket containing two warm loaves of freshly baked bread.

Now Mike, in his humility and wholesomeness, knew that he ought not to take food from another's home without being invited to do so, and Aziel's proper upbringing would not allow such a breach of courtesy to even cross his mind. Nevertheless, they were both curious about the loaves, and rightly so, for who would go to the trouble of baking bread at such a late hour, only to leave it unattended?

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Bida rounded the side of the house and came into the backyard, where a spacious, gated porch looked out over the rolling hills of southern Orofyld. As he bounded up the stairs, throwing the flimsy wooden gate open and nearly snapping it off its hinges as he went, he thought that the view from the porch must be quite nice in the daytime.

There in the darkness among the whitewashed silhouettes of outdoor dining furniture loomed the back door of the Frelicton estate. Eagerly, Bida grabbed the knob.

It refused to turn.

He rattled the knob vigorously, pressing his weight against the door.

It was not impressed.

He threw himself bodily into the door, hoping to forcibly dislodge it.

It seemed to laugh at him.

Indeed, no matter how Bida strained, heaved, blustered, and generally carried on, none of his efforts were sufficient to vanquish the unflinching impassivity of that mighty Back Door. He quickly became enraged by this, and, unsheathing his greatsword, he dealt his adversary a blow so powerful that a lesser door would have surely been ruined under its fury.

A subdued, mocking groan was the only response that the Back Door felt compelled to give.

In frustration, Bida struck the door with his fist, and, in doing so, bruised his knuckles very badly. His breath ragged, his hand throbbing, he turned and began walking slowly down the porch steps, letting out a long stream of uncouth language and readying himself for a violent charge. He would not concede victory to this foe, would not allow his warrior's honor to be compromised by a conceited slab of wood—and not even a particularly thick or imposing slab of wood, at that! No, there would be a reckoning, and—

From over his shoulder, he heard the Back Door creaking open as a voice called out his name.

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As they stood musing over the bread, Aziel and Mike were jolted from their thoughts by a loud, insistent banging from the next room. They stood there in stunned silence, looking through the open doorway into the darkness that sat brooding at the periphery of their magical light, nervously wondering what could have made such noise.

The banging resumed, accompanied this time by a rattling sound, and then with one, final thud, it ceased altogether, giving way to a muffled series of vehement expletives. The mage and the vagrant exchanged looks that communicated something in between incredulity and relief, and they walked without pause into the next room.

It was a cozy den with plushly upholstered chairs, a large, thick rug, and a red-brick hearth wherein the dying coals of the family's evening fire were still smoldering peacefully. At the opposite wall was a heavy wooden door, and through it they heard once more the retreating echoes of certain vengeful mutterings. Aziel unfastened the bolt, turned the knob, and swung the door open to greet the very disgruntled young swordsman on the other side.

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Bida, astonished that someone had so suddenly and easily bested his enemy, turned to see who it was. He stopped cold in his stride, dismayed by what he saw.

The walls and the windows of the Frelicton estate still towered gloomily over him, and the Back Door had been defeated and drawn ajar by Aziel, who hailed him familiarly, but what lay beyond that accursed threshold was nothing less than a vista lifted from the most vivid and torturous of his nightmares. For the den was filled with deathly, sulfurous flames, and crouched among them were the disintegrating timbers of dozens of homes. Estrid, the place he had once called home, was burning anew in that room, and as Bida looked on in horror, he saw the charred figures as they lumbered out of the inferno, their skin seared, their bones blanched hungrily by the heat, and their eyes, black and hollow, glaring resentfully at him as they extended their trembling arms for an explanation he could not

give to them. His blue eyes welled with grief, and as he closed them, a hot scream threatened to burst from his lungs. He shook his head violently, planted his greatsword firmly in front of him, and, drawing in his breath sharply, eased his eyes open.

The vision was gone, and the room was dark but for the soft light emanating from Aziel and Mike, who were both giving him rather concerned looks.

Still trembling slightly, he wiped the sweat from his brow and entered the living room, gripping the hilt of his blade tightly and brushing off the tentative questions of his comrades. Something very strange was going on in this house, and he aimed to get to the bottom of it.

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With a rolling clunk, the tumblers slid into place, and the front door lolled open. Hakak was surprised, for the lock had succumbed to his efforts much more quickly than he had expected, but being a wolf among the flock of Abadar's faithful, he did not waste much time wondering why the god of honest fortune had, for once, neglected to punish him.

He put his tools away and stepped into the foyer just as the others returned. Hakak saw that Bida was cradling a small breadbasket in his arm, but before he could ask about it, Bida marched purposefully past him and pitched it out the door, scattering its warm, flaky contents across the front lawn. He slammed the door shut, ensuring that the bread would not be able to reenter.

This caused a few moments of confusion and concern among the group, during which they recounted and reviewed what they had so far experienced in the manor, which, excepting the self-igniting porch lights and Bida's infernal hallucination, amounted to very little and permitted them to conclude even less. They did agree, however, that it was extraordinary that the considerable ruckus they had raised had not woken any of the residents, and that neither the Frelictions nor any of their servants had risen to investigate the disturbance in their home.

As if in response to this consensus, there was a steady, distant creaking from the floor above them. Startled, they hustled to the base of the staircase, the upper limits of which were wreathed in a veil of shadow that their mystical lights could not throw back. In a voice that almost did not quaver, Aziel announced their presence, apologizing for the late hour and requesting an audience with a representative of the Freliction family, that they might confirm the well-being of the Lord and his beloved wife and children, which the peculiar circumstances of the evening had necessarily called into question.

This request was first met with silence, then some further creaking near the top of the stairs, and then by an unpleasantly lush slithering sound as a roiling hoarde of bloated leeches came spilling down the stairs and washed over the floor at our heroes' feet, thrashing their bladed jaws and writhing about

in pools of their own infectious slime.

(We have reached one of the aforementioned points in the narrative, dear reader, where our intrepid heroes take what can only be described as a preposterously illogical course of action. Again, I implore you to withhold judgment, for the tale depends upon your temperance.)

Though the company of four was both bothered and bewildered by this unexpected turn of events, they were undaunted, and many a leech met its squelchy end under the heels of their boots as Bida led them hurriedly up the stairs.

They remained undaunted for most of the ascent, and they might even have reached the second-floor landing with courage to spare had it not been for the sudden ghostly apparition of Lady Frelicton as she drifted through the air over their heads like a lonely wisp of cloud, translucent and flickering with a somber, ethereal half-light. Without sparing them so much as a glance of acknowledgment, she drifted down the desolate hallway, moaning sadly, and when she disappeared from sight, ghastly lightning leapt like angry spiders from the walls, and her fevered screams reverberated shrilly throughout the house over the accompanying peals of thunder.

Now thoroughly daunted, our heroes fled down the stairs in a frenzy of fright. A few minutes passed, and when it became clear that the spectre did not intend to pursue them, they opted to catch their breath and decide on a new plan of action. It was at this point that Mike the Lamé, brilliantly applying his vast understanding of the supernatural, tested the patience of his associates by deducing that the Frelicton estate had most likely become the focus of a spiritual disturbance of some sort. The only thing to do, he argued, was to explore the manor and vanquish the restless spirits haunting it, thereby putting them to rest.

As unappealing as the idea was, they were all anxious over the fate of Lord Frelicton and his children, and they were curious as to the cause of the doom that had befallen his house. Each had his personal motivations as well—Aziel, his sense of obligation to a fellow member of the gentry; Hakak, the chance to collect some new, potentially highly valuable possessions; and Bida, knowing that Rafael would assert that it was the right thing to do—and so Hakak lit a torch, and, steeling themselves for the horrors to come, they climbed back up the stairs to the second floor.

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The desolate hallway welcomed them with silent malevolence. Bida and Hakak headed left from the stairs, alert and watching for the phantom to reappear, while Aziel and Mike ventured to the rooms on the right.

The mage and the vagrant did not get far before they happened upon the body—it sat in a chair just outside one of the bedroom doors at the end of the hallway, its chin sagging limply against its

chest. Its uniform revealed it to be the butler who had received them earlier in the evening. He had been murdered—from where they stood, Aziel and Mike could see the brutal stab wounds—and the stench of his rotting flesh choked the stale air.

Suddenly, the butler's head snapped up, revealing the pale emptiness in his starving eyes and the rows of long, yellow fangs protruding from his pallid, slavering jaws. He stood upright and stalked forward, greeting his guests with a low growl.

Aziel knew a ghoul when he saw one, and being familiar with the tales of their insatiable hunger, he spoke a rapid incantation and wove a spell of invisibility over himself and Mike. The invalid, however, had already formed his resolve to lay the wayward spirits of the manor to rest, and so he hobbled forth to meet the monster and dealt it a severe blow to the head with his quarterstaff.

Unfortunately, although this was a considerably brave thing to do, Mike had left the boundaries of protection afforded by Aziel's illusion, and in truth he had acted so hastily that he had not even realized the spell had been cast. Valiant and ignorant, he continued to besiege the ghoul-butler with strike after strike, and such was his vigor that at first the undead beast was hard-pressed to fend him off, but it soon caught him in the shoulder with a wild swing of its toxic claw. He felt his muscles seize tightly, and he dropped his staff, paralyzed where he stood.

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At this juncture, Bida and Hakak would have swiftly returned to aid their comrades, had they not been dealing with a strange and dangerous encounter of their own. They had proceeded down the hallway and had found the children's playroom, where, upon entering, they had been shocked to discover that the children's toy chests were possessed of their own will, that they could move freely through the air, and that they were a sight territorial. What followed had been a particularly violent exchange of blows, and when it was brought to an end, the chests lay splintered on the floor, and Bida and Hakak had sustained greater injury than most men would comfortably attribute to the fury of a pair of wooden boxes.

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Realizing the urgency of the situation, Aziel threw off his mantle of invisibility and discharged two bolts of force from his fingertips. They caught the ghoul-butler square in the chest, pummeling it into the corner, where it collapsed, roaring angrily but unable to move. Aziel breathed a momentary sigh of relief at having saved Mike from his own brashness.

Then his heart sank, for he saw the children—Lord Frelicton's little boy and girl, their nightclothes stained with blood, their eyes greedy and cold, their teeth long and pointed—as they lurched through their nearby bedroom doorway, approached Mike, and set upon his helpless form with

famished snarls.

Aziel did what he could, but it was to no avail. Alas, if only the bane of children had arrived sooner! But by the time he and Hakak rushed over, beat the fell creatures back, and managed to slay them, it was too late—they had eaten his throat, and there was nothing to be done.

Thus, Mike the Lamé, beloved vagrant of the generic village and tormentor of Meekus, met a gruesome end at the hands of Lord Frellicton's children, who ate of his flesh, and his butler, who served it to them.

(I will say, dear reader, that I have never personally met the man who was Mike the Lamé, for as you are now aware, he perished before I could have the pleasure, and that every aspect of his representation in this history was collected from the anecdotes and remembrances of those who did know him, the most valuable among them being the recollections of His Majesty and Sir Aziel, who provided for my consideration even the most minute and seemingly irrelevant details regarding their comrade-in-arms, which is to say, most of them.

While his role in this tale is over, I prefer to believe that it ended prematurely, and that, had Abadar willed differently, the crippled mystic might have survived to affect some great and meaningful change in the lives of those around him. But Fortune does not bend to our wistful thoughts, and thusly we should, as in all things, defer to the gods, for that which is must be, and we must satisfy ourselves with the memory of Mike as he truly was—lame and, occasionally and allegedly, otherwise. May the grace of Pelor enfold him.)