Book 3: Burn Again

Prologue:

Something Dark. Something Unknown.

October 19, Year 253 — Ironhall

Mount Hellfang erupted over one hundred miles away. Malcolm Stahlkopf felt nothing.

His world ended in a foundry basement, surrounded by shattered containment wards and the burning bodies of his engineers.

He had been given the assignment only six months earlier. His father had summoned him to the high study — the one with the stained-glass window depicting the House's founding. Malcolm had expected a reprimand. His last project had run over budget.

Instead, his father poured two glasses of aged brandy and said, "I'm putting you on something special."

"The better engine?"

"Not just better. Different." His father set down the glass. "The Churches are growing loud about geistkraft. Using the dead to power trains… they call it a moral rot. Some of the smaller congregations have started petitioning the Rovedaken Council. They seem to believe using the diplomatic city's voice will force change here at home."

"Geistkraft is efficient," Malcolm stated, unmoved.

"Efficiency isn't morality." His father's voice was tired. "And morality is becoming political."

That was when he told Malcolm about Dead River.

The ruined city of Riverpool had fallen decades ago — not to war, but to *something*. A soulblighted terrain now called Dead River, where nothing lived — nothing mortal, at least.

The biome itself had turned predator. Corpses rose. Animals, vermin, even insects — if it died there, it got back up.

For nearly twenty years, the Timberguard Patrol protected the areas bordering the blightscar of Dead River. Weeks and months would pass with no threats at all. Then suddenly, the walking dead grew too populated and hordes would overrun the lands outside the biome. The Timberguard was there to thwart the undead from escaping their own environment, but the cost in living blood was great.

Once geistkraft had been invented, the military sent necrotanks into the soulblight. Massive, armored vehicles, forged by meteore — a rare, mystic ore nearly twice the density of steel and the preferred forging material of dwarves when available — and powered by geistkraft, designed to crush undead under metal treads.

The tanks made it half a mile before shutting down.

Not destroyed. Not overwhelmed. *Stopped*. The theory was that the soulblighted terrain's power source — something vast, something ancient — simply overrode the necrotanks' engines. Like shouting down a whisper.

"The House needs an engine that cannot be silenced," his father said. "Not by blightlands. Not by politics. Not by Churches with opinions."

Malcolm understood. "You want me to build something that makes geistkraft obsolete."

"I want you to make the House indispensable."

His father clasped his shoulder — a rare gesture of warmth.

“Don’t fail, son. There is much riding on this.”

The Stahlkopf House had demanded results. Malcolm had been close.

Too close.

The thermal engine was meant to be a breakthrough. It contained extreme heat drawn from an otherworldly source of pure fire. He had studied the gnomish theory of mago-kinetics. This suggested it was possible. The Churches had been tapping divine and spiritual resources for centuries. This was just engineering.

What Malcolm’s engineering had not anticipated was the thinning of the barriers — a consequence of the Confluence four months prior. And because of that thinning, the fire responded.

The fire responded not as a resource. Not as energy to be shaped and spent. Inside the thermal engine, the captured fire *watched*. It grew hotter under focused attention. It stabilized when trusted and became volatile when forced. Malcolm had named it “spontaneous combustion” — a joke that stopped being funny the third time the flames bent against the airflow.

His engineers thought it was a mechanical problem. Reinforce the chamber. Tighter seals. More control.

The fire disagreed.

The explosion didn’t behave like an explosion. Witnesses reported light bending *inward*. Flames that curled against the draft. A rupture that wasn’t just destructive — it was *releasing*.

Something Dark. Something Unknown.

Two engineers died. Malcolm survived, buried under rubble, ears ringing, watching the schematics burn.

He should have reported what he saw, but the words of his father echoed louder than the ringing in his head: *Don't fail, son*.

Malcolm had been hiding for two days in a crumbling tenement on Ironhall's south side, far from the Stahlkopf estates. He was not surprised when the knock came.

His eldest brother, Gerhard, stood in the doorway. Behind him, two House detectives in gray coats waited in the shade of the one small tree in the yard.

"You're alive," Gerhard declared, his voice offering no relief — only accusation.

"I'm alive," Malcolm agreed.

"Then why are you hiding?"

Malcolm didn't answer. His brother's eyes swept the room — the packed satchel by the cot, the scattered notes which had failed to burn, the schematic fragments he couldn't leave behind.

"The blast didn't go unnoticed, Malcolm," Gerhard noted dryly. "The containment chamber. What were you working on?"

"You know what I was working on. Father assigned it."

"Father assigned a better engine. Not… *that*." Gerhard stepped closer. His voice dropped. "Two engineers are dead. The House is bleeding coin. And you ran."

"I ran because something went wrong."

"Something went *wrong*?" Gerhard laughed without humor. "The wards shattered. The fire source wasn't controlled. Two buildings down the road, the brick makers said the force bent inward after the first explosion. That's highly irregular, Malcolm. What did you do down there?"

Malcolm had no answer that would not sound like madness.

Gerhard's face hardened. "The House is calling it sabotage. Theft of proprietary designs. They need someone to blame, and you gave them a corpse count and an empty workspace."

"I didn't sabotage anything."

"Then come home. Explain it to Father. Let the diviners sort it out."

Malcolm thought of the fire watching him. The way it had *responded*. The thing that had been released — Something Dark. Something Unknown.

He shook his head. "I can't."

Gerhard stared at him for a long moment. Then he turned to the detectives.

"He's alive. That's all I came to confirm." Gerhard added, "Not a word about this until I am ready to tell the family."

He walked away without looking back.

Malcolm watched his brother disappear down the street. He wanted to go after him. He wanted to explain. He wanted to tell Gerhard about the fire that watched, the light that bent inward, the thing that had been released.

But he knew what would happen if he did.

The thermal engine was not just a project. It was a secret. The House had been experimenting with otherworldly fire — the kind of fire the Churches called heretical. If Malcolm returned and told the truth, he would not be explaining an accident. He would be confessing to heresy.

His father would not let him confess. He was his son — but his father was a ruthless man.

His uncle — his father's younger brother — had botched a trade negotiation. Three days later, his body was discovered in the river. Officially an accident. Malcolm knew better.

Relying on mercy because he was the Patriarch's son was too risky. Even a son could be sacrificed to save the House.

The thought settled into his chest like a stone.

Malcolm knew too much. At the same time, Malcolm knew nearly nothing. Even if he tried to explain what happened, what would he say?

The fire was alive.

It responded to my attention.

I think I woke something up.

He could already hear the diviners' verdict. *Unstable. Delusional. A danger to himself and others.*

The House would not believe him. The Churches would call it heresy. The detectives would call it madness.

He could not explain what he did not understand.

The divinations came the next week. Malcolm Stahlkopf was alive — but shielded. Someone or something was blocking deeper searches. That turned suspicion into certainty.

The House made it official: Malcolm was a traitor, a saboteur, a thief. The detectives sharpened their knives.

But Gerhard's visit had bought him time. His brother had not reported the safehouse. Had not mentioned the schematic fragments. Had looked the other way — once.

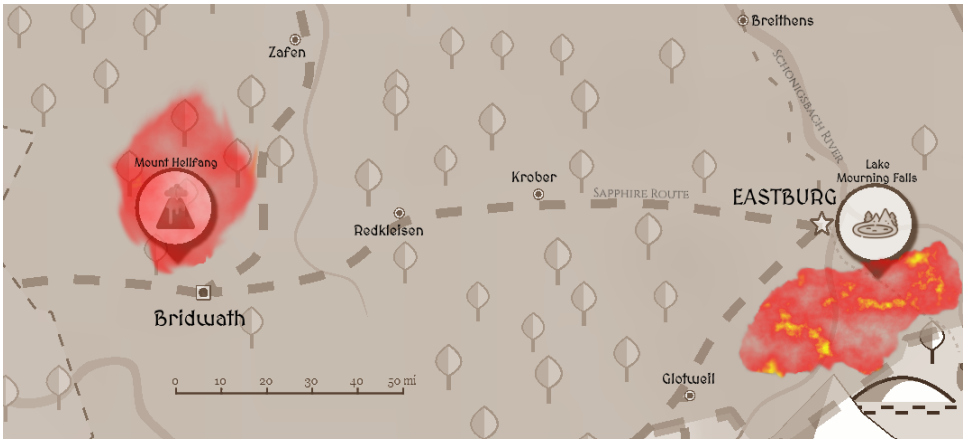
Malcolm could not count on a second chance.

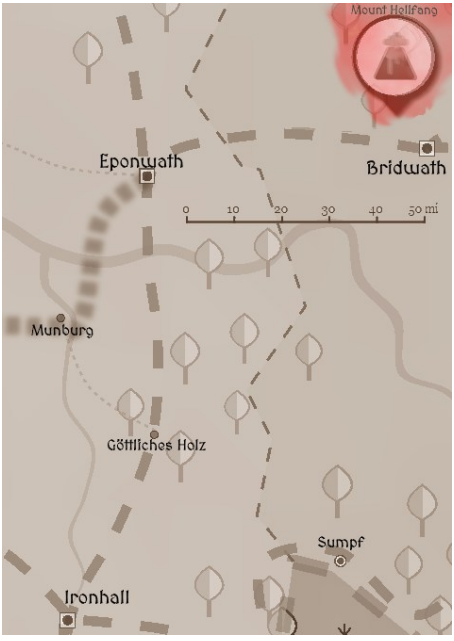
So he ran. Deeper this time. Farther.

And the Stahlkopf House, unwilling to let a traitor vanish without a trace, issued a special invitation.

Elrik Voss was already assembling his team.

Maps


Breithens
Zafen
Schionnsbach River
Mount Hellfang
Krober
Sapphire Route
Lake
Mourning Falls
EASTBURG
Redkleisen
Bridwath
0 10 20 30 40 50 mi
Glotwell


Mount Hellfang
Eponwath
Bridwath
0 10 20 30 40 50 mi
Munburg
Göttliches Holz
Sumpf
Ironhall

World of Fire Renewed

Arariel – Deity of Sky and Sea, worshiped primarily by humans. Followers often carry a mirror-talisman bearing a hand with an eye in the palm. A common phrase among Arariel's devout is “Each day is due the truth.”

Ashfall Bathhouse — An old, partially abandoned bathhouse on the edge of Eastburg, once fed by natural hot springs that have long since cooled. It serves as the meeting place for the Kindled Assembly.

Axiom – A structured spell or magical formula used by sorcerers. Unlike divine magic, axioms are learned through study and practice rather than granted by a deity.

Barachiel – The Mother of Grace is another name by which the winged goddess Barachiel is known. She is the deity of blessings and life. The clergy of the Church of Barachiel are mostly women, all of whom share the same ranking of Sister.

Batfolk – A sapient winged species. Legally protected by the Sentience Acts but still face prejudice. Often found clinging to bridges and abandoned buildings. Their gangs are said to be more about survival than crime.

Blaze – A fire entity from the elemental plane of fire, appearing as bipedal humanoids with bronze skin and yellow eyes. These beings are designed for purpose and service. Fyerk (Feuerkrieger) is a blaze.

Blightlands — Broad regions affected by soulblight. Common speech term.

Blightscars — Specific locations within blightlands where a major event occurred — the death of a powerful otherworldly being, a failed ritual, or a planar breach. Dead River is a blightscar.

Bridwath – A laborer's city in the Human Dominion of Gnjordia.

Catch Coalition — An unofficial guild of local fishermen operating around Eastburg and Lake Mourning Falls. They reported the unusual deaths of fish and changes in the lake's water before the Second Pillar was ignited.

Cozy Chalice – A tavern in Eastburg, partially owned by Heramys, where Sitz spends much of his time. Serves as a gathering place for the group.

Confluence – The rainbow moon event at the end of Book One. Sages associate it with the thinning of barriers between worlds.

Dakas – A mid-level kami spirit that manages multiple samas (worker spirits). For example, a storm dakas coordinates the weather spirits when it rains.

Dorlean – A broad term for the undead and other entities who feed on the radiance of social energy.

Ductillium – A mystical metal used in surgical modifications to the hands, altering finger motion and attracting magical energy to enhance sorcery.

Dwarf – A sapient humanoid species known for their stout build, longer lifespan, and resistance to extreme conditions. Dwarves are divided into two primary cultural groups: gold dwarves (who live on the surface) and mountain dwarves (who live in subterranean halls). They speak the Khazic language. After death, a dwarf's body slowly petrifies, turning to stone. Draenock Strongbrew is a dwarf.

Dyadikí — A human religion. Sometimes Dyadikí refers to the gods of the pantheon composed of eleven deities. Seven of the gods are considered as good, while the other four are evil. In a broader sense, the belief is the eleven are faces of a central entity, but each with his or her own personality, province and agenda.

Dybbuk — A dark entity from the realm of Sheol. One powerful dybbuk, known only as *The Dark*, sought godhood but was thwarted by the failed Champion ritual in Book One.

Eastburg – The capital city of one of the States of the Human Dominion Confederacy. It is cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Known for its velocipedes, public clocks, gnomish engineering, and hosts one of the larger Lyceums of Israfel.

Electrum – A mythical metal with magical properties. A sword made of electrum (such as "Reliable") can cut through creatures that ordinary steel cannot harm. This should not be confused with the naturally occurring alloy on Earth.

Elf – A sapient humanoid species with pointed ears. Elves live up to 200 years. Breeds include grae elves, woodland elves, and snow elves.

Emis – The highest-ranking kami spirit, serving as the pinnacle of a spiritual network.

Fetch – A fey creature that replaces a person who has been taken to the Hinterfae. The fetch steals the original's life, identity, and relationships. Rik's fetch has been living his life for a decade.

Feuerkrieger – Rik's chosen name for the blaze, meaning "Fire Warrior" in an old human dialect. Shortened to Fyerk by Draenock.

Fire Emis (Izadah) – A powerful kami of fire, trapped for two centuries in a cage and exhibited as "The Caged Voice" in a traveling carnival. Freed by Rik and his companions, it now dwells in the fire zone north of Mount Hellfang. Its name is Izadah. In Book Three, Izadah grants Chyldrith hunting rights in the fire zone and reveals the location of the Second Pillar and the titan Vaelthryx.

Fire zone – A newly created terrain type north of Mount Hellfang, where approximately six hundred square miles of forest and field have been burned and transformed by the Fire Emis' release.

First Pillar of Awakening – The first of several cosmic events set in motion by freeing the Fire Emis. Mount Hellfang is the physical representation. The full significance is not yet known.

Frayft – The nhoblit deity of teamwork, home, and community. She is one of the Shire Matriarchs primarily worshiped by the nhoblits. Sitz is an acolyte and aspiring priest. Worshipers often carry a copper holy symbol.

Geistkraft – A technology developed by the Gnjordian military and gnome contractors that powers trains using undead creatures sealed into wheel wells. The constant, aimless motion of the dead turns the gears.

Genie – A being from one of the elemental realms that bonds with mortals, feeding on social interaction. Genies are meant to serve and sustain themselves through connection. The vagrant in Eastburg is a genie.

Gnjordia – The Confederate Nation of the Human Dominion where the story takes place.

Gryf – A flightless bipedal birdlike species. Some are merchants selling feathers and polished talons.

Guddjen – The dwarven god of invention and scholarship. His priests are makers as much as thinkers. The doctrine emphasizes knowledge for its own sake.

Hearthkeeper – A title for a priest of Frayft who actively serves the community.

Hinterfae – The fey world parallel to the material world but with a much different environment. Time moves differently there; Rik spent one year there while a decade passed in the material world. It is characterized by shifting colors, impossible light, and memory-stealing properties.

Ifrit – A powerful fire entity, higher in status than a genie. Shalowi is a grand ifrit, lieutenant of Jakosuth.

Ironhall – A culturally diverse industrial city, known for its smelting facilities, underground volcanic flow, phlogiston lighting. This is the setting of the cursed bracers subplot.

Ironhead – Draenock's terrac riding goat, known for its stubbornness and loyalty.

Israfel – Goddess of beauty and the arts. Her followers, the Isrhymists, study philosophy and seek ordination. The Lyceum of Israfel in Eastburg teaches music, poetry, and meditation.

Isrhymist – A student or follower of Israfel.

Jakosuth – A fire lord seeking to become a god. He has chosen Rik as his champion. He speaks in Rik's mind and is served by ifrits, genies, and blazes. Referred to as "Lord of the First Fire" and "Padishah Jakosuth."

Jhudiel – A human god of honor, community and protector of orphans. Though Jhudiel belongs to the human pantheon, the dwarf Draenock worships him and is later ordained as a priest.

Jzaka – A bipedal atavistic species resembling a crossbreed of primate, wolf, and panther. They use long tails for balance and can leap from great heights without injury. A small number live in Ironhall.

Kael Vorn — A former member of the Kindled Assembly, second to Mariona. He leaves before the march on Lake Mourning Falls.

Kami (pl. kamii) – A nature spirit. All natural phenomena are controlled by networks of kamii. Types include samas (workers), dakas (managers), and emis (pinnacle).

Khazic – The dwarven language, spoken in two main dialects: High Khazic (older, more formal, only preserved in text) and common Khazic.

Kindled Assembly — A fire cult in Eastburg, devoted to Jakosuth. They meet at the Ashfall Bathhouse. Led by Mariona (Sebaste) until her death at Lake Mourning Falls. After her death, Kael Vorn claims leadership.

Krega – A dwarven term of respect for a female business proprietor.

Lake Mourning Falls — A lake south of Eastburg, between the rivers Knabington and Schonigsbach. It is the location of the Second Pillar of Awakening. The lake is guarded by water spirits and is home to the titan Vaelthryx. After the Second Pillar is ignited, the lake becomes a lake of fire.

Lifesong – The aura of a living being, accumulated by the essence of one's identity, aptitudes, energy, magic, and history. An entity's lifesong has three primary components from which it establishes a unique pattern of energy: body, mind and spirit.

Maalik — Among the Dyadikí, the goddess of fire. She is an evil force and ruler of the punished dead. The Jhudiel priests in Eastburg believe the Kindled Assembly is a fledgling sect of Maalik.

Mago-kinetics — A branch of mago-tech engineering that studies the conversion of mechanical force into magical energy. Mago-kinetic theory posits that certain materials and arrangements can translate motion into arcane power, heat, or light with measurable efficiency. Gnomish engineers pioneered the field, and their theories are considered foundational. Geistkraft railways and phlogiston delivery systems are practical applications of mago-kinetic principles. Malcolm Stahlkopf studied gnomish mago-kinetic theory while developing his thermal engine.

Mago-tech – A term for the blend of magic and technology in the world, including phlogiston lighting, *geistkraft* railways, sympathetic spiritual bonding, and clockwork engineering.

Malcolm Stahlkopf — A young engineer of the Stahlkopf House in Ironhall. He was assigned to build a better engine for the House. His thermal engine drew fire from an otherworldly source, and when it exploded. He is now a fugitive, hunted by Elrik Voss. He was helped unknowingly by Sitz on New Year's Eve, using the alias "Sigurd Hammer."

Mariona — The Sebaste of the Kindled Assembly. A patient, thoughtful leader who believed in the fire that renews. She agrees to help Rik wake Vaelthryx.

Marischant – A parasitic spirit-worm that can harvest and alter the energy of a person or object. In Book One, Professor Kühn used marischants to augment laborers. In Book Two, a marischant is fused into cursed bracers.

Marko Veller – The grandson of a prophet, carrying his grandfather's journal of prophecies. A scholar and strategist.

Meridvia – A lesser dybbuk herself, she is the succubus assassin sent by the greater dybbuk, *The Dark*, to destroy Rik and his companions. She can change her appearance.

Meteore — A rare, mystic ore nearly twice the density of steel. The preferred forging material of dwarves when available. Used in necrotanks and other high-end military applications.

Mount Hellfang – The volcano created by the Fire Emis's release. Named by the people of Bridwath.

Mustang – A capital city of another State, north of the carnival, with a railway to Eponwath.

Nhoblit – A small, humanoid species known for quiet movement and expressive ears (which flatten, perk, or go pink to show emotion). The soles of their feet are made of keratin, and they have ears like elves except nhoblit ears have a network of muscles like dogs, allowing them to twitch and perk. Sitz is a nhoblit.

Phlogiston – A combustible gas used as a minor energy source. While it burns for nearly an endless amount of time, the heat it produces is not enough to ignite paper. It is used for heating buildings and lighting streets in cities like Eastburg and Ironhall which have created underground delivery systems. Phlogiston burns with an amber flame.

Sachiel – Human deity of charity and wealth, patron of the Silver Temple in Ironhall. The church also serves as a banking system.

Samas – A worker kami spirit. Thousands of samas perform the actual work of natural phenomena (e.g., frost kamii creating ice on a window).

Scarletite – A magical metal associated with fire. Sitz's dagger, Zachriel's Stinging Flame, is made of scarletite.

Scorne – A city-state (possibly a nation) with bigoted view of the non-human species. Its ruler, Pápo-Megálo Zukran Von-Ertug, died recently.

Sebaste — The title for the leader of the Kindled Assembly.

Second Pillar of Awakening — The second of five cosmic events planned by Jakosuth. It is located at Lake Mourning Falls. It is ignited when Rik stirs Vaelthryx. After its ignition, the lake becomes a lake of fire, and a new fire zone spreads south.

Shalowi – A grand ifrit, lieutenant of Jakosuth.

Sheol – A realm of pain, suffering, and deep evil. *The Dark* originates from Sheol.

Shieldlar – A title for a captain of the guard. Tomas Strongbow, Arlen's father, is a shieldlar.

Silver Underfoot – The dwarven nation, characterized by rocky hills, ancient oaks, and dwarven engineering.

Soulblight — The corrupting phenomenon that transforms living land into dead, hostile territory. Causes corpses to reanimate. Origin unknown.

Stonewood – A magical material that is light as wood but hard as stone.

Sub-orc – A sub-orc is the offspring strain from an inter-species breeding where one parent has the *orkane blood* trait. The heredity of an orc is stronger than most other species due to a foul corruption buried in its lifesong, allowing propagation with nearly any humanoid species, which is almost never consensual.

Succubus – A type of dybbuk, often acting as trickers and fiendish assassins, they feed from the relinquishing of life. A succubus can change appearance. Meridvia is a succubus.

Terrac – A term for sapient species that petrify after death, such as dwarves and gnomes.

Thinny – A place where the barriers between worlds weaken, allowing passage between the material world and the other realm. A thinny weakens under the "weight" of a lifesong; only those who are "light" (not necessarily weak) may pass.

Timberguard Patrol — A military patrol that guards the borders of the blightscar around Dead River. They prevent the undead from escaping the soulblighted terrain.

Uriel – Deity of Light and Weather, primarily worshiped by humans. In the pantheon, Uriel has the obligation of being the keeper and revealer of secrets. The Church of Uriel often plays the role of detectives, investigators and scientists, especially for smaller villages when such roles are not easily filled by the community.

Vaelthryx — The Slumbering Ember. A titan of fire who sleeps beneath Lake Mourning Falls. Vaelthryx chose to sleep because it had burned too brightly, too long, and the world could not contain it.

Verdag Álfurjin – High Khazic for "the world of the fey" (see Hinterfae).

Vhoori — An intelligent, amphibious/reptilian species from a neighboring, Chaos-influenced reality. Physically imposing (8½–10 feet tall). They possess the capability of shapechanging, unusual sensitivity to emotions and planar disturbances, strong swimming ability. They are observing Rik because his actions have altered planar conditions.

Zachriel's Stinging Flame – Sitz' scarletite dagger with ivory pommel, named after its enchanter or a religious figure.

About The Author



Dj Hackney has always been a storyteller — comic strips for his mid high compilation, comic book ideas that were never drawn, short stories for high school and college anthologies. *Burn Again* is the third book in his debut series, **Fire Renewed**.

Grapevine, Texas is Dj's home, where he lives with his family. When he isn't writing, maintaining his software career, or running an RPG world, one can find him volunteering with his church, sharing a bottle of wine with his beautiful wife, cheering for his twin boys at their sporting events, or helping plan for his daughter's wedding.

He believes in the fire in each of us, in characters who question their own worth, and in stories that burn long after the final page.