Starbreaker

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by Sitriss99

Summary

More than thirty years have passed since Veldrin and his companions vanquished the Cult of the Absolute. While the people close to him retired from adventuring or built a new life for themselves, the drow exile remained a wanderer, forever restless. When the Hero of Baldur's Gate begins to experience mysterious visions calling him to the distant Cold Lands, he heeds their call. It is, afterall, sort of a melancholic homecoming for him. He is joined by Halsin's and Shadowheart's daughter Leandreth, who wishes to escape her parents' overprotective embrace, and Rolan's kobold apprentice, Zillix, who seeks to unlock the secrets of transforming herself into a true dragon.

New challenges and foes await them, and yet a familiar face of an old adversary long thought vanquished unexpectedly greets Veldrin soon after reaching the grand city of Lyrabar, half-way across the world. Raphael is seemingly stuck in his human form, mortal, after decades of torture at his father's hands. Why he was released now, here of all places, and almost devoid of all his old powers is a question neither the drow or the former devil can answer.

Notes

English is not my native language. I will update the tags as the story progresses.

Chapter 1

Lyrabar, the great port-city and capital of Impiltur. The jewel of the Easting Coast, thousands of miles to the East from Veldrin's old life in Baldur's Gate and the Sword Coast. At the same time, it was a strange, melancholic sort of homecoming for the drow, as the closer he came to the drow city he was born in, the more unsettled he grew. How could anyone not be curious about seeing one's place of origin after so long, despite the harrowing circumstances of his departure? Desire and dread filled him in equal measure.

At some point, the details of his own escape had become a blur in his consciousness. The one vivid memory he would carry with himself until the end of his days would be seeing the sun for the first time, however. For someone who battled dragons, elder brains, illithid invasion, and gods, one could scoff at still finding the sun the most wondrous sight, and yet he could not bring himself to think otherwise. Praise the Morninglord, indeed. Two centuries of wandering this strange, bright, surface world did nothing to change his feelings on the matter.

The wind shifted, with seagulls loudly screeching overhead. The port itself was full of life; sailors and ordinary folk alike went noisily about their daily routines, their mingled voices an inscrutable, constant hum. The sea's waves swayed mildly against the pier, the sound soothing. Despite being less than half the size, Lyrabar did feel at first glance similar to Baldur's Gate's own harbor. Ships of varying sizes as far as I could see, huge warships towering over everything in vicinity. The fresh breeze helped alleviate the pungent smell of fish, salt, and seaweed.

Having solid ground once again under his feet was a welcome change, after the many weeks they were stuck on the ship. They traveled light, forgoing the luxury of the more expensive available cabins, and while Zilix grumbled about the state of the sanitary conditions, Leandreth regarded it as a more authentic experience. The true adventurer's life.

Veldrin smiled at that memory. It was good to be young and full of awe. The two fledglings were certainly quite a change from the company he kept during the Absolute crisis. For a moment, he tried to imagine Astarion's and Minthara's faces, if he ever suggested they book a passage on one of the less impressive ships from Westgate, cramped to the brim with normal folk and even some animals. Who would have stabbed him first, he wondered.

"You know, with all the talk about war, I didn't expect things would seem so… normal," said Leandreth, disrupting Veldrin's moment of reflection. She still wore her hood, nervous lilac eyes scanning the area. The drow always found her attempts at disguising her exotic features quite ineffective, seeing as the hood did nothing to hide the two dark antlers growing out of her forehead, but if it made her feel better, who was he to judge.

From somewhere below him, Zilix's inflectionless voice replied: "It is still too soon. Lyrabar is a long way from the border, and the war hasn't raged for that long. It will get much more crammed and chaotic in the upcoming weeks I imagine." She flicked her tail in distaste. Unlike Leandreth, she did not bother hiding under hoods or masks, her kobold nature displayed proudly.

As the autumn sun bore down on them, the little kobold even rolled the sleeves of her robe up, and her yellow scales shone brightly in the light. “Now that we are off the stinky boat, we will find an adequate housing, yes?” She asked with hope in her voice. “To work my magic, I need proper rest, and with all the noise, and smell, and nauseating constant rocking of the boat, I had hardly slept a wink! And my studies, why, I could not read or write anything. One needs proper conditions, especially optimal lighting and silence. Master Rolan has high expectations of me, and I can’t let him down, you know.”

“If the weather holds, maybe we could sleep outside of the city instead? That should be tranquil enough, no? And it will feel like a proper journey. Mom and dad, and the rest of the heroes always slept outside, and look at what amazing deeds they had accomplished! I wonder what the forests here are like,” said Leandreth, getting increasingly excited as she continued speaking.

“No. Let me stop you right there. No more Building of Character. Just because we are adventurers, does not mean we have to suffer when we can help it. If you want to go roll around in leaves and hug trees you can do it in your free time, “ scoffed the kobold.

The hexblood’s face fell. “Ah, well, it looks like rain anyway.” She mournfully scanned the horizon.

Despite the general commotion surrounding them, Veldrin noticed they were starting to attract attention. Lyrabar, and Impiltur in general was a predominantly human land, with a small dwarven and halfling minority, and he imagined the sight of a drow, a kobold, and a hexblood especially must have been too much of an exotic entourage for the locals. It was probably better to leave before someone got too curious, or worst case, hostile. His heavy, gleaming armor and equipment of clearly high quality served well enough as a deterrent so far, but better not tempt fate.

“Come now, let’s look for an inn. I am sure we will be able to find something adequate, once we look at our options. A good rest will be welcome, certainly,” he smiled at Zillix, “and seeing as Lyrabar is only a temporary stop, with our goal much further north, I am sure you will get your fill of sleeping under the stars, Lea.”

The kobold seemed appeased, while Leandreth tightened the clasp of her hood and nodded. Veldrin took a quick look at their belongings, checking if they did not forget anything back on the ship, and ushered them forward to the busy streets ahead, away from the sea.

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There was pain, yes. That had been his entire world for … he could not say. Time had lost all meaning at some point. Yet, something was different this time around. He had been burned alive, scorched by hellfire repeatedly. He was subjected to the unbearable frost of Cania, his

father’s domain. All forms of torture and horrific sensations that a mortal mind could not possibly imagine, let alone comprehend. And yet. Yet.

For the first time in eternity, his mind was given the room to think. Raphael shivered. He felt cold, and… was that rain? That was certainly new. With difficulty, he took a labored breath, willing his tired eyes to open.

Dusk has settled over wherever he was, and shadowed forms of buildings loomed over what seemed to be an alleyway. Cold grey stone laid under him, wet. He flexed his hand, and carefully pulled himself into a sitting position, while his ribs screamed in protest.

He squinted his eyes harder, trying to survey in more detail the decrepit street he found himself in. Everything felt out of focus and Raphael could not stop the feeling of frustration from mounting up. It was not even that dark, so why wasn’t he able to see properly? As a cambion, a devil, superior to all but a few select creatures, he should have perceived any and all details of this sorry place with crystal clarity. Instead, only his immediate surroundings were easy to make out, while anything further away had the appearance of a shapeless dark clump. Scarcely any light shone from the shadowed buildings, their windows lifeless and unwelcoming.

With difficulty, he noticed several damaged boxes, stacked against the walls. They lined up all along the dim alley, while huge, filthy rats feasted on the wet trash that lay scattered on the ground. Hardly a place he would willingly frequent. It made his skin crawl. The filth, the indignity of it all. A more proper environment was required, if he was to gather his strength and plan his next move. Shakily, he stood up, almost losing his footing in the process. More ragged breaths followed.

Using a familiar gesture, the cambion reached out to the magic within himself. Quickly, a plan formed in his mind. The main priority was healing the worst of the injuries, then teleporting to one of his safe havens. The most immediate concerns had to be dealt with, and then... his thoughts stalled, as the expected relief did not manifest.

The pain remained. Rain continued to pour down, soaking his already wet skin and the colorless rags barely hanging onto his diminished frame. Scowling, he looked at his hands. They were pale, frail, offensively human. The sight startled him. If he was truly this weak, this diminished, he should have turned to his true self. No magic left to hide his true nature.

Where were his claws? His horns? His mighty wings? Panic gripped him. What was happening? He tried again, and the same hollowed out feeling was the only reaction.

No, no, no. This was not right. What manner of madness was this? Did his father come up with a new form of torture? Was this a tainted dream? A joke, conjured up to further punish him, and keep Mephistopheles entertained? A hysterical laugh escaped him, breaching the silence and stillness of the evening. Only the sound of rain followed. Another shiver ravaged his exhausted body.

Was he ever this tired before, in the entirety of his existence? Defeated, Raphael limped to the nearest lump of boxes. With difficulty he pulled on the tar-coated canvas covering them, and huddled under it, nearly collapsing from exertion.

Fatigue gnawed at his consciousness. Ha! Such an unfamiliar concept. He sneered. At war with his own body, he refused to bend or break. Mind over matter.

His injuries needed to be catalogued and healed; his contacts had to be reached. Favors had to be collected. What year was it even? What happened to his House of Hope? So many questions, so many annoyances he would have to deal with. All this nonsense set him back centuries. Plans, utterly brilliant plans disappeared in a smoke. All because of that parasite of a man. It wasn't the tadpole, who was the real worm. It was that rotten drow meddler.

That is what he got for playing by the rules, for offering help. That damn vermin could have achieved his goal, saved the city, and been the hero. Why did he have to get all up in Raphael's business? What nerve did the drow have to just up and waltz into the devil's home, and make it his personal mission to upset the order of things?

"Veldrin…" he spat out the name. The devil could picture him clear as day. Throughout the years, through the worst of the torture, that self-righteous, dark elven face was all he could see. His hatred knew no bounds. The agony and horror burnt almost everything away, with him being reduced to a mindless screaming husk during the worst of it, but even at the height of torment, that damnable face was there, mocking him.

Shamefully, Raphael had grown sort of fond of the bastard, before the man decided to toss all reason out of the window. The two of them had been cordial, the drow always polite, their shared conversations engaging.

To be fooled, played, by a mere mortal.

Oh, he would enjoy ripping that thief, that liar, into a thousand pieces. Rip out that long, pale hair. Slash and burn that pretty face. All that he had suffered at the hands of Mephistopheles, he would unleash upon the damned, traitorous creature. Thousandfold.

The fiend chuckled darkly. Soon. He only needed... only a moment of rest. Only…

Chapter 2

Finding an inn willing to house their small merry band was proving more difficult than initially expected. Veldrin supposed he grew comfortable with the ease he could move around and acquire services nowadays back in Baldur's Gate thanks to his heroic reputation. Currently, they were met with slammed doors, angry words, and sometimes even with threats of violence. The situation certainly brought back memories of his initial wanderings and the cold inhospitality his kind was treated with.

Once or twice, they were mistaken for a traveling circus act. That he could at least laugh off. When a wizard made an inquiry into buying Zillix, since kobold assistants were all the rage now apparently, he had to make sure Leandreth did not hex the man on behalf of her scaly friend. At least his diplomatic skills assured they were not actually attacked. The locals seemed on edge, a nervous energy permeating the city. Everyone was twitchy, aggravated, ready to explode at the smallest provocation.

The fact that even humans, dwarves, halflings, and others, all refugees, got sent away in about the same manner as he and his companions had, did little to appease him. So many souls huddled together with scarcely any belongings to their name, all throughout the city. And Zillix was correct, the conflict barely began, therefore the situation would get markedly worse soon. He just hoped this city council was up to the challenge and handled it better than what happened during the Absolute crisis on Sword Coast.

As they roamed the streets, and the neighborhoods grew increasingly shady, Veldrin noticed another tavern sign, proudly declaring the establishment was called 'The Singing Ogre'. Fascinating. The sign itself seemed new and well crafted, in stark difference to the rest of the houses and buildings in the area. Cautiously optimistic, the drow paladin ventured forth.

The interior seemed clean and orderly. Solid stone floor and walls were complimented by sturdy looking wooden pillars, windows, and furniture. A cozy bar with several barstools stood on the left, with a carved wooden staircase leading to the floor above. Every single inch of the large room appeared spotless and new. Soothing, gentle light illuminated the large central area, making it look downright cozy. And yet there were no customers.

Considering the impeccably dressed skeletons prowling around, Veldrin could hazard a guess as to why. A single skull, covered in downright obscene number of gems and jewels, hovered above the counter.

"VISITORS! WELCOME, WELCOME. SLAKE YOUR THIRST, FEED YOUR HUNGER, REST YOUR WEARY SOULS. THE SINGING OGRE HAS IT ALL!" A hollow voice echoed through the establishment, the tone a rattle of bones, the chill of a graveyard. "WHATEVER YOUR DESIRES, BE SURE TO CONSULT ONE OF OUR EXPERTLY TRAINED WORKERS," continued the skull, sounding almost proud. If a howling wind could ever sound proud.

The paladin weighted his options. Bunking in a tavern operated by a bunch of strange undead did seem like a possible future safety concern, on the other hand, it was getting late and they did not find any other solution to their lack of lodgings. On top of that, ater spending so much time near Withers, Veldrin had grown less disturbed by the sight of undead in general. Worst case, he was a holy paladin of Lathander, and he could always smash the floating skull with the Blood of Lathander that never left his side. With a sprinkle of a holy smite on top. Violence was a weapon of last resort within his tenets, but still a very viable one.

“Greetings, good innkeeper. I see I have chosen well. Me and my two companions are seeking rooms, for several nights at bare minimum. Could that be arranged?”

“CERTAINLY! COME IN, COME ALL! ONE OF THE BOYS WILL TAKE YOUR BELONGINGS TO YOUR ROOMS, AND ESCORT YOU THERE.” Once more, Veldrin was surprised to hear a sound akin to the cracking of a gravestone seem excited. Poor sod probably did not get much traffic.

“We travel light, so no need for assistance with our bags, but if you could show us to our rooms, it would certainly be appreciated. Let me get my friends,” he said, and went to fetch the two women.

Zillix was easy enough to find, as the small kobold leaned against the wall of the inn, lazily flicking through one of her books.

“And Lea is where exactly…?” Asked Veldrin.

The wizard did not stop paying attention to the text she was seemingly studying, and with a flick of her hand pointed to a space above the two of them.

“I am scouting!” Said a familiar voice. “You will be happy to know that there don’t seem to be any monsters intent on killing us. In this street at least. I can sense there are some worrying creatures somewhere within a mile from here, however. I am still new to this, but I am quite sure I am picking up some fiends and undead. We better stay alert.”

“Well, the undead are probably accounted for, as you will see for yourself. The fiends are worrisome though; you are correct in that regard. Always fiends, meddling in everything.”

If there were fiends around, they did not seem to be as intent on hounding him or his entourage like in the old days. Between Mizora and Raphael, they barely had any time to themselves, without one or the other breathing down their necks. He did miss the chats from time to time. The devils were entertaining company in their own way, no matter how wicked. Raphael was downright pleasant and helpful, until the whole messy business with the House of Hope. Veldrin did regret sometimes that they were unable to reach a diplomatic solution. The devil was a charmer, for sure.

The young hexblood climbed down from the roof of the inn with practiced ease, her pale pink hair a chaotic mess by the time her feet touch the ground. “What do you mean by the undead being accounted for?” She asked.

“Probably accounted for. There might be other ones that I don’t know about, though I doubt it. Anyway, you will see for yourself soon enough. You two, promise me you won’t attack anyone or anything. If we are lucky, our rooming crisis might be over.”

Zillix perked up at that:” Truly? You were able to find rooms without the innkeeper attempting to shoo us away with a broom?”

“On my honor. Your guardians would have my hide if I were unable to provide you with even the bare necessities. Let’s go. We lost enough time as is.”

With assured step, the paladin returned to the inn, and almost immediately ran into a group of skeletons, all seemingly waiting for him.

“Veldrin…?” Whispered Leandreth, hesitantly.

“It’s fine. They work here. I think.” The drow turned his attention back to the undead. “We are quite exhausted, you can show us to our rooms now, yes?”

One of the skeletons went ahead, beckoning the group toward the staircase, while some of the others attempted to take their backpacks.

“No, no, skeleton, sir, it’s fine,” whined the hexblood, shielding her backpack from their grasping, skeletal hands.

“As I have said, we are traveling light, there is no need for assistance on that front, but we are certainly grateful,” said Veldrin and avoided the undead staff, opting instead to go to the counter, to come to some sort of an agreement about the price with the floating skull.

Only Zillix seemed delighted by the entire situation and almost threw her heavy bag at one of the skeletal butlers. “Marvelous, simply marvelous. I will most definitely have to study them, once I finally get some shut eye.”

Veldrin allowed himself a small smile. Maybe their stay in the city wouldn’t be too bad. Things were looking up.

Raphael woke up feeling utterly miserable. The few hours of rest hardly improved his condition, and the cold seeped into his bones. Pale, autumn morning greeted him with not a shred of sympathy. To his great disappointment, he remained trapped in his human form, pale, human flesh still firmly in place where beautiful crimson red should have been. Perhaps he was affected by some sort of a curse. A cleric might be able to help.

His neck felt stiff, as the position he slept in clearly was not ideal, on top of all his already existing issues. He had to waste several minutes by massaging his neck and right shoulder

gently, before he was able to once again turn his head around, without flinching in pain. Was this how mortals felt in their day-to-day life? It was such a wretched experience, simply being alive.

He did not seem to be in the immediate danger of bleeding out on the street anymore, which was mildly reassuring. Gingerly, he felt around for his injuries, wincing when he touched a sore spot.

Since apparently, he was now able to walk more than three steps, the next priority became finding out where in the hells was he, what year it was, and to find someone he could manipulate in order to get out of this mess. Clothes and food were quickly added to the list, as he shivered and his stomach growled. Mortal bodies were so inefficient.

The former devil rolled his shoulders experimentally, and boldly traversed the street, carefully noting down all he could see. Tragically, there was very little. His initial assumption had been correct. He found himself in some sort of a slum. Poverty and despair hung about the area like a dense cloud.

As a devil, he would have had a marvelously easy time here. He wagered many of the local vagabonds were already on the brink of offering all they had, just to get out of this filthy hole. The approach of two brutish men interrupted his musings. Both wielded messy looking clubs as weapons, and both seemed physically strong. The archetypal goons.

“This is Koz’s street,” said the older of the two men. The man’s nose had been clearly broken in the past, and it did not heal correctly, giving him a menacing appearance. He looked Raphael up and down, gaze cold.

“So, you must pay a fee. Obviously. Since you seem like a fella down on his luck, we will ask only for a measly two gold pieces,” said the younger man. He had quite an impressive red beard, and meaty, sweaty fists.

Two gold pieces. Ha. The irony wasn’t lost on him. Was anything in his possession ever that cheap? And right now, it seemed an unobtainable amount. He barely had clothes, if one could call the rags clinging to him as such.

“Ah, it is a great pleasure to learn of this formidable man. Koz, you said? I agree, someone as impressive as him, in charge of a whole street does sound deserving of a tribute, but as you can see good sirs, I don’t have a copper to my name. Maybe I could meet with this Koz and come to an arrangement? I might not have worldly possessions at the present, but I have other valuables, namely an endless supply of information. Surely, some of what I know might be of use to a lord,” said Raphael, all sweet smiles and honeyed words. Internally, he hoped the men would not come any closer, as their hygiene seemed questionable at best. Were those brutes even capable of understanding his articulate speech? Maybe he should have spoken using simpler words.

“You are a funny man. But rules are simple. Pay up, or else,” said the younger man roughly.

“Clearly, we have a misunderstanding here. I would love to pay, alas my sole possessions are the rags on my person. I find it hard to believe your leader would have much use for them.

So, once more I implore you to deal with this like civilized men."

"If you can't pay, you can work it off. You look scrawny, but if the women and children manage, so will you."

The redhead seemed to be the primary speaker of the two thugs, the other not saying a single word since his initial bout of verbosity. What the quiet, older man did however seem to oversee was the physical side of things, because as soon as the young, bearded man stopped speaking, the elder made a grab for Raphael. As out of shape as the former devil was, he simply did not have the agility to dodge the brute.

The man with the broken nose had a crushing hold on Raphael's biceps and tugged him roughly forward. Anger welled up in the brunette. How dare the lowly, short-lived slime lay hands on him. Him. With a single look, he could have had him ripped to pieces, his soul to howl in agony for countless eons. To be dragged as if he was a potato sack was simply unthinkable. It went against the natural order. A travesty. A perversion. A vision of the man writhing, in torment flared up in his mind, and he attempted to rip the offending appendage from his arm.

Where yesterday there was an uncaring void, today a spark ignited. Figuratively, and literally. Electricity surged from Raphael's fingertips, and the brute's body spasmed in pain. In his surprise, he dropped the cambion's arm.

"Oh, you are one of those magical folks. I am sure Koz can make use of a pet wizard," said the redhead, and swiftly brought down his club on Raphael's head.

Time slowed down, as several, very chaotic events happened in rapid succession. A shimmering orb of energy appeared around the assaulted man, effectively blocking the crude weapon's strike. Raphael's delight was cut short, when a second later thick fog rolled around the street, reducing visibility in the entire surrounding area.

"What the fuck," shouted someone, too close for comfort.

Raphael chose to make the very calculated decision of getting as far as his body could manage, in the shortest possible amount of time. His muscles began to protest the moment he started running, but thankfully the surge of adrenaline momentarily muted the worst of the pain. Clumsily, with no way to see, he stumbled in the direction he hoped led somewhere where the thugs would not be able to find him.

The streets all mixed together, the slum a maze of grey, unremarkable locations. Trash, chaos, rats, cockroaches; all were present in varying quantities. Raphael supported himself against one of the dirty walls, one hand clutching the cold stone, the other gently laying against his

stomach. He was barely able to catch his breath without the feeling of wanting to vomit. His body definitely did not appreciate all that running.

As the city steadily woke up from its slumber, more and more people poured out into the streets. A sea of countless bodies made it very unlikely he would be easily spotted, even if the two fools did manage to correctly guess the direction he chose for his grand escape.

Unsteadily, the brunette turned, resting his back against the hard surface of the wall, eyes closed. What wouldn't he give for some wine and cheese. And a nice, long bath in his personal quarters. Frustration took hold of him, and if he wasn't already so physically weakened, he very much wanted to kick something. Sighing, the former devil surveyed the place.

An older woman, hair gray with scarcely any color left, watched him, her gaze sharp. Uneasy, Raphael tried to subtly check if this was another trap. Was the hag in league with the thugs from earlier? Information would have to travel fast indeed.

When she moved toward him, Raphael tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that at least now he had some magic at his disposal, no matter how rudimentary. He was not completely toothless. Other possibilities rapidly flickered through his mind. A thief? Very likely, though she would only disappoint herself if she chose him as her prey. Can't steal from one that has nothing. A … lady of the night? Hells, he hoped not. Even if he felt the urge, which currently was as frozen as the fields of Cania, the woman lacked certain, or well… most of his preferences. All of them, to be honest.

Yes, she was undeniably coming toward him in particular. What joy. He was awake for barely two hours, and already he felt he had enough of socializing for today.

"Hello there, dearie. I couldn't have helped but notice that you seem a bit out of sorts. Things are rough out here on the streets, I know," said the woman gently. "Call me Inga."

Promptly, alarm bells began to ring in Raphael's mind. He was not born yesterday. Nice people were liars. Manipulators. Utter crooks. Noone was kind to strangers. Well, except some of those mind addled do-gooders of Ilmater, or of other similar deities. By Asmodeus' horns he hoped he did not stoop as low as to be taken in by one of those. He must look absolutely dreadful, if that is the case. If he ever returned to Hell, he would never be able to live that down. Might as well start frolicking in a forest with unicorns and dryads.

"Your concern is appreciated, but truly, it looks worse than it actually is, my good woman," he smiled stiffly. "Perhaps you could however help me by clearing up some things for me. You see, I am quite new in these parts, and I might have gotten lost. You wouldn't happen to know where we are…?"

"Of course, of course. Lyrabar can trick even seasoned dwellers, especially with all the recent additions. The markets are not far from here. And if you continue south, you would arrive to the pier," the woman helpfully supplied.

Lyrabar. How the hells did he end up in Impiltur. Why Lyrabar specifically? That seemed like such a random location. He weighed the pros and cons of following up that question with

asking what year it was. Maybe he could save that one for someone else. Raphael did not want to seem too out of sorts.

“Yes. Many thanks. Well, then. I suppose I will be on my way then.”

The woman eyed him with clear concern. Fantastic. He probably seemed like a helpless kitten to her, or whatever old ladies felt sympathy for.

“You know, we aren’t supposed to really talk about it with outsiders, and I do have some misgivings about their ways, but you do look like you could use the help,” she paused, as if considering something.

Raphael perked up at that. If whatever organization she had in mind used shady methods, then they wouldn’t be linked to someone like Ilmater. Maybe the Zhentarim? Helping the refugees for their own agenda?

Oblivious, the woman continued: “I can lead you to the entrance, but no further, as I no longer support the direction those lads chose to take. In these difficult times, they are unfortunately the only ones that would be able to give you the help you need, if you are low on funds. Or lacking them altogether. Not that I wish to make assumptions,” her eyes flickered to his, guiltily.

His dignity would probably never recover after this, but he grit his teeth and made tentative peace with having to go to what likely amounted to a beggar’s den. Perhaps a front for the local thieves’ guild. That would be acceptable. The worse option was him being led to another trap. He hoped that the likelihood of two instances of being robbed or trafficked within such a short time frame were impossibly low. And honestly, he was too tired and sickly to care by this point.

“I see,” said Raphael. “You do have sharp eyes. And mind. It is as you’ve discerned. I was beset by a misfortunate most grave. Show me then, if you would be so kind, to this miraculous place where they would be willing to help a man, who has nothing to his name.”

The woman’s mouth twitched lightly. “Funny you would say that. On that front, I believe you will feel right at home among them and face no judgement. They do call themselves the Lords of Nothing, after all.”

Chapter 3

The permanently snow-covered peaks of the Galena mountains were a recurring sight in his dreams as of late. Which was a strange thought to begin with. Elven blood ran in his veins; sleep and dreams were an unfamiliar concept to his kind. At first, he dismissed the dreams as simple nostalgia for his old homeland. Old memories being relived during his trance.

Yet it wasn't the dark, obsidian black towers of his underground home that found their way into his semi-conscious mind, night after night. It was the surrounding area of the mountains themselves. The frozen, barren surface lands beneath the gloomy shape of the mountain range. Vaasa to the West, Damara to the South, and Impiltur to the South.

It had been two centuries, and he had not spent much time in the Cold Lands after reaching the surface. The wounds were still too fresh, and he had wished to travel far, far away from the horror and tragedy. Thus, he felt at a loss of where to go. The frozen wastes of his dreamscape were unfamiliar.

He had but one major clue, the shadowy, titanic shape of a humanoid towering over him, bright stars in place of its eyes. He felt stripped under their unnatural, burning gaze, but they seemed as if they were demanding his attention. Beckoned him to come closer.

Veldrin had learned to not ignore omens, whether auspicious or malicious. He seemed to have been equipped to deal with both, and he honestly preferred facing issues head on rather than letting them fester.

Tossing and turning, he rose early, tangled in the soft, high-quality blankets. Once again too agitated after the usual calm state of an elven trance. The drow stretched, and went to the bathroom, where a large jug of cold water stood close to the sink. He splashed some of the liquid on his face, while mulling over the potential plans for the day.

The past three days in Lyrabar had proven rather fruitless. Most of the gossip revolved around the increasing flood of refugees, and the fearmongering was growing increasingly widespread. More so with the apparent upcoming nuptials of the Damaran long-lost heir, newly crowned queen Milena Dragonsbane, and the son of one of the most powerful Impiltan families, Evald Torva. Milena needed troops, the recent civil war having depleted much of her forces. Damarans were fatigued, low on resources and manpower. An alliance with Impiltur would rectify much of that.

The locals seemed split on the topic. Some condemned the Vaasan aggression. Their northern neighbor's steady, decades long conquering ambitions were seen as a threat that needed to be put down once and for all. Many however refused to sacrifice their goods, let alone their lives for a war not directly aimed at them. Vaasa and Damara used to be a unified country, a long time ago, so they should be left to solve their issues between themselves, some urged. Impiltur had always been the most stable of the region's nations, less affected by its neighbors' quarrel and tragedies. And so, it went on and on. All very interesting, but unhelpful to his goals.

No titans were seen rampaging across the continent. The paladin figured he could go check out the local wizard academies and their libraries. Sorcerous Sundries had proven quite helpful back in Baldur's Gate. Maybe some other magical library with its wide selection of books would solve their current conundrum. Besides, Zillix would most definitely insist on visiting them regardless. Stocking on some scrolls and potions always seemed like a useful endeavor. One could never have enough of those. And who knew when one of them could come in handy.

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It was just as Raphael had feared. A dirty hovel, and even dirtier wretches greeted him once the old woman brought him to the supposed entrance of the mysterious organization's lair. The area seemed unremarkable, the filth and poverty identical to what one could find in any of the surrounding streets. The only difference the weakened devil could discern were the simple necklaces the local thugs wore, made from a single punctured bronze coin on a string.

The hag ditched him almost immediately after making the introductions, so he was escorted all by his lonesome into the depths of the shoddy building, his sole companion one of the designated guards, if one could call a barely armed vagabond such. Long, winding tunnels led to a shockingly large central area made up of several levels. It reminded him of a busy, upside-down beehive. The stench of human sweat and who knows what else was revolting to his refined nose.

His escort, Uldis, or Uvis or something along those lines, pointed to one makeshift wooden stall at the far end of the first level. To Raphael it mostly resembled a bunch of hastily hammered together planks with little regard for logic or visual appeal. Two women were seemingly unloading a large chest, while a skinny teen of undetermined gender gawked awkwardly from behind what was probably supposed to be a counter. Numerous wooden barrels and chests were piled up behind the little stall. The entire operation seemed rather chaotic and messy, as everything he had encountered so far in this building.

"Talk to Masha. She will get you the basics, fix you up. Once you are done, food is served at the level below us, in the kitchens. It's not much, but it's edible and warm. Most of the time," said his scraggy companion. "I must get back to the main door, but someone else here will point you to Kira. She oversees the newcomers." Without waiting for Raphael's reply or acknowledgement, the man simply left.

Well, that suited him fine. The vagrant hardly dazzled him with his intellect or verbosity. Tentatively, he approached the two women. The teen seemed like the least likely option of being in charge.

"Lovely meeting you all. It has been recommended to me to seek the assistance of one called Masha? I find myself in rather unfortunate circumstances, and any aid would be welcome."

One of the women stopped sorting through the chest's contents and looked him over. She was a stout matron in her forties, wearing a simple white and dark blue dress, the colors diluted by age.

"You look like you have been trampled by a horde of stampeding oxen," she said, forgoing any sort of a greeting. "Well, don't just stand there and gape. Come here, let me have a look at you." She motioned for him to approach.

Behind the wall of barrels stood a worn-down bench and a stool, with a few candles illuminating the tiny area. Gingerly, Raphael sat down on the bench, uncertain about its capacity to support the weight of a full-grown man, even a frail one. The wood creaked under him but seemed to hold for the moment.

"Shirt off," she commanded, and begrudgingly he obeyed. She examined his scarred body, touching and prodding the bruises and slowly healing wounds. Raphael grimaced through the experience, hissing at particularly painful jabs.

The woman nodded to herself. "Cheer up lad, you will live. Let me quicken the healing process," she said, a soothing glow of healing magic briefly engulfing her hands as she moved them over his discolored skin. The instant relief was incomparable, and Raphael breathed deeply, in and out, the various aches pleasantly absent or at least subdued.

Masha clasped her hands with a dramatic clap. "Can't do more, my healing magic isn't that strong but let me give you some potions and ointments. With time, you will be right as rain." The woman rummaged through one of the nearby heavy chests, fishing out several flasks of varying colors and sizes from its depths. "Now don't go around forgetting to take your medicine. So many of you believe you can tough it out, but I say bollocks. Men," she sighed dramatically, and handed the numerous vials over to him.

Helplessly, he tried to hold all of them, hoping they wouldn't slip and break. The matron then threw a shoddy backpack on his lap, while the other woman, a half-elf on closer inspection, held out what appeared to be a change of clothes.

He stared at the sorry bundle of shabby cloth with distaste but relented and after carefully storing the medicine in the backpack, he snatched the rags for himself. The increased number of layers would at last keep him warm.

Whatever passed for kitchens in this dilapidated pit should be his next stop, and then he supposed he would pay a visit to the Kira woman. Cozying up to whoever oversaw this mess seemed like it could have some merit. If he played it right, he would hopefully get some useful contacts and then climb his way up into more prestigious circles.

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Zillix clutched her bounty close to her chest. Despite having ample space in her backpack, she refused to part from the tome, her whole demeanor almost giddy. A rare sight, where the kobold was concerned. It made Veldrin smile.

“Do we have to go everywhere together? Maybe next time we could split? I could have scouted around or trained, instead of sleeping in a bookshop. We have lost half the day already and yet we barely did anything,” complained Leandreth. She then hastily tucked away some of her loose, pale pink hair back under her hood.

The kobold scoffed audibly. “This is a genuine Draconomicon. Do you comprehend what a priceless find this was? Clearly not, if you see the bookstore visit as wasted time. Here, you can learn the biology and life cycle of various draconic species, not to mention all the other dragon related lore contained within these pages. It would do you good to learn more about such majestic creatures. They are the pinnacle of mortal life. Magic and elements, contained in flesh.”

“Sure, dragons are great. I would rather actually see one than read a thousand pages on how they lay eggs though. But… since we are running around shopping, we could go get some herbs then? My stock is quite diminished. And then seeing if there is a blacksmith or an arms vendor? I would love to see if they have any decent bows or scimitars,” said the hexblood, hope creeping into her voice.

Veldrin hummed thoughtfully. Having the option to craft more healing potions and antidotes seemed optimal. “There was a shopping street not far from here, if I remember correctly. Might as well go check it out.”

His armor shone like liquid gold, the sun’s rays reflected against the polished surface, in contrast to his silver-grey skin and snow-white hair. The people around them would stare at him and his company, and then hastily avoid them. It saddened his heart, to once again be the social pariah. Coupled with seeing so much suffering and poverty, caused by the war to the north, his thoughts were melancholic indeed. Maybe he could disguise himself so as not to frighten the locals with his appearance and hand out some balms. Use his healing abilities to ease these people’s suffering, despite their disgust and fear when faced with a drow like himself.

Just as he expected, the street he led them to had various signs proudly declaring what their shop’s specialty was. An alchemist, a bakery, a weaponsmith, another bookshop, and many others. And one of them was blessedly an herbalist, tucked away between a general store and a wine merchant’s abode.

The herbalist shop was neat and clearly well supplied. Herbs were carefully sorted into shelves across the store, and many hung from the ceiling as well. A pleasant aroma permeated the air. The merchant who greeted them was a young-looking dwarf with curly black hair and a short, well-kept beard.

“Welcome to the Mortar and Pestle. We have all a group of adventurers could need and more still. If despite our seemingly endless reserves you find yourself wanting, we also do special orders. In case you are seeking something truly rare and exotic,” the dwarf greeted them

cautiously, eyeing the unusual trio. “Hrydar Stoneheart is my name, and I am at your disposal.”

Both women perked up, and while Leandreth went on a tour of the shop, carefully sniffing at and examining the goods, Zillix pulled out a detailed list and began interrogating the dwarven vendor about the availability of the written down items.

Veldrin stood next to the counter and gently tapped his fingers against the wood absentmindedly, while waiting for the girls to get everything they needed. He could not tell apart balsam from wispweed.

The dwarf, Hrydar, interrupted his thoughts with an awkward cough. “Pardon me for possibly overstepping, good sir, but you seem like someone that can handle himself, where thugs and ruffians are concerned.”

The paladin nodded, caught off-guard by the unexpected conversation, but urging the man to continue.

“You see, there have been some break ins and thievery these past few weeks. All the shops on this street had the displeasure already, some more than once. The city guard is overwhelmed as is, and they have been no help at all so far. It used to be only small amounts, here and there, but the ruffians grow more and more brazen. If this continues, we will lose our livelihood. I was wondering if I could hire you and your band to perhaps guard the street for a few nights, and hopefully catch the culprits? Scare them off at least? Pardon me for saying so, but you and your friends seem rather formidable. The right kind of intimidating, if you know what I mean.”

Before Veldrin could answer, Lea materialized next to the shopkeeper. “Of course! We would love to heroically defend you and your store from any and all evildoers,” she proclaimed. Then she grew hesitant, almost shy, and turned to Veldrin, seeking his approval.

The drow mulled it over. Playing guards for a bunch of merchants was not something he had planned on. Especially ones that viewed him as some sort of a drow boogeyman. But seeing as both his wards could use some adventuring life’s experience, it would not be completely out of question. And he could not completely fault the man for thinking that way. The drow had their reputation for a reason.

“What’s the pay?” asked Zillix, always pragmatic.

“Seeing as you would be guarding the entire street, us vendors would pool some money together, and give you a discount on our goods as well? We can figure out the details together. The sooner you could start, the better. By Moradin’s hammer, if you could start tonight, we would even throw in something extra.”

“That’s a bit sudden, but I don’t see why not. We would love to help some honest people catch a thief. And sure, tonight is good. The sooner we start, the sooner we can rid you of your little problem,” the drow agreed.

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Trying to keep the utterly revolting slop they called food down and not vomit, Raphael was glad to finally find himself in front of what was a genuine door. He was almost impressed they had managed to get one in this beggar's den. According to the local vagrants, this was where Kira could be found.

The brunette knocked, wanting to preserve at least some decorum, despite his surroundings. Barging in uninvited like certain nosy adventurers seemed utterly barbaric.

"Enter!" Barked a rough voice, surprisingly deep for a woman.

Beyond the door laid a barebone office. A large, worn table stood in the middle, with several notes and parchments spread in a disorganized manner over its surface. Two bookcases with various items stood on the left side, and a barely recognizable bear's pelt laid on the ground, its fur matted and the layer of dirt covering it so prominent, it was difficult to guess what the color originally used to be.

Behind the table, sitting on a cracked leather chair was a fierce looking middle-aged woman with shoulder-length red hair and one hazel eye. She could have been almost called lovely, in her own way, if the left side of her face wasn't marred by deep scars, a hollow socket where her second eye should have been.

Well, well, well. This one seemed more interesting than the pathetic legion of spineless rats he had encountered so far. This one had a bite.

"Fresh meat, huh? Then tell me, what can you do? We can find something to do for anyone. If they can prove at least nominally useful at what they do, all the better," said the red head, her single eye scrutinizing him.

"You are in luck, for I am a man of many talents. I can read, I can write, I know history both mundane and arcane, not to mention my magical talents…" he tried listing at least some of his very impressive skills, when the woman interrupted him, rather rudely.

"Magic? You a wizard?" She inquired gruffly.

"Something of the sort. I can shape and mold the weave to my heart's desire, yes."

"Consider yourself lucky then, the Vulture King is always on the lookout for magic types."

Vulture King, she said? The name did not ring any bells. Very likely he was the crook in charge of all of this. If the man was so easily impressed by magic, or desperate enough to have arcane users within his ranks, Raphael could use that to his advantage.

Kira continued, oblivious to his inner monologue: "Running this place, making sure everyone is clothed and fed isn't easy. While the others beg in the streets, or cook, or heal, the most important cog in our operation are the ones in charge of procuring resources. Seeing as you

are new, I would send you out with one of the groups working in less guarded areas. Wouldn't want to get the city watch on our asses by sending a rookie to a noble's mansion."

Common thievery. How… dull. He kept the sneer out of his face, and asked: "And what exactly would be my role?"

"You can be the lookout for starters. And if anything goes sideways, use your fancy magic tricks to get the boys and yourself back. Preferably with the loot and limbs intact. If you prove useful, we could sure use a wizard for the bigger jobs, later down the line. Those pigs gorge themselves on their abundance, while the rest of us rot. You and the rest of the band can help level the scales a bit."

The former devil did not bother debating the natural way of things with the woman in front of him; how the strong and powerful naturally reigned over the weak. For as long as he needed her and the rest of these peasants, he could play nice.

"Today, you can rest. There are bunk beds close to the kitchens. Ask around for a free spot. Tomorrow, you better be ready to head out, however. We will get you some gear, and I'll introduce you to Boslin. He knows those streets better than anyone and sneaking and stealing are that man's lifeblood."

"Delightful. I will eagerly return to you on the morrow then. If that is all?"

She waved him away, no longer finding him worth her attention.

Raphael left brusquely, in search of the promised bed. A common thug. He was reduced to a common thug. The insults just kept coming. He could not wait to finally get a chance to release some of his pent-up frustration and ire on whatever fool stood in his way. But for now, he had to keep playing nice. A tiger among mice, even if temporarily subdued.

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The thugs he was supposed to accompany were certainly colorful in personality, if not in appearance. A bunch of vulgar, loudmouthed hooligans of various races in non-descript clothes, hoods covering their faces. The halfling, Boslin, had been pointed out as the man in charge, while the other two were a human man and a tiefling woman respectively. Raphael did not bother learning or remembering their names. They were inconsequential. So far, the sole boon of being forced to talk to these miscreants was learning what year it was, at last.

1524 DR. A whole thirty-two years after the Cult of the Absolute was vanquished, and he, Raphael, had been struck down in his own home. Thirty-two years of torture. Of being stripped down to gaping flesh and bone. For an ageless creature like him, thirty-two years were nothing. And yet, while he writhed in agony, they felt like an eternity. And they had

reduced him and his powers to almost nothing, when it had taken millennia to be where he was before his fall.

He felt restless. Throughout the previous night he tossed and turned. What if his change was permanent? Another day had passed and he still seemed and felt impossibly human. He had no way to reach his contacts, and even if he did, he could not negotiate anything with the way he was currently. At best, they would mock him, at worst, they would kill him in revenge or take him prisoner. A plaything to their whims. He nearly hyperventilated, panic squeezing his throat tight.

The night was dark, the moon in its first quarter illuminating the shadowy alleys dimly. Their little group reached the target street without much trouble, only a few drunks and street beggars inhabiting the deserted streets at this hour, and those hardly paid them any mind. In a detached manner, Raphael figured that some of the bums were very likely a part of their own network, the so-called Lords of Nothing, and would hardly raise alarm at their approach.

Through the darkened glass vitrines, displayed goods could be seen, and the rogues quietly surveyed the numerous stores and their doors. At last, they stopped in front of what seemed like a weapons trader's shop, if the sign could be believed. A bold choice, in the brunette's opinion. A weapon merchant was more likely to know how to handle himself in combat, if it ever came to that. His choice would have been the clothing shop. Luxury clothes were not cheap, and usually not guarded by hardy individuals.

The halfling took out his thieves' tools and began fiddling with the lock, while the other two waited, close behind. The former devil leaned against the wall a few steps away from the trio. Scarcely a moment later, a click interrupted the silence of the night, and Boslin opened the door, smugly motioning for his companions to follow. Raphael crossed his arms over his chest and gazed upward, at the endless, starry sky.

Something shuffled with a soft sound in the space above him. He frowned. Perhaps a cat was on the roof? Almost immediately he was proven wrong, as color burst in a small area near him, centered on the door and the thieves. All three of them, in addition to the door, were now outlined in violet light. The tiefling woman swore, and pulled out one of her many knives, eyes searching for their hidden assailants.

"You are under arrest. Please do not resist. I would prefer if things did not have to turn violent," said a masculine, melodic voice. Something about it seemed familiar, and a strange feeling of dread made Raphael uncomfortable.

"Show yourself and I will gut you like a pig, coward!" Shouted the human thief, eyes helplessly scanning the darkness.

Boslin seemed more levelheaded, as the halfling smoothly stashed his tools into his pockets and made a run for it without delay.

Gently, with magical feathers swirling around them, a yellow-scaled kobold and a heavily armored drow warrior descended through the air, down to the stone covered ground. An arrow flew from the roof and hit Boslin in the shoulder, creeping, thorny vines bursting from the wound, until he was engulfed and effectively immobilized.

“Permission to use lethal force?” Asked the robed kobold.

The drow shook his head. “Knock them out. There is no need to kill them I believe. We might even get some information out of them.”

Raphael’s head began to pound. He stood there, frozen on the spot, eyes glued to the drow man. The man’s aristocratic features were clearly visible. His pale, snow-white hair was braided, presumably to not get in the way while the warrior fought. A heavy shield was clasped in his left hand, while he wielded a brightly blazing mace in his right one. In the dark of the night, he made for almost an angelic figure.

The tiefling attacked the kobold in a rush, a swirl of knives. Her slashes bounced harmlessly against a barely visible barrier surrounding the reptilian creature. A ray of greenish, necrotic energy hit the fiendish looking woman square in the chest in retaliation.

“Zillix!”

“Yes, yes. I will gently bump her with my staff next time.”

A tiefling descended from the rooftop. Or no, not a tiefling. There was something decidedly fey-like about the young woman. Hexblood perhaps? Despite them being so rare. Raphael was proud that his sharp mind could still function at such a high speed despite the circumstances.

He could not tear his eyes away from the shining warrior. It was impossible. It couldn’t be. Out of all the places on Toril, out of all the times. How could the two of them possibly meet? Fate, or Gods, or devils were cruel indeed, their sense of humor twisted even beyond his dark imagination. Raphael half-expected the shadow of his father to appear and spit in his face, just for good measure.

The combat continued, but he paid it no mind. Since he did not attack and neither was he running, the paladin and his entourage did not target him for the time being. Fury spiked so strongly in his blood, he felt almost sick. The drow was smiling, chatting with the fey and the reptile as they worked on knocking out the thugs with little trouble.

The bane of his existence. Strutting around, safe and happy, without a care in the world. Thirty. Two. Years.

“VELDRIN!” Raphael roared and lunged, in his overwhelming rage not bothering or perhaps forgetting to reach out to his magic, no matter how diminished it was.

Said dark elf froze, and turned toward him, clearly taken off guard by hearing his name yelled out loud. Owing fully to the bewilderment he had caused, Raphael barreled right into Veldrin's face and punched him with every bit of strength his weak, mortal body possessed.

The drow flinched away, more so from the shock rather than the force. For a second, then two, brilliant crimson eyes met Raphael’s own brown ones, the former devil fuming all the while. Then a heavy blow to the back of his knees sent him stumbling to the ground.

“Can we use lethal force, now?” Hissed Zillix in frustration.

“Veldrin! What is going on? Are you alright?” Leandreth cried, frantic, as she tied the tiefling woman’s hands with a rope.

The paladin rubbed his eyes, and looked again at Raphael, aghast.

“Raphael…?”

“Yes, you contemptuous vermin!” The brunette growled and attempted to charge at Veldrin one more time.

Utterly baffled, the drow unleashed a spell, and Raphael’s eyes closed, his body slumping as the magically induced sleep took a hold of him. Veldrin managed to catch his falling form before he hit the ground.

The three of them then stood in perfect silence, the drow, the hexblood, and the kobold, exchanging stunned glances, while the thugs wiggled against the ropes tied around their hands and feet. Raphael was dead to the world, laying heavily in Veldrin’s arms, expression peaceful.

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