

Daemon Retch

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Trader's Way

I am the son of a traveling merchant. For the first six years of my life, we traveled the Sword Coast, my father Ander, my younger sister Elaine, and our mule Mearle.

My father specialized in the sale of exotic trinkets, some of a magical nature, others merely novel in their history. I imagine he could have found financial success peddling traditional wares, but his fascination for these unusual items all but sealed his fate as a traveling pauper.

Ander was a gentle man. He was unusually tall yet thin, as though the gods had taken the time to stretch him over a torturer's rack before throwing him to the material plane. Generally, he was quiet, practically a mute, saying all with a shrug or smile, the exception being conversations with Mearle as he drove our vardo down long-drawn stretches of road. Mearle for his part hawwed back in apparent comprehension, or perhaps to alleviate his own boredom.

Elaine showed signs of being... unusual, at an early age. Like Ander, she rarely spoke, though her silence felt of a different kind entirely. While Ander was ever in the present, Elaine seemed to be floating through a waking dream. And yet my sister seemed to have an awareness of things that transcended what is normal. Take one occasion in Kathatla, as an example.

Elaine and I were brushing Mearle as father gathered wood for camp. Elaine paused and gently turned toward the forest beside us. I followed her gaze. There was an Almiraj grazing on the low grass a few dozen yards away. Elaine whispered, "poor little rabbit" then returned to brushing. This left me confused — the Almiraj seemed fine — but some minutes later the screech of a Blood Hawk foretold the last moments of the horned rabbit.

"How did you know that was going to happen?", I asked.
My young sister shrugged absently and continued to brush.

This was one of many such peculiar incidents. According to Lady Uhma — a seer of Savras whose father visited whenever we passed through the outer city of Baldur's gate — Elaine had an aptitude for the arcane. She urged my father to seek out a mentor who could foster Elaine's abilities and guide her away from dark magics. Ander took Uhma's advice seriously, though I suspect he feared that such an arrangement would require being separated from Elaine, something he could not bear considering.

In my sixth year, my father brought us deep into the cloakwood to meet with a troupe of tradesmen from a distant land in the South West. The camp was almost like a small, traveling village. The people were dark in complexion and wore jewels in their ears and on their noses. They spoke in a strange tongue, with occasional clicks of varied timbre. I didn't understand it, and I must admit I felt uneasy around the foreigners. But Ander and Elaine, true to form, were quickly at ease with the strangers — Elaine delighted in the jewels adorning the troupe matrons while Ander became deeply immersed in a conversation over an oil lamp. I sat quietly by the campfire, taking it all in with wide eyes as the light waned and the sun eased into its horizon bed.

They came in the night. I felt a cold pit in my stomach — a primal sense of dread — even before I understood what was happening. There was the deep bellowing of an unearthly horn. Horses whinnied followed by the calls of men. I rushed to wake Elaine, but her bunk was empty. I practically fell out of the vardo, scrambling in panic. I'll spare you the details of the scene that unfolded, but suffice it to say, human cruelty knows no bounds. A battalion of bandits had come to steal our wares, our innocence, and our lives. I remember one dark figure in particular. He stood out from the rest, armored in black, his face masked, sitting atop a fearsome dark horse and overlooking the scene dispassionately. This figure would haunt my dreams for years to come, growing into a monster in my mind... and as it would turn out, that's just what he was.

Blunt trauma to the head and I went out like a candle in the wind. The bandits must have believed me dead, as they seem to have left me untouched after that. My head spun, and my body ached as the sun slipped through the crescent opening of my eyelids. I waited for nausea to subside, then, stiffly, pulled myself up. Only ash and ruin lay before me. Well, ash, ruin... and blood. My father lay among countless others, faces contorted in final anguish, or burnt black. Our vardo was gone, with no sign of Mearle or Elaine. A part of me didn't want to look.

After wandering the camp, looking for something, anything that could salvage the night's horrors in even the smallest way, I collapsed, defeated. A surge of emotion washed through me; loss, fear, fury... and then I was numb. For countless days, perhaps weeks, I wandered through the Cloakwood. I lived as an animal would, surviving on the barest of means.

By dumb luck, my path eventually intersected with a road where I was picked up by a small family traveling by horse and cart. Two children, their mother and father, all redheads. One of the children was a girl about half my age. The other was a swaddled baby. Jon, I think they named him.

The family was of little means, but kind. They fed and nursed me as best they could as we traveled the road North toward Baldur's Gate. They never pushed questions I did not wish to answer. I spoke little. The numbness in me could not accommodate any fondness for these kind strangers. And when we camped on the Southern side of Wyrms Crossing, I slipped away in the night to make my way across the bridge alone into the outer city of Baldur's Gate.

Baldur's Gate

The Streets

For the next several years I lived as a Street Urchin. After some time as a beggar, I improved my situation slightly by becoming pickpocket of the Guild. Our overseers were volatile and sometimes violent, but the food and shelter were reliable, and that was enough to keep several dozen children and me sticky-fingered.

I had one close friend during this period. The competition was fierce among the pickpockets, so few were friendly with one another. But Ekemon was different. He'd never hesitate to share a loaf of bread or give you some of his earning so you could meet quota and avoid a lashing. Perhaps it was because he was the subject of constant torment himself that found empathy for others. His tiefling blood put a target on his back that he could not wash off.

Ekemon's horns sat on his head comically erect, nearly straight up, but twisted as though he had perpetual bedhead. From him I learned a pinch of Infernal, a language passed on to him from his late father. He was generally even-keeled, but I remember one day when he lost his temper as three boys threw rocks at him, jeering and shouting "go back to the Shadowfel to your father, Bhaal." Ekemon turned back to them, his eyes transformed into two blue flames, the ground shook, and his voice resonated in a deep, thaumaturgical boom.

"PERHAPS I AM THE SON OF BHAAL, AS YOU SAY! SHALL I CALL HIM TO MEET YOU?!"

The three boys scattered.

Ekemon laughed afterward. "That ought to keep off me for a while." That was the last day I spent with Ekemon. I fear the incident may have only put a larger target on his back, as only a few days later he disappeared without a trace. His fate remains a mystery to me. Although with the ruthless nature of Baldur's Gate's streets, perhaps it is no mystery at all.

The Fist

The Flaming Fist — the mercenary company that protects the lower city of Baulder's Gate — created a clever campaign which recruited from the streets of the outer city as a preemptive strike against crime. I was fifteen when they recruited me. As with the Guild before, the promise of warm sheets and a steady supply of coin was enough to win my loyalty. Call it an upgrade.

My time in the streets proved valuable to the Fist. I knew, more or less, the inner workings of the underground — where to go for information, which factions had rivalries, and who not fuck with unless you wanted to make enemies with criminal families as powerful as the Council Four. My knack for locking up thieves and smugglers made me a rising star in the Fist. It also made me many enemies in the underground.

By the time I was 19 I was First Lieutenant. By 22 I was made Captain and given charge of a small platoon of sixteen mercenaries. We were close. For the first time since I was a boy, I felt like I had something akin to a family.

I don't remember when or why I started to visit the seer, Uhma... at first, it was just a fleeting thought as I passed through an alley which happened to smell of the incense which often suffused her parlor. Then one day I noticed her sign. She had moved from the outer city into the lower. On a rainy afternoon one summer, I found myself opening her door, the soft jingle of bone chimes as I entered. I was wet... and nervous.

We would talk for hours. I don't even know what about. Uhma would ask me double-edged questions and make cryptic dictums. I would leave 5 silver on her mantle on the way out or bring a wheel of cheese and some tea. It was not that I particularly enjoyed her batty riddles or the cough-inducing smog of incense and perfume. I'm not entirely sure why I kept going back. I think it must have given me a sense of connection with my former life, with my father, and Elaine. Even Mearle.

Neither of us ever spoke of my family. In fact, I had always assumed she didn't recognize me. It had been over a decade since I had last visited her as a boy. And I think I preferred it that way. It was safe. I didn't have to think about what was lost. But, out of the blue one day, Uhma rounded on me as we made tea, poking her crooked finger into my chest "...and are you ready to finally take your vengeance, boy?! Are you going to eradicate the scourge which took your father?"

"What do you mean?"

A pitying scoff, "Phegh.... don't visit me till you can see your feet on the ground!" With a hump she picked up her tea mug and exited the parlor through a beaded doorway; my cue to leave.

The exchange awoke something inside me. Feelings long tucked away, festering in dark nooks reared their foul heads. At night my thoughts reeled. Anger, obsession, and shame consumed me. Who were the bastards who had raided the camp that night? Why hadn't I done anything about this before? As a child, they had felt like indomitable monstrosities, sure, but now that I was a member of the Fist, I knew better. Likely they were nothing more than the scum I locked away routinely. And they had raped and pillaged and taken everything from me. Probably they were still at it, laughing, happy, while I grow fat in coin and comfort a hundred miles away.

I began keeping my ear to the ground. I would interrogate the captains of platoons returning from missions abroad. I'd exchange letters with clerks at remote outposts. For a time, nothing. But then gradually, a picture took shape. There was one band of marauders who stood out from the rest. And the descriptions of its leader, a dark splinter in the world, convinced me this was the group I sought. Only the stories of this group were hard to believe...

They were called by many different names, but the most widely used was The Red Veil. Stories of the Veil were inconsistent, bordering on fantastical; they were meant to be terrible winged creatures who preyed on weak travelers; no, they were snakes with the faces of men; or they were men themselves, turned rotten from the inside out by the neglect of the world. But a few details were consistent. They were led by an imposing figure in dark armor. They never left any survivors. They would appear out of nowhere and disappear to nowhere again.

I dismissed much of the stories as the jabbering of cowed spinsters. Even my own memories carried little stock. After all, I had been just a frightened little boy.

I went to see Uhma again. The old seer could not be hurried. After much evasive sophistry, finally "I know why you have come. But heed my warning, boy!! You cannot do this with your power alone!" We sat in silence for a time. "Well, go now! I can do nothing for you. You! You must go do this! Now, go." I left with her boots kicking at my ankles.

A missive came from the Storm Horns, one of the outposted clerks I'd been in correspondence with. He had reports from numerous sources of activity matching the Veil's description in the area. I didn't hesitate. I made plans and executed.

It was not within my authority to mobilize an expedition. I was a rank shy of that. And there was little hope that I could convince a Marshal or General to create one; there was little to gain by going after a remote assemblage of bandits. And I feared the commanders wouldn't believe in the admittedly far-fetched tales of the Red Veil besides. So I forged the papers... the Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard himself had asked us on a secret mission. I lied to my men. I lied to the armory clerk and stablemaster. I lied to myself — this was all for the greater good. But I could not do this on my own, Uhma had said. So I assembled my men. Nearly twenty in all. We collected supplies, loaded our mounts, and traveled East.

The territory around the Storm Horns is mostly unpopulated. There are a few small settlements, occupied mainly by fur traders passing through. It is the domain of nature, unconquered by people. The land is cold and barren, the elements unforgiving. We rode from lush river basin around the Chionthar, through arid grasslands, and finally to the snowy wasteland of the Storm Horns, with scant to offer in the way of food or shelter. The hills became mountains. The days grew colder. We had to abandon our horses when the terrain became too steep. The first casualties — Treven, Dominic, and Sam — were the product of hunger and bitter cold, not the Veil. But fear not, there would be plenty of blood yet for the Veil to spill.

Signs of the Veil were scarce, at first. Mostly second-hand rumors from folk on the road. The unyielding snowfall made tracking near impossible. But the evidence did grow thicker. Burned settlements. Bodies strewn from trees, or placed in odd geometric patterns on the ground, resembling the runes of a shaman. 'Bone art' the men had begun to call it, though 'flesh art' would have been more apt — the corpses were always fresh, preserved in the frost. Always, the faces were contorted in agony or burnt black as though pressed to the coals of a fire. I must admit that I grew more fearful each day. But I showed no sign of it to my men and pressed on.

I awoke to the crunch of snow. It was barely morning, still dark in the valley of our camp. A dark figure stood over me. The dark figure. Fear paralyzed me. I could hear my heart pounding like a war drum. Everything else was silent. We stared at one another for what seemed like an eternity. He cocked his head. Then, slowly, lifted his metal boot and pressed down on my ankle. There was the crunch of my bones and pain spread through me like wildfire. My eyes clenched shut, fists balled. I awaited the next assault. But none came. I took a glimpse. Nothing. I whirled about, searching for my foe. No one.

No one but the dead. Bone art lay in a ring around me, bodies bearing the insignia of the Flaming Fist

The Unraveling

Another aimless trek through the wilderness like an animal, this time with even less will to live. I often feel the gods let me live out of spite. I learned from a post in Triel that a bounty had been placed on my head. My deceit had been discovered, and I was to be brought to Baldur's Gate for trial. I had expected this but believed my men and I would return victorious, earning the possibility of amnesty. But now, even if a bounty hadn't on my head, shame would prevent me from returning.

I took to drink. I slept in alleys. My clothes grew tattered and filthy. I became gaunt, skeletal. There were weeks when I uttered a word to no one. A back-alley dweller offered me Three-Eye for my boots. I'd never touched the pink liquid. It was deadly at certain doses. I unlaced my boots and wiggled the toes of hole-riddled socks in the air. I handed them over. With the small vial in hand, I sneaked into a barn to lay in a bed of hay. I took enough Three-Eye to kill me.

Euphoria, then mania, then... a voice.

"Stupid, stupid boy! Foolish boy. Zyou have no wisdom. Zyour sister zyou are not! I said zyou do not have zhe power alone. I said noshing of strength! Zhe strength of a hundred men is not zhe power of one! ...go North. I sense something zhere... a growing power... maybe you can find what you seek..."