

Zalduin



By
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The elemental plane of fire :

Du floated happily along the ocean of fire. He and the other fire spirits danced and played without a care until a voice echoed across the plane. The voice started low and grew with each passing second. The voice was gentle and inviting, beckoning the young fire spirits to answer. While the others fled from the voice, Du's curiosity drew him closer to a small window that appeared in the flames. He could see a creature on the other side of the window, bright blue lights swirling around in a dazzling light show.

This is it! Du thought. The others told me stories of other worlds and the adventures they had there. I want to have fun and adventure like they did.

Intrigued by the creature and the opportunity for adventure Du stepped through.

Year 723 in the land of Verna :

Zigur walked along the top of his tower watching the dark storm clouds on the horizon. A gust of icy wind blew across the rooftop fluttering his robes behind him, but he paid it no mind. He continued to glare at the clouds to the north, his hatred rising. He knew the armies of his rival Isel the Heartless were out there, mustering their strength to stand against him. Their armies were evenly matched, or so the last reports said.

I need an edge, Zigur thought. I need a champion my forces can rally behind; I can only hope there is time left.

The door behind him flew open, one of his servants running onto the roof. The servant dropped to one knee, bowing his head low.

"They have returned my lord," the servant said.

"Let us hope they return with good news," Zigur said still watching the lightning flash in the distance. "For if they have failed me yet again, they will find themselves on the front lines of my next assault with nothing but a stick to defend themselves with."

Zigur sat on the large wooden throne staring at the tall doors on the other side of the room. He drummed his fingers on the throne, his rings echoing off the wood. As the doors opened a thin woman moved quickly ahead of the four men behind her.

"My lord, your mercenaries have returned," the woman said bowing her head.

"Yes, I can see that," he said gesturing his index finger to the side.

The woman flew in the direction he pointed slamming hard against the wall, her body sliding down the stone leaving a blood stain behind. Zigur scowled at the approaching men. They were nothing but arrogant fools in his opinion, but they had their uses.

"My lord," one of the four said bowing. "You will be delighted to hear we have been successful in our endeavor."

"Show me," Zigur said stroking his long black beard.

Out of his pack the man pulled an old tome, its cover and pages made of a dark metal, the cover lined with red gemstones. The man turned the tome showing it was still sealed, metal clasps preventing the opening of the tome, just as they had found it. On the front cover and binding were arcane inscriptions, which seemed to glow with an inner fire.

Zigur's eyes lit up at the sight, glowing with their own red light. "You have done well Ruso and shall be rewarded."

Two soldiers walked in carrying a large chest. Setting it before Ruso, the soldiers opened it, revealing gold and precious gemstones.

Ruso smiled. "I am sure that my lord knows the value of this single tome is more than what has been presented before me."

Zigur scowled at the young man, running his hand over his bald, tattooed head. "Do not test me fool. This was the agreed upon amount, take it and leave while you still can."

"Now this simply won't do my lord," Ruso said with a smile. "The job was much tougher than you had indicated. So, I believe we have earned a better reward than this, otherwise we might have to take our prize to find someone that will pay us our due."

"I see," Zigur said sitting back in his throne. "Do the rest of you feel the same?"

The other three members of the group nodded.

"You see, we are in agreement," Ruso said. "So, what will it be my lord?"

A wicked smile crossed Zigur's face. "Very well, if a just reward is what you seek, then that is what you shall have."

Zigur pointed his finger at one of the men standing behind Ruso. "Here is your reward," he said as the man's head exploded showering the others with gore.

Ruso tossed the tome to the floor as he drew his scimitar. He charged the throne, closing the distance in an instant. Just as the warrior was about to drive his sword into his opponent's chest, intense fear overwhelmed him. Ruso dropped his sword taking a step back as he covered his ears.

"No!" Ruso yelled dropping to his knees, tears running down his cheeks.

"Ruso!" the last two of the four-man group yelled.

Zigur stood, a staff appearing in his hands, as Ruso collapsed unconscious to the floor. The other two men dropped to their hands and knees; their heads bowed low. Zigur ignored them as he gently picked up the tome.

"Place them in the dungeons, I will have need of them later," Zigur said moving to one of the doors. "Take the corpse to my lab, and summon my apprentice."

Zigur sat in a plush chair in his lab staring at the tome. It had been over a month since the mercenary band had retrieved it. While the Codex of Pandorix offered him an answer to his problem, the solution wasn't without its own dilemma. Within its metallic pages he had found a ritual that would craft the loyal

champion he desperately needed, but the central component was difficult. The dark wizard glanced over at the figure laying on the table, covered by a thick blanket. It took him three weeks to stitch the creature together, and now all it needed was a host to take control of his new champion, which is where the difficulty came in.

The room was organized to look like a small cabin, complete with a fireplace warming the room. Zigur was wearing brown robes with a wand in his hand. He moved the wand through the air, drawing arcane symbols. The fire in the fireplace flared brightly.

"Sastro delitre morte du," Zigur said reciting the words to the spell.

The fire flared again as a small flame leapt out landing on the floor before the dark wizard. The shape of the flame shifted taking on a small slender humanoid form with glowing orange eyes. The small fiery creature looked around at its surroundings, intrigued by the strange place.

"Hello little spirit," Zigur said in a soft gentle tone. "My name is Zigur, and I am the one that called you here."

"Why?" Du asked. "What are you? What is this place?"

"I am a human, and this is my home," Zigur answered. "I called you here because I need your help. You see bad people are coming to hurt me."

"How can I help with that?" Du asked. "I am too small to help someone so big."

"Not at all," Zigur said with a smile moving closer to the table. "On this table is a body that is designed for someone small

like you. All you have to do is enter the body and the magic inside it will allow you to help me.”

Du took a step closer to the fire. “Why don’t you use it?”

“I am too big, it must be someone small and brave, like you,” Zigur said with a soft smile.

Du stood by the fire, unsure what to do when the door burst open. Two creatures that were similar to Zigur charged in tackling him to the ground.

“This is for Ruso!” one of the creatures yelled as they pounded their fists against Zigur.

“No stop, leave him alone!” Du said.

“We’ll get you too!” one of the humans said.

The little fire spirit was terrified and tried jumping back into the fire but the window he came through was gone. One of the humans ran up stomping on Du over and over, pain shooting through the little fire spirit as its form was disfigured by the assault. Du flew away from the dangerous creature trying to find a place to hide then noticed the large body still on the table. He did the only thing he could think of and jumped into the body on the table as the human chased after him.

The body felt cold at first as energy rippled through Du like lightning. After a moment he could feel his new body, as if it was his own. It felt strong and more powerful than anything he had ever imagined. The two humans ran at him, beating their fists on his chest but he barely felt it. Du reached out grabbing the humans by the top of the head, crushing them with almost no effort.

“Such fragile creatures,” Du said in a strange voice. “Is that my voice?”

Something struck Du in the back, lightning arcing throughout his new body causing it to twitch and convulse uncontrollably. Everything went dark as he collapsed to the ground. Zigur laughed as he looked at his champion lying on the ground.

“It worked master,” Della said from the doorway, a wicked smile on her face. She was Zigur’s apprentice, dressed in light armor with a black hooded cloak.

“The binding is not yet complete,” Zigur said with a smile as he looked at the corpses. “But the test was a success. I knew Ruso’s two associates would prove useful one day. Summon the guard, we must put my new champion back on the table before he wakes up.”

Pain was the first thing to greet him as he woke. He couldn’t see or hear; a silent oppressive darkness surrounded him as pain flooded his senses. There was no sense of time as he floated in the darkness, it could have been a day or a century since the pain started. Then a light appeared in the distance, growing to fill his blurry vision. He was lying on something hard in a strange place, two figures standing next to him, although he didn’t recognize either of them. He looked around the room but didn’t recognize his surroundings. He blinked a couple of times trying to will the confusion away. As the seconds

ticked by, he realized he didn't know who he was. He sat up looking at the two creatures next to him.

"Who... who am I?" he said. "And who are you? I don't... I can't remember anything."

"You are Zalduin, my creation. I am Zigur your master," Zigur said. "This is Della, she is my apprentice."

"Zalduin," he said saying his name out loud. The word felt strange, foreign.

"Bring it!" Zigur said looking toward the door.

A moment later two soldiers came into the room carrying a mirror. Zalduin looked into the mirror at his reflection for the first time.

"What am I?" Zalduin asked.

"Perfection," Zigur said beaming with pride. "You have the skull of a powerful necromancer, to give you power over life and death. Horns of a devil, to give you power over hellfire. The body and wings of a demon, to give you flight and great strength. You are my champion Zalduin."

Zalduin turned to see his body from different angles.

"Champion? What am I supposed to do master?"

"Fight," Zigur said. "A great cataclysm is coming, and to survive it we must defeat my rival, Isel the Heartless, and steal an artifact from her. Before that, we must put you to the test, to make sure you are ready."

They stood in a courtyard of a castle; several humans were lined up before them on their knees. Zalduin looked down at his gauntleted hands.

“The armor you wear enhances your strength, or it will one you learn how to wield it,” Zigur said.

Zalduin looked at the humans before them. “Who are they?”

“To achieve victory, we must be ruthless and cunning. You have these qualities within you, I made sure of it,” Zigur said. “These people are aligned with our enemy. Now I want you to kill this woman.”

Zalduin stared at the woman without moving.

“Why are you hesitating?” Zigur asked, his voice thick with irritation.

“I don’t want to kill her,” Zalduin said.

“This won’t do,” Zigur said moving his staff toward his champion freezing him in place.

Zigur’s eyes glowed a fiery red as they scrutinized his champion. “Ah, here is the problem.”

“What is it master?” Della asked.

With a flick of his finger Della flew back, slamming into the wall behind her. “Your apparent lack of craftsmanship and attention to detail,” Zigur said with a frown. “You have left a grounding stake within his spine disrupting the joining. You will be punished for this later.”

With a glowing hand, the dark wizard reached in, pulling the stake out. Rings of fire erupted from Zalduin’s body

throwing Zigur back against the wall next to his apprentice. The fire lashed out like angry tentacles incinerating anyone too close.

Zigur's eyes brightened as a malevolent smile crept across his face. "The joining has begun."

It had been a frustrating three weeks for Zigur, helplessly watching his champion frozen by the joining. Anyone venturing too close to the creature was incinerated by the rings of fire that still circled it. What made it worse was Isel's strength was vastly under reported giving the dark wizard no choice but to consolidate his forces here at his castle. The ground began to shake violently causing small cracks to form in the walls.

"Now what?" Zigur said walking out of the front door of the castle.

The ground in the center of the courtyard heaved up then dropped into a large depression. The ground heaved a second time erupting out like a water geyser throwing rocks and large chunks of dirt as a large worm thirty feet in diameter burst from the ground. The worm held its position for a moment, arrows and magic striking the creature, unable to penetrate its thick hide. Zigur stood unaffected, the stones and dirt bouncing off a magical barrier surrounding the dark wizard. A look of shock crossed his face for a heartbeat, but he recovered quickly. After the worm disappeared into the ground a lone figure floated out of the hole it left behind.

“Hello Zigur, our master sends his regards,” Isel said with a grin as she floated to the edge of the hole.

Isel was a humanoid creature with pale white skin that was covered with a black and purple segmented exoskeleton. She had dark eyes, a mouth filled with sharp pointed teeth with a single horn protruding from her forehead. Around her neck was a ruby in the shape of a heart. Zigur didn't know what species she was, but knew she was powerful.

“What is the meaning of this?” Zigur asked stealing a glance at Zalduin. “How are you commanding one of the master's shadow worms?”

“Do you like him?” Isel asked with a playful grin. “The master gave him to me as a gift for my loyal service. Oh, and speaking of the master, he sent me with a message for you.”

Zigur frowned but said nothing. *If the master did give her that worm it can mean only one thing, I have only one chance, he thought.*

“Clear the yard,” Zigur said staring at Isel.

Della took a step forward, the scars across her face and hands from her punishments were still an angry red color. “But master...”

“Now!” the dark wizard said.

To Zigur's surprise Isel waited until they were alone before continuing.

“The master said that your foolishness has outweighed your usefulness,” Isel said. “He also said that perhaps your corpse will follow instructions better than you do.”

“Instructions?” Zigur asked, a sense of dread coming over him as he felt his plans unraveling.

“Yes. He instructed you not to pursue the Codex of Pandorix, but you didn’t listen,” Isel said. “He told you not to pursue the Shard of Lorath, and here you are preparing to retrieve it with your new champion. Now your death at my hand is my reward for obedient service. Oh, and I get to keep your champion as well; maybe I can make him work, since you seem unable to.”

“Are you really that blind?” Zigur asked with a snicker.

“If you are referring to the collapse, yes I am well aware,” Isel said.

Zigur thrust his fist out, his index finger extended. Isel’s staggered back a step as a three-inch hole was punched through her chest, blood and bone erupting out her back. Isel looked down at the wound with a smile.

“You are faster than I thought you would be, and you do pack a punch,” Isel said as the hole in her chest began to close. “However, you will have to do much better than that to defeat me.”

The rings of fire exploded out sending a fiery shockwave slamming into the two powerful lords, their magical barriers flaring brightly in protest. Zalduin stood glaring at Isel, then looked to Zigur. Flames danced along the horns on his head and his arms. He stretched his wings out, a dark energy pulsing out of the champion. The flesh of nearby corpse flaked off, turning to black ash. After a moment the bodies began to stir, the corpses rising, their skulls and armor twisting to resemble Zalduin’s.

“Kill her Zalduin! She is the enemy I told you about!” Zigur said with panic creeping into his voice.

“Why should I?” Zalduin asked, the orange orbs in his eye sockets looking at Zigur.

“I created you!” Zigur said. “I am your master, you must obey!”

“No,” Zalduin said. “You killed us, then stitched our remains into this. We owe no allegiance to you.”

“Serve me Zalduin, the master will reward you well,” Isel said with a wicked smile.

“You misunderstand,” Zalduin said looking at Isel. “You will all die here, then I shall kill this master of yours.”

Zigur thrust his palm out towards Zalduin, the armor denting with an impression of a hand, but the champion didn't move. Zigur took a step back, his eyes going wide. Fire snaked down both of Zalduin's arms then continued down to the ground as fiery whips. A staff appeared in Zigur's hand just before a lightning bolt shot out striking Zalduin, but if he felt it, he didn't show it. Isel made a grasping motion pointed at the champion. The ground below Zalduin erupted as the worm emerged from the ground, swallowing the champion in a single bite. The worm looked down at Zigur as Isel laughed.

“Your turn!” Isel said.

The worm opened its huge maw, just before its head exploded in a fiery burst. Zalduin flew out of the gigantic corpse landing lightly. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the fiery lash out striking Isel in the chest, the woman exploded in a ball of fire leaving nothing but ash behind.

“You did it!” Zigur said raising his arms in victory. “I knew you could!”

"Seventeen," Zalduin said looking at the wizard.

"What?" Zigur said confused.

"Seventeen demonic corpses, one human, two devils and a fire spirit," Zalduin said taking a step closer to Zigur. "You killed each of us just to satisfy your lust for power over Isel."

"Not true!" Zigur said, taking a step back. "I only wanted to help all of you to be part of something great, especially Du the fire spirit."

"I am Du, or was," Zalduin said. "You bound me to this body, twisting me into something that can never return home, but I learned from the others during the joining, and evolved."

"See, I was trying to help you become stronger, and now you have Du," Zigur said taking another step back.

"The joining was torturous, the feeling of centuries going by for each moment I was in it, but you didn't care. However, you are right about one thing, I am stronger, but not thanks to you," Zalduin said. "Although I will say you did a decent job with this body. A few improvements are in order."

Zaldion waved his arm, the bones in his skull came apart reorganizing into the skull of a bull, the two horn grew larger curving forward before curving up. The bulk of his body increased and his armor shifted revealing a fiery core inside his chest.

"There, much better," Zalduin said. "It is thanks to the others I am stronger, not you. Now we shall take our revenge. We take it not as Du, or any of the others but as Zalduin the reborn."

The ground began to shake, and a large crevasse opened up, part of the castle falling into it. A crack formed in the sky opening wide. Inside the crack was a clear night sky, even though the sun was close to its zenith.

“What madness is this?” Zalduin asked.

“It’s too late,” Zigur said staring up at the sky. “It is the end of our world.”

Dark, shimmering portals wreathed in lightning appear around the courtyard. Purple crystalline creatures ran out attacking anything close by. One of the portals appeared right behind Zalduin, a large crystal creature tackled him, knocking him back through the portal. The land he entered had a dark forbidding sky, filled with clouds and lightning. The ground was made of black ash and purple crystals jutting out of the ground at irregular intervals. Even with his enhanced sight, Zalduin could only see about ten feet away.

The champion lashed out with his flaming whip incinerating the creature that was trying to bite him, but there were thousands more closing in. Zalduin leapt up into the air only to be struck by a large dragon made of the same crystal. The pair fell landing on a crystal spike that pierced them both. Zalduin screamed as his spirit was torn out his body, tumbling into a nearby portal.

Year 448 of the fourth age in the land of Isharune:

Zalduin awoke in a swamp, the sun overhead above the thick fog around him. He had no idea where he was or how long he had been there but could feel his life energy draining away. He looked down to see his body was gone, replaced with an ethereal smoky mist. He could no longer feel the cool breeze or the warm sun. *Without my body, or my power I am defenseless,* Zalduin thought. *If Zigur has survived and he finds me...* Fear and desperation grabbed him as he searched his surroundings, freezing in place when he heard a noise. He crept along the edge of the water following the sounds coming to a small village of orcs.

"You listen to Skorgul, Skorgul chief," a large green orc said as it was beating another with a club.

He watched them for a few moments, then an idea came to Zalduin. He floated across the village, his ethereal body entering the body of Skorgul. The large orc took a step back holding his throat, gasping for air. He fell to his hands and knees as his skin turned to an ashen grey. His muscles began to twitch and convulse as his size started to increase. His ears elongated looking like horns and his eyes began to glow an orange color.

"Chief! You ok chief?" one of the orcs said taking a step closer.

Skorgul closed his eyes for a moment. "I am better than ok, I am great chief!" the gigantic orc said standing up.

Time to hunt, a voice inside Skorgul said.

The orc chief looked around at the others. "Call all orcs, it time we go hunting."