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I was asked by the DM of a D&D campaign to come up with backstories for all the characters in the party. The stories had to end with them all meeting in the same tavern – with the exception of the last one, Yen, who joined them at a later date. The stories had to incorporate behaviours from each class, alignment and race. It was incredibly fun to work on, the type of work I love doing the most!

Toldror – Dwarf Cleric

Unlike his nine brothers, Toldror was not built for a life of quiet worship. His family had been one of prominent holy men since before the Great War had even dreamed of starting. And like all temple folk, Toldror had been trained in all the prayers and rituals of his people, had performed them time and time again on the Great Halls of the royal family of Isaus Draukat and within the holy temples of the order.

However, there was a side of him the great Bahamut kept hidden until his fiftieth birthday, the one he had inherited from his mother, a legendary champion: the warrior. After Toldror proved himself as skilled in the battlefield as he had been between temple walls, the ancient leaders of the Great Bahamut temple had seen it as a sign from the Great God himself.

He had received two gold bracelets on the day of his initiation. Underneath them, tattooed black against his copper skin, were the dragon head in profile, Bahamut's symbol, to remind him of his holy mission and carry his blessing; and the dragon head with the five claw marks, Tiamat's symbol, to remind him of the treachery that could be lurking and to remain true to his path.

Since then, his days had been spent split between smashing heavy hammers against shields or gaining bruises; and praying alongside his brothers, blessing weapons and studying holy texts. Toldror would spend days in isolation, meditating underneath the mountains, hearing the hum of the Earth and making himself as strong as the rocks around him, rarely ever seeing the light of day.

Now, as he sat in his room at the Stone Hill Inn, washing after the exhausting journey from Isaus to Phandalin, he wondered if he was ready. But he had to be. Bahamut had made the message clear to the temple elders: Toldror was to be sent south. Something important was about to happen, something even the wisest men in Isaus couldn't understand.

But Toldror knew his God would not fail him. So he closed his eyes and prayed.

Nim – Gnome Wizard

Nim had been no more than a young child when magic came into his life. He had been wandering the woods one hot summer day, playing a game he could no longer recall when he came upon a dying man. He had never seen a human before and to a small gnome he looked very much like a giant.

It wasn't his size that caught Nim's eye, however. It was the way the man was murmuring words to himself and, as he spoke, his whole chest seemed to glow. But no matter his efforts, he was still dying. So Nim did the only thing he could think of and brought him home.

His parents had been more than a little startled – gnomes didn't really have that much contact with other races any more – but after much begging and pleading, they had helped save him. He had turned out to be a powerful wizard and, in return for Nim's kindness, he had taught him a trick. Nothing complicated, just a simple conjuring of a spark, the kind of thing a child would love, but Nim had picked it up so fast and seemed so interested in the process, the man decided to leave one of his smaller, cheaper spellbooks behind.

And that was it. The knowledge was like a drug and for years Nim read and re-read every spell, that book becoming almost a second skin as he ran around the woods of his small, isolated settlement, smiling, singing, casting prank spells on every gnome he came across, always rolling with laughter after each one.

But the knowledge ended and Nim wanted more. Much more. He could help people, learn how to heal them like the man had tried to heal himself. So he left behind his life and set out in search of more books, texts, but more importantly, of other wizards who could share their secrets. The cover of that first book he sewed onto his tunic, a reminder to never give up, a talisman to constantly carry around.

And yes, he had trusted the wrong people once or twice, but the risk was worth it. And even his cheaper, easier to conjure tricks had their uses. Like paying for a drink at the tavern of the Stone Hill Inn as he exchanged stories with his travel companion and buying the time to pour over his books.

Samsan – Human Rogue

People were idiots. It didn't matter the race or clan, it didn't matter their wealth or the number of books in their libraries, everyone was eager to be made a fool of. Samsan was no exception, or at least he hadn't been.

A lifetime ago he had been one of those idiots. He had met a beautiful woman, fallen madly in love and built a house close enough to Dragonbane to make her happy. Because that beautiful wife of his had been a devoted member of one of the many religions that popped up in the area like spring flowers, all worshipping one dragon or another. He had spent every ounce of coin he made as a locksmith on talismans, scrolls, dragon scales, all of it fake, just to keep her happy.

But by some twist of fate they must have gotten their hands on something real – or at least something someone thought was real. He still remembered her corpse lying bloody on their bed as he walked through the door, every trunk and closet tossed and turned. His loving wife, dead. It wasn't until later he found she had been loving to a lot of other men and her loose lips were what caused that invasion in the first place. But whoever killed her knew how to disappear and before he knew it he was in prison, awaiting execution for a murder he didn't commit.

Small blessing, locksmithing is very useful to break out of jail cells. So he ran. He ran and decided that since the world wasn't going to play fair with him, he wouldn't play fair with it. Since then he had made his living selling his skills to the highest bidder and learned to listen in the shadows for clues of treasures for himself.

That's how he had caught wind of a certain box being transported. Definitely worth something. And word was, this is where he would find it, in this filthy inn on this filthy town. He would take the box and kill the men carrying it. The fact that they were dragon worshippers would just be an added bonus.

Asael – Half-Elf Sorcerer

Asael had studied and heard so much about the Great War he felt like he had lived it. It was his life's work. More than that, it was his life force. High-elves were not normally fond of sorcerers not found amongst their own ranks, but Asael's powers came from a place too close to Bahamut himself to be ignored. And so the King of the High-Elves had allowed him access to their lands, to the draconian relics of old, always under a cautious and judgemental eye, in the hopes that it would awaken something in him, something that would give them an edge in whatever was to come. And they were certain something was coming.

But magic, raw magic couldn't be willed out like that. No matter how many trinkets of the King's prized collection he touched, no golden ray of light came out of him, no flames or disembodied voice. Were it not for those walks around the Noble Peaks however, Asael would have never met his mentor, the one he would spend his entire life with.

He found his calling. His mentor, a powerful draconian sorcerer himself, showed him how to tap into the dormant power inside Asael, how to respond to the call that came from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was exhilarating and overwhelming and often dangerous. His mentor was important enough to the High Elves to demand space and solitude so it had always been the two of them. No formal starfall dinners, no social occasions, no concerts between the trees, just wandering, meditating and talking. An unbreakable bond had formed between them, a family bond.

It was that bond that kept Asael from asking any questions when his mentor dragged him across the land to Phandain carrying a box, riding harder than they ever had. And now as his mentor clutched that box, his elegant face unusually concerned, Asael felt that whatever he had been preparing for, it wasn't far off.

Beron – Human Fighter

Beron's size had picked his occupation for him. At age fifteen he already towered over most of the adults in Phandain. The military was a natural path for someone like him, not just strong and tall, but driven. A survivor. Disease had taken both of his parents when he was twelve and it had almost taken him too. But he had fought, not with his fists and weapons like he was now so used to do, but with determination fueled by the knowledge that if he died, his sisters would have no one to care for them, that they would end up on the street or worse.

So he had moved with them to Dragonbane, to get a position on the City Watch. It was a lot of young mens' plan and the competition was much fiercer than Beron had expected, but he was born for this, born to fight. Born to win. He had risen through the training fast and even faster through the City Watch ranks after that. It was honorable work. Beron often felt like Hogar himself, felt his strength on every patrol, every city corner. He always walked by the Great Hero's statue and touched the necklace of his likeness that his middle sister Bea had made for him.

The same sister whose letter he now carried on his uniform pocket. Bea had moved back to Phandalin to get married. And now she had had a baby. She named him Beron. It had felt weird to be back in Phandalin after so many years, but it was worth it to see the little one's face. He looked so frail, so small. It reminded him of how little his sisters had once been, how innocent.

He thought of all that as he sat sharing ales with his sister's husband. There were laughs and stories, but something inside Beron was feeling a change. He felt the weird quietness that comes before a battle, the calm before the storm. So Beron stared at the Stone Hill Inn's door, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword tightly under the table.

Jadis – Half-Elf Bard

As far as Jadis was concerned, he was an orphan. He couldn't quite tell if it was true, of course, having been left with a travelling troupe at only a few months old, but an orphaned bard sold more than one with a comfortable childhood. People never paid to hear to hear the tales of well-adjusted folk and their straight-and-narrow paths; they wanted danger, adventure, tragedy, lost love.

And so Jadis gave them what they wanted and more. The only weapon more powerful than his imagination was his oud, the beautiful black wood string instrument seemingly made by high-elves, the only possession left with him when he was abandoned.

Jadis spent his whole life with the same troupe, jumping from town to town, often selling his own fake story. Sometimes he would be the son of a powerful High Elf who ran away with a human woman, sometimes it would be a human Queen tricked by a Fae-like Elf, whatever worked for one audience or another. Most of the time, however, all they wanted to listen to was tales of the Great War, of Dragons, Hogar Dragonbane, Tiamat and Bahamut.

But as Jadis smiled and collected coins on yet another tavern, the Stone Hill Inn or whatever this one was called, he couldn't help but want, once again, to have a true story of his own to tell. An adventure where he wasn't just the narrator, but a participant. Where the magic that flowed through him could be put to more use than plucking strings for food and coin.

There was more out there. There were treasures to be found, people to be helped, lands to discover, adventures to be had. So Jadis played on, eyes closed, waiting for a sign.

Waiting for opportunity to walk through the door.

Halduil – Elf Ranger

It wasn't unusual for elves from the Silver Woods near Cryogeyser to spend time alone in the lush forests of the area. But that time normally meant weeks, maybe months. For Halduil, it had been years.

The city dwellers didn't mind, of course. After all, it was rangers like Halduil who kept the monsters away from their children's beds, kept them at bay at the edges of the world. Some lived in small settlements or were part of a large order, but Halduil had always preferred being by himself, though he was never truly alone.

Nature spoke to him. Every bird and beast, every blade of grass, every dew drop, they lent him their energy, taught him their lessons. From a young age,

he decided he didn't need a mentor, a tutor, an order; his books and teachers would be the natural world.

Almost everything he owned, he made. What he couldn't make, whatever extra parts he needed, he could get from traveling salespeople who occasionally wandered through the woods. No monster or bandit could escape him in his territory and soon he started being known as the "ghost of the wood". It wasn't a peaceful life, but Halduil enjoyed the company of animals, the shelter of trees, the silver light of stars and the feel of the Earth underfoot as he continued to be on the move, invisible in his gear among the trees.

And one day something had changed, the very Earth seemed to have shifted, like something fundamental was altered. The animals felt it too. Halduil was possessed by a sudden sense of urgency, like the biggest challenge of his life was about to begin.

He had followed that energy, followed whatever it was the natural magic was trying to tell him, followed it all the way to the most unexpected of places: a small inn in an average town. Now he stood there, the noise of singing and drinking deafening, a creature of the woods trapped between four walls and he could swear that the very ground was infused with magic.

Only he couldn't tell if it was good or bad.

Yen - Human Warlock

People often said they were raised by the streets, but Yen had always felt it was particularly true in her case. Only instead of bitching and moaning about the damp of the ground or the smell of the gutter, she used the misery of Shodon to her advantage. She had washed up on the city when she was no older than six after her father's ship had been caught in a storm. It seemed ironic that, with so many people out for his blood, it was nature that got him in the end.

Unfortunately for Yen, if they couldn't claim Captain Odan's life - and the considerable bounty that came with it - they would settle for the next best thing: his daughter. Unfortunately for them, Yen had been taught how to lie, trick and deceive since she was old enough to walk. It wasn't hard to disappear. She lived as a boy for a while, but as she got older she realized it was a lot easier to get people to do what you wanted if you were a woman, specially in a town like Shodon, where most marks worth taking were men. She sold potions that were nothing more than water and dye; made deals that would never come through and sold amulets that you could find in a crappy pawnshop for more gold than she needed for a year. People begged to be taken in.

They wanted the lies she was selling and no one wove better lies than her. She did always end up losing her earned money in the gambling houses and taverns of the lower parts of the city, but it was no matter. She would just go out and find a new sucker. One was born every day. There was no one she couldn't charm with a smile and a few words.

No one until Halia.

She had seen right through the junk Yen was trying to peddle, only instead of trying to kill her, Halia had recognized her potential. Magic potential. The real kind, the kind that meant Yen could become a warlock, not just pretend to be one. She made the pact. It seemed like dark magic, but the bond was powerful and the doors it opened too enticing to ignore. The two women had

spent years tricking and stealing from half the city, magic coming to Yen as naturally as deceit did. The power was enough to make Yen drunk with it. She felt invincible.

But the past had a way of catching up to people, no matter how fast they ran. Yen remembered blood and light, she remembered the metallic taste of magic as she fought off the man who had spent his life hunting her father, his obsession now turned towards her. Halia had pulled her from a fire, holding off a crew intent on murder. She screamed at Yen to run and shoved a piece of parchment in her hand. It only said "CITY. Do not come back. I will find you."

And so she had.