

ZX-8491

ZX-8491 (usually known as Z)

Class	Ranger
Gender	Male
Race	Half-Elf
Age	Unknown - about 22
Height	5'5"
Hair	Deep red/auburn
Skin	Light brown
Eyes	Green
Build	Slight, athletic
Deity	Dimitri



Appearance

The first thing that people usually notice about Z is his rather elven appearance. In a land where elves are seldom seen, he is viewed as something of a novelty and most will mistake him for an elf.

People will sometimes joke about Z's hair, as it is probably the most rebellious part of him. It is long and unruly, refusing to stay where it is put, no matter what is done with it. It is auburn in colour, shining a deep red when the sun catches it. Z rather enjoys its untidy freedom, even though it gets in his eyes. His Duerger masters used to insist on it being cut short, so feels like something of a luxury.

Z's eyes are very green, a much truer green than is usually seen among humans, though something not uncommon among the elves. When first introduced, people tend to notice that his eyes are unusual, without always realising why. This causes them to look for longer than they ought, much to Z's discomfort, as they try to understand what it is they have seen that is so unusual.

He speaks quietly, with a noticeable Duerger accent that strikes an odd chord with his gentle voice. Much to his embarrassment, he does not speak Elven, nor can he read or write.

Character

A genuinely nice guy, despite what he's been through and the things he has seen. He always sees the good in people, believing them to be better than they know. This either results in the person doing their best not to let him down and rather enjoying the company of someone who sees them as they would wish to be seen, or really disliking him as they feel uncomfortable around him, particularly under the gaze of those unnaturally green eyes, that seem to see right through you and lay your thoughts bare.

He is kind, childlike in his innocence and strangely diffident. A shy, quiet individual, he speaks only when he has something to say. He has a very strong sense of right and wrong - lying is probably beyond him. He is sensitive to the needs and others and could not see someone in need of help and walk by - indeed, he could not conceive of doing anything other than helping.

Religious outlook

He is fairly fatalistic, believing everything to be guided by the Unseen towards some pre-determined destination. He believes that all things happen for a reason, that he is here because he is meant to be here, and that he has only to make sure that he takes the subtle hints that the Unseen give him and acts as they would want him to. They will do the rest. He fears only letting them down.

Background

An ex-slave, his childhood is full of pain and he does not like to speak of it. We don't know where he was born or who his parents were, but his earliest memory is of receiving the brand that he bears on his arm and that probably sums up the experiences of his early life quite well. He's certainly seen and experienced things that no child ever should.

Like most slaves, he started his life working deep in the Duerger mines. Later on he was sold into household service, which could only be seen as an improvement.

The brand itself is likely to be something of a problem now that he is leaving the village. It functions for slaves as a registration number functions for cars, allowing the slavers and officials to track slaves as they are bought and sold, or go missing. If anyone looks him up in the register, he will almost certainly show up as a runaway. To keep it hidden he must wear long sleeves even in warm weather, which could raise suspicions.

History

His arrival in the village was something of a shock for most of the villagers. He appeared suddenly one night in the middle of a frightful storm: A small, frightened figure; bruised, bleeding and half-dead from cold and exhaustion. It was some time before they learned how he had come to be there. This is the story provided by one of the villagers when asked about him (he would not tell it himself):

"At first he would only speak of it in passing, so we built the story itself from pieces as one might put together a jigsaw puzzle, the picture slowly taking form and becoming more and more clear in our minds.

Z was born a slave, one of many. His birth was insignificant and unregarded, noticed by his Duerger masters only because of the money it could bring them in his sale. As all the other slaves before him, Z began his life working in the mines. It was hard, backbreaking work. Safety was not something considered worth investing in when your workers are literally two a penny. Children are popular workers as they can get into the smaller crevices and swing a pick in places an adult cannot reach. They also tend to be cheap as they need to be trained, but they quickly learn their place.

Over the years, Z saw many terrible accidents in the mines. He and others were often sold from one Duerger mine owner to another, usually when new seams were uncovered that needed to be exploited, or when their master had lost a bet. It often seemed that the Duerger preferred to deal in slaves than money when betting. Less to lose, they say. In all of those mines, many of the slaves had at least lost fingers, if not limbs. Many's the time that Z saw or heard someone crushed under one of the trucks, or when there was a cave in. Others would die when they were punished by the Duerger, who did not take kindly to any kind of failure, real or imagined, and their cruel whips like to lick across the backs of any who appear not to be working hard enough, or who might be thinking of it.

It was in the mines that Z first found an aptitude towards healing, something that made him popular among the other slaves. It is not an ability that is found often, and, particularly in a place such as this, it is a valued skill. The mines are a cruel and unforgiving place, and most slaves end their lives there. Z was fortunate enough to avoid the worst fates, though he does still bear the scars of those whips - they criss-cross his back, and to a lesser extent his arms and legs - a permanent reminder of his past.

Life improved somewhat when a large feast was held and there were not enough kitchen slaves to be had. Z, being one of the younger slaves, was sold again, this time to a Duerger cook with a kitchen big enough to fit several of our houses into it. Safety was not high on the agenda here either, and Z retained his popularity, this time tending to burns and scalds rather than broken bones. After the feast was over, he was sold to another kitchen for another feast, and so it went on. He would not return to the mines again, much to his relief.

It was not long before his function changed again, and he was sold into the service of a household, where he not only continued to work in the kitchen, but was called upon to wait on his masters, to clean their home and their clothes and to wait upon and dress their children. It was a much easier and gentler life than his time in the mines had been. But life never really settled down. Over the next few years he was sold several times, always now into the service of a household. Being trained it would have been considered a terrible waste to send him back to the mines.

His Duerger masters often had visitors from another mountain, and Z would be among those called upon to wait on them and tend the fire while the drinking and feasting ensued. They drank and partied until quite late, when someone would suggest - as happened fairly often on these occasions - that the party could get more interesting if some of the younger slaves were 'invited', and there were calls for them to be brought in.

The worst thing about being a slave is that you cannot say no - not at any time or for any reason. As usual, it tended to be the young girls who suffered, though some of the Duerger were known to turn their attention to the young boys (whether Z ever had been the subject of this attention, we do not know and he will never say), and he cursed himself for not being able to prevent it happening to those around him. On the few occasions that he had tried to speak up, he would regret it for days afterwards and carry the scars for the rest of his life.

These sales caused him to be moved back and forth between the different mountain halls, the only times he saw what it was like outside. The first time they brought him out, it scared him terribly to see the vastness of the sky and to feel the air move unexpectedly. There was no wind and no breeze deep inside the mountains.

It was on an occasion when Z and several others were being taken from one mountain to another, that the Duerger slavers grew complacent, and having released for the purposes of waiting on them a small number of slaves from the wheeled cage they carried them in, proceeded to set up camp for the night. On this night, after he had served his purpose in building the fire and preparing and serving the food and copious quantities of drink, Z was forgotten, as were the two others with him. Seizing their chance, they stole away and slipped quietly away into the night.

It was cold outside, away from the fire. Very cold. Z and his companions had never seen the snow before, and they certainly weren't dressed for spending a night on the side of a mountain. It had been warm in the camp, and the thin, in-door serving clothes that they wore had been adequate then. Out here, the wind cut through them like a knife, chilling the 3 children to the bones and throwing snow into their faces, making their eyes stream and their skin smart.

They ran as soon as they were far enough away not to be seen at all. It was dark, pitch dark, and they stumbled and fell and clambered through the snow and rocks. More than once they fell over something or one another or ran into some unseen object in the way. They seemed to travel forever like this, holding onto one another and all but completely blind. It's a miracle that they didn't fall down a cliff or into a ravine. Eventually they slowed, and finally stopped. Too cold and too tired to go any further, they huddled together beneath a small ledge against a cliff face. Their hope all but extinguished, they all regretted leaving at this point. Anything had to be better than this. They would die here, Z realised, cold and lonely and frightened.

He does not know at what point he lost consciousness, whether it was sleep that claimed him or something else, but he was aware at first of the quiet, then of the feeling that he was floating on a great lake or river, its waters warm and welcoming and lapping gently at him. The light was grey and colourless and the waters seemed to go on forever, but he was aware of being carried gently by the river. He has since learned that this river is the river of Death, that meets and carries everyone through each of the nine gates to the final resting place.

The river seemed to seep into his very being, bringing feelings of comfort and safety and erasing all fear and worries of the past and future from his mind. He was content to lie there and let the river take him where it would, but he did not get past the first of the Nine Gates. If he had, he would not be here today, as few who pass the first gate ever return, and those who do could not be considered alive in the normal sense of the word. No one ever returns from beyond the Ninth Gate.

Something stopped him there, and held him on the very threshold of the first gate. At first, he was angry and wanted to go back to the river, which tugged at him even now, whispering at him to go with it, to let go, lie down and just let it take him, and he fought the being that held him. But it was strong, incredibly so, and held him fast despite his efforts. When eventually he stopped struggling and looked up, he was unable to really see it properly. The being was bright, so bright that had he looked on it with his living eyes it would probably have blinded him, but here in death he was simply unable to see its features. He could tell only that it was humanoid.

He was not afraid of it. This only struck him as odd later when we asked questions about it. Fear just wasn't something he had considered before. Although it held him fast, he did not feel threatened. The being seemed benevolent and he had no reason to believe otherwise.

It had carried him back, back away from the gate and towards Life. It had spoken as it carried him, the words seeming to enter the mind rather than the ear. They didn't seem to even be in a particular language, as only the meaning seemed to trickle into his mind, echoing and reverberating there. "Not yet, it is not your time. Go back, go back and live, for we have need of you." The words seemed to carry a power beyond their meaning, that gripped his mind and held it firm, forcing him back to Life and further, giving him the energy to move when he awoke, pain exploding all over his body as he broke through the barrier and was thrust into the cold, unwelcoming world. The words continued to echo within him as he got to his feet and started to walk, stumbling and crying and getting up again, only to stumble again.

He had woken some distance from the cliff, and he reasoned that he must have fallen down the mountain side, though how he didn't manage to sustain any injuries worse than cuts, bruises and a broken arm he does not know. His friends were no where to be seen, but the wind had now lessened and the snow was floating around him gently, settling on his eyelashes and hair.

He had not gone far when something made him look up. That's when he saw the light - small and distant but definitely a light. It made him remember all the things that he really missed right now - food and warmth and people and light. Then he stumbled and fell and lost it. Panic started to close in, and he searched desperately for another glimpse of it in the darkness. Seconds seemed to pass like hours, but he couldn't see it. Ah! There it was again! Relief washed over him and he got to his feet again and stumbled, crawled and clambered across snow and rocks and goodness knows what else to get to it. Occasionally he'd lose sight of the light again when he fell, and then panic would ensue until he found it again, but it was getting closer now and the hope that had previously been extinguished now blossomed and burnt brighter with every step, until he finally fell against the door of a house, crying out and beating against it with his hands, despite the broken arm.

When the door - my door - was opened, he collapsed across the threshold, unconscious.

The shock of those inside was almost tangible. Who was this strange boy, who had thrown himself - quite literally - into our quiet community? We brought him in as fast as we could, not wanting to get cold ourselves, and were quite surprised when we brought him into the light, where we could see that this stranger was indeed strange. We had noticed when we brought him in that he wasn't at all suitably dressed for a day in the valley at that time of year, let alone a night in the mountains. It wasn't until we got him into the light that we realised he wasn't human. No one had seen an elf before, so we weren't entirely sure that that was an elf, but he seemed to match the descriptions we had heard and he certainly wasn't a goblin or an orc or one of the Duerger.

We also noticed that he carried a brand, and that he wore an iron collar round his neck and shackles on his ankles and his wrists, which told us something of his origins.

The first few days were the hardest. Slavery is not something that exists in the village, so few people could conceive of what he was or what he had been through. Many were wary of him at first because of the obvious physical differences between us, which led to some awkwardness. He also didn't speak our language, though we didn't realise at first as he didn't speak until some weeks later. It was confusing, as he obviously wasn't stupid, but getting him to understand what we wanted was difficult. On top of this, he tended to assume a servile role, doing the things he knew - cooking, cleaning and tending the fire - all things that the inhabitants of the house appreciated, though not without some guilt. He seemed so desperate to please and would become distraught at the slightest hint of unhappiness with anything that he might have done.

On the third or fourth day, he dropped a bowl, which shattered on the flagstone floor as crockery tends to do. The effect on Z was something none of us will ever forget. Father shouted at him for being so careless, and instantly Z went and cowered in the corner, using his arms to shield himself from the expected beating. It was pitiful. Mother wept and I think even Father shed a tear.

Of course we would never beat him, we didn't even think of him as a slave, but that was the moment when we first saw something of what his life had been before he came to us. We had not thought of him as so different from us until then.

It was not long after this, when the weather had improved, that Grandmother came to visit. She was a small, tough woman and we all loved her dearly. Z seemed to be fascinated with her, and she with him, though the source of Z's fascination was less obvious, but he sat there, on the floor in front of the chair that she sat in, observing her every move as she spoke with Mother about how she'd been coping with the awful weather recently and how some others hadn't been so lucky. He later explained that he'd never seen anyone as old as she was who wasn't Duerger.

Grandmother pointed out what we had all been thinking - that we should take Z to the blacksmith so that he would no longer have to wear the chains that currently snaked between his wrists and ankles, or the collar that was about his neck.

He was very nervous about going anywhere. Of course, though we tried to explain it to him, he didn't understand what was going on. Grandmother wrapped a cloak about him and took him by the hand, and we all trooped off to the village to see Mr Farrier, the blacksmith. He drew a fair bit of attention from the other villagers as we went through the village. They'd been told about the presence of an elf in the village and almost no one had seen one before. He clearly didn't enjoy the attention, and tried to hide behind Grandmother most of the time, his eyes on his feet and his face burning.

None of us will forget the look that Z gave Mr Farrier when he removed the shackles from his limbs and the great iron collar from his neck. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so happy before, though it took some time to heal the open sores that had developed where the nasty iron cuffs had been. He seemed taller leaving the smithy than he had been when we entered it, and actually smiled for the first time since he arrived. I think he practically skipped home that day.

It was not long after this that Grandmother suffered a stroke. She had always been so fiercely independent before and it really upset us all to see her like that, unable to look after herself or perform simple tasks like stoking the fire or sweeping the floor. Father had never gotten along with Grandmother either, and the thought of having to have his mother-in-law beneath his roof was not a pleasant one. I think Z saw this, and considered it his chance to make it up to us. In any case, he managed to convince the old woman to let him look after her. I think it was probably a war of attrition. They were both so stubborn. She was determined not to be waited on and he was determined to do everything for her. In the end, he won.

From then on, he was her lifeline, her eyes and ears in the village and her full-time carer. Everything that she needed doing he did, as well as keeping her company and being content to talk to her when she wanted company. She was probably the only person he really spoke to at any length, although he did have a few friends among the children of the village. I often wonder how much he told her, whether he told her about the memories that so frequently plagued his dreams and woke him, as they did that fateful night when tragedy struck.

He'd had a particularly bad dream that night, and felt the need to go outside to try to clear it from his system. He often walked in the woods at times like these, finding solace in his surroundings and enjoying the quiet dignity of the trees. On this night, he stayed away longer than normal, not wanting anyone to see his tears or hear the tremor in his voice, and believing Grandmother to be safely tucked up in bed.

When he returned to find the house ablaze, it took 4 grown men to hold him back and prevent him from going in himself to try to save her. We all knew it was too late for that. Father, two uncles and several friends had already tried, but by now fire was gushing from every orifice of the house, leaping up in great red tongues of it. The heat could be felt from some distance away. We don't know what started it, but the general consensus was that the old woman, waking to find herself alone, must have attempted to do something for herself rather than wait for him, and in doing so knocked over a lamp, setting the house ablaze.

Whatever happened, he never forgave himself for not being there to prevent it, and the depth of his self-loathing shocked us all. He now mistakenly believes that we all blame him as he blames himself, and nothing will convince him otherwise, so he has decided to leave the village and to atone for something that, in all our eyes, was simply a tragic accident and never his fault."

Character special abilities

- As a result of his time as a slave, Z can speak Duegar
- Z gains both survival and knowledge(nature) as a class skill
- Z has the healing domain. As such he adds the spells on it to his spell list at the same level, and casts healing spells at +1 caster level