

## **Chronicles of the Mandrake**

By Tim “HeXetic” Gokcen  
hexetic@hotmail.com

Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

### *Dramatis Personae*

Hex Zetic  
Mature Adult Male Gold Dragon  
Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact  
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Zacharajakh  
Ancient Male Red Dragon

Darpax, Renashadaal, Tormorass, Isashacharakh, Jherrimazel  
Gold and White Wyrmlings

### *... But Family is Chosen for You*

“Viscount, there is a red dragon outside to see you.”

Zetic looked up from his lute at the man standing just inside the great cavern that formed the main hall of his home.

“Please bid my father-in-law enter, Jacob. After that, you and Seyuk may retire for the evening. Return tomorrow afternoon when the junket from Trana-Dorval arrives.”

“With such a guest in your home, are you sure you wish to receive the diplomats? They can be lodged in town and the meeting can be postponed for a few days, if you wish to be alone with your family.”

“That will not be necessary. The meeting will take place tomorrow as scheduled.”

“Then good-night, my Lord.”

The guardsman, halberd in hand, gave a bow and walked out of the room through the gigantic front entrance tunnel. Zetic continued to pluck away at his lute, reflecting deeply while playing it as others may reflect while smoking a pipe or sitting in meditation.

Echoing up through the entrance corridor was the creaking sound of the great front door being opened. The groan and clatter of it shutting again was mixed with the heavy plodding step of an immense four-legged creature.

The footsteps ceased, and Zacharajakh, colossal red dragon, stood in the cave, surveying it.

Zetic continued to look down at his lute as he gestured with one hand to a pile of cushions on the opposite side of the room from himself.

“Please, father-in-law, sit down and make yourself at home.”

Zacharajakh’s eyes flickered and he paused for a moment to consider what lay before him. Adjusting his jaw, he walked across the thick carpeted floor to the immense collection of pillows, and took his seat.

Zetic’s concentration remained on the lute, though in-between the fast trills and low plucked notes, there was now something resembling a melody coming out from it.

“I am glad to see that you did indeed receive my message, despite the condition in which you left the messenger.”

Zacharajakh, now settled on the ground yet still appearing distinctly uncomfortable in the present environment, harrumphed.

“I hope he was not *permanently* damaged.”

“No, though the experience was quite terrifying for him.”

“As I intended it to be. I am not one to be... summoned... in such a manner.”

“The note was not a summons, father-in-law, but an invitation. An invitation that I am happy to see you have finally decided to accept, a year after I sent it to you. I trust that the magic bag that I sent with the message reached you as well, and was of sufficient size to safely bundle up your possessions.”

“It was.”

Naught but the music of Zetic’s lute, the tiny trickle from the fountain in the centre, and the soft flickering of the arcane fires in the chandeliers, candelabras, and torches around the room could be heard for several minutes, until Zetic seemed to hear something off in the distance and turned towards the covered tunnel at the back of the room.

“Would you care for some tea, father-in-law? The leaves are from a local plantation that has rather quickly earned a reputation for excellence.”

“Thank you, son-in-law... You do not smoke, by any chance?”

At last, Zetic turned to look at the great old wyrm.

“I have not acquired a taste for smoke-weed, father-in-law. However... I believe that we do have in our possession a water-pipe as well as a sack of tobacco from the Dales. Excuse me while I get them for you.”

Laying the lute gently down in front of him, Zetic walked off on two feet through the back entrance to the room.

Zacharajakh was left alone in the hall. With nothing else to do, he looked around.

The enormous room, easily able to seat a thousand men, was exquisitely decorated and almost completely wrapped in woven fabrics and cloths. Deep red seemed to be the colour of choice, with great carpets and giant cushions displaying it prominently along with light green, a solid blue, and, here and there, wispy strands of white and gold. On the wall directly behind Zacharajakh hung a rug emblazoned with the blue star-scape that was the icon of Bahamut. The front tunnel was bare save for a small sheer curtain, but covering the back exit from the cave was a thick red tapestry that bore the symbol of Torm, a raised gauntlet with the palm held forward.

His eyes at last looked at the side wall in front of which Zetic had been sitting. Hanging on it was the centrepiece of the room, an immense banner displaying the cleric's personal emblem: Torm's gauntlet with Bahamut coiled around it to form a caduceus, his wings outstretched at the back.

The three incredibly ornate woven pieces were more than sufficient to make the room equivalent to a grand cathedral in honour of the two Gods. To Zacharajakh, creature of selfish impulses and evil, the prominently displayed symbols of two deities of lawfulness and goodness were almost overbearing and he felt... threatened... by their presence.

Yet the room had been designed to be welcoming, and so it was. The three large chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, with their magical flames casting a soft light, was reassuring. The clear pool of water in the centre, with a tiny fountain coming from a rock formation, was soothing. And the rugs and the fabric – and even the banners with their outspoken icons of justice – were comforting in their coziness, and their lushness, and their soft colours.

Zacharajakh was just beginning to relax in this alien environment when he was interrupted and felt anxiety creep up his throat once again.

“Father! It's so good to see you again!”

Isacharact entered the room with a smile on her face and bounded over on two feet to warmly hug the red dragon around the neck. It was, needless to say, a gesture to which he was most unaccustomed, and the old wyrm looked around with a panicked look in his eye, unable to fathom what to do.

Eventually, he composed himself and placed one arm around his daughter's shoulder, effectively hugging her back.

After a few seconds, Isacharact pulled away and smiled joyously at her father.

Zacharajakh was still out of his element in the face of her affection and blankly stared back, disbelieving what she had just done. Isacharact's face slowly took on the characteristics of a frown as she failed to understand the meaning of his reaction.

She soon backed away and turned to face Zetic, however, as he re-entered the room carrying a large narghile and sack in one hand and a tea service in another. Zacharajakh's eyes lit up as the gold dragon placed the water-pipe and bag of smoke-weed near him. With a grin he reached out for it and eagerly got to work readying the device.

Zetic placed the large tray on the ground as well and then turned to Isacharact, who had already taken notice of the fact that there were only *two* large tea-cups.

"Wife of mine, it is getting late. You should see to the children and then go to bed. Your father and I have many things to discuss this evening."

Isacharact looked at Zetic with a combination of righteous disgust, incomprehension, and yet also... good humour.

*"Husband of mine, are you ordering me away from my own father..."*

She reached out and firmly grasped the underside of his chin.

*"... in my own home?"*

Zetic swallowed and flatly spoke the only answer he knew that she would accept.

"Yes."

Isacharact opened her mouth in a grin and stared at Zetic sideways, her tongue peeking out as she licked her teeth. She held the pose for a few seconds, considering Zetic's response.

*"Very well, then. Good-night, father."*

Isacharact withdrew her hand... but she clawed Zetic's chin in passing, causing him to quickly clasp a hand to it in pain, hunch his neck, and curse in a forced whisper.

*"She-devil!"*

But the she-devil in question only chuckled, flashed her eyes, and turned to leave.

Zacharajakh stopped in the middle of preparing the water-pipe to see her go, and both he and Zetic watched, fascinated, as she walked away.

For Zacharajakh, it was the memories of Isasarach that sprang to mind at seeing the way his daughter had handled her husband.

For Zetic, it was the way his wife seductively wagged her tail back and forth.

And so, for profoundly different reasons, both males stared at her until she finally passed through the doorway and the banner bearing Torm's symbol flapped down again, covering the tunnel completely. Shaking himself awake, Zetic coughed noisily and began pouring the tea, while Zacharajakh was occupied once again with the water-pipe.

At last, the drinks were served and the pipe was ready. Zacharajakh took a long draught from the hose, blew up into the air, and seemed to relax. Zetic took his cup and returned to his seat, taking up his lute again.

Zacharajakh looked at the finely ornamented wooden tip of the hose reflectively.

"This is a very elegant narghile, son-in-law."

"It was a gift from the Pasha of Calimshan... sent for our baby shower."

Having Zetic's children introduced to the conversation sparked a look of nervousness from the old wrym, and he quickly tried to change the topic.

"This tea service is interesting as well."

The fine porcelain cup was painted around the outside with the image of gold dragon chasing the tail of a white dragon who was in turn chasing the first one's tail. On the inside of the cup, the design was mirrored and reversed in direction.

"A housewarming gift from a tribe a frost giants who are our friends, also given to us when we installed the nursery."

There seemed to be no avoiding the subject. Zacharajakh exhaled deeply.

"So... how many are there?"

"Five. Three white, two gold. Three daughters, two sons – one of each colour."

"A large and healthy clutch, then. You have..."

He hissed out the last word.

"...my *felicitations*."

Zetic ignored the thick sarcasm and continued to speak plainly, as before.

"Thank-you, father-in-law. Unfortunately, they are asleep already, else I would bring them out and present them to you. But there will be time enough for that tomorrow."

Zacharajakh grumbled.

"And who says that I am here to stay the night?"

Zetic turned up from the lute and stared straight at Zacharajakh, a small grin on his face.

“Surely, father-in-law, you do not expect me to believe that you packed up your entire hoard and came here merely to visit for a few hours? Of course you are here to stay the night; several nights, even. Perhaps more. I prepared a room for you this morning, once I knew that you were coming; I hope you will find it comfortable.”

The lips of the old red dragon curled up into a sneer as if tasting sour milk.

“I see you still have your... *sight*. Shall I bother to explain my reasons for being here, or are *you* going to tell *me*?”

“My eyes can only see what you know, father-in-law, and even *you* do not wholly know why you are here.”

Zacharajakh put the smoke-hose into his mouth again and puffed away as Zetic continued to strum on the lute, completely nonchalant. At last, the red wyrm looked off to one side and replied to him at a ponderous pace.

“Well, in that, at least, you are correct. In truth, many things drove me here. A desire to see my daughter and my grandchildren, yes, but there is more—”

“There always is. Motivation is never a simple thing, I have found.”

Zacharajakh was annoyed at the interruption, but continued in a morose tone.

“Yes, well, more. Ever since you visited me ten years ago—”

Zetic piped in again, still appearing to pay all his attention to the lute.

“The problem stretches back further than that, and you know it.”

Zacharajakh appeared incredulous at this second disturbance, but still he continued on, as slowly and as carefully as before.

“*As I was saying*, I have had... problems... and—”

“Emotional problems you, mean.”

With this third interjection, Zacharajakh became infuriated, raised his neck up, put the smoke-hose down, and spoke in a highly indignant tone.

“Would be *possible* for me to get a word in edgewise about my *own* troubles?”

At this outburst, Zetic at last smiled widely and let out a laugh, though he continued to look down and play his lute.

“Of course, father-in-law! But first, I had to get you out of that deep gloomy mood you were in. Be lively! You have thought about this for a long time; there is no need to pile worries about speaking your mind on top of the worries that already trouble it.”

The great red wyrm blinked, glanced downwards, and, huffing deeply, conceded in his mind that his son-in-law was correct.

“Aye... And yet... and yet it is so *difficult* to speak of these things.”

“Perhaps, but to whom could you speak more easily than the husband to your daughter, a compassionate cleric of Torm, and one who knows your suffering almost as well as you know it yourself?”

“No-one, I suppose. But then, if you already know my ills, is it truly necessary that I speak them aloud?”

“It is not *necessary* that you do anything, father-in-law. It may be better for you in the long run to tell your tale sooner rather than later, but I invited you to come here, not *ordered* you to ‘report in’, and you may speak your mind or remain silent as you please.”

There was a long pause. Zetic continued to add to the noise of the room with his lute while Zacharajakh puffed away at the hose. At last, the old red let out a small chuckle.

“It was just your poor messenger’s bad luck that he came on the first day that I had been outside in several weeks. There I was, drowned in misery, barely able to lift myself out of bed, and here was a man sent from *you*, bearing your letter.”

And, now, at last, Zacharajakh dropped his false composure and with it, the false self-righteousness. He blinked, and held the smoke hose off to one side.

“I had thought that hearing her answer to my question would bring me solace. Instead, your ‘help’ has only made my suffering worse... As if it wasn’t enough that you were responsible for plunging me into a deeper depression over my loss, now you were sending me a writ that showcased your own gains, almost to rub them in my face!”

“You know that I could never have done it for such a reason as that.”

“I do now, and I suppose I did then, too. But when one’s mind is so... tortured... it becomes difficult to think properly. I do not apologize for lashing out at your messenger, but I am... *relieved*, in a sense... to hear that he escaped unharmed.”

His eyes became teary, and he wiped them off with one hand. Zetic looked straight at him.

“My life... my life just hasn’t been the same without Isasarach. I... I tried to... to *move on* after her death, but... but as I am here today, in this sad state, and with these heavy thoughts upon my head... I have clearly failed.”

The majestic old wyrm paused to whimper through his shut mouth, his eyes welling up.

“She left me, she was taken from me! Nothing in all my life before I met her compares to the time I spent *with* her... Now, there is a hole where I am empty inside... and nothing I have done in the last *three hundred years* has been able to fill it.”

Zacharajakh covered half of his face with one hand, sobbing underneath it.

“All I have left of her... All I have left is the memories, and the veil... and my daughter, your wife... However precious those things may be... compared to having *her*, they are insignificant. Yet *you*...”

He turned to Zetic.

“... You have your love... your children... your fortune... your title, your home, your health, your Gods...”

The red drake opened his eyes wide and they were full of sorrow. His speech was now quite distinctly marked with staccato breathing.

“You have everything! And I... I came here simply to beg you...”

He swallowed, shut his eyes, and lowered his head to the ground, facing Zetic.

“... to beg you to let me into your home, and let me drown my troubles by wallowing in its glory.”

Zetic stared at the pitiful prostrate form before him, and tears began to form in his own eyes at seeing the ancient creature’s suffering.

But he closed his mouth, slowly blinked his eyes, and made himself calm again, resuming his music on the lute. It was not quite yet time to let Zacharajakh *in* proper.

There was a lesson to be taught, here.

“One does not *beg* entrance to my home, Zacharajakh.”

The old wyrm’s eyes had dried up, and he lifted his head again, not understanding the meaning of Zetic’s words.

“What... what do you mean, one does not beg entrance? You... you wish more than that, then? A... *payment*? A *bribe*?... I... I had thought you *different* from other dragons... but I see that I had been wrong. You are greedy like the rest of us.”

He became angry, letting out a dismissive growl and snarling at Zetic.

“And heartless, too! You... you have plenty of wealth – perhaps even more than I. You have all your children with you, alive, healthy, and numerous! You even have *my daughter* to call your own! You already have everything that I could possibly have wanted, everything that I could possibly have possessed! Do you seek, then, to rob this old dragon blind? To extract some payment for my past sins? My memories and my daughter are already yours; what more of my possessions could you possibly want?”

Zetic calmly played on.



“I *want* nothing of yours, Zacharajakh.”

The red wyrm became at once both enraged and disgusted. He spoke in a yell.

“So you will turn me out? Send me home after you invited me here yourself? Is this some planned humiliation? Some plot to embarrass me in the name of your ‘righteous’ God? You... you are despicable, to take advantage of me thus!”

Zacharajakh snarled and got up to go, but Zetic stiffened his neck, stared at him coldly, and barked back.

“Calm yourself, Zacharajakh, and sit down!–”

The red froze in place and stared back with one eye, but did not sit.

“–One does not *beg* or *buy* their way into my home, Zacharajakh. The only thing needed to be a welcome guest here...”

Zetic’s face and tone softened.

“... is to simply step in through the door. For the house of Zetic – *my* house – is open to all, and I play host to any who come wishing to lodge under my roof.”

Hearing these words, Zacharajakh realised his mistake and collapsed onto the floor again, picking up the smoke-hose and choking back more tears.

“Oh, see what I have become! Truly, a pathetic creature, that I was unable even to grasp your meaning from the first word, to see that you were merely testing me... I have made the same error today as I did a year ago.”

“Be at ease, father-in-law. I have perhaps been too harsh in teaching you this lesson tonight. But may it be a first step on the path to your recovery.”

Zetic stopped his random plucking and began to play a soft melody on top of a sour rhythmic bass line. The music calmed Zacharajakh, and the droning of the long strings of the *Chitaronne* was entrancing...

Lost in his sorrows and lost to the music, the great red dragon soon fell asleep on the cushions where he sat.

Zetic gave one last sad look at his sad father-in-law and then retired from the hall.

Partially obscured by the thin, translucent swatches of white cloth that hung from the ceiling, Isacharact was lying on her side in the large mass of pillows that formed the basis for the couple’s canopied bed.

“Was that ‘*Courtship by Moonlight*’ I heard you playing out there?”

“Yes, it was.”

“I hope you did not perform the *dance* for my father as well.”

Zetic grinned, and as he walked through the rows of drapes towards her, he stared at her and mimed the fast arm and hip motions of the ritual dance, clicking his talons as if holding castanets or finger-cymbals.

“I am afraid that exhibitions of *that* kind are exclusively reserved for you, my dear.”

He put the back of his right hand to his forehead in mock regret as he twirled, using his left hand to swirl the cloak behind him, still dancing to an imaginary beat.

“Alas! What will my adoring public say to such a refusal to perform?”

She smiled back at him, and when he came close enough, she grabbed his arm and pulled him down onto the bed with her, giggling. He chuckled back, and they held each other closely for a few minutes, snuggling...

“How long will my father be staying with us?”

Zetic rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know. It depends on *him*... on how he behaves, on how hard he tries to change. I want to help him, but his troubles are incredible. It will be a difficult task.”

Zetic blinked, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

“He’s so sad, so miserable, and he’s been that way for so long... Oh, Illmater! Give me the strength to help bear his pain! I am weary already just from tonight, and who knows what tomorrow will bring?”

Zetic shut his eyes and nodded off. Isacharact nestled herself against him and went to sleep.

A dream...

As he slept, Zetic’s mind delved into that of his father-in-law. Figures of smoke and ash danced before his sleeping eyes, figures bearing the shape of Isarach, the White Queen of the North, and Zacharajakh, her Red mate.

Round and round they went, two blurry images whirling through the Queen’s palace of ice and frost. Isarach stood tall, proud, mighty. Zacharajakh was at her side, held in thrall by her power.

And yet... sometimes, when they had made love, or when he had spoken softly to her, or when he had stood majestically by her, or so few other moments when they were briefly alone with one another, she had been held in thrall by *him* as well.

Yes, she had loved him. And he had loved her. He *still* loved her.

Oh, the incredible sorrow of love lost long ago!

Zacharajakh's terrible pain became known to Zetic, and it awoke in him his own anxieties.

He tried to push these back down, but they came forth nonetheless, presenting themselves as if signing off on a roll call.

Ancient fears... Fear of the dark when he was a child. The never-quite-overcome fear of battle from his youth. The fear of the death of those close to him, and the agony of that inevitability when it had come for his parents. Fear for his friends who might turn to darkness, and the horrible memory of one who had. Fear of the sword, of the flame, and of the sight of spilled blood.

Fear for his fate in Swight's dungeon. Fear to love Isacharact. Fear in the presence of the God Bahamut. Fear of being changed for the worse with the deity's gift, or during his years of wandering completely alone, or with the elemental *Hapax Legomenon* inside of him. Fear for the world during the events at Focus. Fear to fail in his obligation to Isacharact when he had been in the company of Miishara, and a fear of returning to his betrothed only to find she had given up on her promise to him.

Recent fears as well, for Zetic, in spite of his outwards behaviour, his great fortitude, and his great willpower, was still afraid of many things.

Afraid to have dragon-children – of what it meant for *him*, of the implications for the future, of having to settle down for the decades needed to rear them, of what they might become.

Afraid of the hundreds of years of life still ahead of him, too. Each and every one was a question that he could not answer easily.

And now, thanks to Zacharajakh's miserable emotions that stemmed from his beautiful memories of Isasarach... a new fear crept into his mind.

The fear of losing his Isacharact...

...just as his father-in-law had lost her mother.

Zetic awoke from the nightmare with a start and wiped the tears that had already collected in his eyes. Impulsively, instinctively, he turned to his side and was relieved to see Isacharact sleeping beside him.

As he looked at her, he sobbed and laughed at the same time. Glad that she was still there, but sad at the thought of losing her. It was a new thought... and an unwelcome one.

If he was stronger than Zacharajakh, perhaps he could overcome it, in time. His wife would have enemies, yes, people who would be out to harm her – to get at *him*, probably – but not as many as Isasarach had had, and the new couple were blessed with far more allies and friends than the old dragon-queen had been.

It was a foolish fear, he told himself. *Of course* she might be taken away from him, and *of course* he would be sad beyond belief if that should happen. But it made no sense to fear that day, for his fear of it could not possibly help him prevent it.

Prevent it...

Zetic rolled on his side, brought his arm around Isacharact, and pressed against her back, as if this tiny gesture would help keep her safe from the perils of the world at large.

Maybe it would, and maybe it wouldn't, but it was a good action regardless, for Isacharact seemed to feel his presence even in her sleep. She sighed softly, and pushed her own body against his.

The gesture in reply brought relief, and Zetic was soon asleep again.

“Good-morning, sleepyheads!”

Zetic's bright voice shook the inhabitants of the small room out of their light sleep and into various degrees of semi-consciousness. Five pairs of eyes opened up and blinked at him, and here and there the sound of a half-awake, 'Good-morning, father' uttered in reply could be heard. Seeing only scattered sluggish movement in the mass of cushions, Zetic spoke on in an energetic voice.

“Wake up, little sluggards of mine! The day grows late!”

A man-sized golden serpent, still wiping its eyes, spoke up.

“Not late enough! Some of us slept poorly last night.”

Zetic looked straight at his son with a mock stern face.

“And some of us have been up since the crack of dawn, giving thanks to their God! Come on, wake up, the all of you! There is a special guest with us today.”

A sarcastic voice came from a white dragon at the back of the room.

“They're *all* special!”

Zetic raised an eye at his daughter.

“Indeed they are, Sasha, and do you know why?”

A wide smile crossed his face, and the other children rolled their eyes in anticipation of the lecture to come.

“It is because there are a great deal many *special* people in this world who are most *specially* interested in visiting the very *special* children of a certain very *special* couple who, I am told, live in a *special* little cave right around the corner from this one.”

A few snorts and chuckles came from the small crowd. Now almost fully awake, another gold wyrmling spoke up.

“So who is the ‘special’ guest today, father?”

Zetic inhaled to speak, but before he could reply to his golden daughter, the other of his white ones answered for him.

“Weren’t you listening last night, Rena? It’s our grandfather!”

“Oho! Listening to *what*, Jherrimazel?”

She turned to look at her father and suddenly her eyes went wide as if from fear.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Then it must have been someone else who listened for you to know that your grandfather has come to visit. Perhaps the walls have ears, then?”

He placed one hand to the side of his head, as if craning to hear a faint sound.

“Yet I made every single stone in them, and I do not remember giving them that particular ability.”

The only child to have remained silent so far finally pointed out the guilty party with a sheepish grin.

“Mother told us before she went to bed.”

Zetic looked at his other son with a playful smile as he pulled on one of his whiskers.

“Well, then. The culprit is revealed. I suppose, given the nature of the crime and of the criminal, we’ll let her off this time with just a stern warning.”

“A stern warning for what?”

Isacharact came into the room, which was now almost beginning to seem crowded – or at least *full*, what with the two adults and the five children.

“The crime of Grand Theft Sleep, naturally. Unless, of course, you want to plead innocent to knowing that telling the children of our newly-arrived guest would fill their heads with exciting thoughts and in so doing, rob them of their slumber.”

Isacharact smirked and tried to rebut him.

“And what of your rule about not keeping secrets?”

“They would have learned soon enough. What of children needing their sleep?”

“I know what they need! After all, who here has raised more children?”

“You have, but who here *is* the more childish?”

She snorted at him.

“I can’t argue with you about that.”

“My dear, you cannot argue with me, period. For, if I am apparently not the Master of Secrets of this household, I am at the very least its unquestioned Lord of Debates.”

The couple stared at each other for a few moments. Zetic smiling defiantly, Isacharact, defeated, yet in defeat, amused and... aroused? She mindlessly licked one side of her lips, until it dawned on her that nothing could come of the moment, and she dismissed everything.

“Well. Perhaps you ought to go out and see if my father is up yet, husband.”

“He is, for I have already been out. I have already served breakfast, too. Go and join him, and I will send the little ones out shortly after you... just as a beautiful queen may be followed by a retinue of followers.”

Zetic took her hand and kissed it in a deep, flowing bow, his other arm flourishing to the side. Isacharact savoured the display, and ran a claw under his chin as she turned and left.

“Good-morning, father.”

Isacharact pushed the rug covering the tunnel aside and entered the main hall where her father had spent the night. The great wyrm was already awake and was currently sitting where he had slept, sipping a cup of coffee.

“Good-morning, daughter.”

The reply came relatively easily, though Isacharact could still sense some tension in the old wyrm's voice. She sat down across the fountain from him, just to one side of Zetic's usual place.

She almost laughed at herself for, despite all that she had changed in the ten years since she had last seen her father, and despite all her tutoring in the art of 'small talk' at Zetic's side, and despite having entertained numerous guests already... there was still an uncomfortable silence between her and her father.

As had happened ten years ago, Zacharajakh broke it first.

"So, my daughter. You two have settled down at last, I see?"

"Yes... though it is most likely only temporary. I think we shall be globe-trotting travellers once again when the nest is empty."

"That is still some time away."

"I know. But as much as I enjoy the stationary life, Zetic is restless, even here."

"And you?"

She smiled.

"I have become like him."

"Intriguing... And him?"

"The same as he has always been."

Another silence; Zacharajakh took another sip of his drink as Isacharact helped herself to some of the various foodstuffs on a low table near her seat.

"We are spied upon, it seems."

Zacharajakh was looking at the back tunnel where a minuscule white head was poking out from behind the rug. Hearing his words, it gasped, and the tapestry flapped back into place. A small commotion could be heard coming from behind the cover, and here and there it fluttered outwards as if a number of things were pushing on it.

At last, the white head reappeared, and its body followed, scraping the ground, pushed out by an unseen hand. The wyrmling's eyes were open wide as she stared at the two adults, unable to fathom what to do. Isacharact wiggled a finger and motioned for her daughter to come to her side. That one scurried over hurriedly, and partially hid herself in her mother's arms, still staring at the great red wyrm with a half-hidden face.

"Say 'hello' to your grandfather, Jherrimazel."

A tiny timid croak came from behind Isacharact's arm.

“Hello.”

The old dragon grinned.

“Hello, little one! You hide; are you are afraid of me?”

The minuscule head nodded quickly, and Zacharajakh let out a loud laugh.

“Well good, you should be!”

Jherrimazel gasped and disappeared behind her mother’s arms, but quickly realised that she had been made fun of and was annoyed at it. She therefore resolved to ‘get back’ at her grandfather the only way she knew how: she stood up and blew a noisy raspberry at him before indignantly moving to sit by Isacharact’s side, fully exposed.

This act of defiance amused the old wyrm considerably, and he cackled aloud. Isacharact chuckled and gently gave a stroke and a pat to her daughter, who was wearing a smug and satisfied expression and still staring at Zacharajakh.

The tapestry at the back of the room rose up again, and Zetic peeked through with a smile.

“Well done! Here comes the next!”

He gave a gentle shove to a small golden figure standing at his feet, and that one entered the room with a distracted look about him.

“Hello, grandfather.”

“Hello, grandson. And what is *your* name?”

“Darpax.”

“Well-met, then, Darpax. Come and take your place around the fountain.”

Darpax moved over to the side of the room near where his father usually sat.

The flap opened again, and two came out: one gold, one white. They spoke in unison.

“Good-morning, grandfather.”

“Good-morning, my grandchildren.”

The white one gave a bow.

“I am Tormorass – The One Beholden to Torm.”

The gold one followed suit.



“And I am Renashadaal – The Bright Serpent.”

Zacharajakh nodded back, and the two children went to sit close to the centre of the room, in front of where their parents usually sat.

Zetic held the cover up again, and the one remaining child proudly walked through the opening on all fours and glanced around at the room. She blinked once at her grandfather, and that was as close as she would get to bowing before him.

“Good-morning, grandfather. I am Isashacharakh.”

The old wyrm’s eyes followed her closely at her as she haughtily walked over to sit off to one side from her mother, a cold look on her face.

When, at last, she sat down, the tapestry at the back of the room flapped down, and Zetic stepped through, gesturing at the children clustered near Isacharact.

“And there you have the whole lot.”

“Impressive. And unusually well-behaved, for dragon children.”

Smiling at Zacharajakh, Zetic went to sit down in his usual spot, to the side and slightly behind Isacharact.

“I have my methods.”

“Highly effective they must be, then. Yet can they be spoiled?”

“Not by what you are planning. Go right ahead.”

Zacharajakh flinched at this small reminder of his son-in-law’s powers, then turned once again to his grandchildren and grinned.

“Well. As I have brought my entire hoard with me on this little trip...”

He pulled out a large sack from behind him.

“... I thought it would only be appropriate for me to give you each a *present* from it, so that you might revel in your family’s wealth.”

Ten young eyes lit up with the anticipation of receiving gifts. A few tongues even darted out to impulsively lick lips. All the children followed Zacharajakh’s arm as it reached into the enchanted bag further than seemed possible.

“Of course, not having met any of you before, I know not what items would suit each of you best, so I will require your... participation.”

He looked at them with a sneaky expression.

“I will offer up five items from my treasure-ward, one at a time. Claim one, if it catches your fancy, or hold out for the next, in the hopes of receiving something better.”

And so the game was on; the challenge for each, to wind up at the end holding the most precious gift of all those proffered. There were a few glances exchanged between the competitors, the acknowledgement of friendly rivalries, perhaps.

“For the first, I have this book...”

He pulled out an immense tome from the bag.

“... an ancient codex of arcane wisdom. It came to my possession over six centuries ago, and there are still secrets within its pages that I have not yet been able to unlock.”

Several of the children were looking at it eagerly, though none more so than Darpax.

“It will make a handsome gift for one who wishes to grow strong in the sorcerous arts and learn the great mysteries of magic.”

He looked around, and his eyes rested on Darpax as he gave his final pronouncement.

“Who will claim it?”

Before anyone else, Darpax spoke up and walked forward, considerably more awake and vivid than he had been when he first entered the room.

“I will, grandfather.”

Zacharajakh handed it over slowly.

“Take it, then, but beware powers that you do not yet comprehend, grandson. Be cautious when you explore the knowledge contained within.”

Darpax nodded back as he took the tome that was almost as large as he was.

“I will be careful, grandfather. Thank-you.”

Staring intently at the book and turning it around in his hands, he went back to sit down at Zetic’s feet, much closer to his father than he had been sitting previously. Once seated, he placed the book delicately on the ground and turned to the centre, still interested in seeing the other gifts despite having already chosen his.

Zacharajakh, a twinkle in his eye, continued to talk in a showman’s voice.

“The gift of sorcerous arts has been given. Perhaps a gift of martial arts next, then? However unusual it may be for dragons to use swords, I do not doubt that at least *one* of you has taken after your father and is desirous to learn the techniques of swordplay. For that one, then, I offer up an elegant gift...”

He pulled a two-handed sword in a plain-looking scabbard out of the sack.

“This sword’s scabbard looks ordinary, but that is because its owner wished it to be that way so he might surprise his opponents when he drew it.”

Zacharajakh pulled the sword halfway out of its case, and all present could see that the bright steel was inlaid with intricate and flowing designs.

“I took it from its previous possessor by force, but to say that is not to diminish the sword’s power, for it gave me many a nasty cut before the hands that held it became cold.”

A suffocating tension passed over the room when the others realised what he meant by that last statement. Zacharajakh loudly re-sheathed it to break the atmosphere.

“This sword has the extraordinary power to aid its owner in parrying blows of all kinds. A swordsman who wields it is a tough opponent indeed, for it gives him the bite of a two-handed sword and the bark of a sword-and-shield.”

Renashadaal was looking at it hungrily, and all the other children were looking at her. It was obvious to whom this gift should go.

“I would have that sword, grandfather.”

“Then it is yours. Use it well, but remember that you are still a *dragon*, and do not neglect your study of the techniques of the tooth and of the claw.”

He handed it over to her, and Renashadaal quickly unsheathed it and held it in both hands, flourishing the blade in a twirl and slashing the air several times to feel its balance. Satisfied, she put it back in its scabbard and went back to her seat.

Zacharajakh reached back into the bag with a grin.

“I have given away two things that will be precious to their owners for what they will make of them, but that is not the only way that things may be made valuable. For some things may be dear to us simply because they were once dear to someone else. This next gift is one such thing.”

He pulled out a great wooden disc the size of a chariot wheel. Icons of ancient deities were painted and engraved on its face around the edge and spectacular geometric forms decorated the interior.

“The Gods in homage to whom this prayer-disc was made are long-dead, but it is precious in spite of that – or rather, because of it, for it is easily tens of thousands of years old, or more. A true piece of art... and a humbling reminder of the passage of time.”

Fascinated eyes looked at the relic. Glances were exchanged between the three as-yet-unblessed children; like poker players, they were each trying to play this item off on each other – it was an incredible gift, but perhaps there was something more incredible to come.

Finally, Tormorass gave in and stepped up.

“I will take the prayer-wheel, grandfather.”

Zacharajakh handed it over carefully.

“Keep it well, grandson, and respect its age... but do not become so caught up in the mysteries of the world’s past that you neglect the mysteries of your own future.”

Tormorass took the disc, and returned to his place by the fountain.

“Thank-you, grandfather. Your wisdom is as valuable to me as the disc itself.”

Zacharajakh’s eyes narrowed... until he realised that the comment had been intended as a compliment, and something approaching a gentle smile crossed his face.

“There are two gifts left, and two White Princesses to whom to give them.”

Isashacharakh and Jherrimazel looked at each other briefly. Isashacharakh wore the same cold stare, and Jherrimazel’s face was held in a smirk. The first daughter was outwardly stronger, but it was something of a false façade. The second was outwardly more timid, but beneath that visage lurked a hidden strength.

Zacharajakh watched their interaction with amusement as he pulled out the next item.

“And this next gift is one that befits a not merely a princess, but a queen!”

One open hand lowered to the ground revealed a tiara. It was a tiny piece of jewellery, and the gold frame was simple, but all eyes were on the magnificent blue sapphire at its front, a giant of a gemstone that was intricately attached to the frame by tiny gold filaments.

In-between looking at the piece of jewellery, the eyes of the two daughters darted at each other. The tiara was beautiful, and both of them wanted it, but there was in them both the gambler’s hunch that what comes last is best.

There was a silence in the room for several seconds as each of them considered it. Zacharajakh sat impassively, examining the two bidders.

At last, Isashacharakh yielded to the allure of the coronet and to the resilience of her sister, walking forward to take it.

“I shall wear the tiara, grandfather.”

He placed it on her head, and it fit her well, though of course all knew that within a decade she would outgrow it.

“Jewellery is beautiful, my granddaughter, and we prize it highly amongst our treasures, yet do not slacken; let this be the *first* such item of yours, not the *only* one.”

Isashacharakh proudly strode back to the other side of the room and sat down much closer to her mother, trying her best to radiate a cold beauty.

Zacharajakh turned to Jherrimazel.

“So, you have held out to the end, my granddaughter. Well done.”

She grinned greedily, but remained silent.

“They who dare, win’, and you have won. For though all of these gifts would fetch similar handsome prices at market, this last one I consider most precious of all.”

Zetic’s eyes opened wide as he saw what was coming next, and he interjected before Zacharajakh could pull the last present out of the bag.

“No, father-in-law, you can’t do that!”

“It is my own property. I may give it away or keep it as I please.”

“But you are not *ready* to give it away. It would not be good for you to part with this item just yet.”

Zacharajakh grumbled back.

“I asked for your hospitality, not your help in dealing with my problems.”

Zetic spoke back in a gentle voice.

“You didn’t *have* to ask. I already see your heart.”

The old wyrm snarled at Zetic, eyes showing fury.

“Again with your infernal sight! Turn your eyes away, if you do not want to watch! I will give this gift, and my granddaughter will receive it!”

“No, she will not.”

Zacharajakh was yelling rather than speaking, by now. He was almost four times Zetic’s size, but his voice... a good ten times louder than the gold’s, at least.

“And who are you to stop me???”

“I did not claim to stop *you*. I claimed to stop *her*.”

He turned to his daughter.

“Jherrimazel, I ask that you refuse your grandfather’s offering. To accept it will do you no good, yet it will do *him* great harm.”

The red wyrm turned to her as well, and his voice became controlled once more.

“Will you take the gift, granddaughter of mine?”

She looked around nervously, but sat resolute.

“As my father requests it... I will not, grandfather.”

Staring at the wyrmling whom he could've easily picked up in one fist, Zacharajakh spoke with an insidious tongue.

“Think carefully... I advise you to accept it, for you will be offered no other.”

“My answer is still ‘no’, grandfather.”

The old wyrm took his empty hand out of the bag and became dismissive.

“Bah! I should've expected that you would have raised mewling man-children instead of real wyrms. Obedience, faugh! You've merely made them afraid to take a chance; see how this one is timid as a fly!”

Zetic thought about saying something in reply, but he saw that Jherrimazel wanted to come to her own defence, for she had already stood up. She looked her grandfather straight in the eye and spoke with great force, given her size.

“Not timid, but wise! Wise enough to know the wisdom of my father, at least. The gifts you have bestowed on my siblings are precious and beautiful, yes, and they are certainly appreciated and adored, but they are not *needed*, they are not *demand*ed! However valuable this fifth prize is, however much I may desire it, I accept my father's judgement and I know that it is not something I *require*, for I have my wits...”

She turned sideways, and her expression was that which her mother so often used: a sort of proud disdain, marked with a hint of a cold allure.

“... and my wits are all I shall ever truly need.”

Zacharajakh was stunned at this unexpected show of fortitude, and several tense moments passed before he spoke again.

“Incredible... Child, you have only five years to my twelve hundred...”

He looked at Zetic, still speaking to his granddaughter.

“... yet you compare to me as a sharp arrowhead compares to a dull stone...”

The old wyrm turned back to Jherrimazel, a regretful look on his face.

“You humble me. I... I am sorry for losing my temper.”

“I forgive you, grandfather.”

He put the bag down on the ground and looked at it sorrowfully.

“Alas, I had only prepared those five items. For now, you will go away empty-handed, but you may have your pick of the prizes in this sack, once I install myself in the guest room.”

With one eye cocked, Isacharact spoke to her father.

“Why not do so now? You have seen our brood accept your gifts with enamoured eyes, and heard the wisdom of one of our daughters, but they have in truth been on their best behaviour, and it would do you good to see them act as children ought to. Let them assist you in unpacking, and you will know that they are indeed drakes.”

Zacharajakh seemed to grow alive once more, and with a gentle grin on his face, he stood up and walked to the back of the room.

“That... that sounds like an excellent idea ... Come, my grandchildren! Help your old grandfather empty out this bag and stash the bounty within!”

As he pulled aside the banner covering the entrance, the five children preceded him with vigour to show him the way to his chambers, nattering to each other about the gifts they had received... and the gift that Jherrimazel would pick out from the wyrm’s hoard.

With a closed mouth, Zetic smiled intently at his wife. She took notice of his attention, and smirked back.

“You’re giving me a funny look. I take it that what I just did was *good*?”

“Oh, no, my dear... it was *perfect*. I couldn’t have imagined a better resolution.”

She blushed and turned away at hearing his words. Still staring intently, Zetic leaned over and softly kissed her rosy cheek.

“You should go back there with them. If we continue to lend your father aid, he will surely pull out of the pit in which he presently finds himself. In the meantime, I must tidy up this room and finish cooking for the arrival of the diplomatic envoys.”

Isacharact looked straight at him again with a frown.

“Is that all you need to do? They won’t be here for three hours at least.”

“Well, I suppose I should also go over the documents which concern the meeting. After that, I was looking forward to practicing my lute for a bit.”

“Humph! You practice it almost constantly already. Isn’t there something more important you could be doing, instead?”

Zetic was genuinely confused.

“I don’t know... is there?”

“Yes, there is...”

Isacharact blew out a blast of cold at Zetic’s neck, causing him gasp, shut his eyes, and rapidly curl up in a shiver. She took his chin in one hand and pulled it back up to just below her eye-level as every forced breath he took created frost in the air before him.

“...for your she-devil went to bed *hungry* last night, and she needs to be *fed*.”

In the guest chambers, nobody paid any attention to the pitter-patter of feet going by in the hallway, assuming they were even able to hear it over all the sounds of unpacking the old wyrm’s hoard... and of the children frolicking *in* said hoard.

Watching his grandchildren playfully unload the magic bag had an unusual effect on the old wyrm as, for the first time in many, many, years... Zacharajakh felt good to be alive.

“Welcome, welcome! Please, come in and sit where you will.”

Zetic was expertly playing the role of the affable host as he personally hung up the cloaks and coats of the four men and two women in the delegation from the Trana-Dorval.

“It is quite chilly out today; would any of you care to warm your bones with a cup of tea or coffee? I also have some spiced wine from Amn, served cold or hot, as you like.”

Though they had heard stories about the Viscount’s hospitality, the members of the delegation were nonetheless quite surprised at having a dragon wait upon them in such a manner. A few bows, curtsies, and spoken words of thanks later, Zetic was serving drinks to the junket as they sat in low, plush chairs.

He turned briefly to his guards, who were still standing in the doorway.

“Jacob and Seyuk, I’ve already served your lunch in the guard-room. I hope you like quail; it was the specialty at market today.”

The guardsmen exchanged curious looks and saluted Zetic before leaving. One of the men in the junket turned to the cleric, a surprised look on his face.

“You serve meals to your own guardsmen personally, my Lord?”

“Yes, I do.”

One of the women in the junket commented in-between drinking her coffee.



“Well, food *is* the fastest way to men’s hearts.”

Assorted chuckles all around, but Zetic broke in.

“Not true! The *fastest* way to a man’s heart is through his sternum.”

He mimed a forward stab, but the black humour was too sudden, and it shattered the light atmosphere, leaving the diplomats stunned. This had been Zetic’s intention, however. A simple rule of ambassadors everywhere: make them comfortable, and be calm, but show that you can unseat them at any time.

“Or, at least, so I was told by the Mistress of Assassins in Waterdeep as my squad and I were arresting her. What she didn’t know is that, apparently, it also happens to be the fastest way to a *woman’s* heart, for when the trial ended in acquittal several months later and she walked free, one of her own pupils assassinated her using that very method.”

Zetic finished pouring the drinks, walked several paces away to sit in the pile of cushions that effectively formed the ‘throne’ of the room, took up his lute, and began to play a soft, spirited melody.

“But I use such dark humour recklessly. And you did not come all the way here from your province to hear tales of my past. If everyone is installed comfortably, we can begin to talk business.”

A half-dozen heads nodded back.

“Excellent. If memory serves, the situation can be summed up thusly: The province of Trana-Dorval, ruled by the Marquis Dejim Cenetan, is in rather dire financial straits after a series of calamities, both internal and external. Her Highness the Regent, Princess Alusair, is somewhat loath to help, given the Marquis’ past – and even current – connections to some of the more treacherous noble houses. Those same houses have offered to help, but the political price in obedience that they demand is steep.”

One of the diplomats – the head negotiator, clearly – energetically stood up and continued where Zetic left off.

“Precisely! So, my Lord the Marquis, having heard tales of your own personal wealth and of your *excellent* character, has written you and subsequently sent us here to try to negotiate an agreement that will see both our provinces prosper.”

The envoy pulled a stack of papers out from his vest.

“I have here the details of my Lord’s proposal, if you would care to hear them.”

Zetic nodded and sat back, relaxed, still playing the lute as the envoy gave the details of the Marquis' plan to obtain a loan of Zetic's wealth in exchange for numerous boons, including being made the vassal of the higher noble, being granted some additional lands, the promise of a healthy repayment, and so on.

Diplomacy was one of the few games that Zetic truly enjoyed. Oh, certainly, games of dice and cards were interesting, and he admired the tactical minds that were able to fathom the abstract intricacies of board games such as Shah (or chess, as it was called here in Cormyr).

But however much he liked those activities, diplomacy was Zetic's game of choice, and he had learned from one of its great masters, that rascal old cleric of Tyr, Damasc Lorto – or, as his pupils used to call him, 'Uncle Lorto'.

Ah, memories... It had been over forty years since he had been at Lorto's side, learning the ropes of diplomacy in a crowded conference room at peace treaty negotiation, but the images were still fresh in his mind, like water from the spring thaw...

Standing around the edge of a crowded palace hall, having just entered through the doorway, Lorto leaned over and started talking in a somewhat hushed voice to Zetic.

“And so it begins! I want you to watch something, my boy – your first lesson, if you will. Diplomacy is all about ‘give’ and ‘take’ with the end goal being, obviously, to wind up giving your opponents only things that you didn't care for anyways, and taking from them everything of theirs that you value. Now, see that fellow over there–”

He pointed at a large robed man who was currently speaking in a loud voice to about thirty or forty others.

“That's the envoy from Torkamos. I can't hear every single word he's saying, but the general gist of his speech is that Torkamos wants to be given the whole of the province of Alasarab as war reparations. Of course, that sounds like a bad idea to everyone else, given that it would almost double the size – and power – of Torkamos. So, naturally, the request will be denied.”

The two walked up to the table and took their seats as Lorto talked on.

“But here's the rub – after days of hearing Torkamos' incessant demands for Alasarab, when the envoy at last appears to ‘cave in’ and offer to take smaller Busar province instead, the other diplomats will be so relieved and they'll be so enthusiastic about achieving ‘real progress’ in the discussions that they'll hand it over with nary a second thought. A perfect situation for Torkamos, because Busar is the territory they *really* wanted. Talking belligerently about Alasarab for a week will make it seem like Torkamos already owns it, and subsequently the envoy can ‘give it away’ in exchange for Busar.”

Taking their seats, the older cleric grinned.

“And I, with you at my side, as representatives of two allied churches of law, order, and goodness, are going to have to put a stop to such shenanigans and ensure that no-one, Torkamos included, pulls a fast move on everyone else here.”

“You seem to know these techniques suspiciously well, ‘Uncle Lorto’...”

There was a twinkle in Lorto’s eye as he spoke back.

“Oh, well, as for that... It takes a thief to catch a thief, don’t you know.”

Zetic smiled back at his teacher, and together the two of them had ensured that the negotiations proceeded with fairness, preventing the use of such underhanded tactics to achieve an unjust settlement.

The flashback and the envoy from Trana-Dorval were both interrupted as Zacharajakh poked his head in through the back tapestry. All eyes turned to the new arrival.

“Ah, father-in-law. Won’t you join us? I would appreciate your counsel on these matters of state.”

“*If* I will not be intruding...”

“Of course not, come in...”

A certain amount of awe showed on the faces of the envoys as the great red wyrm took his seat behind them and off to the back side of the room. Zacharajakh lit his narghile, still there from last night, and began to puff away at it again.

“... The good representative from Trana-Dorval here was just speaking of gaining for Isacharact and I the titles of full Countess and Count.”

The envoy launched into his banter again.

“Indeed, indeed! And that is just *one* of the many benefits which my Lord wishes to confer on you in exchange for your desperately-needed aid.”

Zacharajakh squeezed in a question from his seat.

“Exactly *how much* ‘aid’?”

The diplomat turned halfway around to face him.

“Alas, it is an immense sum, for we are truly besieged by the fates themselves to have so many problems. The citizenry is almost in revolt over the poor harvest last year, the standing forces are grumbling over poor or missing pay, and many of my Lord’s other

vassals are upset at the state of the province. There are even more financial troubles, for a number of scandalous bookkeeping operations have been discovered that have put a serious dent in the ability of my Lord to conduct business on behalf of his populace. Trade is being stifled because of this, and *everything* suffers because of that!”

He turned back to Zetic.

“Yes, an immense sum, though my Lord would be grateful for almost any paltry amount that you can lend him to ease our province through these difficult times.”

“I have considerable resources, as the Marquis must indeed already know, and I would be glad to lend them to an enterprise that would profit the people of this land.”

“A very wise attitude, good Viscount. It is in exchange for such generosity that my Lord would be similarly glad to bestow upon you the honours which I have already mentioned, that you may take them and bless this land in turn.”

The diplomat handed over several sheets of paper to Zetic.

“Please, as I have already outlined our perils, our desires, and our offers, read over the details of this agreement yourself. We would then be happy to negotiate any of its terms as you see fit.”

Zetic quickly read through the contract with an unemotional face. As he neared the last page, Zacharajakh spoke up.

“May I see that?”

Zetic glanced at his father-in-law and, having finished reading the document, walked over and handed it to him.

“Certainly.”

The diplomat had sat back down and was quietly conferring with the other members of the delegation as Zetic resumed playing the lute. Zacharajakh, meanwhile, was intently reading one section of the papers.

“I see here that your master wishes to make my son-in-law his vassal.”

The envoy hastily stood up again.

“Yes, master dragon, in order to thereby elevate him to the status of Count.”

“Such a thing can be done without requiring vassalage.”

“Well... yes, but in addition to other benefits, it is considerably easier to do this way. Otherwise, it would require a petition to the Regent, and such an application would be subject to much scrutiny, as my Viscount surely remembers from when he applied to be granted his current title.”

Zetic replied without even looking up.

“I do, though it was not quite as difficult as you make it seem.”

Zacharajakh grinned.

“That is precisely my point. There is more to vassalage than simply granting titles. And there is more to this deal than simply money. I laired in the Reaching Wood for many years, and as that is very close to Cormyr, I know a fair deal about the intrigues of its court. Your Marquis’ problems extend far past his financial debts, for those are relatively minor.”

The diplomat made to say something in his defence, but Zacharajakh motioned for him to be silent.

“Oh, certainly, certainly, they are grave, but there is little doubt that the Marquis will be able to pull himself out of them within a few years, with or without help. He would therefore easily be able to repay my son-in-law.”

Zacharajakh took a deep breath from the water-pipe.

“No, the good Marquis’ problems are not of money, but of respect and of power. These are things that money can influence, yet cannot buy, and he has squandered them. He allied with the upstart nobles who practically revolted against the crown, but when they failed, he turned away from them again, and so has lost face on both sides for being both a rebel and a traitor.”

“You speak harshly, master dragon, but I will concede that there is some truth in your words. My Lord does indeed lack for friends, hence his offer to your good son-in-law, the Viscount. An offer made in friendship, for friendship.”

Zacharajakh sneered.

“An offer made in *false* friendship, you mean. The Marquis has designs on the throne, and cares not for my son-in-law’s *friendship*. What he *really* wants is to be able to show off the vassalage as a sign of his power. This document has been cleverly worded to make it seem like simply an agreement to sell a title. With my son-in-law in fealty to the Marquis, he no doubt hopes that other nobles will take him seriously.”

The envoy took a more defensive tone.

“I’m not sure what you mean, my Lord Dragon... Your son-in-law is well-liked and well-known, of course, but... this viscountcy is neither powerful nor ‘respected’, at least from a power base perspective.”

“Hah! Your Marquis will have no trouble portraying its power to other nobles when he tries to woo them to his cause.”

“But master dragon, *what* power? Vellingdale and Tremblay are far too small to have independent armies; only a few scattered constables protect this viscounty. Surely you see that these accusations of yours have no basis, for my Lord the Marquis would stand little to gain in terms of military strength from having Viscount Zetic’s ‘forces’ at his disposal.”

The old red wyrm was becoming angry, and he snarled at the man standing before him.

“Do you not know the ancient laws of vassalage, then, or have you conveniently forgotten them? Your master certainly knows them well, as the wording of this treaty follows the form required by them to the letter. If my son-in-law has no standing army of his own – and he *needs* none – then when your Lord the Marquis, calls upon him for support, he would have to come on his own, and on his own, he is easily the equivalent of a thousand men-at-arms!”

The diplomat stood firm in the face of Zacharajakh’s aggression.

“You exaggerate. My pardons to you both, but one dragon, however powerful, is not the same as an army of soldiers. Witness how our King Azoun IV single-handedly slew the “Devil Dragon” Nalavarauthatoryl the Red in personal combat.”

“Single-handedly, indeed! A whole army at his side, your King had, and it was hardly a clean victory, for he died himself in the fight!”

Zetic at last looked up from the lute with a stern look on his face.

“Come now, enough of this bickering! We are here to discuss the Marquis’ proposition, not to argue about the events of the past.”

Zacharajakh growled at Zetic and waved the papers in his hands.

“Surely you are not *seriously* considering this agreement? It amounts to signing yourself out to be robbed by this pretender to the throne!”

The diplomat shouted back, sure of himself. The others in his troupe, meanwhile, were feeling considerably *less* confident about the idea of arguing with a great red wyrm.

“I resent that! My Marquis has presented a fair and equitable arrangement, and one that will profit the Viscount considerably!”

“But it will profit the Marquis more considerably; my son-in-law will be taken advantage of, and made to dance like a puppet! I will not stand idly by and see the honour of my family violated in such a manner!”

At last, the envoy lost his restraint.

“And what do you propose to do about it then, red wyrm? The agreement is for your son-in-law to sign, and not for you!”

Zacharajakh roared... Zetic had already set a ward of protection around the diplomats when the great red dragon spewed forth an incredible stream of fire, completely covering the area where the men and women were standing.

Seeing that his fire had no effect, Zacharajakh stopped and growled at Zetic. Underneath the shimmering bubble, all six people were cowering from the flames that they had expected to hit them head-on.

“Why do you bother to protect these thieves? They deserve to burn for what they want to do to you! Take down this wall, and let me deal with–”

“That’s enough, Zacharajakh! I will not have you attacking honoured guests in my own home!”

Zetic leaned forward and stared with unmasked fury at the old wyrm, who snarled out another roar, threw the papers on the ground, and stormed off through the back exit to the guest room.

The protective shell expired, and, believing that the threat had passed, the chief negotiator uncovered his head and spoke again.

“Thank you, Viscount. I am sorry that I argued with him, but those baseless accusations wounded me considera–”

“Be silent! Those were not baseless accusations in the least, and you know it! I do not approve of my father-in-law’s reaction, but he spoke no lies!”

“My Lord!... You cannot tell me you honestly believe the things that he said.”

“I knew that the things that he said were true before he said them, for even if I could not simply read the very thoughts out of your mind, I had already come to the same conclusions as him. I am not ignorant of the situation of the ‘quiet wars’ amongst Cormyr’s nobles, and I made inquiries of my own into your Marquis before you arrived. Clearly, he takes me for a fool, that I would accept this offer of his. I see that *you*, at least, do not take me for as much a fool as your master does.”

At last, the realisation of failure dawned on the negotiator, and his energetic demeanour turned to a depressed lethargy.

“I... I told my master that this plan would not work... And now you have rejected the agreement, seeing straight through its designs...”

He took a deep breath in and out, and waved at the others to leave, but Zetic stopped him.

“I reject it only *as it is*, envoy. As much as I know that the Marquis sought to make himself more powerful by binding me to him, I also know that the suffering in his province is quite real, and that he does indeed need coin to help his people. Go, and tell him that I will lend him the gold – without interest, even – but will not be made his vassal.”

The negotiator blinked.

“What about the title of nobility?”

“It doesn’t interest me even in the slightest. The only reason I petitioned to be made Viscount instead of Baron is because of the people of Tremblay, as any one of them or of Vellingdale could tell you, had you bothered to ask. Your master used honey to try to lure me to his trap, but I am no honey-bee.”

Zetic sat back into his calm position, smiled at the diplomats, and began playing his lute.

“In the meantime, it has grown late. You are welcome to partake in my hospitality until tomorrow morning. If you would prefer not to remain here – and, in truth, I could not blame you – the town inn will gladly put you up for the night in my name.”

The entire junket was positively flabbergasted. Their leader nodded slowly as he spoke in reply, walking over to where his cloak and hat were hung on the wall.

“You are very wise and generous, my Lord. I have no doubt that we would be safe here, in your magnificent home, but perhaps it *would* be best if we stayed at the inn instead... if only out of respect.”

The other members had followed him and were putting on their surcoats as well.

“Good-bye, my Viscount. We shall return several days hence with a new agreement – one that respects your intelligence, I hope.”

The negotiators bowed deeply, and Zetic dipped his head in reply. They exited the great hall, and the room was empty again save for Zetic, and the music from his lute.

Evening came. Zetic had remained in the main hall since the diplomats had left, playing away, waiting for something to happen.

And something did indeed happen, for as the sky outside began to turn the colour of dancing flames, Zacharajakh pulled aside the curtain at the back of the room and walked to the front door exit.

Zetic looked down at his lute, affording the opportunity for the old wyrm to stare at him without feeling the discomfort of a stare in return.

“Going somewhere, father-in-law?”

The old wyrm swallowed deeply.

“Yes. I am going home. There is no place for me, here.”



“You are wrong on both counts, father-in-law. There *is* a place for you, here, and *this* is now your home.”

“My cavern in the Reaching Woods will not yet have gained new occupants. I shall return to it, as it has been my home for over two hundred years.”

“And it has *failed* as your home each and every one of those years, for a home ought to make you feel comfortable and content. All that that cavern ever did for you was give you a dark place to wallow in your own sorrows.”

Zetic looked straight into the deep red eyes.

“I cannot allow you to go back to that horrid place.”

“Even to your own detriment? My presence here is disruptive to you. I have offended your children—”

“That situation turned out well enough, and the fine robes that Jherrimazel took in place of the veil are very elegant.”

“Then what about this-afternoon! At your own court, I embarrassed you deeply in front of those emissaries with my unfounded words.”

“They were not unfounded.”

Zacharajakh’s eyes narrowed.

“You *knew*?”

“Before the delegates even walked in the door.”

“Then why didn’t you try to stop me?”

“I did.”

“Not hard enough, obviously.”

“Obviously, but it is not my intention to *force* you into the path I feel is best for you. I will bring you to the long road that leads to recovery, and you may travel along it as you will. That is the help I offer you.”

The old wyrm appeared exasperated.

“But *why*? *Why* are you trying to ‘help’ me? *Why* do you wish to pull me out of my misery? I have done you no favours, and I have no intention of doing any in the future.”

“You are family.”

Zacharajakh guffawed.

“That means nothing. Dragons do not care even for marriage, let alone extended family. Humans are similar, too, often despising their in-laws, so do not chalk up your actions to my being ‘family’.”

Zetic raised an eye.

“Then chalk it up to simply the way I am.”

The old red wyrm actually looked... gentle... as he walked over and settled on the ground in his usual place.

“Humph... You’re very stubborn... I can see why my daughter fell in love with you. The females in Isasarach’s line always did enjoy having a certain amount of... *resistance*... in their mates... Yet I still can’t understand your motivation. You are a cleric of Torm, and I am not ignorant of His commands. According to His will, you should be trying to destroy me in the name of Justice.”

“Justice may also be served by *turning*, Zacharajakh. I do not care much for vengeance. True Justice, as I see it, is to take that which is evil, point out the error of its ways, and in so doing, turn it to good.”

“You want to redeem me, then? That will be a difficult task, cleric.”

“Yes, and I knew it would be so the moment we left your cavern ten years ago. But they used to call me ‘Zetic the Redeemer’ in the church of Torm, you know, and not without good reason.”

“‘Zetic the Redeemer’, eh? But why ‘used to’?”

Zetic suddenly looked down at the ground, and the soft smile disappeared from his face.

“It no longer seemed appropriate ... after Paul.”

He let out a deep sigh.

“There is a story behind this, father-in-law, if you would care to hear it.”

The old red nodded, fascinated, and took up his narghile once again.

“Paul... was a paladin of Torm, and my best friend in all the world. For fifteen years we adventured together, having taken up Torm’s cause at the same youthful age. We adventured across the earth, saving the land and its people, defeating evil, sharing in the glories of doing good. They used to say there was no foe that the two of us could not overcome – Paul, with his battle prowess, and I, with my powers of healing and persuasion. In our time, we brought many lost souls into the light.”

Zetic smiled at Zacharajakh again, as the happier memories came to mind.

“But it was more than simply doing Torm’s work. We got along together so well... We were more than companions, we were blood brothers. In-between quests and adventures, we used to have great debates about philosophy, or history, or religion. And lighter things, too, for Paul was a veritable fountain of humour, and plenty of higher ministers looked down their noses as they saw us two rascals laughing our heads off to one or the other’s jokes in a barracks commons-room.”

He turned his down to face the floor once more.

“Yes, they were good times... but fate willed them to come to an end. I was summoned to one of the higher cathedrals of the order to receive further training in the high arts of the divine, and in the meantime Paul decided to continue adventuring, as I no doubt would have done in his place.”

He looked up at Zacharajakh again with a studied look.

“But something went terribly wrong in the year that I was away... To this day, I know not what, exactly. Paul must’ve found something, or experienced something, or met someone on those adventures... for he became corrupted. He fell from grace, no longer a noble paladin of Torm, but a blackguard of Bane.”

Zetic’s eyelids half-closed over his eyes.

“And as he had been my companion for so long, I asked the church to send *me* to defeat him, believing that I could redeem his soul as I had redeemed so many others. It took months to find him, and once we did, the fight was fierce, but my troupe was victorious in the end, and I confronted my old friend...”

“It’s over, Paul. You are defeated.”

Paul was lying on the ground, his back propped up against a wall. Blood was dripping from wounds, spilling over his plate armour, and making his dark red robes even darker so.

“Not quite, Zetic. I still breathe, and as long as I do, it is *not* over, and I am *not* defeated. Finish me off, then, if you want it to truly end.”

Zetic was standing in front of Paul, his figure casting a shadow over the blackguard’s body, his large sword held in one hand.

“I came to bring you back into the light, my friend, not to slay you.”

Paul spat out blood as he spat back his reply.

“Then you have come on a fool’s errand, *my friend*, for there is only darkness inside of me, now, and I cannot be turned!”

“You forget our debates, Paul. I have always maintained that there is *good* within everyone, no matter how evil they are.”

The dying figure grinned, and its teeth were partially stained a crimson colour.

“Oh no, I remember them well, Zetic! But even if you were right about there being goodness within all, you failed to realize the greater truth: there is *darkness* within all of us as well, and just as I have fallen to it, so can you!”

The near-corpse cackled.

“For I see the dark seed within you, my friend! It will yet come to claim you, and you will be too weak to resist it, just as I was! Evil’s black tendrils tug at your heart already, and I see your rosy nature being turned a sour green.”

Paul’s wounds were beginning to get the better of him, and his voice became faint.

“Why don’t you run, Zetic? Run, run away! Run as fast as your legs can carry you... but you cannot run from the evil within. You can turn to face it, instead, but you will only be consumed just as I was. Either way... it will take you in the end.”

Zetic, the gold dragon, forty-one years later, squeezed out a tear as he concluded the tale.

“I killed him, driving the tip of my sword straight through his heart.”

Silence.

The tear in Zetic’s eye ran down his cheek, and splashed onto one of the cushions underneath him.

“And now you know why they stopped calling me ‘The Redeemer’. But in spite of that incident, I still continued to try... and I continued to succeed, just as I intend to try and to succeed *here*.”

Zetic stared at the fountain in the middle, lost in his own memories. The lute lay to the side, out of his hands.

Zacharajakh smoked the pipe deeply for a long time before replying.

“So... What do you suggest that I do, if I am to unchain myself from the past that haunts me?”

“The same thing that I did. I took a year away from active adventuring, and went to help build a church to Ilmater in a small town. The labour was exhausting, but there was comfort in it... for it is simple to build a church, and glorious when it is complete. I was tired at the end of each day, almost too tired to think about what had happened with Paul... but not quite. For I did think on his final moments, each and every day, and reflected deeply on our times together.”

The golden head turned up from the fountain.

“And when the church was at last complete, I found solace, and completeness, and closure, for just as my physical work was done, so too was my meditation, and I had come to terms with what happened, and made a stronger man because of it.”

Zetic smiled again.

“I suggest the same treatment for you. You come at a very opportune time, as well, for the town of Tremblay has decided to build a temple to Torm just as Vellingdale has done. With your aid, it could be done in a month.”

“You suggest that I serve as a beast of burden?”

“Yes, for what was truly awful about your years reflecting in your cave was that, on top of your sorrow for Isasarach, you also had the sense of not accomplishing anything. The twin depressing thoughts were two too many, and it overwhelmed you. By applying yourself to a simple task as this, you will only have to deal with the one, and as you are strong, father-in-law, I know you can overcome it.”

Zetic thought he noticed something unusual in Zacharajakh’s eye... but it disappeared before he could read the thought.

“Very well, then. Perhaps I should see this church of yours.”

“Would you like to go right now? It will still be light out for several more hours, and the town is only a short flight away.”

“Yes, let us go now.”

In the air, about an hour later, the son and father in-law were flying back from Tremblay, having examined the foundations of the church and briefly spoken with the town’s burgomaster about the possibility of Zacharajakh helping in the construction. The mayor had understandably been incredulous, but nonetheless welcomed the help.

Strangely enough, the old red wyrm had remained almost completely silent since they had left Zetic’s house... and Zetic was becoming worried. There was something strange going on in Zacharajakh’s mind, and Zetic’s powers were unable to pierce it.

Half-way home, Zacharajakh at last broke his silence.

“You really prefer to turn me, instead of destroying me?”

“If possible, I would rather not kill anyone. I follow the teachings of Ilmater in that respect, and strive to kill only suffering itself.”

“But you *have* killed before.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you could kill me?”

“I have no reason to. If, as you said, you have done me no favours, then you have at least done me no harm as well.”

“Suppose I gave you a reason. Suppose I attacked your family.”

Zetic looked at Zacharajakh with suspicion.

“Then I *would* fight you.”

Zacharajakh’s eye narrowed maliciously.

“But do you think you would win?”

“Yes, I would defeat you.”

Zetic saw the same disturbing flicker in Zacharajakh’s eye, but again he could not place it, nor feel the thought that drove it. It worried him considerably... but then the old wyrm started to talk again, and he used a disarming voice that calmed Zetic.

“I wonder, my son-in-law... My daughter says that she has been changed by you, and you wish to change me, as well. Yet she has twice said that you have remained the same – once yesterday, and once ten years ago, when we first met... Do you fear change, to have remained so constant in the face of all that has tried to change you, then?”

“No. Well... Perhaps, a little. I like the way that I am.”

Zacharajakh chuckled lightly.

“As many do, and others wish they did. But should you really fear change? Change can be for the better. And I wonder, I wonder... When Bahamut made you a dragon, how much did he change you? For men are not things of power as dragons are, and I wonder... did he truly instil in you the powers of dragon-kind?”

There was that strange look in Zacharajakh’s eyes again, and Zetic craned to try to seek out what thought was creating it.

But the thought sought *him* out instead and, without warning, Zacharajakh banked towards him, grasped him in mid-air, and plunged into a dive.

“There is one way to find out!”

Locked together, they slammed into the ground, Zetic ploughing into it head-first as Zacharajakh landed on top of him and jumped off to one side. Zetic started to raise himself up, choking out dust and dirt.

“Father-in-law, what is the meaning of thi—”

A reply came, but not in words. Zacharajakh slashed Zetic across the face, causing him to tumble to the ground again. Zetic spat out dirt for a moment but quickly rolled to one side as the red wyrm’s foot crashed down where his head had been.

“What are you doing, father-in-law? What is the meaning of this attack?”

“Shut up! I’m going to see if you’re a real dragon, once and for all!”

Zetic quickly got to his feet.

“I don’t want to fight you, Zacharajakh. This isn’t necessary.”

Zacharajakh roared louder than anything Zetic had heard before. The very grass in the field around them seemed to buckle and shudder at the tremendous sound. The great red dragon raised himself up on his hind legs and extended his wings fully, making Zetic look tiny by comparison.

“If you won’t fight me, then you-will-DIE!”

He charged forward and bowled Zetic over, catching the golden neck in his maw and biting down with incredible strength.

Crushed beneath the immense form, Zetic let out a feral howl of pain as Zacharajakh’s teeth punctured his neck-scales and drew blood. He clawed with all four limbs at the red mass on top of him, but it was useless, and Zacharajakh merely laughed, his mouth still squeezing Zetic’s throat.

Finally, after a few seconds, Zacharajakh withdrew, and Zetic scrambled to his feet, breathing heavily. The old wyrm was still laughing riotously.

“Hah! You are pathetic, son-in-law! I could’ve killed you right then and there, snapping your neck in two. Come on, then! Give me a good fight, give me a real fight!”

Zetic’s right arm instinctively reached onto his back ...

There was nothing there.

“Looking for your sword? I cut off your scabbard when we dived down. Fight me as the great dragon my daughter makes you out to be, not the pathetic swordsman that I see you as. Come on, I’ll even let you take a free hit.”

Zacharajakh grinned and stood his ground, gesturing at his chin as he lowered his neck so that Zetic could easily hit him.

Unable to think of anything better to do, Zetic recalled his hand-to-hand training, raised his arms in a boxing stance, and gave his father-in-law a solid right hook.

The red head whipped left and sprung back immediately, still bearing the same grin.

“That’s what you squandered your free hit on? You disappoint me! Fighting like a man, with your fists, instead of like a dragon, with your claws. Observe!”

Zacharajakh gave a tremendous swipe with his right hand, sending torn scales scattering everywhere as Zetic tumbled sideways into a thicket of nearby trees.

Raising himself quickly, Zetic began to cast a divine spell of protection, but the old wyrm was faster than he was, and sent an arcane bolt slamming into him, preventing the ward from being established.

“No calling upon your God either, son-in-law! That’s another thing that only weak *men* do. Use your dragon-powers, instead, like this!”

The wyrm spoke a few arcane words and lightning poured forth from his fingertips, snaking through Zetic’s body for several seconds. At last, Zetic was able to shake it off, and he got to his feet.

With a growl, Zetic charged his father-in-law, and for the next few minutes they tumbled with each other, grappling, breaking the hold, and slashing at each other.

Needless to say, Zacharajakh was getting in almost all of the hits, and even though Zetic sneaked in a few spells of healing, as yet another of the colossal dragon’s powerful spells blew him back three hundred feet, he was battered, bruised, and bleeding all over.

Zetic realised that he needed his sword... but there was no way to find it, buried in the thick grass as it must be.

A thought came to his mind, and Zetic grinned briefly on the inside while his bashed-in face bled on the outside.

He wouldn’t be able to find the sword himself, but his Lord could retrieve it for him.

So, clasping his hands together, Zetic summoned up all the divine might within him, and began to call to Torm, that He might save His servant from defeat.

Zacharajakh snarled as he saw Zetic start the powerful divine spell, and ran at him, snatching him in a bear hug to break the cleric’s spellcasting.

But fortitude in battle and concentration under duress had always been Zetic’s best qualities, and even as he was being pinned on the ground under the red drake, he maintained the necessary verbal elements to their end.

The colossal red wyrm was blown clear away by a flash of light, and Zetic raised himself, glowing with a divine aura that healed all of his wounds. Zacharajakh growled from the ground where he lay as Zetic simply smiled and put one arm up in the air.



There was a high-pitched ringing sound that quickly grew louder... and with a loud \*whoosh\*, Zetic's sword flew into the outstretched hand. Putting his other hand on the hilt, he whipped it around in the air, showing off his swordsmanship.

Zacharajakh waved off the display.

“So you've called for your crutch, man-dragon? It still won't help you win!”

Zetic grinned.

“This sword slew Klauth.”

“Hah! Klauth! Is that supposed to impress me?”

He got to his feet and raised himself high above Zetic.

“Klauth was a fool and a weakling! The only reason he was the subject of that Great Hunt several years ago was because he was *active* in the world, whereas *I* have remained hidden. If you think that I will be as easy to defeat as Klauth, you have much to learn about your 'father-in-law'.”

And so the dance of death began again, but this time, the scales of Tempus were tipped in Zetic's favour, and Zacharajakh found himself retreating from gold dragon's sword-blows; there was a fury behind them that he had not expected.

Holding the sword gave Zetic the ability to defend himself again, and in the moments of respite he resumed casting his spells, so whenever Zacharajakh was not having his belly slashed at, he was being blasted by holy light.

The old wyrm still gave a good fight, though, and Zetic's golden form was covered in caked red blood, giving him a most disturbing appearance.

Eventually, however... the fight neared its end. Both combatants were exhausted and covered with vicious wounds. Zacharajakh's red scales were almost completely coated in his own blood – and Zetic's blood, too. Meanwhile, Zetic's blue cloak had managed to stay intact, but now it bore heavy stains of red. Sometime during the fight his headdress had snapped off as well, and it was lying a few hundred feet away.

There was a brief pause as the fighters considered each other.

Finally, unable to bear the delay, Zacharajakh swiped to the left. He missed, though, and as his right arm whipped by Zetic's face, the sword sliced down into it, cutting straight to the bone and nearly severing the limb.

The red wyrm cried in pain, but more of that emotion was to come, for Zetic followed through with an incredible strike to the face that dug several inches into one side and sent a dozen teeth flying out the other.

A second growl came as Zacharajakh clutched at his useless arm, but Zetic still wasn't done, and a low sweep broke the dragon's left leg, sending him tumbling sideways and backwards onto the ground.

Zetic raised his sword up above his head and made to give a final chop to the proffered neck before him... but he stopped, realising what he was about to do.

Panting quickly, the old wyrm looked up at him.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Finish me off!”

The strange look crossed Zacharajakh's eyes, and Zetic at last recognized what it was: his father-in-law *wanted* death.

Zetic lowered his sword, holding it in one hand.

“No.”

“Why not?! Why not?! You didn't have any trouble killing your *friend* when he turned to evil! I am evil, son-in-law, I am not your friend, and I stand before you! I will not be turned! Do me in, as your God commands!”

Zetic burst into a maniacal laughter, and this, more than anything ever before, frightened the old wyrm.

“You think that because Paul was my friend, it was *harder* for me to kill him? Fool of a dragon, the fact that he was my friend made it *easier* for me to give him death.”

“You lie! I saw the tear in your eye!”

“A tear for his death, yes, but that *I* had been the one to administer it is the only thing that brings me happiness about that story.”

“This makes no sense! You killed him in anger!”

“No, Zacharajakh, I killed him in friendship. For when I recounted that incident, I did not tell you the *whole* story...”

Zetic was back in front of Paul again.

“If you will not be turned, then I must kill you now, my friend.”

Paul, still lying on the ground, chuckled in-between the few breaths that he had left.

“Good, good! Give in to your lust for vengeance!”

“No, Paul, I am not killing you out of my *own* vengeance, but out of *yours*...”

The chuckling ceased, and Paul looked up with uncomprehending eyes.

“... for you were once a paladin of Torm, Paul, and the reason I cannot turn you is because I know that *you* could never live with yourself, knowing what you have done in this time of darkness.”

Zetic wore an incredibly sad face as he placed his left hand on Paul’s shoulder and positioned the tip of his sword over Paul’s heart.

“So I must kill you, Paul... but because it is what *you* would have wanted.”

He drove the sword in deeply, strongly, and firmly. The body before him convulsed in pain, but said nothing.

“Good-bye, my friend.”

Wearing a scowl, Paul gurgled out blood for several moments, staring at Zetic.

And yet, in his final throes, he closed his eyes, and the scowl disappeared...

He put his arm on Zetic’s arm, pulling gently, and leaning forward as if to speak.

Zetic lowered his ear to Paul’s mouth, and the poor man’s last words, breathed out in a whisper, were heard by him alone.

“Thank-you... my friend... You’ve saved m...”

And Paul was dead.

For a minute, both battlegrounds were silent.

No-one had spoken when Paul had died in the past, and the old red wyrm was stone-mute in the present at hearing the story’s conclusion.

With a snuffle, the storyteller wrapped up his tale.

“So now, Zacharajakh... you know Paul’s final words. They are the one secret that I have ever truly kept, and by keeping it, I lost the moniker of ‘The Redeemer’.”

“You... you never told anyone before now?”

Zetic looked off into the evening sky.

“No. I don’t truthfully know why. Perhaps because I feel that I still failed Paul, even if he thanked me, in the end. I don’t know his fate in the afterlife, either... I hope that he went to dwell with Torm in the heavens above, but in my heart, I fear that when he was presented to Kelemvor, Judge of the Dead, he chose to suffer the burning hells instead, punishing himself for his own deeds...”

Zetic's eyes shut, still turned towards the heavens.

“He was forgiving, but he never learned how to forgive *himself*. And so, if I am glad that it was at least *I*, someone who loved him, who sent him to the Fugue Plane, I am tortured by it, too, for he was my friend, and I ought to have been his protector... not his executioner.”

Tears poured from the golden eyes, and Zetic clasped his hand to his head as he sobbed.

Zacharajakh looked on, awed.

At last, the old wyrm spoke up.

“You will be known as ‘The Redeemer’ once again, my son-in-law.”

Zetic swallowed deeply and turned to him, uncovering his face. The ancient dragon had shed tears as well, and was now looking at him with unabashed regret.

The gold dragon bent over and stretched out his arm, and the colossal red took it in his left hand, pulling himself up with a grunt and a heave.

With Zacharajakh leaning heavily on his son-in-law, one arm around his shoulders, they walked off towards home together, and as they did so, Zetic began to sing softly.

*Requiem for Those Who Suffer*, the anthem of Ilmater, the Crying God.

It brought comfort to them both.

THE ADVENTURES WILL CONTINUE.