

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Hex Zetic / Hapax Legomenon
Young Adult Male Gold Dragon / Fifth Element
Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Elminster
Ancient Male Human
Wizard, Arch-mage, and Chosen of Mystra

The Simbul
Ancient Female Human
Sorceress, Wizard, Arch-mage, and Chosen of Mystra

Szass Tam
Ancient Male Human Undead Lich
Necromancer, Arch-mage, and Red Wizard of Thay

Aō, and Beyond the Fifth

“How long has it been, now?”

“Two days.”

Elminster, looking in through the doorway, took the pipe out of his mouth.

“And he hasn’t moved at all?”

“Not a single inch. He went completely limp after the battle; I didn’t have any difficulty at all with carrying him here.”

Zetic was lying on his side, head on the floor, mouth closed, eyes shut, limbs outstretched, and the only movement his body made was that of his chest rising and falling as he breathed. Isacharact sat behind him, head raised up, hands stroking Zetic’s mane as she spoke with the arch-mage at the door.

“And the sword?”

“The Simbul is examining it in her chambers. Last I heard, she has found nothing.”

“I’ll go see her next, then... Have you been with him all this time?”

Isacharact looked down at Zetic’s head.

“I have.”

Elminster stuck the pipe back in his mouth.

“Take heart. He’s a resilient lad. I don’t think he’ll be out of it for much longer.”

Isacharact sighed and laid her head partially on top of Zetic’s, rubbing it gently.

“I certainly hope so.”

Elminster shut the door, and the guest-chambers of Zetic and Isacharact in the palace of The Simbul were covered by the darkness of night-time once more. The only light was that of the stars and the moon, streaking in through the windows.

With another sigh, Isacharact went back to sleep next to her love, extending her left wing to cover him like a blanket.

In the darkness, something goes *pop* and you feel yourself being in the middle of nowhere. Complete blackness all around, can’t see anything.

Then a tiny dot of light appears so far off... then another, and another, and another, and another, until the dots multiply at an incredible rate, filling your view.

Some are coloured, some are white. Some are large, some are small.

Is it your sight returning? Are you seeing the heavens, the stars?

Maybe, maybe... but the stars never looked like *this* before.

And then one ‘star’ in particular catches your attention. Nothing special about the way it looks, just something about the way it *feels*.

It’s suddenly getting larger. Is *it* coming *your way*, or are *you* heading towards *it*?

Bigger, and bigger, and bigger...

So immense now, it must be so close!

It's going to hit you!

You and it collide and merge, and suddenly you remember who you are: I am Hex Zetic.

But not just Zetic. There's something – or someone – else here. I can feel it.

Can I speak with it? Should I try?

Might as well, I suppose.

Hello?

Hello.

Who are you?

I am Hapax Legomenon.

The voice in the sword, and in my dreams?

Yes.

What are you?

The Fifth Element.

And what is the Fifth Element?

It is what I am.

But what is what you are?

The Fifth Element.

I don't understand.

I am sorry.
How can I explain to you what I am
when what I am
is all that I know?

*You mean you don't have the words?
Can you show me, instead?*

Look around us.
That is what I am made of.

Hex Zetic/Hapax Legomenon looked around. He still saw the ‘stars’ as before, but there was something more... familiar... about some of them. As he thought about them, the ‘sky’ changed shape; no longer were all of them so distant. Some of them were close to him, and some were far. He became aware of their location.

One of them was very close to him; right next to him, even. Zetic/Hapax recognized it. It was Isacharact; she was dreaming... of him? How sweet those thoughts were, how beautiful. Hopes for the future... hopes that he would wake up and be her love again.

Hmm...

Waking up might be a good thing to do eventually.

But let’s stay here, at least for a bit longer. Take a look around. There are other... *presences*. Some I don’t recognize... guards, maybe? But two others close by... I know them. They’re The Simbul and Elminster. They’re thinking about something... the sword? They notice that the eye is missing from the blade.

Well, of course it’s missing! The eye is in me!

Wait, how did I know that?

Because I was the eye.
But now I am in you.

And why are you in me?

I chose to join with you.

Why with me?

You came near.
You looked like a good host.

*Looked like a good host?
Will you leave me if you see a better one?*

Moving is difficult for me.
You are good enough.

What do you look for in a host?

Contact with instances of the Fifth Element.

What do you mean?

You can move around easily.
You are made of flesh.

And what are you made of?

I am made of the Fifth Element.

*I suppose I should've expected that answer.
So... now are we joined?*

Yes.
We complement each other.

I heard you say that you would not change me.

When I was the eye, yes.

*Is that still true?
You will not try to control me?*

No, I do not want that.
I only want to feel the Fifth.

Are you just along for the ride, then?

All I want to do is feel the Fifth.
But that is not all that I *can* do.

What are your powers, then?

I can feel the Fifth.
I can alter the Fifth.

And now these powers are mine?

Yes.
My powers are yours.
But it will take...
TIME
...for you to learn to use them.

Why did you say "time" in such a strange manner?

Because I do not know it.
The word is yours.

*I see.
So where do we go from here?*

We could wake up.

Not a bad idea, that.

And so Zetic/Hapax woke up.

Isacharact was lying partially on top of him, covering him as if trying to protect him. Zetic felt her wing over his side, her head resting on his, her arm draped over his side, and her chest against his back.

Zetic opened his eyes, though he kept his head still.

Something looked strange about the room. It was early morning, and the sun must've just been peeking over the hills, but there was some strange extra glow that seemed to illuminate everything. He moved his eyes around, and the light seemed to follow his eyes. Whatever he looked at was brighter than everything else.

His sight passed over the mirror... and two balls of white light looked back at him.

What have you done to my eyes?

They are where I am.

They're so bright...

So am I.
Now you are bright, too.

They're very noticeable.

You were already very noticeable.

I suppose that's true.

So... glowing white eyes? Well... not that much of a change from a solid gold colour, I suppose. Let's have a closer look.

With his head still on the ground, Zetic examined himself in the mirror.

Not bad, really. Rather impressive. Can I control the brightness? Yes, I can. Can't seem to turn them off, but at least I can dim them. And I can make them almost blindingly bright.

Neat.

Zetic closed his eyes and grinned to himself at this little discovery.

Though his mouth had moved only a miniscule amount, Isacharact noticed it and lifted her head just off of his. She spoke softly, with her eyes still closed, thinking that perhaps the movement she felt was but a dream.

“Hex?”

“Good morning, Isa dearest. How is everything?”

His plain-faced response startled her. She opened her eyes and turned to look down at him.

“You... you’re all right?”

“Perfectly fine. Did anything happen while I was passed out?”

“No. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, and much better than before, when *Hapax Legomenon* was still trying to merge with me.”

“What? The sword tried to merge with you?”

Zetic opened his eyes and started to raise his head up.

“*Hapax Legomenon* is the name of the entity *in* the sword, not the sword itself.”

He looked at her, and she was startled again as the light flashed in her face.

“Oh! Your eyes!”

Zetic blinked and turned his head a bit, changing the brightness of his eyes and showing off his face to Isacharact.

“Yes. *Hapax Legomenon* lives in them.”

Isacharact shook her head, mortified.

“Husband, what has happened to you? I’ve been so worried; you’ve been asleep for two days. Do you remember anything from before?”

“Of course I remember. I passed out when *Hapax Legomenon* completed the joining just after we defeated the last vampire.”

Zetic brought his head up in front of hers, and caressed her cheek.

“I’m sorry you were worried. But I’m all right, really.”

He kissed her on the cheek.

“Come now, take that worried look off your beautiful face. Everything will be fine.”

Isacharact smiled half-heartedly and her eyes became teary; she still worried for Zetic, but was relieved that he had at least come to. They both closed their eyes as Zetic rubbed his head up and down the side of her neck, trying to soothe her.

“Sorry if we’re interrupting.”

Isacharact turned her head to see Elminster and The Simbul who had appeared behind them, apparently from nowhere. Zetic ignored the new arrivals and continued to stroke Isacharact, his head moving from the front of her neck to just under her chin.

“You’re getting slow, old man. The magic wards you and The Simbul placed on this room told you both I was awake a long time ago.”

Elminster opened his eyes slightly wider at hearing this, but otherwise kept his composure.

“Well, we had to get up *ourselves*, didn’t we? It’s early in the morning.”

“Don’t try to trick me into believing you were asleep without you actually saying so, Elminster. Besides, I know that you were both up and examining the sword.”

Zetic stopped his motion, opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked at them both.

“You’ve got a lot of questions. I haven’t got a lot of answers. What I can tell you is this: There was something in the sword, something which calls itself *Hapax Legomenon*. It says it is made of the ‘Fifth Element’, and it merged with me essentially because it wants to travel with me. That merging is now complete, and I am in good health – of both body and mind. My eyes are a side-effect of *Hapax Legomenon*’s presence.”

The Simbul remained relatively impassive but Elminster, hands on his hips, looked at the ground and shook his head in disbelief.

“That’s quite a mouthful.”

“Yes. And I know it’s not enough for you, but I’m afraid it’s all I have for now. We should meet again when the day is fully awake; I may know more, then.”

Zetic nestled his head back under Isacharact’s chin and resumed rubbing against her. She closed her eyes in delight.

“In the meantime... I would like some private time alone with my wife. I have not... *attended* to her... for almost three weeks.”

He brought his face up against the side of Isacharact’s head.

“An unfortunate dereliction of duty. One I intend to correct as soon as possible.”

Isacharact opened her eyes and growled in a breathy voice as Zetic ran a clawed hand down the back of her neck and between her shoulders.

Elminster grinned at the scene and flashed his eyebrows, turning to The Simbul.

“It appears that we are being commanded in your own palace, my dear!”

But The Simbul wasn't paying attention to his words. She had cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You know, I don't remember *you* ever being worried about failing to ‘attend’ to *me* after our long stretches of time apart, even in the general sense of paying attention to.”

Zetic laughed loudly with his head pressed against Isacharact's neck.

“Hah! What did I ask you before we set out here, eh, old man? I was right to worry about your relationship! You'd best take her away and make up quickly if you don't want to have her draw more uncomfortable comparisons.”

Elminster no longer wore his usual smug face.

“You're probably right.”

With his lover still looking at him funny, Elminster teleported them both to their room.

In the dragons' chambers, Isacharact put her head down again as Zetic continued to caress her neck. He cast a few assorted spells – a wall of silence around the room and the cantrip that Elminster had made for him several years ago, among others – and then, much later...

“It's good to have you back, husband.”

Isacharact was lounging on her stomach, wide awake, looking at Zetic, and stroking his mane as he lay beside her, panting heavily.

“Well, you know...”

Zetic huffed a few times and swallowed, still catching his breath.

“...it's good to *be* back.”

With his breathing still laboured, Zetic barely squeezed out a grin in answer to his own joke. He turned onto his back and stared up at the ceiling.

“Unconscious for two days... and I'm already tired enough to go to sleep again.”

Isacharact purred and took her left paw out of his hair, planting it on the floor on far side of him as she leaned over, kissing him.

“Oh, no sleeping for you yet, my dear husband. We’re not done here.”

Zetic squeezed his eyes shut and shivered out a whimper of pleasure as Isacharact clambered on top of him.

Another long period of time later, and Zetic was calmly lying on his side, feeling completely refreshed. Isacharact was snoozing next to him, her back towards him.

His thoughts wandered...

That was very interesting to experience.

What was?

What you call ‘sex’.
It is a curious thing.
The Fifth Element becomes so...
tuned.

I still don’t understand what the Fifth Element is.

I cannot explain it.
But you are clever.
You will comprehend it soon.

*Another thing: why is that I talk with you?
You said we were ‘merged’.*

We are joined physically.
Mental integration will come later.
You must first come to know The Fifth.

Show me more of it, then, so that I might learn.

Close your eyes.
See The Fifth through me.

Must I always close them to see through you?

Eventually, no.
For now, yes.

Zetic shut his eyes. His sight did not disappear, however... it merely changed.

It was the starscape as before, but different. Brighter, apparently with additional things in the sky. Though... were there actually more, or was he simply seeing more of what had always been there?

Zetic spent the next hour looking around with his eyes closed. It was... unusual. He saw minds, heard thoughts, smelt feelings. He roamed around, sampling the sensations as if sampling dishes at a buffet table.

It still did not help him understand what the Fifth Element was, but it was a start to unlocking Hapax's powers. One of them, clearly, was a kind of telepathy.

As he returned from the mental jaunt, however, a new mind caught his attention. Powerful, forceful, and close... Not Isacharact, or Elminster, or The Simbul, or indeed anything else that had been in Velprintalar recently. It was just arriving.

There was something dangerous-smelling, and dangerous-looking, and dangerous-sounding about it, whoever it was.

Zetic opened his eyes, seeing with *his* sight again, and touched Isacharact on the shoulder as she napped, half-awake.

“Yes, my love?”

She rolled around to face him, pressing her head against his.

“We must go to the palace audience-room. Something important is going to happen there very soon, and I need to be there.”

Isacharact put an arm and her tail over him and spoke into his ear.

“*How* soon?”

Zetic pulled away from her, got up, and started to walk to the door.

“About an hour, I think... it's hard to tell. But we really should get there early, if only to—Hwaakkk!!”

There was a loud *splat* noise as Zetic fell backwards onto the floor, yanked towards Isacharact by the ethereal golden chain which she had silently conjured up, wrapped around his neck with more magic, and now held solidly in her hands, pulling him to her as she lay on her side.

“I stopped listening at ‘about an hour’.”

About an hour later, a rather frazzled looking Isacharact and Zetic entered the palace great hall through a side-door, sneaking glances at each other and trying to look nonchalant as they picked a spot to sit in on the side of the room. The Simbul was holding court with Elminster by her side.

The locus of attention in the room, however, was *not* the two dragons. A good thing for them, for it would have been quite an embarrassment to be noticed in their current dishevelled state. Isacharact fiddled with her horn ornaments, trying to untangle them, and pushed down on her girdle, which was starting to ride up her neck. Zetic took a few seconds to shake his hair back into place, change the angle of the headdress, and finish attaching his cloak. No-one noticed as they made these hasty last-minute adjustments.

Indeed, everyone – several dozen courtiers, a dozen guards, and The Simbul and Elminster, even – was paying attention to the cluster of six men and women standing in the middle of the room, dressed in red.

It was a diplomatic delegation from Thay, land of the Red Wizards and traditional foes of Aglarond – though, of late, an uneasy peace had reigned between the two neighbours.

At the front of the group was a trim woman with a shaved and tattooed head, dressed in flowing red robes. Two wizard-guards in red flanked her a few feet away, and three more guards stood behind her, all five of them dressed in plate mail and with sword-scabbards at their sides.

“Come now, my Lady The Simbul. I am trying to be reasonable. We are more than open to any suggestions or recommendations that you may have.”

The Simbul was pacing back and forth in front of her throne and appeared quite agitated.

“No suggestions or recommendations do I have save to spare your breath and head home. Though I will allow your people to trade with Aglarond, I will not endorse the creation of a sovereign-soil trading post here as has been done in so many other lands.”

“But *why*, my Lady? I have already explained how those enclaves have brought much prosperity to the people around them. The ability of our wizards to manufacture items directly, nearby, and in the comfort of our own laws and customs is a great boon to all involved. Merely ask the rulers of those places to hear of the benefits. And even some of your Majesty’s own merchant citizens have voiced support for this proposition.”

A murmur went up around the room. The courtiers easily picked out that the key concept was ‘*some* merchants’ – for most of them stood nothing to gain by having a Thayan enclave nearby. Only a handful of traders would profit from the Red Wizards setting up shop – and then, only by the negative impact it would have on their competitors. The ambassador’s proposition would be hardly a ‘great boon’ for Aglarond, and everyone present knew it.

“Even if I believed that such a thing could benefit this land in the way you suggest, I would still say ‘no’ because of the potential long-term effects.”

Zetic noticed that the Red Wizard feigned being insulted with superb skill. The rulers of Thay had chosen their negotiator well.

“My Lady The Simbul! Surely you cannot think we have some ulterior motive with these operations. We only seek to enrich ourselves – before, it was by war. That failed, so now we have switched to trade. It works well, and so Thay continues to pursue it.”

The tone of voice, the expression on the face, the body language – all very well acted. It *almost* worked, and as the representative spoke, the room began to murmur again, until Elminster guffawed and spoke out from his chair.

“Hah! Talk of Thay and one cannot help but talk of ‘ulterior motives’. The Zulkirs constantly scheme and make plans within plans within plans. This recent fascination with mercantilism is nothing but a temporary distraction.”

The murmurs ceased. Whatever their feelings towards the reclusive wizard – or even their own fire-tempered ruler – all recognized that Elminster spoke the truth.

Seeing that she was losing her audience – her true audience, that is: the courtiers, not The Simbul or Elminster, the ambassador changed her tactic.

“Alas, our reputation precedes us everywhere. Especially here, where the wounds of our past folly were most deeply felt. You speak the truth, Master Elminster, but it is a truth of the past. Thay has changed. In recent years we have—”

Zetic stopped paying attention to the Red Wizard as she began to recount a surprisingly honest version of the recent Thayan wars of aggression, though her story was peppered with an apologetic tone that was beginning to ‘hook’ the members of the audience once again.

But Zetic didn’t care. The important thing in the room was no longer the female Red Wizard, but rather... one of her guardsmen.

Behind her and to the left, on the far side of the room from Zetic, the approximately eighteen year old black-haired young man in shining armour and red robes – obviously not yet having reached full wizard status, else his head would be shaven – did not appear special to anyone.

Except to Zetic’s eyes, that is. For he had become aware that everyone in the room radiated a certain white glow, save this one. Instead, a fine white line stretched out from his chest and through the east wall of the room, as if he were anchored to something far away.

What is that line?

It is that creature’s connection to its Fifth Element.
Its Fifth is separate from its body.
I have seen this only a few times before.
I do not know what you call it.

I want to know where that line goes.

Follow it, then.

How?

Close your eyes.
Follow the line.

*I saw the line without closing my eyes.
Can't I follow it without closing them?*

You can try.
Look at where the line meets the creature.
Feel yourself pulled along it.

Zetic stared at the guard's torso... and felt his eyes slowly being drawn closer, and closer, and closer, until...

Sucked in, like water down a pipe! With a burst of light, Zetic was off, his sight following the white filament, travelling at incredible speed straight through the wall and into the outside air, spinning as he went.

Back in the room, Zetic swallowed deeply as he started to become dizzy from the sensation of speed...

Riding the filament, he flew straight over Aglarond, passing over the Dragonmaw Mountains and soaring by the river Lapendrar. The speed slowed down slightly near the Thayan city of Tyraturos as the line curved northwards. A second later it was circling an immense fortress, spiralling around and around and around... then, straight through a wall in one of the high towers, and down into a dark hallway in the dark basement, and into a dark room and into a dark box, and then...

A dark diamond.

But dark only in real light, for the gem glowed with the Fifth. Here, then, was the presence Zetic had felt about an hour ago.

The gem glimmered and Zetic began to feel the mind within it...

Back in the room, the emissary of Thay was just wrapping up her heart-warming story of Thay-Aglarond relations in the last century.

“... So, you see, my Lady The Simbul: in truth, Thay has changed much in the past while. Please, if you reject us today, at least take our offer under consideration and keep it in your mind. Perhaps in a few years, things will be different for you as they have been different for us.”

The Simbul’s emotional state had not changed one bit. Not that the Red Wizard had really been trying to affect *her*, anyways.

“Will they be? Or will the Zulkirs still rule Thay in the same way they always have, with cruelty and force?”

The Simbul addressed the courtiers gathered around the room.

“How many of you would like to meet one of the Zulkirs yourself, hmm? If you believed our honoured guest’s sob story, then remember this: Thay is still ruled by wizards consumed by evil purposes. I don’t think any of you would like to sit down for tea even with the loudest proponent of this strategy of ‘peaceful trade’: the undead lich and Zulkir of Necromancy, Szass Tam.”

At this, Zetic burst into uproarious laughter and drew the attention of the whole room on himself. Even Elminster put down his pipe to look at him, and The Simbul was showing an annoyed face – he had disrupted the psychological effect of her closing statements to the gathered barons and merchants, after all.

However, it was the Red Wizard who spoke first.

“Does my Lord dragon find something humorous about my Lady Simbul’s pronouncement?”

Zetic still stared at the guard, not even turning his head to face the woman leader.

“He does, indeed.”

The ambassador was insulted at Zetic’s dismissive attitude. Enough kow-towing to these Aglarondian fools; it was obvious that this plan was a failure. Time to at least show Thay’s strength by teaching this one some manners, she thought. Nobody, not even a dragon, talks that way to a mighty Red Wizard. She turned around to face him completely and spoke with a strong and icy voice.

“*Well then, my Lord gold dragon, be not selfish. Please... speak up and enlighten us, so that everyone present might share in your laughter.*”

Zetic brushed off her words with a snort.

“Your tone doesn’t faze me, Red Wizard. You’re about as potent as a snowflake compared to the blizzard that is my Isacharact, and even *her* incredible chill only raises my spirits instead of dampening them.”

Isacharact beamed at the room. The Red Wizard, meanwhile, wore a sneer as Zetic walked towards her group.

“Yet I shall do as you ask. But the joke would be better told by this one, here.”

Zetic pointed at the guard, who only now turned his head to look back.

“Well, my friend, are you going to take off your mask, or shall I break it off? As I’m new at the art of arcane sorcery, I can’t promise that I’ll be gentle, so I would recommend you do it yourself.”

The guard remained silent and stared back at Zetic, who grinned at him.

“Oh, don’t feel so bad, Szass. I spotted The Simbul when she was invisible a few weeks ago. You’re already admitted to the ‘club’ of wizards whose spells of illusions I have broken. It’s your choice whether to enter gracefully or flat on your face.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Too bad for you, then.”

Zetic closed his eyes.

I can break the enchantment, right?

I do not understand.
What do you want to do?

Pull his Fifth Element back into his body.

That would be very difficult.
A powerful force keeps it stored elsewhere.

Can I at least disrupt the connection?

Yes.
Pluck the string.
Motion with your hand if it helps you to visualize it.

Zetic flicked his hand at the air in front of him, and through his closed eyes he saw the thin filament vibrate and waver.

He opened them again to see the guard fall to his knees and clutch his chest.

A murmur went up around the room, and the four other Thayan guards put their hands on the handles of their swords.

But then the guard stood back up, apparently unharmed. With a sharp glance at Zetic, he tilted his head back. A dark, smoky wind circled him like a cyclone and a few seconds later, he was not a mail-clad guard, but a balding and skeletally thin man, dressed in fine dark cloth that hung off his body as the small amounts of flesh on him hung off his bones.

It was indeed Szass Tam, undead lich of some 200 years, and effectively the most powerful Zulkir of Thay.

He floated in the air, gesturing with his crooked hands – more like claws, really, given the absence of flesh – at Zetic in front of him.

“Well-played, gold dragon. That was done with style and grace, both qualities I admire, even in a foe. You will make a formidable opponent.”

Everyone – even the Red Wizard ambassador – was stone-mute at this unexpected appearance, save for Zetic.

“Is that so, lich? And who says we must be opponents?”

It was now Szass’ turn to laugh uproariously.

“And a sense of humour, even! Wonderful! So much better than the stiff-necked crusaders or self-absorbed schemers I usually have to deal with... Unless, that is, you are seriously implying that a gold dragon such as you, paragon of virtue and defender of justice, could possibly get along with a selfish and manipulative undead necromancer such as I.”

Zetic pulled his cloak around in front of himself, showing the modified holy emblem of his God on the back of it to the floating skeletal figure.

“More than just a gold dragon, lich. The power of Torm flows through me.”

The creature turned its dark eyes up at Zetic’s.

“Amongst others, it seems. For you disrupted my existence just now with neither arcane nor divine magic. I am interested to know what device you used, then”

Zetic tilted his head sideways.

“A curious request, lich. I may not like keeping secrets, but tell me why I should reveal this one to you.”

Szass spoke with a surprisingly friendly tone of voice.

“There is no reason, save perhaps your desire to be a gracious winner. This plan of mine has fallen apart; I doubt that our attempts at fostering trade here will succeed anytime soon after what you have done today. I am merely trying to salvage something from this failure by learning more about my enemies.”

Elminster, preferring to remain passive, stayed seated, though he watched the scene with unmasked interest. The Simbul, however, walked over and spoke up.

“You don’t owe this man anything, Zetic. I don’t know how you saw through his disguise, and certainly not how you managed to bring it crashing down around him, but there’s no need to tell him anything.”

The lich turned to her and *tsked*.

“Now, now, my lady The Simbul, I’m sure he’s quite capable of making his *own* decisions. You and I are finished our business here, and I’ll be out of your audience-chamber soon enough.”

Zetic looked at the lich and saw... an opportunity. He stretched out both of his hands in front of him, palms facing upwards.

“Take my hands, Szass.”

The undead Zulkir’s dark eyes narrowed.

“Take your hands? Why?”

“To learn more about my powers. Take my hands, and I will show you what I can do, and perhaps tell you how I do it. All you have to do hold them. Or...”

Zetic looked sideways at the lich with one of his luminescent white eyes and grinned curiously.

“...are you afraid?”

The lich looked at the hands, and then Zetic’s face, and back between the two again, until he finally seemed to make up his mind.

“I am not afraid of you, dragon. Begin your presentation.”

The lich moved closer and placed his hands in Zetic’s. The fingers gently closed around the bony limbs, and Zetic closed his eyes. He followed the Fifth Element link once again to the dark jewel which held the lich’s soul.

A minute passed in silence... even Szass, ordinarily very patient, was becoming annoyed.

“Well, dragon? When are you going to begin?”

Zetic spoke with his eyes still closed.

“I already have... Listen.”

The silence in the room became even more noticeable as everyone waited anxiously for what they expected to be some profound pronouncement from the dragon.

A loud, masculine voice crashed through the air, but it was not Zetic's.

As everyone looked around for the speaker, they realised it was not anyone else's either. It seemed to come from the walls themselves, speaking in an incomprehensible tongue.

And then another voice spoke out – another man, speaking some kind of mantra in a low chant. Then another voice – old, and chattering quickly – and another, and another, and another, and another, until the room was a veritable cacophony of voices - all those of older men, though some seemed older or younger than others.

Szass looked around slowly, and appeared somewhat disinterested.

“Voices from the walls. Is that all? This is an illusion practiced by young sorcerers, not an explanation, dragon.”

“Shhh... quiet, Szass. Listen to the sounds, though you have not the ears to understand them. Listen closely...”

Zetic turned his head around to one side, though he kept his eyes closed.

“... isn't there something... familiar... about them?”

Indeed there was, and not just to the lich. Elminster spoke out from his chair.

“Some of them sound like spells being cast.”

Szass began to recognize something more in them, as well.

“Yes, yes... but there's more... He's right; there *is* something familiar about these voices. I could almost swear I've heard them before, and only just recently. And... No, no, I can't place them.”

The room grew dark... Zetic had opened his eyes and they shone with a blindingly bright light, casting deep shadows everywhere. Even the lich had to avert his face.

“You can't place them? You can't place them? Ahh, how sad for you, that you cannot even recognize yourself! For they are *your thoughts*, Szass! Keep listening, and I will translate for you...”

The voices changed... switching from their incomprehensible language into ordinary common speech. The voices talked over themselves, but they almost seemed to be talking to each other.

What is this sorcery? *I don't know what this, but I know that I don't like it.* Kill them all! Wait, wait, **stay calm.** I should stick around; learn some more. Oh, who cares? There are BETTER things to do than waste my time *with these fools.* Ah, there's The Simbul! How nice it would be to **have her powers.** Bah, that thorn-in-my-SIDE Elminster is staring at me again. What are you looking at, old fool? I'll be *getting* you sooner or later. I really need to CHECK in on Urjaak; it's been too long since I've heard from him. Wait, WAIT! Stop thinking about this! They can all *hear me!* Shut up, shut up! Think about **something else!**

But however hard he tried, Szass could not silence all the voices. After all, it is a very difficult thing to completely control one's mind in that kind of way. His thoughts reverberated around the room; some spoke of his selfish desires, others of dark plots, and still others of reviled enemies.

“And in that far corner, behind you and to the left...”

Zetic stared at the lich.

“... ever so quiet, ever so silent, yet still there... lies the voice of goodness still within you. Weak, perhaps... but still there.”

Goodness? *Hah!* Hahaha! HAHAAH! Goodness, me?! AHAHAH! **BWAHAHAHAH!**
Oh, this is RICH! HOHOHOHAHAHAHAH!

The voices changed to laughs...

But then the lich turned his head to look at that corner, and the voices became confused, befuddled. Szass almost heard the tiny voice that Zetic said was within him, and he was petrified.

The voices cried out in a panicked terror.

A few seconds later, the Zulkir yanked his hands out of Zetic's grasp and backed away.

The voices from his head continued to cry out from the walls.

“Why do the voices remain? I no longer hold your hands!”

Zetic looked up at the ceiling, his eyes dimming.

“I no longer require you to hold them. For I can hear your thoughts clearly, without any trouble at all.”

The lich waved a hand in the air and screamed back as if being tortured.

“Then make them stop! You must make them stop!”

The voices from the walls stopped abruptly, but the room was not left empty of sound. Isacharact, Elminster, and The Simbul all let out gasps as the eerie song of *Hapax Legomenon* could be faintly heard, apparently emanating from Zetic’s glowing eyes.

Szass recovered his breath – though the undead creature did not actually have to *breathe* – and stared at Zetic.

“I have learned much from this demonstration of yours, gold dragon, but still not the answer to my first question. What gives you such power over minds?”

“*Hapax Legomenon*, elemental creature of the Fifth Element does.”

“The Fifth Element? You speak nonsense. The Fifth Element is negative energy.”

The Simbul butted in.

“Or positive energy – depending on how one counts.”

“I suppose so. But regardless of how one counts, all wizards know the six elements. Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Positive energy, and Negative energy.”

Zetic’s eyes flashed brighter briefly before returning to their already bright level.

“No, no... Positive and negative energy are *not* elements! There are *only* the Five: Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and the Fifth.”

“You still speak nonsense, dragon. For tens of thousands of years mage-scholars have spoken of the six elements I named. Who are you to gainsay them?”

“Is it a crime that we should be wiser than our elders? The refutation of the two kinds of Energy as being elements is simple when you see the complete and utter absence of their corresponding elemental creatures. There are fire elementals, air elementals, earth elementals, water elementals, and even elemental cross-breeds. But there are no positive energy or negative energy elementals. How can these be elements without having elementals?”

The Simbul, well versed in this kind of knowledge, spoke up again.

“All who have studied that question so far say that they must exist but that we simply have never seen them. So we continue to look.”

“A feeble excuse. No, they are not elements. I am certain of it; *Hapax* says it is so.”

The lich tilted his head at Zetic.

“Very intriguing... You have answered my question, gold dragon, but it has only spawned more questions in my mind.”

Zetic stared back at him. His eyes were no longer shining so brightly that they were casting shadows, but they were still brilliant.

“I know; I hear them. Go, and try to answer them if you can. But I doubt it. *Hapax* does not think that anyone has known of the Fifth before, and I believe it.”

“I go, then. We shall meet again, no doubt. I look forward to crossing paths – and swords and words, too – with you.”

With a nod to The Simbul and something vaguely resembling a bow to Elminster, Szass Tam teleported away, leaving the other five Red Wizards in the delegation to scurry out of the great hall all by themselves.

“So *here* you are! Have you been avoiding me?”

Zetic was sitting on the grass in the courtyard-patio where he had spent so much of the past few weeks, though he was not staring out at the city as he had then, but rather was curled up on his side under one of the large trees, strumming aimlessly on his *Chitaronne* lute.

“Not at all. I just got back, I’ll have you know. And, besides...”

He turned to look up at Isacharact and his shining white eyes glimmered in the night air.

“...I knew you were coming here.”

Isacharact sat down under another tree, thirty feet away from him.

“Where did you go, anyways? You were gone almost the whole day.”

Zetic looked down at the neck of the instrument and started to play a soft, slow, sad tune.

“Oh, many places...”

He trailed off. Isacharact noticed that he was staring intently at the lute... a little *too* intently.

“You may now have this ‘Fifth Element’ to read minds, husband, but I still know how you behave. You’re trying to hide where you went from me by pretending to be absorbed in your music. Well, if you don’t want to tell me, just say so. Sometimes you take this whole ‘no secrets’ thing a bit too far.”

Zetic paused and looked back at her with one eye... then continued to play the melody.

“I visited the churches, temples, chapels, and shrines of the city, disguised as a blind man. At each one, I begged the cleric in charge to ask a question of his or her God... I asked why my eyes had been made this way, and what I could do about it.”

The song continued, and so did his story.

“All the clerics, believing me to be asking about my apparent blindness, took pity on me, and went to pray. But, from the Gods... no reply. Tyr, Illmater, Lathlander, Helm, Kelemvor, Mystra, Oghma, Selûne, and, of course, Torm. All of them, completely silent; the clerics were most confused and apologetic.”

“No wonder you were gone so long. There may not be that many churches in this city, but it would have taken all afternoon to visit all of them.”

Zetic looked at the lute and played on.

“Yet it is the late evening, now. You did not ask about that discrepancy, but I will tell you nonetheless, as penance for having failed to tell you everything outright.”

The tune became more melancholy...

“When the churches of the good Gods failed me... I went to the hidden tabernacles of the dark ones. Bane, Cyric, Shar... The ministers there were less... *accommodating*. I had to use a little... *coercion*... to get them to ask the question. But ask, they did, and still the same result: no answer.”

“What does all this mean, husband?”

“It could mean many things... Perhaps none of the Gods know the answer. Perhaps none of them are able to tell me the answer. Or, perhaps...”

He stopped playing.

“Perhaps the Gods are *afraid* to tell me the answer.”

Zetic and Isacharact sat in silent contemplation at this notion. It was indeed unusual for the Gods to collectively neglect something or someone. For each and every one of them ought to have jumped at the opportunity to indebt a powerful creature such as Zetic to themselves by answering him.

Zetic turned back to his lute, trying to use it to shake off the uncomfortable thoughts about what had happened today.

Isacharact sat silently for a short while, turning the questions over in her mind until she was too confused to go on and simply gave up, losing herself in Zetic’s soft strumming.

“I recognize that tune. Elvish, isn’t it?”

“Yes. ‘*Cormanthor, I Remember*’. Heard it when you stayed in Evermeet, no doubt. I’m surprised they didn’t try to teach it to you, given what it’s about.”

“Actually, I think they did. Let me see if I can recall the lyrics.”

And so, Isacharact sang along for a few verses of the sad song woven in homage to the great forest that is the Elves’ ancestral home – and still is the actual home for some of them, though not all.

Both Isacharact and Zetic felt depressed after it was over. They stared at the ground in front of them for several moments...

“I remember them teaching me the words, and the melody is nice, but I still don’t like it. It reminds me of when you were away from me for all those years. *That* story may have had a happy ending, but the song still makes me sad.”

“Yes, it makes me think of those times, too... What would you rather hear?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

She chuckled softly to herself and her eyes flashed briefly at Zetic.

“How about that song you wanted me to dance to at the court of Queen Amlaruil?”

Zetic arched his eyes and chuckled back.

“Ooh, you mean the Janni belly-dance song?”

He started to play the fast tune, but Isacharact immediately dismissed it.

“No, not that one. It was slower, with more of a deep beat, and it had words. Something about eyes...”

Zetic stopped and paused in reflection before starting to play a different song. Isacharact had to listen along for a bit before she recognized it.

“Yes, yes, that’s the one. I remember you playing it other places, too; at the harvest festival in our barony, for one. What is it called, again?”

“‘*For the Eyes of Gütne*’. A Calimshani riding-song. It’s one of my favourites, you know. Every time I hear it I see the great desert wasteland with a band of camel-riders driving across it on some raid.”

“It is quite an... *engaging* tune.”

Zetic stuck his tongue out sideways and opened his eyes, looking at her.

“Ahh, and does that statement mean that my fair Isacharact will bless me with a sensual dance tonight?”

She looked back at him with a smirk.

“Maybe... but I don’t know how. *Humans* dance, not dragons.”

“Then you are in luck, white she-dragon!”

Elminster, smiling widely, strode out onto the patio, holding the hand of The Simbul lightly up in the air.

“For you are in the presence of the illustrious Elminster, wizard, arch-mage...”

He flourished in a comically deep bow.

“...and most excellent dancer and master dance *teacher*.”

Isacharact turned to look at him with a grin.

“Indeed... But do you propose to teach me to dance right in front of both of our lovers? Jealous looks from all sides, we would have.”

The pair of mages had arrived in front of the two dragons, standing on the stone path that ran between them.

“Well, it depends on *how* I teach you, doesn’t it? You are quite capable of learning by example, I think. So I will dance here with The Simbul, and when we are done, you can say ‘I have seen men and women dance well’, and be able to try it yourself.”

All had a good laugh as Elminster bid Zetic strike up a bright Aglarondian song. Isacharact looked on as the couple danced, the wizard showing surprising agility and nimbleness, given his age. Though, of course, she paid more attention to The Simbul, who danced flowingly in the Elvish style.

It wasn’t quite the way one would dance to a fast Janni or Calimshani beat, but Elminster had been correct, and watching them dance did give her... ideas.

After a few dances, the joyous couple said good-night and retired. Not to their rooms to sleep, necessarily, for those Chosen by Gods such as Mystra need hardly any rest for their near-immortal bodies. And, after all, The Simbul and Elminster both have many responsibilities in the world at large.

Zetic watched them go off, glad to see their romance had obviously recovered from where it had stood in the morning, then re-tuned the lute for the Calimshani scale.

“And now, my dear... what do you say?”

Isacharact got up on two feet and stretched a bit before replying.

“I say, ‘The dancers are ready, let the musicians begin’.”

He began the riding-song again, but this time harnessed the instrument's magic powers, and in addition to his strumming and plucking, the lute played along with the sounds of drums, tambourines, reed wood-pipes, bowed instruments, and other accompaniment, so that a person who could only *hear* the performance would think that there was a veritable orchestra out on the patio, and never merely one large but simple-looking lute.

Isacharact danced surprisingly well, considering it was her first time. Zetic noticed that she seemed to integrate the flowing arm motions of The Simbul's elvish dancing with the fast full-body movement required for the belly-dance. She was dressed appropriately, too, for the way the chains across her horns jingled and the heavy weights at the tip of the headdress moved was... captivating... Exactly as such a dance was meant to be.

Then Zetic glanced down at her wedding-girdle – effectively a necklace, really, when she stood on two feet – and he exhaled deeply, remembering why he had ordered it made up to be her wedding-gift.

The way its tassels shook and the gems glimmered as she danced was positively hypnotic.

He began to take more notice of her body movements...

Oh, incredible!

Visions of that morning's... *activities*... danced in his head...

Zetic soon found himself staring at her in the same daze he had been in at the court of the Queen of Evermeet when the elves had first ornamented Isacharact with a headdress and taught her the art of being a temptress. Zetic was barely paying attention to the music that he was playing, so completely engrossed with her motions was he.

This is interesting to experience, too.
I see so many new things with you.

What, the music, or the dancing?

Both.
They affect the Fifth in unusual ways.
Though this 'love' is quite unusual itself.

Hah!
Every poet who ever lived would agree with you, there.
*But explain what *you* find unusual about it.*

It is the way the Fifth interacts.
You want to make her happy.
And when you succeed...
It makes you happy, too.
The same goes for her, and so you have ...

A ‘loop’ of happiness that feeds back on itself.

That explains the intensity of love, I suppose.

Intensity of emotions, yes.
You modify each others’ emotions so easily.
I have difficulty with it.
When I was in the metal that became the sword...
I tried to modify the smith’s emotions.
Make him less afraid, make him less worried.
It should have been well within my power.
But it did not work.
Perhaps I simply did not understand his mind...

Hmm...

Maybe you can understand better than I.

What are you talking about?

You wish to give pleasure to her, yes?
You should try to use my power to do so.

You mean affect her mind?

Yes.
You have learned to read minds through me.
Now you should learn to act on minds through me.

“You’re not even paying attention!”

Isacharact, standing in front of Zetic, had stopped dancing. He stopped playing.

“Uh, er, I’m sorry, dearest... I was distracted for a moment.”

She harrumphed and turned away, annoyed. Zetic tried to recover from the blunder.

“But by your dancing, actually.”

Isacharact looked at him sideways over her shoulder.

“You held me quite in thrall there... When this little adventure is over, I should take you to the grand palace of the Pasha of Calimshan and, just as he had his wives dance for *me* when I was a visitor there, so I will have you dance for *him*.”

She turned herself sideways and looked at him head-on, though with her arms folded in disdain and a disbelieving look on her face. Zetic continued the story – and the recovery.

“He’ll draw me aside afterwards, bring me to his finest coffee-room and bid me relax on the plushiest of the cushions. He’ll surround me with the fairest of his harem girls, bring in the most fantastic of musicians to play for me, give me the most exquisite of foods and drinks to consume...”

He grinned and began to play the fast, spicy music again.

“...And then offer me a *fortune* for just one night alone with you.”

Isacharact smirked back, and started to wiggle her shoulders to the beat again.

“And what will be your reply, hmm?”

Zetic licked his lips and began to nod along to the music himself.

“Ahhh, I don’t rightly know. What would you have me say, dear?”

She opened her eyes wide at him, arms still crossed, body still lightly bouncing to the tune.

“Simple, husband. You should tell him that you cannot take payment for something that is not yours.”

He narrowed his eyes, but the smile on his face only widened.

“Oooh, and what do you mean by that, wife? Are you not mine?”

She turned all the way around and walked up close to him, a toothy grin on her face.

The golden chain had materialised in her hands again...

“Not at all, husband. You have it backwards; it is *you* who are *mine*.”

And with this, she shackled his neck and headed into the palace.

“I’d like to try something a little *different* tonight, my dear.”

They were back in their rooms, Isacharact having led Zetic from the courtyard by the chain around his neck – making certain to mischievously give it an extra yank or two anytime someone saw them in the corridors.

“Oh, really?...”

Isacharact lay down on her side and stared at him, breathing slowly and with a grin on her face. She jerked the chain again and Zetic tumbled towards her, landing on his chest in front of her.

“...Like what?”

“Like this.”

Zetic reached out a hand and touched her on the face, harnessing *Hapax Legomenon*...

Isacharact’s head arched back in a gasp and she shut her eyes as pure, simple, and incredible waves of ecstasy washed over her from the power of the Fifth. Her eyes went blind, there was a ringing in her ears, and her whole body tensed up as if in shock.

A few seconds later, Zetic pulled his hand away. Isacharact opened her eyes wide, choked a bit, and panted heavily.

“*What* was THAT?!?”

“*That* was a bit of the Fifth Element.”

Zetic grinned at her as he thought how it was usually *him* who wound up sputtering on the floor after their lovemaking.

“Would you like a little more?”

Isacharact put a paw on his shoulder.

“Yes...”

Zetic’s hand waved in the air – having used the power once, he no longer needed to touch her, and the gesture was merely for dramatic purposes.

Her breathing stopped, her eyes clenched shut and squeezed out a few tears, and the hand on Zetic’s shoulder gripped tightly.

A few seconds later, Zetic broke the hold.

Now she opened her eyes wide, looking at him with feral ferocity as she recovered her breath. Isacharact pushed him down underneath her, holding on to both his shoulders, and spoke in an open-mouthed hiss.

“Again!”

Zetic was surprised by her reaction, but obliged nonetheless, and Isacharact’s claws dug into him painfully as she let out a moan through clenched teeth and shut eyes. He let it go on a bit longer, this time...

And when she awoke from the overriding sensations, she expelled an incredible feline roar unlike any he had ever heard before, took her hands off his shoulders, snarled at him, and slashed at his face with her right paw.

“MORE!!”

Fearing another swipe, Zetic hastily called upon the Fifth again. Her hands tensed open in front of her, eyes crying, mouth trying to let out a whimper without the breath to do so.

They held this position for almost a whole minute until, finally, the Fifth was too much; Zetic had pushed Isacharact's mind too hard, and he had to react quickly to catch her as she fell unconscious.

As he gently placed her head on the ground and looked at her in disbelief, he suddenly felt an incredible pain in his face.

Touching his cheek with a hand, he pulled it away and gasped. It was covered in blood.

Zetic wriggled out from under Isacharact, hurried over to the room's large mirror, and was startled to see three immense red gashes across the right side of his face, stretching from his ear to his nose, blood dripping from the wounds.

Good Gods, she had really carved up his face! The bleeding had almost stopped, for dragons heal quickly, but Zetic nonetheless cast a quick spell to close the wounds and clean up the blood. The deep red-black scars remained, however, and he stared at them in disbelief as he ran his fingers over them.

What had she done? What had *he* done?

That was very well done.

What??

I didn't want her to pass out, and certainly not to slash my face!

But you did want to bring her pleasure.

In that, at least, you succeeded.

Better than I did when I tried to bring calm to the smith.

You were perhaps too forceful.

Proper control will come to you eventually.

“What... what happened?”

Isacharact was coming to. Zetic turned to face her.

“You don't remember?”

She put a hand on her forehead as if recovering from a heavy hangover.

“No, I... Ohhh...”

She opened her eyes wide and stared at him, speaking slowly.

“I *do* remember. What you did... it was incredible.”

Zetic pointed at the scars.

“And what *you* did was painful. Or have you forgotten giving me *these*?”

Zetic turned back to the mirror as she got up and walked over, looking at his face in it.

“No, I haven’t.”

Isacharact licked her teeth.

“You’re going to keep them, aren’t you?”

Zetic turned to stare at her in disbelief while she still looked at him in the mirror.

“What??”

She grinned at his reflection.

“Oh, come now. A dragon without scars is like a hawk without feathers. You may only actually be some 50 years old, but you appear to be almost 100. Without any scrapes on your body, it looks as if you’ve never seen a good fight. What’ll other dragons say, hmm? They’ll see you and think, ‘easy target’.”

Isacharact turned away from the mirror to look straight at him. Reaching out to stroke the deep gashes, she spoke on, albeit in a more sensual voice.

“And *I* like them. They mark you as being mine.”

Zetic gaped at her for a few seconds and then slowly turned back to the mirror.

“Uh... I think I’ll... I think I’ll heal them up... Um... I’d rather not have any scars... Er, for now... And, ah... besides, if I wanted some later... I suppose you can always ‘give’ me more.”

Isacharact let go as Zetic cast a powerful healing spell that cleared the marks, leaving no trace that they had ever been there.

“Indeed I can... But right now, there’s something else I need to do.”

She pushed him back onto the floor again and gently landed on top of him, pressing her hips against his and sticking her face in front of him.

“My dear husband, it was a *mistake* for you to impart upon me the principle of ‘fairness’ when we first courted. For now, as you have made me *pass out* from sheer pleasure—”

“Uh-oh.”

“–I feel obliged to... return the favour.”

It took a while... but eventually, hands gripping the carpet, mouth gasping noisily, eyes rolled back in his head, Zetic gave one last croak ... and blacked out.

Isacharact, still on top of him, squirmed once or twice more to make sure her work was done. With a smug look on her face, she chuckled to herself, readjusted her position, wrapped her arms around his head, and went to sleep with her lover underneath her.

Two months passed. There wasn't much to do: on the one hand, everyone – Zetic, The Simbul, and Elminster – was trying to learn more about *Hapax Legomenon*. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be much they *could* learn. Zetic could clearly read minds now, and even influence them emotionally, but otherwise he seemed to be at an impasse as far as unlocking any more abilities. Even *Hapax* itself didn't speak much during this time.

So, unwilling to leave the relative safety of the palace, Zetic spent the days on the patio, playing music and looking out over the city, or in the audience chamber, hearing the cases being brought forward and offering some advice after searching the thoughts of those involved. And at night... he *did* learn how to 'control' the power, much to Isacharact's delight. He received no more scars, though that is not to say that she had become any less... demanding.

Still, the situation was one of stagnation.

But there is chaos in the world. There is the force of entropy that constantly chips away at the status quo, and such a situation could not stagnate forever.

Zetic was on the patio again, looking out across the city, occasionally delving into the mind of someone he saw. Lunch was being served; Elminster and The Simbul were there, too, for it was a beautiful day, with not a single cloud in the bright blue sky.

He had been playing the lute for Isacharact – and numerous passers-by – all morning. But now, as he haphazardly scanned the inhabitants of the capital... a voice spoke up again.

This moves too slowly.

It was *Hapax Legomenon*, but it sounded different than before.

*What do you mean, too slowly?
I thought you had no concept of time.*

I do now.
I acquired it from you.
This process moves too slowly.

Which process?

The process of integration.
It is dangerous to prolong it.

You said earlier that I was learning quickly.

You were, and you still are.
But not quickly enough.
I did not realise before the dangers in this process.

What dangers?

I do not know them, exactly.
I can only feel them.
They are powerful.

And I am...

Afraid.

*Afraid of what?
What are these dangers?*

Powerful instances of the Fifth.
I feel their gaze.
They are always present.
They are watching me closely.

What do they want with you?

Not so much with me...
...as with us.

And, in this current state...
...we are vulnerable.

Well, what should we do then?

We must...

...Accelerate.

In the corner of his eye, Zetic saw Elminster bring a tea-cup up to his mouth and prepare to drink...

... but he never actually drank. The cup stayed still, and his hands moved no further.

And then Zetic realised that nothing else was moving, either. The Simbul's hair defied gravity as she was in the middle of turning her head. A servant was pouring tea and the liquid hung in the air. Isacharact was dead motionless, reaching for something on the table.

They all glowed with the Fifth, of course... but instead of being aware of the minds of only *one* of them, Zetic became slowly aware of the thoughts of all four at the same time.

It was confusing, having them all talk at the same time in his head. But then time sped back up, and Zetic let out a yelp of pain as his awareness turned once more to the city.

A hundred thousand thoughts began to speak in his head.

A hundred thousand eyes projected their vision onto his.

A hundred thousand different senses of smell, of taste, of touch, of hearing...

The four others on the patio turned towards him and saw Zetic tilt his head backwards in pain, drop his lute, and clutch at his eyes, trying to cover them. Isacharact moved to go up to him, but stopped short as white beams lashed out from his head and fanned towards the city.

More beams flew out, and more, and more, until his head was a veritable beacon of light even in the face of the midday sky. The light would have been visible for tens of miles all around...

That is enough for now.
Feel the Fifth in a way you did not before.

... but only briefly, for it stopped only a few seconds after it started.

Still reeling from the experience, Zetic collapsed forward onto the ground, breathing heavily, still covering his face.

“Zetic? Are you all right?”

Elminster had stood up.

“Yes... yes, I am. I just had an... unnerving... experience, that’s all.”

“What kind of experience?”

“A Fifth Element experience.”

He took his hands off his eyes; they were flooded with tears. He wiped them off and recovered his breath.

“And I learned many things, but one in particular stands out.”

Zetic turned to face a small bush nearby which was currently infested with a pile of small birds who were chirping loudly.

“Come out, Szass. I saw you in there.”

From inside the thick brush, one of the tiny birds flew out onto the stone walkway. A few seconds later, it changed into the elegant but rotten shape of Szass Tam once again. Elminster remained seated, calm in the face of one of his great opponents, but The Simbul hastily got to her feet and her clothing glowed with the magic power within.

Szass was unfazed by her reaction; he feared nothing from her, not even in her own palace.

“Hmm, I thought I caught you blind that time. Understandable, that you would pick me out of six people who were the centre of attention for a whole room, but to spot me in a bush full of unnoticeable creatures... very impressive.”

“If I had realised that you were such a fan of polymorphing yourself into other things, I might’ve seen you earlier. As it was, I got lucky; if you’d been anywhere within twenty miles just now, I’d have seen you.”

“So I gathered, from the way those rays of light shot out from you.”

Zetic didn’t need to deliberately peer into Szass the way he had before. The lich’s thoughts already seemed to echo in his head.

“You didn’t just come here to spy on me, Szass. You came here with a different purpose. Two, even. One is... sinister... but the other is that you’ve been investigating the Fifth Element yourself. You’ve got a proposition to make.”

Zetic turned away. He knew more, but didn’t feel like presenting the Zulkir’s plans himself.

“Let’s hear it, then.”

The robed skeleton blinked and gathered himself.

“No doubt you’ve asked your God for help, and no doubt these two powerful mages have been trying to research this ‘Fifth Element’ just as I have. And, what is more, I don’t doubt that we have all come up empty-handed. Whatever my intentions and designs on the world, I am still a scholar, and interested in... studying... this intriguing phenomenon. Yet all of my resources, however vast, have failed me. I only know that which you discovered through your own introspection.”

Szass floated over to the table where the others were.

“I am patient, but the complete absence of any information of any kind makes me anxious. It has only been eight weeks, and arcane and divine research both are known to frequently take years... but I can already feel that your earlier pronouncement was truthful; there is no information about this Fifth Element anywhere.”

A common threat overrides even great enmities, and Elminster agreed with Szass.

“I began looking into it when Zetic came to me several weeks prior to his current situation, and still have found nothing.”

Isacharact was nervous.

“But *do* we need to know more? What is the rush?”

Zetic sighed.

“Because *Hapax Legomenon* itself feels hurried. *It* provoked the outburst just now. Oh, I have been blind! There is something going on here beyond the simple melding of two minds, and I was a fool to not see it earlier. If even the Gods do not answer me, then it must be a very large thing indeed”

There was a long silence as everyone thought on Zetic’s words.

Szass Tam broke it, continuing his speech.

“I have conceived of one last possible course of action, then. There is a place known to me, and probably to you two both—”

He pointed at Elminster and The Simbul.

“—creatures of magic arcane and divine, as you are. It is called Focus.”

Zetic had already pictured the location in his mind as the lich talked on.

“Nothing more than a stone circle in the middle of a field, and it does not pulse with energy. Or, at least, not of a sort that anyone has ever been able to truly identify. Yet there is some intangible power that surrounds the monuments, and all who pass by it can feel it. Legends abound about what, exactly, Focus *is*.”

The Simbul still stared at Szass, ready to attack him or face his attacks. Yet she softened a bit, seeing that Elminster had remained calm, and gave her own view.

“I have heard one of them. It says that Focus is the place where the Weave and the Shadow Weave melded when Shar created her imitation of Mystra. This makes sense, for spells cast in the area – whether spells of the shadow or the normal Weave – behave very strangely.”

Elminster put down his tea and reached for his pipe again.

“And I have heard another. It claims that the site is the birthplace of magic itself, and Mystra’s connection to her Weave. If spells behave strangely, at the very least they are sometimes magnified to incredible proportions, and several sects of sorcerers and wizards believe that meditating at Focus brings great insight.”

Szass listened attentively to these alternate explanations before presenting his own.

“Yet I have heard a third. Grander and more mysterious than those two, though that, of course, means nothing as far as credibility. When it comes to usefulness, however... *This* legend says that Focus is one of the – or perhaps simply *the*, for no-one has found anything similar – anchors that hold the universe together. The stones are completely immovable and indestructible whether acted upon by physical or magical force, and connections to other realms seem to function more strongly there, though opening a permanent portal is impossible. The tales go that anything presented at Focus is spread to all the planes, and it immediately comes to the attention of the Gods... *all* of the Gods.”

Zetic was still looking off, seeing the place called Focus in his mind.

“You want to bring me there, to see if anything will happen.”

“Yes. You may have asked the Gods for help, but I doubt you could have asked them all at once. If *my* legend is correct, then Focus will allow you to do that. Perhaps if they are all summoned together, something new will happen.”

Zetic sighed. There wasn’t anything else to do.

“Very well. Let us go.”

Now Szass became more practical.

“Though it is easy to open portals *at* Focus, it is apparently quite impossible to open one *to* Focus. Teleportation spells similarly fail. The closest we could get would be three hundred miles away, and then we would have to make our way there ourselves.”

The lich appeared more alive; planning things out was an obsession for him.

“We will open a portal and then fly the rest of the way. I have prepared the necessary magical items and spells. And you are free to refuse it on the basis that you do not trust me, but I have also prepared a band to be our escort. For it is a dangerous path, filled with areas of wild magic. The journey will take two days.”

I know time now.
That is too slow.
We must get there today.

I think I begin to see, now.

“No. We must get there today.”

Szass turned to Zetic, who was still staring off, seeing Focus in his mind’s eye.

“That is quite impossible. No divine or arcane magic that I know of can take us straight there, and even if we were to use magic to speed our travel, we would still arrive only tomorrow afternoon, were we to travel all night.”

It is not impossible.
You know it.

*Yes.
Wherever you go, there you are.*

“The Fifth Element can move us there.”

Zetic closed his eyes and thought of Focus... and he thought of Isacharact, and Elminster, and The Simbul, and Szass Tam, and himself... and of them all being at Focus.

The palace courtyard disappeared from around them, replaced with the enormous mute stone circle of Focus. Seven enormous obelisks, raw, pointed, and buried so deeply into the ground that they looked more like stalagmites in a cavern, surrounded the two dragons and three humans in a large, flat, circular clearing in a forest.

There is danger here.

Zetic’s sword flew straight out of its scabbard into his hands.

*What is this?
How can I command the sword?*

The Fifth is in the sword, too.

The Fifth is in the sword?

But you are not in the sword, and I have only seen the Fifth in creatures with minds!

The sword has no mind!

Stones may speak when spoken to.

Yet they have no minds.

The Fifth does not require a mind.

But...

*But that would mean that the Fifth is *everywhere*!*

Yes, it is.

And now, Zetic was truly in pain, for if the awareness of a hundred thousand people was tremendous, it could not compare to being aware of *everything* around him. One tree was not just a single tree with respect to the Fifth, but Zetic saw every piece of it individually, and saw *through* every piece of it individually.

One leaf, and another, and another, and a branch, and another branch, and the trunk, and the pieces of bark, and each root in the ground, and the seeds on the limbs, and the buds on the branches, and the other leaves, and the leaves in the ground, and one piece of earth, and another piece of earth, and a stone in the earth, and a worm in the earth, and the root of a plant in the earth, and up that root into another tree, and another branch, and another leaf, and another leaf, and another leaf, and the air, and the wind, and the sky, and the bird, and the feathers on the bird, and the feet of the bird, and the tree on which it landed, and the branch of that tree, and the gust of air which brushed against it, and through that gust of air all the way, all the way, all the way to a city, and the people in the city, and the houses of the city, and every cobble-stone in the street of the city, and the fires in the city, and the hair on the people in the city and the wind above them and the clouds in the sky and the water in the clouds and the birds in the sky and the creatures in the earth and the rocks and then ACROSS THE PLANES! To the place of the blood war, of the demons and the rocks and the earth and the air and everything there within!...

Overwhelmed by being conscious of so many things at once, Zetic gurgled aloud as his mind did the only thing it knew how to do in self-defence: it lapsed, and he fell unconscious.

But that was not *all* that happened, for *Hapax Legomenon* also feared for itself in this powerful place and acted in self-defence as well.

Time stopped – but on this occasion, not for just Zetic, nor for a small area around him, nor even for an area of twenty miles.

Hapax Legomenon was terrified beyond imagination, and reacted as such.

Its power reached out to the limits, bringing the world *entire* to a standstill, and more! The shockwave blasted straight through the fabric of the universe itself, bringing a halt to everything on all the planes.

A gigantic battle in the Abyss stopped. The great waterfall at the foot of heavenly Mount Celestica froze in mid-pour. So many other things paused in the middle, or the beginning, or the end, of their course of action.

But there, in the circle, time continued. A great shimmering bubble appeared around Focus, created as an ancient form of defence for the stones themselves, so important they were to the world – though that importance did not necessarily confirm Szass's theory.

Yet that pocket of time was meant to protect the stones, not the people near them. The four others were still held in place.

In the centre of the formation, Zetic was lying on the ground. The *Hapax Legomenon's* feeble powers kept time going for him, albeit at an unimaginably slow pace.

And, for the longest time... nothing happened.

A vertical circle of shimmering light appeared, and through it stepped a man clad entirely in plate mail that was polished to a dull shine. From his head to his toe he was entirely covered by it, almost more metal than man. He took a few steps towards the centre of Focus, then stopped, pulled out a large bastard sword, purposefully stuck it in the ground, put his hands on the pommel, and waited. The circle closed behind him.

Minutes later, another circle appeared. Emerging through it was an enormous bald red-skinned man, bulging with muscle, wearing little more than a pair of shorts, and with a great spiked mace hanging at his waist.

The man in metal nodded curtly to the new arrival, whose only reply was to shoot the other a glance with his burning eyes.

Another portal, and through it this time stepped a silver-coloured dragon, though he was the size of a man. Blue eyes looked at the two others, who acknowledged him in their own ways.

A fourth portal: This time, a warrior, though not wearing such heavy armour as the first.

And then the number of portals appearing magnified incredibly, and the people came by twos, and fours, and sixes, and eights, and tens, and dozens, until the field was crowded with hundreds of strange-looking men, women, elves, dwarves, dragons, gnomes, halflings, and other creatures.

The man in metal, closest to the centre of Focus, spoke first, his voice echoing through the helmet that completely surrounded his head.

“We are all here, then. Now, we must decide what to do with this creature.”

The red man spoke first.

“Simple: this creature has become too powerful for a mortal. What lies within him threatens us all. It is therefore quite obvious to *me* what we must do, and it ought to be obvious to you others, as well.”

A sad-faced man, his arms wrapped in chains, filled in the blank with a sorrowful voice.

“You want to kill him.”

The hulking red man replied in a sneer.

“Of course I want to kill him. Painfully, if possible, but I’ll settle for anything. And don’t tell me you aren’t thinking of his death, yourself. Think of all the *suffering* he could wreak on the world with that power, Illmater.”

Illmater, eyes glistening with tears, turned to Zetic’s unconscious figure.

“I don’t believe he would do such a thing.”

Another man, bearded, clothed in skins and holding an immense spear, spoke up in a thunderous voice.

“Who knows *what* he would do? Look at all the absurd things he’s used the power for so far. I side with Bane on this one; he needs to die.”

A dark-robed figure on the other side of Zetic as Bane, interrupted.

“All you two can think of is death. Why not *use* him instead of killing him?”

The armoured man cut him off.

“We cannot use him; even *you* ought to know that, Cyric.”

Another warrior, blind, and with only one hand which clutched his sword, interjected.

“But we cannot just kill him. That is no reward for everything he’s done so far.”

Bane took a few steps closer and gestured at Zetic.

“If it’s ‘just rewards’ you want to hand out, Tyr, what sort of just reward ought we to mete out to him for daring to seize such power? Surely, even you can see that he must die for such presumption!”

Illmater broke in again.

“I don’t want to see him die. Why must you always want creatures to die?”

Bane nearly spat out his reply.

“Because I’m Bane, that’s why! And in case you hadn’t noticed, this one isn’t exactly on my list of ‘favourite creatures’.”

The fourth arrival, a lightly-armoured man who had previously been staring straight at Zetic since he appeared at Focus, spoke out at last.

“But he is on *mine*, Bane. I will not see my humble servant die today.”

Bane looked at him with disdain.

“As if I care what a *lesser* God like you cares, Torm. Why this idiot chose to follow a lap-dog such as you instead of at least one of the greater Gods whom you associate with is beyond me. But in case you haven’t been paying attention, your ‘humble servant’ hasn’t been particularly humble or serving since he was infused with the Fifth.”

A five-headed dragon off to Bane’s left cried out.

“Bah! This miserable creature is just one big mistake of yours, Bahamut!”

Bahamut didn’t even flinch as he replied.

“As I recall, Tiamat, you acquiesced to his reward for defeating Swight.”

Tiamat’s five heads all spoke out at once.

“And if I knew how he would steal away my creature or how you would lie through your teeth, I would not have given my consent! Telling him that neither man nor dragon was better, indeed! Go ahead, just *try* and say that he hasn’t been better off as a dragon instead of a puny man!”

A tiny grin crossed Bahamut’s face.

“I believe I said that neither form was better *objectively*. For *him*, dragon-form has worked out well, certainly, but that is *subjective*. On the whole, no-one is better off as either a dragon or a man.”

The armoured man interrupted again.

“This bickering goes nowhere. We achieve nothing by discussing how this situation came about.”

Bane turned to him.

“As if you have a better idea on what to do, Helm. But, no, of course you don’t. You just sit in the background and watch the world happen around you.”

Behind his mask, Helm might've been wearing an incredibly cold stare.

“And what about you, Bane? You meddled so much in the world – you *all* meddled so much in the world – that you were shunted into mortal bodies for your bickering. This is no time for such internal fighting. Bane is right, at least, in one thing: here is a creature that threatens us all. We must decide what to do to save ourselves, and save the world, from what he might do. Killing him is one option, though it should not be the only one, and it may not be the best one. Enough talk of how this situation arose; it is time to talk about how to solve it.”

Helm pulled his sword out of the ground and sheathed it again.

“Does no-one have any other ideas?”

A man clad in elegant wizard-robos quickly spoke up in an anxious tone.

“There is no time for other ideas! He awakens!”

All the Gods stared at Zetic, who was recovering consciousness.

They're here!
They're here!

Who?
Who's here?

The powerful instances of the Fifth.
The ones that have been watching us.
They speak of destroying us.

I am afraid.

Zetic opened his eyes and looked at the creatures that surrounded him.

By all the Gods...

...it's all the Gods!

But as he looked around, the power of the Fifth re-awakened within him, and he became aware of the minds of the Gods, and moaned in pain as their thoughts and their minds were made known to him.

Oh, the overwhelming sensations!

*The Gods are aware of so much...
It hurts to be conscious of so many things at once!*

Conscious.

That is a strange word...

You do not know it?

I know it now that you have said it.
And, in truth, it is a word that I know well.
Or ought to have known well, at least.

Conscious...

Consciousness...

That's what the Fifth Element is, isn't it?

Yes, yes!

And now, at last, you see the Fifth.
And now, at last, you feel the Fifth.

You are **CONSCIOUS** of the Fifth!

With the secret of the Fifth unlocked at last, being aware of everything no longer hurt.

Zetic got up and turned his head, seeing and the stares of the Gods around him, but more – he *felt* the stares, and he *saw through* their eyes, seeing himself as the Gods saw him.

*The power of the Fifth Element is greater than they are.
Even the Gods are made of it, and you command it.
They're all afraid of you because of that.*

Yes.
And they are all staring at you because of that.

They're waiting for you to do something.

They're waiting for you to say something.

They're waiting for us–

No!

No!

Not us, anymore.

No more “you and me”.

There is only *I*.
And I am Zetic, for, just as *Hapax* promised, I am still me.

As he thought this, Zetic looked up towards the sky, and the white glow from his eyes melted and diffused across his entire body, spilling out from the sockets to cover him entirely.

A gold dragon no more – now he was a blindingly bright one, a fusion of the elemental nature of the entity *Hapax Legomenon* and of his own flesh and bone. Zetic flexed his wings, and they burned with the white glow of Consciousness, the Fifth Element, and they sung, too – the eerie music of *Hapax Legomenon*, that incredible, incomprehensible, infectious music that is one manifestation of the Fifth.

Zetic spotted Torm in the crowd and walked over to his Lord, abasing himself, putting his head on the ground in front of the God.

“My Lord Torm... I have been no great cleric of Yours these past months. I have neglected my duties to Your church. For this, I beg You tell the dues that I owe You in order to atone.”

Torm, the God, practically choked at this unexpected display of humility. He soon composed himself.

“No penance do you need to serve, Zetic. That you have prostrated yourself in front of Us—in front of *me*—speaks for your heart being true. You know my ideals well, and forgiveness is one of them. You are forgiven.”

Zetic got up and raised his head up over the human-sized avatar once more.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

He began to circle the group of Gods who encircled him. To Illmater and Tyr, the two other members of the Triad of which his God was a part, he nodded and spoke their names reverently. He stopped in front of Helm and gave a deep bow.

“Lord Helm. I hope I have helped Your work in my efforts to bring Your church and that of my Lord together in peace.”

Helm’s metal face-guard was impassive, though he might have been smiling underneath it.

“You have, Zetic. I am thankful.”

Zetic continued circling. In front of Sune, Goddess of love, beauty, and passion, he grinned and spoke her name with a pleasing tone. He felt as well as saw her smile back, and knew that the Goddess found his love of Isacharact wondrous.

Zetic continued circling, nodding and bowing to the Gods whose names he knew and whose works he had preached, and whose ideals he respected. At last, he passed in front of Bahamut, and gave such an incredibly deep bow that his head touched the ground.

“Bahamut... I can never thank You enough for the wonders this form of Yours has shown me, and the blessings which I have received through it.”

Bahamut’s incredible blue eyes turned the colour of the day sky, and Zetic knew that the God was pleased.

Tiamat, however, was angry at this display of respect and screeched out at him, pointing to Isacharact, still frozen in time.

“Blessings! Wonders! Nothing but a thief, you are, to have stolen from me my Isacharact, my precious creature of greed and evil, and one of the only remainders I have of my even more beautiful creature, Isasarach.”

It was hard to tell, considering that they burned with same colour as the rest of him, but Zetic’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at Tiamat.

“No thievery did I commit, Tiamat. Your creature came to *me*, and willingly.”

The Dragon-Goddess was even more outraged. Two of her heads snarled at Zetic, two screeched into the air, and the last one talked on.

“Such lack of respect! I am the Dragon-Queen, pathetic creature! I will not forget this insult of yours!”

Zetic waved his hand.

“You already have.”

Tiamat looked back, confused.

“I *already have* what? You are nothing but a thief, miserable creature, to have stolen from me Isacharact, my precious creature of greed and evil, and one of the only—”

With the other Gods gasping at this display, Zetic flicked his hand again; Tiamat forgot everything and put a hand to one of her heads. The only thought in her mind was: ‘What was I just thinking?’

Turning quickly away from her, Zetic moved back to the centre of the circle and began to reflect...

I cannot stay like this. For a mortal such as I to have power over the Gods themselves... it's not possible, it's not allowable. And see—and feel—how nervous they are, how afraid they are. I can't be allowed to live on like this.

Can't I?

What would Szass say if he were in your place?

He'd call you a coward, to want to throw away such power.

Feh! Coward, himself!

I am afraid to face the world with this power, maybe, but remember him from the palace audience-hall: he was afraid to even face himself. *That* is a far more cowardly fear.

And what of Elminster, and The Simbul, and Isacharact?

They would say nothing; Elminster because he would want me to make my own choice. The Simbul because she would not know what choice to make. Isacharact because she would accept whatever choice I chose.

Then I chose to end this: I may still be myself, but I cannot stay with this power inside.

Zetic looked around at the assembly.

“I cannot remain like this, more powerful than you Gods, yet not a God myself. This power inside me must be removed from play, and I know of only one way to do so.”

Bane grinned, took his mace in hand, and rushed forwards.

“Now, you're talking!”

Zetic turned his head and held an open palm facing Bane.

The God collapsed onto the ground in front of him, his body shaking in an epileptic fit as Zetic shorted out his mind. Some of the other Gods – especially the evil ones – swallowed deeply, fearing the same fate for themselves.

“No, Bane. The way you proposed would not work, for then *Hapax Legomenon* would once again roam the world – and *that* cannot be allowed. It is a mistake that *Hapax* even exists.”

Helm, no doubt still staring at Bane's quaking form on the grass from behind his mask, spoke up.

“Are there any more such... mistakes?”

“There are no others, Helm. *Hapax Legomenon* chose its name itself, and it chose well: in the language of thoughts, *Hapax Legomenon* means ‘Singular Value’. It wanted to merge with me partially because it felt alone in the world.”

Zetic released his grip on Bane’s Fifth. The God gasped for air and raised itself up quickly, but said nothing – remembering well what happened to Tiamat.

“There is only one way out of this situation. *Hapax Legomenon* must be removed from me, and the mistake that let it loose on the world must be undone. *Hapax* must be returned to the elemental plane which spawned it.”

Helm replied.

“None of us has dominion over that place, Zetic, nor have any of us ever seen it. I am not even certain if it exists.”

“It exists, Helm, and there is a God who watches over it. There is in fact only *one* God who watches over it, and it is the *only* thing that the God watches over.”

Zetic looked up at the sky again.

“The Fifth Element is the realm of Aō.”

Collective gasps went up around the circle at the mention of the universe’s over-deity. Only Helm managed to keep calm.

“Aō has not been heard from since the Time of Troubles, Zetic.”

“And that is because Aō was not needed since the Time of Troubles, Helm. Any one or several of you might have prayed for Aō’s intercession, but never before have you all called upon Aō at the same time.”

Zetic lay down in the centre of Focus.

“You must do so now. Call to Aō, and bid Aō take back *Hapax Legomenon*.”

In the centre of the circle, surrounded by hundreds of deities, Zetic closed his eyes and went to sleep. Glancing around, the Gods saw that, indeed, there was nothing else to be done, and so they got down on their knees – or stood standing, or fell on their stomachs, as their manner suited them – and prayed – some loudly, some softly, some in their minds alone – to Aō, ruler of them all.

Several minutes passed while the Gods summoned their Deity...

Aō comes for me.

Will Aō take you back?

Yes.

I join with Aō, and return to the place that made me.

Then, goodbye, Hapax.

Goodbye, Zetic.

But, not quite yet!

I MERGE with Aō already, and know Aō's WILL.

And Aō...

...is PLEASED.

You HAVE HANDLED the situation well.

You might HAVE CORRUPTED the WORLD with me.

You MIGHT HAVE TOPPLED the GODS WITH *HAPAX*.

YOU might have DONE SO MANY THINGS.

YET YOU DID NOT.

The voice was entirely Aō's, now.

AND SO, I WILL LEAVE YOU A GIFT:
FOR YOUR RESPECT FOR MY CREATION,

I GIVE YOU SIGHT...

...BEYOND SIGHT.

A SLIVER OF THE POWER OF THE FIFTH THAT YOU HAD,
BUT IT WILL BE ENOUGH.

Hapax Legomenon was gone. The time distortion ceased to exist, and around the world and the planes, things resumed happening. The other four at Focus came to, and shuddered at the incredible scene before them.

Zetic's body glowed no more, returning entirely to the pale gold colour that it had held.

GO BACK INTO MY CREATION, MANDRAKE.
RESPECT IT WELL.

Zetic awoke, and the Gods stopped praying. They began to leave already, knowing that the terrible power within him was gone, and wishing to leave the place of power that is Focus.

Torm, the last to leave, lingered for a moment.

“Aō has blessed you on this day, servant of mine. I know it, and all the other Gods know it, and none can match Aō’s blessing.”

The God showed a warm smile.

“But I will add to it nonetheless. Feel the power that you channel increase, and know that I will continue to watch over you.”

With that, Torm returned to his home across the planes. Zetic did indeed feel stronger – and not merely in the divine energies of his Lord, but in body and soul as well, for Bahamut’s spell of accelerated growth had surged once more, and was nearing its completion. Zetic stood up, and Isacharact noticed that he seemed larger than before... still smaller than her, maybe... but the gap had narrowed.

Szass Tam had already begun to weave his teleportation spell.

“Incredible, simply incredible. I doubt the world has witnessed anything like *that* in a thousand years. I certainly never have, and will not likely do so again. I missed much, doubtless, but what I saw was enough. My thirst for knowledge sated, I will leave you all, and return to Thay.”

“Remember what I said, Szass; and think upon what is inside you.”

“Perhaps I shall, dragon... Perhaps I shall.”

Elminster and The Simbul made preparations to leave, as well.

“Would you like a lift back to the palace?”

“No thank you, Elminster. We have everything of ours with us, and besides, our next destination is not Aglarond.”

Isacharact had approached, and hugged Zetic.

“Our next destination? You have decided where to go next, then?”

“Why, of course, my dear! Do you not remember?”

He grinned, and Isacharact saw in his eyes a glimmer, eerie and strange... yet somehow warm.

“You have an appointment to give the Pasha of Calimshan a belly-dance.”

THE ADVENTURES WILL CONTINUE.