

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Zetic

Young Adult Male Gold Dragon

Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact

Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Lural Saraendas

Young Adult Male Moon Elf

Rogue

Qumara Vissé-Lanar

Young Adult Female Sun Elf

Wizard

Miishara

Young Adult Female Copper Dragon

Queen Amlaruil

Ancient Female Sun Elf

Wizard

Elminster

Ancient Male Human

Wizard, Arch-mage, and Chosen of Mystra

Praden

Old Male Human

Bard

At the Court of the Elf-Queen

Lying on his back, Zetic was staring upwards at the ceiling of the cave, his eyes wide open as if seeing something other than the darkness above, and breathing heavily as if having just run a marathon – but still feeling his ‘second wind’.

Isacharact, lying down on her stomach to his left, ran her eyes over him.

“You look a little unusual, cleric. Are you feeling alright?”

Zetic smiled at the ceiling.

“I’m fine; I’m just... exhilarated.”

Isacharact smirked and dragged a claw down his neck.

“Still energetic? A marked change from yesterday and the day before.”

Zetic’s eyes bulged a bit and he swallowed, remembering what had happened.

“Well, I was only a novice, then.”

Isacharact raised up her head a bit and prodded him in the chest.

“Oh, and you fancy yourself an expert, now? After so little experience?”

Zetic, glanced over at her briefly and spoke dismissively.

“No, that’s not it; I just mean... that I’m at least a little more adjusted. And, anyways, I was only trying to explain why I wasn’t exhausted – it’s not for *that* reason that I feel exhilarated.”

Isacharact put her head back down, becoming a little tired with the roundabout explanation.

“Then what, pray tell, *is*?”

There was silence for several seconds as Zetic reflected with mouth agape. When he spoke, it was a whisper.

“Five years.”

“Pardon?”

“Five years, Isa, five years. For five straight years there was only one thought in my mind: coming back to you. For five whole years, I was utterly devoted to that task. For five whole years, without excepting even a single day or hour or minute or second, I did nothing that did not further me towards you...”

Zetic turned on his side and looked at Isa as he continued.

“... I’ve *never* been so devoted to anything for so long.”

Isacharact, surprised, pulled her neck back a bit.

“Never? Not even in matters concerning your religion?”

Zetic, still looking at her, and yet somehow past her, remained adamant.

“Never. Even training for taking up the banner of Torm, even while sequestered away in the towers of the church, even while adventuring with friends. I never was held so completely to a single, definable goal. I’ve always wandered a bit, wanted to go here and there, to do good wherever I saw fit. But these last five years turned that completely around. Five years! Enough time to turn a youth into a young man.”

Isacharact turned to one side.

“For a human, perhaps. Five years is not long for a dragon.”

For some strange reason, Zetic looked as if that thought made him... sad.

“Isn’t it?”

“No, cleric, it is not. Five years? A tenth or a twentieth of one’s life, perhaps, to creatures who can bear to live a century. But to a dragon, who can live a thousand years, it is a pittance. And you had best realise this quickly, cleric, because it is one of the most defining attributes of our kind. There is an old saying of the humans of the Dales: ‘An egg in hand is worth two hens tomorrow’.”

Zetic nodded and ‘hmed’ to himself.

“Sage advice about investing in the future.”

“That can be one of its meanings, certainly, but dragons look at it a different way: it shows how men are focused so much on the present. Two hens tomorrow *are* worth more, and the reason men choose the egg is because they do not know if they will even see the morrow to claim the hens – humans are in a hurry to live life. How many generations of a human family may there be in a single century? Three? Four? For Dwarves and Elves, perhaps two, but a family of dragons rarely counts more than one.”

Crossing her arms as she lay, Isacharact appeared to wake up a little more, becoming more animated. Zetic, too, seemed less distracted, and more interested in what Isacharact had to say.

“... And when embarking on great projects, we take our time, cleric. Do you know the tale of Nalavarauthatoryl?”

“The Devil Dragon of Cormyr? Of course – it was only two years ago that he and so many other calamities befell that ancient and beautiful kingdom, and only a few months ago that he was finally defeated.”

Isacharact smiled smugly, showing a few of her teeth.

“Ah, but I wonder how much you really know. For the true story involves far more than the downfall of the latest King, Azoun IV, and stretches far further back than a mere two years.”

Her voice lowered, her head tilted down, and her eyes seemed to glitter in the grey darkness of the cave.

“... The true story of Nalavarauthatoryl is older than I am, and it reaches back six centuries and nearly twenty generations of Kings and Queens of Cormyr. For it was then, five hundred and seventy-eight years ago, that a young man of the Obarskyr royal family, with a team of soldiers in tow, went on a quest to prove his manhood by ridding his homeland of some great evil.”

Isacharact turned to look directly at Zetic as she continued the tale.

“Fate caused him to come upon a cave of dragons, and, taking up his sword and leading his soldiers on, he slew all the creatures within, returning triumphant with the heads of a dragoness and three wyrmlings to the adoring crowds of the capital city of Suzail.”

Isacharact paused; Zetic was still listening in wonder. She spoke again, but slowly.

“Nalavarauthatoryl was not at home when his children and his young mate were killed. Still young and unsure of himself, he vowed revenge, but decided to bide his time...”

Isacharact paused again, licking her lips.

“...And his vengeance was almost made complete last year ago when he killed Azoun IV, a descendant of the prince who had angered him so long ago.”

Zetic looked a little overwhelmed by this revelation.

“He revenged himself upon the family almost six hundred years later?”

Isacharact simply smiled and repeated Zetic’s words back at him in a matter-of-fact voice.

“He revenged himself upon the family, almost six hundred years later... So you see now, cleric, that a mere *five* years hardly qualifies as anything epic as dragons count the passage of time.”

Zetic turned on his back so that he was looking up at the ceiling again.

“Indeed ... I suppose I have a long way to go, then. But... you can hardly blame me for still thinking like a man, can you? I’ve still lived longer without a tail than *with*.”

Isacharact suddenly became stern, and she clacked her claws loudly on the stone cave floor.

“On the contrary, I can certainly blame you. Your grasp of what it means to be a dragon and even what you yourself are capable of is sorely lacking. You didn’t even know that you could breathe underwater, cleric of *idiocy!*”

Zetic chuckled and turned back to her.

“Well, as I said, I couldn’t have been expected to try drowning myself, could I?”

Isacharact snorted dismissively.

“And as *I* said, you, a scholar, ought to have straightaway picked up and read a book or found a sage to ask about your own stupid self. Bah!”

Isacharact put her head back down, clearly not interested in discussing the matter any more. But even in the face of her dismissal, Zetic brightened up and looked at her adoringly.

“Grant me at least, Isa dear, that when I tell you five years was longer than I had ever had to work for something, that I speak the truth. It felt, and still feels, like a large investment of time”

Isacharact peered at him with one eye.

“Yet you were gone for fifteen years in total, and that time makes up *my* investment, cleric. Not as focused or as difficult a task, maybe, since I could do many other things as it went by, but an investment nonetheless. I don’t think you still quite grasp what ‘time’ ought to mean to you.”

Zetic’s head wavered as he considered it.

“I suppose... I suppose...”

Seeing his indecision and lack of clarity in the matter, Isacharact lifted her head up once again.

“You are still confused, so let me tell you another story. Perhaps you’ll learn something more of it, as it will... ‘hit closer to home’.”

Zetic seemed intrigued.

“Closer to home?”

Isacharact looked off briefly, and then turned back down at him.

“Closer to *my* home, actually. It is the story of my mother, Isasarach, and of her downfall – a downfall due in no small part... to *hastiness*.”

She spoke the final word with a harsh whisper, pausing to clear her throat.

“But first, perhaps another word about our kind, a different word. For in the *likely* case that you didn’t know, let me tell you now: dragon society – if dragons can even be said to *have* a society in this age – is patriarchal.”

“Because of physiology? Because males are stronger than females?”

Isacharact grinned faintly.

“Because of physiology, yes, but not because of *strength*. Though males will tend to have more experience fighting, perhaps, in fact the male and female are quite evenly matched in terms of mind and body. The reason males are dominant is purely because of *children*: a female dragon is only fertile into her eight or nine hundredth year, whereas males can sire children for two centuries more after that, and sometimes even more. That simple discrepancy means that ancient wyrms may still claim younger mates, and the behaviour is itself mimicked by almost all their younger fellows down the chain, leading to old males who lay claim to younger females, and young females who will pursue the oldest and greatest males to father their children.”

“That’s a very curious reason... but it does make sense. You’re going to tell me now that your family bucks the trend?”

Isacharact smiled wickedly.

“We do indeed. Stretching back twenty generations, perhaps even more – the true count was lost some time ago, and the bloodline has been known to fade in and out – the females in my mother’s lineage have all been great matriarchs, though no-one remembers any quite as great as my mother herself. And it is *there*, in that bloodline – *my* bloodline – that there was a true inequality of sexes, for the female children were always born larger and stronger than the males, and far stronger in general than ordinary white dragons.”

“I see.”

“Oh, you see and hear, cleric, but you obviously don’t understand, so let me spell it out. Just as how the simple inequality between fertility was enough to make a whole race patriarchal, so was the inequality of strength enough to drive one female insane.”

Isacharact put her arms down and planted herself more firmly in the ground. The pace of her speech suddenly quickened.

“Because that is really the only way to describe my mother: absolutely and completely insane. *All* dragons desire to take as much as they can from the world before they leave it behind, but only *she* laid claim to the whole land of Faerûn and everything and *everyone* in it.”

Zetic was captivated by the story; Isacharact leaned over, speaking more quietly.

“And do you know what the truly amazing thing is? She quite nearly succeeded. Nalavarauthoryl’s plans took six hundred years to mature; those of my mother took just shy of a thousand, and by the time it was almost ready... A stable of mates at her side, all

of them ready to die for her. An army composed of nearly all of the creatures of the north – the fiercest enemies of white dragons, the Frost Giants, included – stood poised to begin their march on world at large. And she herself, having prepared herself for the glorious moment, had almost completed her own final preparations of magic...”

“How was she defeated, then?”

Isacharact bristled at the question.

“Don’t interrupt; I’m getting to that.”

“Sorry, dear.”

He grinned, and she flashed her eyes at him, but she wasn’t truly angry, and her annoyance subsided quickly.

“I said she laid claim to everything in the world, and I mean it. For decades, rumours had passed of the army massing in the North, and the inhabitants whispered her name in hushed tones. And when at last Isasarach’s herald, one of her great green mates, landed in the great city of Neverwinter to demand its surrender within the month, across far and wide all the people knew that she was coming.”

Isacharact cast a small spell and used her left claw to draw bright lines of white-silver on the rocky cavern floor, mapping out the Northern lands of Faerûn and showing the lay of the great cities – and showing also, far to the north, far further than any map of men has ever shown, the citadel of ice that was Isasarach’s palace.

“But that city would still have to wait. The first target of hers – the first target whose fall the outside world would notice, I mean – would have been the Ten Towns of Icewind Dale. So it came to be that a group of archmagi, hired in part by the city of Neverwinter, came to one of those towns on a Great Hunt to slay her before she could unleash her army on the world at large.”

As Isacharact spoke, the magically inscribed map changed to show the towns of Icewind Dale.

“Yet they knew their task was hopeless. Banded together, they might be able to defeat her alone; impossible to win against her if her army was in support. But luck found them one day, for they met a young man whose family had lived in Icewind Dale since time immemorial – and that is even as dragons remember. A week later, the ancient proverb rang true: that one man defending his home is more dangerous than an army of hired soldiers. For this man somehow divined Isasarach’s weakness, and when one of her heralds – one of her weaker mates, most likely – passed overhead, he held up a tiny diamond that was his family’s heirloom and proclaimed: ‘Wyrms! Go and tell your mistress that I show this stone as being *mine*, and if she wishes to lay claim to it, let her come here and take it from me herself!’”

Isacharact’s stance softened.

“The herald had been given explicit orders only to scout, and so did exactly what the man had asked: he said that in one of the towns, he had come upon a foolish man who had held aloft a pitifully small diamond and claimed it as his own.”

She looked off into the darkness of the cave.

“None could have predicted what Isasarach did then, save perhaps the man himself. The thought of so deliberate a taunt, so arrogant a defiance – even though so obvious a trap – was too much to bear, and she straightaway set out to claim what was hers – *alone*.”

Isacharact licked her lips and looked at the ground regretfully.

“She had built an army, but she never trusted it. She had taken many mates, but she would not let them fight for her. In her mind, the world was *hers* to take, and she would have preferred being able to take it all on her own, all by herself. And so the man’s ploy worked – she was drawn out alone, enraged and blind with fury.”

Putting the past behind her, Isacharact composed herself again.

“The battle is said to have raged from dawn until dusk without interruption, and by the end of it all the magi were dead or unconscious, leaving only the lone man who was defending his home. With the wizards unable to help, the man did the only thing he could, and leaped into the frigid waters of Lac Dinneshere, clutching his sword in one hand... and the diamond in the other. Still consumed with lust, Isasarach tore after him, diving below the waves...”

Isacharact said nothing for several minutes, until Zetic could bear it no longer and spoke out.

“Well? What happened?”

Isacharact smiled faintly.

“Isn’t it obvious? Isasarach, though she might have held the world in her grasp. Isasarach, whose armies were ready to sweep over all the Northern lands. Isasarach, whose name was steps away from terrorizing the great cities of the world. Isasarach, in the North, the very whisper of cold death... *drowned* while trying to seize a single... tiny... stone.”

The last words were like hammer-strokes upon an anvil, and Isacharact spat them out.

“The fey of the cold waters – who, just as all other creatures of the North not already enslaved by her, stood to *lose* by Isasarach’s reign – helped the man and used their magic to allow him to breathe and swim swiftly. The two combatants struggled underwater for so long that Isasarach finally drowned. She was consumed by a greed for the world, and do you know what the truly horrific part of it is? In her own words, before she left to fight that man and the magi, she proclaimed that even had he held up a single worthless rock, she would still see to it that he was personally dealt with. Can you imagine? Throwing away a thousand years of work for a *rock*? A thousand years of preparation, a hundred thousand

soldiers ready to march, a hundred mates and over a hundred children, all of them scattered and gradually destroyed as her empire-in-waiting collapsed in the wake of her madness.”

Isacharact looked at the ground in absolute disgust, and Zetic paused for some time before speaking.

“Do you share her dream, Isacharact?”

She suddenly looked up at him, but said nothing.

“... You tell the tale as if you wish she had succeeded in her dream, Isa. That speaks of someone who shares in the same dream.”

Isacharact turned the thought over in her mind momentarily before replying.

“Yes, I do wish it. It would have been something incredible. Magnificent. Something to be proud of. And she would have died naturally soon enough, leaving me to claim far more than what I wound up with. Instead, I had to fight tooth and nail to seize the paltry amount she had built up, and I am ashamed to have had a madwoman for a mother. A powerful madwoman, to be sure, feared and respected by many, but there could’ve been so many more...”

Caught in another memory of history, Isacharact yanked herself back to the present, and began to smile again – but with a certain fierceness, a defiance in her eyes.

“And as for your question, cleric... Yes. I *do* share her dream – but not as literally as perhaps you think. For what does it mean to ‘own’ the world? I care not for one particular rock or even one particular diamond that some one poor fisherman holds up above his head. I see the world as a field full of riches, and I want to reap as much of it for myself as I can – but no more.”

The smile disappeared in favour of a sideways look.

“...*That* does not require ruling the world in the way my mother imagined and worked to achieve. I will take a different path, instead, to a different goal – and in the end we will see who comes out on top. And before you ask – yes, I know you will brook no evil; your friend Saraendas already informed me of that.”

Zetic smiled and began to defend himself half-jokingly.

“I wasn’t going to bring it up.”

Isacharact smirked.

“Of course you weren’t. But since I already have, let me tell you I do not intend to change my behaviour one bit while around you. You will simply have to deal with it; the reason I remain near you at all is because I think you *can*. And more important than that is whether or not you have truly learned the lessons of *time* here. Isasarach threw away a thousand years’ worth of work over a stone. Nalavarauthatoryl had his revenge six

centuries later, though he died in achieving it. The lesson to be learned is that when it comes to great tasks, great dragons... take their time.”

Zetic sat up and then lay back down on his side.

“I think I understand. Five years... you’re right. In the grand scheme of things, a tiny speck, not even worthy of mention. But from those five years was born something greater, I think. Everywhere I went, I was thinking of you, yes, but there was more: I wanted you to be *there* with me. Every taste I sampled, every wonderful palace I saw – I wanted you to see it too. There is so much beauty in the world, Isacharact... I want to gather it all up, and lay it at your feet.”

As he spoke the last sentence, he picked up Isacharact’s left hand and gently kissed it while holding it in his right. She grinned widely back at him.

“You see? I’ll have the world at my fingertips, with only an army of one.”

Zetic smiled back, kissed her hand once more, and was about to pull away when she interrupted him, speaking in an low, inviting tone.

“Keep going.”

“What do you mean, ‘keep going’?”

Isacharact glanced down at her arm and showed some of her teeth.

“Up the arm, my good cleric. If you’re going to be romantic, then learn to make romance *properly*.”

Glancing up at her, and then back down at her arm, and then back up and down once more, Zetic licked his lips uneasily and began to softly plant kisses up the length of her arm, until he reached her chest.

Zetic looked up at her once more, and seeing an approving and... enticing... grin on her face, paused.

“And where to now, my Lady?”

She replied with a chuckle.

“Up or down, as you please.”

Isacharact shuffled her lower self on the ground, turning it less on its belly and more on its right side. Looking down her body, Zetic could see her tail twitching playfully.

“Err... um...”

Her whole body shook slightly as she laughed at his sudden discomfort, and her chest heaved as she took a breath in and out.

“Then go up, instead. As I said, two days makes no expert.”

Zetic swallowed.

“Well, to be honest, either direction is a little... uncomfortable. Look back two weeks, and you’ll find me afraid to even touch you. Of course...”

Zetic breathed deeply, pulled his head away, and brought his right hand forward, staring at the jewellery he had bought for her and tracing one of the lines of the intricate metalwork with a claw.

“... find me a year ago, and I though just seeing you wear this would enough. Do you know... do you have *any idea* how long it took me to save the money to pay for this piece? And yet, I’d gladly sink ten times what I paid into it, just for the sight of it on you.”

Zetic looked up at Isacharact, who was watching him with an amused, sideways grin.

“You’re beautiful, Isacharact.”

Isacharact didn’t even flinch.

“I know.”

Zetic furrowed his brow and looked away, taking a second or two to understand what she had just said. Eventually, he choked out one laugh, and then another, and then completely broke out into chuckles and pulled away. Far from being annoyed, Isacharact appeared almost as amused as he was.

“What’s so funny, cleric?”

Zetic pointed at her with a wide smile.

“Your reply! It’s certainly... out of the ordinary. In all the stories of romance that I’ve ever heard, when a man tells a woman that she’s beautiful... Well, it doesn’t quite play out like this, that’s for certain.”

Isacharact snorted, amused.

“My dear cleric, *firstly*, you are not a man, at least not anymore, just as *I* am not a woman, and *secondly*, would I be incorrect to say that the women in these stories are all innocent, dainty little damsels, virgins to the world of love, meek and prim and proper and lacking in self-confidence?”

“No, you are correct.”

Isacharact seemed very satisfied with herself.

“Ah, and that is why in those stories the women melt at hearing those words that they’ve never heard before. But make no mistake, cleric: *I* have. And besides that, I know myself well enough to be aware of my physical... talents. I appreciate your words, of course, but don’t expect me to swoon over them.”

With a laugh still lingering on his tongue, Zetic bent back over to her chest.

“I’m sorry, then; I shouldn’t have been presumptuous.”

Isacharact breathed in deeply as he slowly began to plant kisses up her chest. When he reached her neck and slowly began to go up it, she brought a hand around and gently held on to his head, running her fingers through his hair.

Becoming slightly more hesitant, such that Isacharact almost had to pull his head up to keep him going, he reached the underside of her head, and she closed her eyes as he kissed the softer and more sensitive area under her chin.

He reached her mouth, but by that time he was shivering; incredibly nervous at what he’d just done, he simply couldn’t bring himself to kiss her on her lips now.

When he had stopped for a few seconds, Isacharact opened her eyes once again and looked at him. Seeing his obvious discomfort in his stilted breathing, wide-open eyes, and mouth clenched shut, she simply ‘hmp’ed amusedly to herself and then bent her mouth over to his left cheek.

Zetic’s eyes exploded wide open, his hands clenched up into fists, and he had to swallow deeply just to prevent himself from choking... when she stretched out her tongue and delicately licked his almost-hidden ear.

And a few seconds later, still breathing at a cheetah’s pace, he emitted a whimper loud enough to hear on the other side of the island when she gently breathed frosty air straight at the side of his head.

Isacharact let go of him, and Zetic positively toppled over onto his back, arms clenched at his chest, mouth panting in-between breathless moans; eyes unable to decide whether to remain wide open or clenched shut.

Laughing at his incapacitation, Isacharact climbed up on top of him.

“We also have our little romantic techniques.”

Still trying to choke together a decent breath, Zetic began to laugh.

“You certainly do!”

Isacharact bent over and ran her head up his neck, drawing in through her nose. Zetic appeared to calm down, but it was more likely that he was simply too overwhelmed to do anything.

“Uhm... uh... Don't you think, ah, Isa, don't you think that perhaps we ought to, er, be, uhm, getting back to Leuthilspar soon? They'll, ah, they'll be missing us.”

Isacharact wiggled herself briefly on top of him, extracting another moan, two whimpers, and a few seconds of Zetic's head arching back, eyes shut and upper teeth biting down hard on lower lip.

“All right, cleric, but we'll go because *I'm* growing tired of this dark cave. It was a suitable place to... introduce you... but when it comes to this sort of play, I prefer the rich accommodations of a palace.”

She bent over, and Zetic managed to restrain himself long enough to participate as an equal in a long kiss. She finally got off him and began to walk away, barely pausing to gently slap his face with her tail as he lay, stunned, on the ground. When she rounded the corner, he had to take a second to slam the top of his head into the ground a few times just to bring himself to his senses.

It was late morning and the sun was just reaching its zenith in the air above the island of Ozassélé when Isacharact and Zetic took off towards the larger island of Evermeet to the east. The journey to Leuthilspar, the capital city, ought to have taken only two hours, as dragons fly.

But as dragons frolic...

Zetic was positively dancing in the air, making full use of the time to stretch his wings and practice his flight. As had happened some time ago, Isacharact was flying straight and level, only mildly interested in Zetic's aerial acrobatics.

They were still over the water and just coming up on the western shore of Evermeet when Zetic came back to Isacharact's side wearing a wide grin.

“My Lady Isacharact... you fly most plainly today, and look all the less joyful because of it. Perhaps, if you were to follow my example, you might take more pleasure in the travel.”

Isacharact rolled her eyes.

“Very amusing, cleric. But what I said sixteen years ago still holds true: White dragons are still not superb fliers, and I am more comfortable on the ground.”

“Ah, but circumstances are different today: you are not serving as a scout. There is no need to vigilantly watch the ground.”

“True, but the circumstances are different for you as well; then, you were an aberrant beast barely able to take to the air. Now, you are a gold dragon, and of true

dragons, they are the most graceful in flight, though I have heard that even Beholders still look down upon them as clumsy.”

Zetic’s grin only grew larger.

“And so I suppose that is your way of saying that there is nothing you can teach me of elegant flight? So be it then; if I cannot draw you out by begging you to take me on as an apprentice, perhaps I can learn from the story of your mother... and get you to join my in my game by robbing you.”

At the mention of her mother, Isacharact’s interest was piqued, and her eyes narrowed, wary.

“Oh, indeed? And what is it you intend to steal from me?”

As if waiting for these very words, Zetic swung himself closer to her, pecked her on the cheek, and then zipped off, barely leaving himself enough time to cry out, “A kiss!”

Isacharact exploded into a chortle of laughter at the childish prank, but watching Zetic dive down almost to the water and go hurtling up above the treetops that were just coming up beneath her, she suddenly felt joining him – and so she did, diving down after him.

The pace of their travel slowed considerably, though that is not to say that they flew any slower. Indeed, it could be said that they flew even faster than they otherwise would have, diving and climbing over valley and mountain, dodging and weaving around tree-tops and clearings. Zetic had indeed learned several new moves, and Isacharact was hard-pressed to keep up with him. Though she could still beat him for sheer speed, he had an edge in manoeuvrability, an edge that at one point he put to good use by flipping himself in the air and coming roaring back at her, passing by her just slowly enough for him to steal another kiss on her cheek.

“Kissed you twice, shame on me! But if I should kiss you three times, shame on you, Isacharact!”

She yelled after him as she banked to the left, beginning a slow but powerful turn to follow him.

“Oh, I’ll get you yet, cleric!”

And she soon did. A few minutes later, as Zetic flew low over a grassy meadow, she managed to swoop down from above and smash him to the ground, landing herself a few feet away.

Just as he turned around and lay on his back, spitting earth and grass out of his mouth, she pounced on him, landing heavily and knocking the wind out of him.

“I win, cleric.”

Isacharact spoke haughtily and was wearing a playful look of supreme victory as Zetic found himself completely immobilized below her. He blew out a few more chunks of dirt to the side before speaking.

“You do indeed. Would you like to claim your prize now?”

Isacharact’s eyes brightened up.

“Prize? What prize?”

Zetic had to look aside for a second to compose himself, and when he turned back, he barely managed to speak with a straight face.

“You get to take all your kisses back.”

They both burst into ridiculous laughter at the same time, but Isacharact managed to stop just long enough to say something in reply.

“And what happens if I take back more than were stolen from me in the first place?”

“Then the game’s still afoot, Isa, and it is I who will be in pursuit of you.”

“This is a singular activity that you’ve dreamed up, cleric. I can’t imagine anyone in their right minds wanting to play this foolish game.”

“‘Love makes fools of us all’.”

At the mention of love, Isacharact seemed to stiffen, and her tone, while still soft, acquired a hint of coldness.

“No, cleric, I think you were always a fool. But I’ll stoop down to your level, if only for a bit longer.”

With that, she kissed him five times.

“And now, cleric, I’ll see you in Leuthilspar. Keep up, if you can.”

Briefly shoving him back into the ground, she took to the air at a terrific pace, and when Zetic at last managed to get airborne again, he found himself hard-pressed to keep up with her.

Afternoon’s arrival was just being heralded by a light drizzle of rain when the high peaks of Leuthilspar were agitated by the zigging and zagging of a pair of dragons. When that same

pair finally came in to land near the palace, afternoon, bringing a spring shower with it, could be said to have arrived in earnest.

“So there you are! What have you been up to for the last couple of days, hmm? And look at you both; fit to be pixies or sprites, you are! Tails wrapped together, wet wings dripping water all over the floor, faces flush with exertion, chests heaving with exhaustion, and I saw you nuzzling each other around the corner like a pair of Shaaran lovebirds!”

Lural, wearing a broad smile and having traded his formal court dress for much more casual, but still courtly, set of robes – and still wearing a ceremonial short-sword at his waist – managed to catch Zetic and Isacharact heading back to their room and looking exactly as he described.

“Wet wings?... Oh, my.”

Zetic turned and finally noticed the trail of water that he and Isacharact had left – and were continuing to leave.

Water was dripping off their wings loud enough to be heard; but Isacharact barely paid it any attention, and Lural turned to address her in just as cheerful a voice.

“My Lady, *what* have you done to my good friend Zetic? He must be tremendously distracted indeed to not have properly dried himself off before coming in.”

A palace servant soon appeared around the corner, already working diligently to clear up the rainwater with a pair of enchanted mops that operated all on their own. Seeing that the problem was being taken care of, Zetic turned back to Lural and was about to say something, when Lural beat him to it.

“And what’s this? Zetic, ignoring a problem that he’d caused? The friend I knew would have instantly dismissed the servant, called off the mops, and insisted on swabbing the floors himself with a simple rag, even would it have taken him all night!”

Isacharact glanced at Zetic before replying.

“It’s good to see you again too, Master Saraendas. Has anything happened while we were away?”

Lural was unmoved by her dismissive attitude and simply quipped back at her.

“You mean, aside from the creation and subsequent destruction of a whole new river running straight through the palace hallways? Why, nothing at all, of course. But you must tell me what *you* two have been up to; it would be incorrect to say that the palace is in an uproar, but there is a certain amount of wonder at the Queen’s court as to where you both disappeared to.”

Just as Lural finished, Zetic began muttering words in some long-forgotten tongue with his eyes closed. Isacharact and Lural both recognized this as meaning that he was on the verge of casting a spell, so they stopped talking for a moment to watch him.

With a final spoken word of power, Zetic waved his hand in the air and a rush of air came out of nowhere, causing Lural and Zetic's hair to billow unexpectedly and, more importantly, blowing the two dragons completely dry.

Isacharact looked over herself.

“Handy to have in a fight *and* to have around the home, I see, cleric.”

“Well, living celibate for so long, one does tend to pick up and learn some rather utilitarian... domestic-oriented... spells.”

Lural spotted something off in the distance and broke in once again.

“Speaking of living celibate, let me introduce my fiancée, Qumara Vissé-Lanar.”

He stretched out his hand to a young and vibrant bright-skinned and pastel-clad sun elf woman who hurried up to take it from behind the two dragons.

Large, exotic, dark-coloured eyes looked up behind somewhat messy-looking brown hair at Zetic and Isacharact as the head they were embedded in gave a small curtsy.

“How do you do, master Zetic and Lady Isacharact.”

Zetic bowed in return while Isacharact simply nodded. Lural took her arm and drew her close enough for them to kiss each other briefly.

“Qumara was away visiting her family in Nimlith when you came.”

Qumara's sky-blue robes fluttered briefly as she whipped around to face him.

“And I'm afraid I have to hurry away again, my love. I'm actually just on my way to see my great-aunt, and one can't keep her waiting, you know.”

“No indeed. Go on, I'll finish interrogating these two 'prisoners' here, and perhaps you can come and join us after you meet with the Queen.”

With a peck on his cheek, Qumara hurried off.

All watched her go; Zetic spoke up.

“Her great-aunt is Queen Amlaruil?”

Lural nodded before turning back to face Zetic, wagging a disapproving finger at him.

“Yes. But don’t try and change the subject, my friend. You still haven’t told me what you two were up to these last two days.”

Isacharact answered him in simple tone.

“We were visiting the wood elves.”

Lural’s slanted eyes darted from one dragon-face to the other, obviously aware that wasn’t the whole story, but, seeing the way the pair were holding hands and becoming increasingly captivated with each others’ stares, he decided that Isacharact’s answer was good enough, smiled, and pressed the issue no further.

“I see. Well, your apartments are still in order. Have you just flown in from the forest, then? Shall I have some refreshments brought up?”

With a soft tug on his hand, Isacharact led Zetic onwards past Lural.

“That would be excellent, master Saraendas, thank you.”

Ten minutes later, Zetic and Isacharact were sitting on the cushions in their chambers while outside a thick, bright, fog had descended as the spring shower turned into a melting downpour. The windows admitted soft grey light and the fresh smell of the ocean, as well as the chatter and clatter of raindrops falling.

Lural soon came bustling through the door in with a pair of servants and a small wheeled cart of food and drink just in time to catch the two dragons in the middle of a deep kiss.

Seeing him come in, Isacharact hastily withdrew from the embrace and brought one hand up to her mouth, licking her lips and staring at Zetic, who chided the newcomer.

“A little privacy, if you wouldn’t mind, Lural?”

“I’m sorry, my friend. I thought my arrival was expected.”

Isacharact, with one hand still rubbing her lips, responded.

“It was, but not the precise timing. In any case, now that you’re here, perhaps you can help answer a question I have.”

After sharing a little laugh with the servants and directing them to leave the food by the side of the room, Lural helped himself to a glass of spiced wine and spoke as he turned around to face her.

“Yes? What is it?”

But Isacharact was still looking at Zetic, who seemed a bit perplexed by her attention.

“Zetic, how many women have you kissed?”

Lural snickered in the background as Zetic wore a look of surprise.

“What, on the lips? Before you? None, my dear.”

“I find that hard to believe. Lural, is he telling the truth?”

Zetic’s brow furrowed at not being taken seriously, and the young elf only chuckled at seeing his irritation.

“Oh yes, my Lady. What you are looking at is the genuine article as far as chastity is concerned. I’d believe him when he says that he’s never kissed a woman before – and some would say he still hasn’t, of course, with no offence intended! – but perhaps his count leaves out the better question – the number of women who might’ve kissed *him*.”

Isacharact smirked at Zetic, her point partially made.

“Precisely.”

Zetic seemed even more indignant than before.

“What do you mean, ‘Precisely’? I spoke the truth! Lural, you pointy-eared Elven back-stabber, you know I never had any flirtations of that sort.”

But Isacharact interrupted before Zetic could make more accusations or Lural could defend himself against those already made.

“Were you an ugly man, cleric?”

“Heavens, no!”

“Lural?”

She once again turned to the elf for supporting testimony. Lural quickly took a sip from his wine-cup before answering.

“I’m no judge of the beauty of human men, my Lady, but I can certainly say that he wasn’t *dishevelled*. His hair tended to vacillate between close-cropped and shoulder-length, but for the most part he kept his beard trim; he was in shape, his proportions weren’t noticeably incorrect, he was pleasant to be around – remarks about having ‘pointy ears’ aside... He was a big man, a bear of a cleric, but no, he wasn’t ugly. Not handsome by Elven standards, perhaps not *princely*, but certainly not *ugly*.”

As Lural finished his evaluation, Zetic burst out, annoyed.

“This line of questioning is quite absurd. What does my appearance from before you met me matter *now*, Isacharact?”

Before answering him, Isacharact reached over to the cart that Lural had brought in, took a large cup of wine for herself, and drank a deep draught.

Eventually, looking up at him from behind the cup, she answered, speaking slowly.

“Because, cleric, while you’re still no expert, I must admit that, *for an amateur*, you are surprisingly... *good*... at kissing. You are very... enjoyable. It betrays past experience.”

Zetic remained indignant.

“I’ve had no ‘experience’ of the sort!”

“Come, come, now. By your own admission – and Lural agreed – you were no ugly beast. As an upright cleric of Torm, surely there was at least one occasion for you to rescue some imperilled damsel, who would’ve fallen into your arms at having been freed from a fetid pit of despair?”

With one hand holding the wine-cup, Isacharact mimed an expansive hug. Hearing her proposition, Zetic suddenly fell silent. It was up to Lural to egg him on.

“Actually, now that I think of it, there *was* Princess Monamarré...”

Zetic shushed him.

“Hush, Lural. That was nothing.”

Isacharact spoke sharply to him, and good-humouredly to Lural.

“Hush yourself, cleric. Continue with your story, Master Saraendas.”

Lural kicked back the rest of his wine and poured himself a fresh cup.

“Well, as I recall it, we were on a quest to rescue the kidnapped daughter of the Duke of... I can’t remember where, exactly. Somewhere along the Sword Coast, I think. At the time, our party was made up of two rather thieving rogues, myself, Zetic, and a capable wizard named Jafaxo. After I led us through the thick forest, we reached a ruined tower where the princess was being held – Who was it who had kidnapped her again, Zetic? A tribe of Orcs?”

Though annoyed, Zetic retained his good nature and grudgingly assisted.

“Ogres, actually. They demanded ransom for the princess; if payment was not received within two weeks, they said they planned to *eat* her.”

Lural’s memory appeared to suddenly return to him.

“Right, right. I remember that they even sent a sack of potatoes to her parents as a crude symbol of the stew they planned to make. We were hired with only two days left

before the deadline... Anyways, we came upon that tower, and after sneaking our way through most of it – quite handy, having those two rogues, Olar and Steppas were their names, I think.”

Zetic corrected him again, his voice betraying chagrin as he caught on to the fact that Lural was deliberately misremembering the story in an attempt to get him to participate in the telling.

“Olar and *Steppan*.”

Lural remained affable and haughty, having fully expected the correction.

“Of course, of course. Olar and *Steppan* were quite handy at getting us through most of the doors and trapped hallways, but eventually we came upon a very important door – the princess’ door, as a matter of fact – whose guards we eventually subdued and yet were unable to open by either lock-pick or magic spell. Without a burly fighter or paladin to lead us, it fell to Zetic to cast a spell of strength on himself and try to batter the door down.”

Lural took another drink as Isacharact turned to face Zetic with an amused look on her face. Zetic, for himself, having realised that there was no way to stop the story, suppressed his displeasure and wiggled his head up higher, showing a little pride at this example of his door-breaking skills.

“And batter down the door I did!”

The cup barely out of his mouth, Lural chimed in.

“Yes, you did, and the poor girl was quite terrified at finding a great armour-clad sword-wielding bearded man barging into her cell. But, of course, when you began asking her if she was all right, if she was injured or hungry or thirsty, and when you began attending to her ankle, which the Ogres had broken in a rather primitive attempt to keep her from running away, why, my Lady Isacharact... she quite simply cried all over him thanking him over and over and over again for having saved her.”

Lural’s hand kept waving in the air in an ‘over and over’ motion as he paused for a second to remember the events exactly; when they came to him, he smiled and continued.

“Of course, we weren’t out of the tower yet, and there were still a couple of fights left before we got her home – as I recall, in-between cowering out of sight, she seemed to be watching *you* rather attentively during those battles, Zetic.”

Zetic dismissed the notion.

“Probably because with only *me* having a real sword and the other four of you flinging arrows, spells, and bolts, only *my* fighting was interesting enough to be worth watching.”

“Oh, of course, my friend. *Surely* that was the reason.”

Zetic harrumphed and tried to suppress the elf's innuendo with fact.

“She was happy enough to be brought home, Lural. And, if you recall, she was engaged to be wed to the prince of a neighbouring duchy; it was while en route to meet him that she had been abducted.”

Lural simply dismissed the facts with a casual wave of his hand.

“I do recall, but something tells me she could've been just as happy if she was engaged to... Well, I'd best not speculate on the past too much. In any case, you can see, my Lady Isacharact, that there have indeed been women who were... how shall we say... *interested*... in him. In fact, Zetic, weren't you telling me last time we met that someone in the Church of Torm was talking to you about setting you up with their daughter? An archbishop?”

Zetic looked up at the ceiling and recited the name as if he'd been forced to memorize it.

“Archdeacon. Archdeacon Spaqué. He had a daughter a few years younger than me, a paladin in the order of the Sacred Gauntlet.”

Lural laughed again.

“You'd know better than I, of course.”

There was a pause. Zetic looked tired and a little embarrassed. Lural was – not unsurprisingly – amused having been given the opportunity to make some clearly uncomfortable revelations about his friend's past. Isacharact, meanwhile, was looking at Zetic, and seemed to be waiting for something... When it didn't come, she spoke.

“And so this princess, you never kissed her?”

Zetic stopped short of being aghast.

“Goodness, no. It wouldn't do to take advantage of a poor girl in distress like that. She had suffered horribly, and she would've surely latched on to the first scoundrel who showed her compassion and helped her out of her misery.”

“I see. And there was no-one else like her, whom you *did* kiss? No-one who paid you attention, and to whom you paid attention in return? No-one who might've been something more than just another friend or acquaintance?”

Zetic looked at the ground, reflecting for several moments.

“No, no... Well... I suppose, if you count everyone... there *was* Miishara...”

Lural burst in so loudly that neither he nor Zetic noticed the icy look that had suddenly sprung onto Isacharact's face.

“Oho! What’s this, my friend? You’ve had few enough romantic encounters, and now you speak of a woman I’ve never heard of? You must’ve met her more recently. What an exotic name, too. It sounds almost-”

Lural was interrupted by Isacharact, who began to speak slowly, sternly, and with her gaze completely fixed on Zetic.

“*That* name... is *Draconic*... for ‘Lilly-of-the-Valley’.”

Zetic was petrified, and he slowly turned his eyes – but not his head – towards Isacharact. When he swallowed deeply, that was clue enough for Lural.

“Ooooooo...”

With the smile wiped clean off his face, Lural slowly backed off towards the doors and, reaching them, hurried out of the room to leave Zetic to his fate.

On his way out, he bumped into Qumara, who was just coming back from the Queen’s chambers.

“Where are you going, Lural? I thought you wanted to meet up in their room?”

Lural shut the doors and began to walk off hurriedly.

“My dear Qumara, I think we should leave them alone for a little bit. My good friend Zetic appears to be in a bit of a bind, stuck between a flower of the past, and a blizzard of the present...”

Qumara followed after him, concerned.

“A bind? How serious?”

“If he doesn’t get out of it, then the prospects for having a double-wedding look quite grim, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, my. Hanali grant her the wisdom to be forgiving.”

“Zetic could certainly use the Goddess’ intervention around now.”

Back in the room, Zetic swallowed again as Isacharact slowly advanced on him, a furious look devoid of any hope of forgiveness in her eyes.

“*Who is she?*”

Zetic replied hastily, hands held palm forward in a gesture of pacification, trying to calm her down.

“‘Was’, Isa, ‘was’.”

It didn't work. Isacharact tilted her head down, narrowed her eyes, and bared her teeth, pronouncing each word clearly and distinctly through them, her head almost shuddering with each syllable's weight.

“WHO. IS. SHE?”

Zetic licked his lips, rooted to the ground where he stood.

“A young copper dragon, who visited me in the spring six years ago, and stayed with me until the same year's winter. She was... vibrant, and sweet... and very pretty...”

At that last word, Isacharact emitted a low, furious, growl, and Zetic suddenly snapped back from his reverie.

“... but I never touched her, Isacharact! Not one finger! And you have no reason to be angry with her, either, because if it weren't for her, I might never have pulled myself up out of the mire in which I had stood, and found the willpower to come back to you.”

Isacharact stopped growling, but she opened her eyes wide, and tilted her head, as if she couldn't believe what he was saying.

“The mire? Willpower? You had best explain yourself, cleric...”

“I mean to. But you must understand something first, Isacharact: I was away for fifteen years, and you already know that the last five were entirely devoted to *you*. All the stories I've been telling over the last week have been from the first five years – when I roamed over the whole continent, adventuring recklessly, driven by that *Essa Chakamarul* ‘wander-lust’. As for the middle five ...”

Zetic turned away from Isacharact, looked at the ground, and melancholy seemed to wash over him just as the coming tide washes over rocks on the shore.

“After five years of adventuring, I simply... lost my nerve. For some reason that I can't fathom, I had had enough of it. I just wanted to be alone, away from the civilised world of men – away even from the somewhat barbaric lands of the North and the East. And I didn't feel the time was right to return to you, either; you felt distant, as if perhaps we weren't even meant to be together in the first place...”

Zetic breathed in and out, dejected by the bleak memories of the past.

“So I retreated to the South, to the hot, arid grasslands of the Shaar, a place I'd never been before. I found myself a little cave in a little mountain, and retreated into it like some half-crazy hermit. And for five long years, for five straight years, I *wallowed* in that place, barely aware of my surroundings. I neglected myself, I neglected my friends, I neglected *you*... I even neglected my Lord Torm. Everything I did was rote; merely going through the motions. There was a tiny village of partially settled Shaaryan nomads not far

away, and from time-to-time I came to their aid, finding lost children or driving off wild beasts, but I found no *joy* in helping those people.”

Zetic looked up at Isa, his face showing the misery of the story. Isacharact’s look softened slightly, but Zetic didn’t even notice. He turned towards the grey, rainy mist outside the windows. What had started out as a sun-shower had turned into a full-fledged summer rain, complete with overcast skies and smothering grey fog.

“Even remembering those times is hard... It felt like I was adrift in a boat, stuck in the middle of a vast sea, with no paddle, no oar, no sail. No wind to give life to the air, no compass to give direction to the world, no great waves to fill me with terror, nor bright sun to fill me with joy. In the night, no moon to keep the seasons, no stars to light my way. And, most of all, no land in sight, no way out. Only the prospect of endless gloom under a grey sky... If the Grey Wastes of Hades could ever bear to have an ocean, that place would be it. Despair and misery were tangible; but their odour, reaching my nose, provoked no reaction – so dead to the world was I. The weeks spent in Swight’s dungeon were terrible and, at points, seemed hopeless, but even they couldn’t compare to the overwhelming muddy greyness of that sea of the mind.”

As he told his story, Isacharact followed his gaze out the windows, and pictured the great ocean that separates Evermeet from the mainland, with Zetic adrift in it, half-dead. Zetic paused to breathe before continuing.

“I had not attempted to make myself well known in the region, but the nomadic tribes of the Shaar, however isolated they are, do communicate with the outside world through the city of Shaarmid. Word of my presence must’ve gone by those channels, because in the late spring of my tenth year away from you, Miishara came to me.”

The mention of that name brought Isacharact back to reality, and she turned away from the window to look at Zetic with watchful eyes as he continued his story.

“She was young, for a dragon – only 61, just a few years older than me – of course, I was old, for a man. She said she had only left the lair of her parents a handful of years ago, and had, like myself, been wandering the world in that time.”

There was no emotion in her voice when Isacharact interrupted.

“In other words, she had just finished her *Essa-Chakamarul*.”

“Yes, though I didn’t realise it at the time. She was just a visitor, and though I was living a dreamless sleep, I still remembered courtesy and hospitality, and, to a certain extent, friendship. She said that she’d heard a few stories of a powerful dragon who, in spite of being young, had performed incredible feats of skill and power. She said she’d heard that same dragon was last seen heading south, for the Shaar. And she said she’d heard that a gold dragon had recently taken up residence in this area. She asked me if I knew who the person from her stories was.”

Still staring off into the misty city, with the occasional elf scurrying – without *looking* like he or she was scurrying – from one towering building to another across the thoroughly soaked streets and archways, a smile seemed to break out on Zetic’s face.

“When I told her it was me, and asked her what she wanted, her only reply was that she wanted to *learn*. The dragon in the stories had seemed to her to be so very wise and experienced, and she wanted me to share with her that wisdom and knowledge.”

Zetic tilted his head as if agreeing.

“And so I did. Over the course of the rest of the spring, and the whole of the summer and fall, I taught her everything I knew. From swordplay, to the lay of Faerun, to the Gods and the planes, to my scraps of knowledge of alchemy and the arcane arts; from the general history of the world to the specific timelines of particular areas: Calimshan, the Dales, Mulhorand, The North... I taught her to sing, and showed her how to play the lute. She learned her lessons well, but stayed on, and so I taught her more still.”

The rain outside had been waning, but it now waxed strong again, and while the sky remained closed to the sun, the fog began to lift just as the shower turned into a downpour. The elvish windows, carefully made from coloured glass and even more carefully hung in the living wooden wall, bore the weather without even a rattle in protest.

“By the time winter came, we were hunting together for food, and sleeping next to each other for warmth.”

He held up a finger to Isachract.

“But make no mistake: I was still far removed from her, and from the world in general. I didn’t notice them at the time, but she had in fact taken a few... aggressive... steps. She would occasionally bat her eyes at me, or smile at me for no reason at all, or nuzzle me gently in my sleep... But, poor girl, they were of no use: I was too far gone to notice them, and even further away from understanding them.”

In the street below, a lone watchman elf was darting from one side to the other, busy lighting magical street torches with a long pole-like wand. A small disc of magic force hung over his head, shielding him from the rain.

“And so it came to be that I found myself outside one chilly night in the dead of winter – it may even have been the winter solstice itself, I don’t know. All I remember is that it was uncharacteristically cold that night, though the Shaar is certainly no stranger to frost. And there was the moon... Selûne shone so brightly that night, I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.”

Isachract betrayed no hint of recognizing that day or remembering her own actions on it.

“As I sat outside, staring at the moon, dumbfounded, Miishara came out and spoke words that brought my life back into focus...”

A cold moon hangs over a cold, stony field at the top of a small mountain range, and Zetic, with his sword slung on his back, is sitting and staring up at the bright circle of light.

From a cave entrance a few hundred feet away comes Miishara, a copper dragon about his size, with turquoise eyes that shimmer in the bright night sky. Miishara pauses a ways behind Zetic, but when he fails to notice her in spite of the noise of her footsteps and of the tiny rocks she ‘accidentally’ kicks up, she sighs and comes forward, winding up standing next to him, hands fidgeting aimlessly.

Even with her so close, Zetic fails to acknowledge Miishara’s presence, a fact which is clearly disappointing to her. Eventually, she licks her lips and speaks.

“Good evening.”

Zetic still stares at the moon as he gives a detached and completely automatic reply.

“Good evening.”

Miishara pauses, but doesn’t give up.

“The night is frigid. Aren’t you cold, Zetic?”

“No.”

Spirits doused by the one-word answer, she looks around, as if hoping that one of the small rocks scattered in the field will tell her what to do next. A sudden, hopeful, smile on her face would seem to indicate that one did.

“The moon is beautiful tonight, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

After speaking, Zetic’s mouth stays agape; so focused on the moon, he’s lost sight of it.

With a long draw of breath in and out through her nose, Miishara closes her eyes and resolves to do the one thing she didn’t want to have to do: be direct.

“Zetic.”

He doesn’t even turn to see who is addressing him, and barely hears the words. It might’ve been Torm Himself standing next to him, and he wouldn’t have noticed.

“Yes?”

“Do you not find me attractive?”

Zetic blinks several times and slowly turns to her, but says nothing.

“Do I hold no interest for you? Is that why you ignore me? Is that why you pay no heed to the clues I’ve been leaving for you to follow?”

If he was in a reverie before, Zetic is now in shock – though one would be hard-pressed to see any differences on the outside. Miishara clenches her eyes shut briefly and snuffles back a tear before delivering a final question.

“Am I not beautiful?”

Stunned, Zetic, mouth agape, fumbles for words – and they eventually do come to him.

“No...”

Where before there was simply cold emptiness, a certain warmth seems to have appeared in him, and he begins to stand up.

“No, Miishara, no, no, you *are* beautiful. But what is the meaning of these questions? What clues? What – what are you talking about?”

Miishara composes herself, but remains emotional.

“I’m talking about *me*, Zetic. I’ve... for the last five months, I’ve been *trying* to gain your attention, but to no avail. Didn’t you see my signs? Am I so poor at making my intentions known?”

Zetic looks away, trying to remember what she did. Eventually, he shakes his head, but he’s scolding himself, not her.

“No, Miishara, I didn’t see... but that’s not your fault. The blame lies with me; I’ve been blind. Blind not only to you, but to everything else around me.”

He turns and begins to scan the horizon around them.

“... It seems as though I’ve only arrived yesterday and managed to somehow spend five years here; five years in an ethereal, timeless dream. Only just now, when you spoke earnestly, does it feel like I’m waking up ...”

Finishing his examination of the area, Zetic turns back to Miishara; with a compassionate look, he reaches over and brushes away tears that had formed under her eyes – eyes that now look at to him lovingly.

“Then... is there hope for us?”

Zetic swallows, and slowly withdraws his hand.

“I’m sorry, Miishara... my heart belongs to another.”

Miishara's eyes shut again, and her face betrays misery, if only for a brief moment. But the satisfaction of at last having a definite answer emboldens and reassures her, and she speaks again.

"I understand... But, may I ask: why then are you here, Zetic? Why have you taken refuge in this place so distant to where your heart must surely lie?"

Zetic looks up at the moon once again, and his raspy voice carries the emotion of an exhausted sorrow; one that has gone on so long it has tired its owner almost to the brink of death.

"I don't know!"

For several minutes, there is only the sound of the winds that gust from mountain-peak to mountain-peak, rushing across the small high plateau on which the two dragons stand.

Miishara seems to hear something on the wind and, reflecting upon it, speaks her thoughts.

"Do you love her?"

Zetic nods at the moon.

"Yes..."

Miishara's face brightens.

"Then oughtn't you to go to her, Zetic?"

"I ought to, yes, but..."

"But what?"

"But I don't feel ready, is all... I remember, now. That's why I came here. My time of wandering was over, but I didn't feel as if I was ready to settle into the life that awaited me. I still wanted to be alone, but the drive to explore was gone, stolen away from me before I'd finished with it."

Miishara clasps her hands together and begins rubbing them against each other; a reflexive, reflective motion.

"And now?"

"And now... I don't know. I still don't feel ready."

"Sometimes, it is only by doing things that you *do* feel ready. Will remaining in the Shaar make you any more ready? Will sitting outside this night make you any more ready? Will staring at the moon make you any more ready?"

"No, it won't."

“Then your path is clear: if you love her, then *go to her*.”

“Yes...”

Something happened then that Miishara had never seen before; it grew slowly at first, but the signs were unmistakable. Zetic smiled. It was something he had done almost constantly, years ago, but it was as if he'd forgotten how. The muscles were sore, underused, atrophied, but they still responded.

“Yes, Miishara, you're right. You're right...”

The smile grew larger, and larger, until it was hard to tell which was brighter – the moon at which Zetic was looking, or the smile that he was beaming to it.

“You-are-right! I *do* love her, and so I *must* go to her! I must go to her *at once!*”

Bittersweet success. Miishara was glad to see Zetic's spirits lifted, but the promise of the future made her sad. Zetic, suddenly aware of it all, turned to her, full of a zest and vigour that Miishara had never seen before.

“I'm sorry, Miishara.”

“Don't be. You've given me much in these past three seasons; you've taught me many things, and until today you've done everything and given to me everything I've ever asked of you.”

“But still... You're disappointed.”

Miishara looks uncomfortable and glances down as she shifts her weight from foot to foot.

“Yes... I am disappointed to find out, only too late, that one of the things I wanted was impossible to attain.”

Zetic comes close, and holds her by the shoulders.

“And for that, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't notice your actions sooner. I'm sorry I was so deaf, and blind, and mute to the world. I'm sorry you had to feel this misery. And I'm sorry for so many other things besides...”

Suddenly, Zetic turns to the heavens, throwing his arms up.

“Oh, my Lord Torm! Can you forgive me for neglecting Your will?”

No reply comes, but Zetic, not expecting one so quickly, is only slightly disappointed. He turns back down to look at Miishara, who is gazing up at him with adoring, almost uncomprehending eyes.

They lock glances for several moments, until Zetic looks away and thinks for several moments.

“Take it. Take it all.”

Miishara is confused.

“Take what, Zetic?”

Zetic waves his hand towards the cave that is their home.

“My treasure, my gains of the past ten years. Let me have only my sword and a few items that are dear to me; I give the rest – *all* the rest – to you.”

Miishara is stunned. Zetic’s hoard is not large in the grand scheme of things, but for a dragon their age, it is substantial: a pile of coins and gems large enough for them both to sleep on.

“I don’t ask this of you, Zetic.”

“No, it is *I* who ask this of you, Miishara. Don’t you see? I have to get rid of it all. I have to atone for this incompetence, this inexcusable self-pity. I have to give up all my gains, only to make them back again! And I want you to have it, as well. As payment for your efforts that turned out, through no fault of your own and entirely through mine, to be in vain. Take it; I won’t have ‘no’ for an answer.”

Miishara smiles back at him.

“Alright, I’ll accept it, but you must buy that acceptance.”

“Name your price.”

“Tell me her name.”

Zetic pauses to reflect...

“Her name... her name is—”

Miishara rushes to interrupt him.

“Wait!... I’ve reconsidered. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to have someone to be envious of, someone to *hate*. I’ll take your gift, with no price.”

She whispers a last few words in Draconic – but there’s an unusual ring to her voice, as if someone else is speaking along with her.

“*Gethra’n vaj, Zetic*” – “Go to her, Zetic.”

If Zetic notices the strangeness in her voice, he does nothing about it. Their faces are slowly drawn together as if by magnetism... but at the last moment, Zetic breaks off, and kisses Miishara on the cheek, instead.

Yet that gesture somehow doesn't seem to be enough, and after a few seconds of them looking at each other, half-longingly, they come together in a hug. Miishara, forcefully, begins to rub her head up and down the side of Zetic's neck, as if trying to get in some last bit of contact before they are separated. Zetic, for his part, simply stands there, holding her – but all he can think about... is Isacharact, waiting for him on the other side of the world.

After an all-too-short eternity, they pull away.

“Goodbye, Miishara. And thank you, for pulling me up out of this darkness.”

She looks at the ground briefly, and licks her lips before turning up to face him.

“Goodbye, Zetic.”

Zetic hurries into the cave and emerges moments later, wearing his headdress, with a sack and his sword on his back, and leather half-gauntlets on his hands.

Miishara is staring up at the moon in much the same way as he was barely an hour earlier. With a look of regret, he can't help but give another parting word.

“If you ever need help... I will always be your friend, Miishara.”

She only nods in response. With her back turned towards him, Zetic can't see the tears pooling in her eyes and streaming down her cheeks – but he knows that they're there.

Finally, one last draw of the frigid night air, Zetic launches off of the mountain peak, soaring over the valley to the north...

Miishara turns to watch him go. Her last thoughts are of sadness... but there is a smile on her face. A shame, a disappointment, a sense of loss – but promise for the future. For the year spent with Zetic was no waste, and she feels ready to take whatever else the world wants to throw at her.

“... And so you see, Isacharact, that in truth you have no quarrel with Miishara. Were it not for her actions on that cold night... who knows how long I might've lingered in despair. It was akin to divine intervention.”

‘Akin’ indeed, thought Isacharact – but said nothing of that sort.

“So that is when you began your five-year ‘journey’ to come back to me?”

Outside, the downpour had stopped, and the late afternoon sun was beginning to show itself through the clouds once again, casting its golden beams across the shiny, wet surfaces of the magnificent city. Zetic turned away from the window at last and smiled at her.

“Not quite. There were things to atone for, first. In those five years, I never prayed once to Lord Torm. I might argue that I kept his spirit – I still helped the innocent, and did no evil – but I had to repair my negligence, first. And so it was that for a period of three months, if you had gone and stayed at the Temple of Torm’s Coming, in Tantras, you might have noticed a distinct improvement in the fare being served from the kitchen compared to previous seasons.”

The smile became mischievous.

“... And if you had gone down into the kitchen proper, you would have found, in the back corner, the main cook – a man-sized robed figure, his hands and face bandaged to humble him before the glory of Lord Torm. But if you had looked *very* closely, you might have noticed that this figure had a bandaged *tail* as well.”

Isacharact chuckled.

“Three months serving in a kitchen doesn’t seem like a particularly harsh sentence, cleric. I thought Torm’s church punished traitors more severely.”

Zetic sprang up.

“Heavens me! I was no *traitor* – merely a devoted follower, who had, for a time, lost his way, and needed to be guided back into the fold. The penance need not have been violent.”

Isacharact opened her eyes wide and presented an alternative idea.

“Not to mention that, practically speaking, it simply wouldn’t do for the church to get rid of so powerful a follower, I would imagine.”

Zetic agreed good-humouredly.

“I suppose so... though that’s not to say that there weren’t the stuffer ones at the top who *tried*. Luckily, Pontiff Barriltar Bhandraddon understands me more than some of his advisors do.”

There was a pause, as Zetic and Isacharact took the time to consider both the story that had just been told; and when the reasons for its telling came back into mind, Zetic’s smile became less pronounced.

“Well, there you have it...”

Zetic breathed in and out deeply.

“... that’s the story of Miishara. I’m sorry for not telling it to you sooner; I *was* faithful to you, but perhaps I should’ve been more open and honest.”

The bitterness and anger crept back into Isacharact’s voice.

“Yes, perhaps you should’ve. And *perhaps* you shouldn’t have had anything to do with ‘Miishara’ at all.”

“Perhaps. But since I can’t change history... can you forgive me?”

Isacharact considered the question for a long while, letting Zetic ‘sweat it out’ – or so to speak, for dragons don’t actually sweat, and in this case Zetic was fairly certain, judging by her previous responses, that he was ‘off the hook’.

The fact that he knew he’d done no wrong infuriated her more than the idea of him doing wrong. And so, with his puppy eyes still looking up at her, she stepped towards him, and quickly drew back her left hand in order to clap him on the left side of his cheek.

The force of the blow was sufficient enough to knock him over sideways, though he wasn’t injured or greatly stunned.

However, he *was* very soon prevented from getting back up – or, shall we say, *assisted* in getting back up, as Isacharact reached down and with one hand clenching his neck and the other holding him by his mane, she quickly brought his face up to hers, speaking to him with a growl.

“Consider that your penance from my part, cleric. I’ll forgive you – but just you keep one thing quite clear in your mind...”

With Zetic’s hands holding on to her arms to support the rest of him, she pulled him up straight off the ground, leaving only his tail touching the floor as she brought his face right up to hers.

“... If I *ever* catch *any* female of *any* race giving you a look that I don’t like, then you had best make sure to step aside and stay *well* out of my way...”

Isacharact yanked on his hair, tilting his head back. Zetic’s legs squirmed in the air, a few feet off the ground.

“You’re mine, cleric, and I don’t share my possessions.”

Zetic blinked in her hold; he was breathing rather noisily and quickly through his nose, although she wasn’t actually constricting his wind-pipe. After a few seconds of holding the pose, eventually he managed to relax, bringing his breathing back to normal and, with Isacharact still holding him aloft and staring angrily at him, he spoke.

“Isacharact...”

She barked a reply and seemed ready to pounce, although there really wasn't anywhere for her to pounce *on*, seeing as how her prey was already in her grasp.

“*What?*”

Zetic for the most part managed to keep a straight face, but there was the hint of a grin behind it.

“Has anyone ever told you... that you're even more beautiful when you're angry?”

At that, Isacharact ‘hmp’-ed amusedly and grinned, releasing her hold and causing him to tumble backwards onto the ground.

“As a matter of fact, they *have*, cleric. I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that if you really want to impress me with words. Though I don't think I've ever heard it from someone who was quite so at my mercy.”

The anger had completely disappeared from her voice and her face, and she was grinning mischievously at him, still half-sprawled on the ground.

“Get up, Zetic.”

Zetic obliged, and quickly stood up on his feet. But Isacharact didn't seem satisfied.

“When I asked you to get up, you decided to stand on your hind feet instead of on all fours. Why?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

He got back down on all fours, but that turned out to not be what Isacharact wanted, either.

“Cleric, when I give you a command, trust that you will have no difficulty in identifying it as such. *That* was not a command, it was a question. I've noticed that you seem to prefer walking on two feet instead of four, even though it looks like it gives you trouble from time to time.”

Zetic got back on two feet.

“Well... it's just that I feel a bit more comfortable this way, even if it is harder. There's also the matter of practicality, of course. I can't swing a sword unless I have hands to hold it in.”

Isacharact tsk-ed at him.

“Although I admit that I liked the way you used it in presenting yourself when you returned, I had hoped that you would give up that human crutch in favour of using your natural weapons. Still, I suppose it's not all bad... Come over here; step into the light from the window.”

She nodded towards the back of the room and Zetic steps a few paces forward, exposing his front to the red sunrays that were close to being blocked out by the forest to the west.

Standing in the warm light, Zetic's scales seemed to glitter, and Isacharact looked him over with a discerning eye.

“Now that I've got you in some decent light, Zetic, perhaps it's time for a more detailed examination. You've grown a fair amount since Bahamut's palace. Let's have a look at the changes, shall we? A bottom-to-top inspection. Show me your tail.”

Zetic brought his tail around from behind him, and Isacharact snatched it up in her hands, running her fingers over its scales and testing its strength.

After a brief examination, she let it go.

“Are you used to it now? No more surprising your own self with your tail?”

“Yes. I've even managed to learn to use it in a fight. Quite handy when someone's sneaking up behind you.”

Isacharact seemed pleased.

“And how accurate are you striking with it? Knock that cushion off the dresser.”

She pointed at the side of the room, where a large oak dresser sat. On top of it were several knick-knacks and a single throw pillow. Zetic had to turn around and size up the target for a few seconds, but eventually he stepped close enough and then lashed out with his tail, whipping the pillow into the air. With another slap of the tail, he struck it in mid-air, hurtling it into the opposite wall, where it hit with a muffled 'pfumph' before falling to the tile floor.

Zetic turned to Isacharact for approval.

“How's that?”

“Adequate. Come back over here.”

When he approached, he let out a small yelp as Isacharact grabbed his right ankle and bent her head over to inspect his leg. He had to hop around on the other foot to stay upright.

“Stop squirming. Put your forelegs down if you want to balance yourself”

Zetic obligingly got down on all fours as Isacharact examined his hind foot.

“Your rear claws seem to have seen some use.”

Turned away from her, Zetic answered.

“I’ve also learned a bit about fighting on the wing. I was hoping to be able to sweep the ground with my sword, but I’ve found it easier to strike at enemies on the ground with my hands and feet.”

Isacharact put his foot down.

“Good. But when I say they have seen ‘*some*’ use I do indeed mean ‘*some*’. You’d better learn to use them more frequently; unlike your sword, they’ll never be separated from you. Now, stand up tall and stretch out your wings.”

Moving more towards the centre of the windows, Zetic planted his feet firmly and stretched out his wings – the room was just wide enough to let them all the way out. Isacharact squinted and began to look them over, poking, prodding, and checking for weak spots and dirt – and even holes.

“I take it you flew often?”

“Almost to the point of excess. It’s truly the most wonderful thing.”

“You seem to have taken good care of yourself. Or perhaps you’ve simply been overly cautious. Did you ever try hitting anyone with your wings?”

Zetic turned to face her and tilted his head, confused.

“Hit someone with my wings?”

Isacharact looked up from her inspection duty at him.

“Never tried, then; just as I thought. They’re useful for flight, certainly, but a dragon’s wings can also be weapons. Land, and you can flatten everyone around you with but a single flap. Or hover close to the ground, and kick up a storm of dust and dirt into their eyes, blinding them and making it impossible for them to see you.”

“I never thought about doing either of those things.”

“Obviously not. That sword isn’t just a crutch; it’s impairing your learning as well.”

Zetic stiffened a bit.

“Regardless of what it causes me to do, my swordplay is still nothing to be scoffed at. Since I have to use such a large sword, it winds up packing quite a punch. And I’ve noticed that I’m able to simply shrug off some attacks, so whereas before I used to have to parry blows, now I find I’m simply chopping downwards or slicing sideways with little regard for blocking or defence.”

Isacharact only murmured in acknowledgement, moving around behind him to examine him from the back. Zetic smiled at having a memory come up to mind.

“I remember one of my first swordfights with a strong band of wild brigands in the North. My sword was bigger than all of them – and in terms of sheer strength, there was truly no comparison – but I was still set in the idea of blocking and parrying. It must’ve looked quite ridiculous to see such a huge creature trying to ward off the blows of a pack of human bandits who might’ve easily poached another dragon of my size.”

She spoke up from behind him, still meticulously examining the back of his wings.

“I take it you soon picked up on the fact that they were going to have trouble enough hitting you, let alone hurting you.”

“It took a few minutes, but yes. For a while afterwards, I still had to consciously prevent myself from trying to stave off blows. I think it took me a good four or five months to really get the feel for the new fighting style.”

Isacharact stepped out from behind him again, and Zetic turned his head to face her.

“All clear back there?”

“Yes. Give me your hands.”

Zetic obligingly placed his hands out in front of him and Isacharact turned them over, examining every aspect, and especially focusing on the claws.

“With so thorough an inspection, I feel like I’m about to be put on the auction-block at a Thayan slave market.”

Isacharact looked up and grinned at him.

“Oh, no, good cleric. You’ve already been on the block; now, the prospective buyer has laid down her deposit and is examining the merchandise before making a final decision on whether to buy or not.”

“Whether to buy or not? But you said...”

Isacharact took a perverse pleasure in showing how she’d twisted her words.

“I said you could *arrange the wedding*, cleric. To have my final answer to your question, you’ll have to get me up on the altar.”

Zetic only shuffled his feet nervously in response before taking a second to puff out his chest a little more and hold himself just a bit higher than he had before.

Isacharact took notice of this small increase in effort before returning to her inspection of his hands.

“Pull out your sword.”

Reaching over to where Zetic had placed most of belongings, Isacharact plucked up his sword-scabbard with one hand and presented it to him, pommel first. Zetic cheerfully reached out his right hand and quickly drew out the sword, bringing his left hand onto the handle as well, in order to hold it straight up.

Putting the scabbard on the ground, off to one side, Isacharact bent her neck over and examined his hands closely.

“Ah, I see it now. This sword’s grip has been flattened in the same direction as the blade itself. I was wondering how you were managing to wield it solidly, given that most dragons can’t hold things of a round shape very well.”

Zetic looked pleased at that revelation.

“Yes, I learned that myself soon enough after acquiring a normal sword and enlarging it with magic, but it was then only a matter of having that altered by a blacksmith later. This sword was a custom order, however, made to fit in my hands. If you’re not as familiar with blades as I am, you might not notice it, but the grip is also considerably longer than normal for a sword of this size, and it doesn’t taper off towards the pommel like a true Claymore.”

Zetic brought the blade horizontal and put his left hand on the pommel, as if to push it forward.

“I had to change my style as well; thrusting is no longer quite appropriate, because my targets are often so small – relatively speaking. The pommel is therefore much smaller, being only used for maintaining my grip.”

He raised the sword back up again, running his left hand up the blade and examining it.

“I’ve never had a flaming sword before – I usually preferred holy enchantments. You might say it’s redundant, since I can breathe fire myself, but how could I resist the idea of making it seem like I was lighting my own sword on fire?”

With the last word spoken, Zetic barely muttered the sword’s command word – ‘Torm’ – and spat out a tiny flame at it, timed perfectly to hit the blade just as the sword itself burst into flame. Sparks and ash bounced and trickled down to the floor, thankfully leaving no permanent mark on either the elegant tile or the pile of cushions a small distance away.

He seemed overly proud of his sword, so Isacharact quickly breathed out a little ray of frost while at the same time muttering a hasty spell of magical suppression, deactivating the sword in what appeared to be a frosty blast.

Seeing the flames extinguished, Zetic smiled and his forked tongue quickly peeked out through his lips to ‘taste’ the air – like a snake – in an unconscious reflex gesture of amusement.

But the tongue piqued Isacharact’s interest, and before it fully retracted, she managed to catch it between her fingers, pulling it out – and it brought Zetic’s head forward with it.

“Aaa! Wwaath arr-u dthooing withh my thungue?”

To a gurgling sound from Zetic’s throat and a further movement forward of his head, Isacharact yanked on his tongue a little more in order to determine its full length, which turned out to be a good three feet. With the tongue fully extended, she casually examined it between her fingers.

“Interesting; gold dragons in particular and metallic dragons in general don’t normally have forked tongues. A curious choice on Bahamut’s part. Just one suggestion, though, cleric...”

With a final tug for good measure, she released his tongue, and it – as well as his head – practically snapped back into place. Zetic clutched at his neck, clearly smarting from the mistreatment.

“... Keep your tongue in your mouth unless you plan on making it *useful*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shot him a bright-eyed glance and walked over to the bed of cushions.

“You’ll learn soon enough... Now, come over here, and let me finish my examination. I’m tired of standing up.”

She lay down on her side and Zetic, after rubbing his throat a little more, walked over to join her.

“Let me see your head.”

Zetic sat down next to her.

“No more tongue examinations, I hope?”

“Not for the time being. Have you cut your hair?”

With Zetic on his side facing her, she ran one hand through his hair while the other manipulated his head.

“I haven’t needed to. It hasn’t grown in relation to my size.”

Isacharact casually tossed a bundle of the hair around.

“It seems a bit thicker, though. The same goes for your horns, of course, but that was to be expected. I’m still a bit surprised as to their form. As I said before, gold dragons have horns coming out the sides of their cheeks, which you certainly don’t. The horns on your head are quite different enough from those on a gold dragon’s as well – they have the opposite curvature and seem to be much more separate rather than simple extensions of the skull-plate bone.”

Isacharact rolled onto her back, bringing Zetic's head with her in her hands, holding it up above her. Zetic seemed to have to hurry to place his right hand on the other side of her to help support himself.

“Of course, certainly the most obvious difference your eyes. No dragon has eyes *this* large...”

She traced the outline of his left eye with her right claw, causing Zetic's secondary, translucent milky-white eyelids to blink upwards in reflex action.

“... and yet for some strange reason they seem to fit your head. As for your whiskers... still hair instead of scale, naturally, but whereas normal gold dragons grow more tentacle-like whiskers as they age, you seem to have kept your four simple bundles. They *have* gotten longer, however...”

By this time, Zetic was now struggling slightly to stay up, with only one hand on the other side of Isacharact, and the other three on the same side as most himself, with his head being held high above her. It would've been a simple thing to simply lie part of himself down on top of her, or to scooch up a little closer to her, in order to relieve the strain on his lower neck, but he felt uncomfortable acting so... *comfortable* with her, taking what he saw as a 'liberty'. So, instead, he simply picked up his right hand and put it down again in a slightly different spot.

Isacharact, meanwhile, was turning his head over in her hands.

“Open up.”

Zetic obliged, opening up his mouth for her to examine the inside. He also adjusted his right hand's placement once again – but the cushions yielded too easily to the pressure, and he had to move it once more.

“All your teeth are still present.”

“Nathin's haad tha appa-t-unity too knock tham aaut, thho far.”

“Hmm. Also curious is that some of your teeth poke out through your lips. That's quite uncommon among metallic dragons; usually, protruding teeth are a feature of the evil breeds.”

Almost about to slip, Zetic quickly adjusted his right hand once again. Isacharact began to take notice of his discomfort.

“What are you doing with your hand?”

“Aam athout too thlip–”

“You don't have to leave your mouth wide open while speaking, dummy.”

Zetic spoke as if complaining to an elder about an obnoxious intricacy of some routine, menial task

“I said I’m about to slip, so I have to keep moving it. The cushions aren’t really providing enough support.”

Isacharact looked at him with an air of disgust.

“Then put either *it* or yourself on me, fool of a cleric.”

Zetic looked around nervously.

“Well... I mean... I don’t want to, er, put undue *stress* on you.”

She talked back as if speaking to a complete idiot, pronouncing the words clearly.

“*Undue stress?* Maybe you hadn’t realized, cleric, but I’m still rather considerably *larger* than you, and that’s not liable to change in the immediate future. Just a few minutes ago I managed to lift you up with my own two hands; *that* at least ought to tell you that placing *one* hand on my shoulder, for support, or lying a bit of yourself on top of me will barely be a bother at all. And, conversely, you didn’t seem to be particularly pained by having *me* on top of *you* earlier.”

Zetic had to admit she was right to dismiss his reasoning; except the problem was that the reasoning he’d presented wasn’t entirely the reasoning he’d used.

“I suppose... I suppose not. Maybe the problem is I’m still a bit uncomfortable about... erm, being... ah... *physical* with you.”

Isacharact only snorted and shook her head in disgust.

“I don’t want to have to deal with a mate who’s too afraid to even *lie* with me. You don’t seem to have any trouble *kissing* me, so hurry up and get over the rest of your prudishness. Start now.”

The last statement was not a suggestion, it was an order, and so Zetic hesitantly – and *very* lightly at, first – grasped Isacharact’s shoulder with his right hand. Gaining a bit of confidence, he cautiously pulled himself up until much of his upper body was lying on top of her.

“There, now, that wasn’t too hard, was it?”

Zetic’s face was the very embodiment of squeamishness, barely hidden by good humour.

“Ah... I suppose not.”

Isacharact, deciding to have a little more fun at his expense, quickly snuck her right leg underneath his lower torso – still lying down next to her – and pulled it up on top of her. Zetic reacted instantaneously, pushing up with all four of his feet so as to keep his body off

of her. With her left hand, though, she kept his neck just short of being pressed down against hers: the net effect, therefore, was to leave Zetic in a somewhat uncomfortable position – the exact opposite of how he had been previously, and just like before, it was a pose he likely wouldn't be able to maintain for very long.

Nonetheless, Zetic seemed determined to keep himself elevated off of Isacharact, however ridiculous either the idea or the implementation of that desire. She watched him amusedly for several minutes as his legs gradually weakened with the awkward, semi-spread-eagle position. The slippery cushions weren't helping things, and the smooth tile floor underneath them held no prospect of improvement in terms of helping Zetic's grip.

Eventually, as the struggle to stay up seemed to become one of life and death, she spoke in a playful voice.

“How long are you planning to hold yourself up like that, hmm?”

“Uh...”

“It doesn't look like you can maintain it for much longer...”

“I'll, uhm... I'll –”

His stammering was cut short as Isacharact slowly blew out at his upper neck, sending cool air straight down his front. A tiny shiver followed it down his spine, and he whimpered slightly, balance almost faltering.

Seeing that he had resisted her first blow – literally speaking – she breathed again, and this time the reaction was more noticeable. His left hind leg buckled for a half-a-second, though he clenched his eyes shut and pursed his lips and, with what seemed like a supreme effort, managed to stay up.

Isacharact laughed aloud before drawing in deeply and letting out a much more forceful – and much *colder* – jet of air. It overwhelmed Zetic, and he collapsed on top of her – and was about to try to get back up again, only to find Isacharact hold him down with her right hand as she raised her neck a bit and shot another blast of cold air straight along his back – and as that little jet ran along, every muscle it touched tensed up, eliciting another little whimper.

Zetic finally resigned himself to the fact that Isacharact wasn't going to let him get up anytime soon, though that didn't help ease his tension any.

What *did* help ease his tension was when she brought her left hand up and began to slowly and gently rub and scratch the back of his head, under his hair. His breathing slowed, his muscles progressively relaxed, and eventually he managed to open his eyes again – if only halfway.

“So... what does the buyer think of the merchant's wares?”

Isacharact spoke slowly and very seductively.

“She likes what she sees, but she would still like another demonstration...”

Evening had come when Lural found himself outside Zetic and Isa’s room, listening for the sounds of... well, anything.

Pointed back-stabbing ears hearing only complete silence, he cautiously opened one of the great doors a tiny bit and poked his head through the gap.

Inside, Zetic and Isacharact were laying half on top of each other, with much of Zetic’s torso lying under Isa, and their tails twisted together almost into a braid.

Seeing that the couple had obviously made up, Lural chuckled to himself – unwise.

Unwise, for dragons have exquisite hearing, and Isacharact, without even opening her eyes, spoke.

“A little privacy, if you wouldn’t mind, master Saraendas.”

Lural smiled at having been discovered, and his reply showed his cheerful nature.

“Oh, I *beg* your pardon, my Lady Isacharact. It will *certainly* not happen again. Good-night to you both.”

He shut the door again and Isacharact could just barely make out the sound of a female elf’s laughter on the other side – clearly, Qumara had been right behind him as he had snuck in a look.

“Who was that, Isa?”

Zetic, half-asleep, half-moaned the question, shifting his body slightly.

“Only your rather intrusively inquisitive elf-friend.”

“He’s a good friend, though.”

“Mmm, and I never said he wasn’t.”

Outside, the sky was pitch-black – but the city below it glowed in ethereal colours: emerald green and pastel blue, illuminated by magic fire and light – and people, too, for elves of all kinds still walked the streets. The night was young, and the whole island would remain awake for quite some time before any of the inhabitants felt the need to retire for the paltry few hours of trance-like meditation that was the equivalent of ‘sleep’ for an Elf.

“Isa... What about the wedding?”

Isacharact shifted her own body before speaking, eyes still closed.

“You can start to arrange it tomorrow. I suggest you plan to have it as soon as possible. I don’t care much for the details, only that you satisfy one single condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You will give me a wedding unlike any Evermeet has seen before, and unlike any it will ever see again. If I’m to be married, it will be at a wedding fit for a *goddess*.”

Zetic swallowed at the thought of all the work... and the *expense*... that would have to be sunk into such an endeavour. It was definitely a very good thing, he reflected, that he had saved a considerable fortune in addition to what he spent on her wedding-girdle.

“I’ve never planned one before, but I’ll do my best to please.”

“If you expect me to say ‘yes’, your *best* had best be good enough.”

There was a resolve in Zetic’s reply.

“It will be, I promise.”

“Good. For now, let us rest.”

Reaching over, she began to caress the back of his head again. In response, Zetic turned his head towards her neck and began to kiss it softly. But that only escalated things in turn, as she replied with a more aggressive massage and by beginning to purr softly. The feeling of both caused him to whimper briefly.

The whole chain reaction culminated in their tails wrapping together more firmly than before, shortly before both fell asleep once again.

“You have an unusual look of determination about you today, Zetic.”

“Indeed, Lural. I have a wedding to plan.”

Lural, walking – or, it might be more appropriate to say, jogging – beside Zetic, chuckled.

“So then you *did* make up last night. But slow down, my friend! Elves may be light-footed, but one of your steps is easily worth five of mine, and you look about ready to go crashing through any wall that happens to be in your way.”

“Torm help me, I may very well have to, if I want this event to happen soon. I’ve ministered three weddings, and when I spoke to the happy couples before the actual event, it wasn’t hard to notice the sheer overwhelming exhaustion of planning the whole thing.”

Zetic, charging along on all fours, didn't even slow his pace as he raised himself up on two and threw his arms up in the air.

“... And now look at me! I have to do it all in a couple of weeks!”

Lural stopped dead in his tracks for a moment, resuming his jog only when it became clear that Zetic wasn't going to stop for him – and perhaps not even anyone.

“A couple of weeks? You're completely mad, Zetic! My wedding to Qumara has been in the works for almost a year now, and we're still months away from it, with the tempo of the planning only increasing every day!”

At last, Zetic slowed down a bit, but it was only to turn and address Lural.

“Ah, but my friend, consider that my task is at least somewhat easier than yours. You and Qumara both have large, extended families who will not only need to be accommodated but who probably are having a healthy hand in the planning as well.”

“They certainly are, though I don't know if I'd describe their involvement as 'healthy'... It almost surprises me they're able to get along at all. Although you have to grant that moon elves and sun elves do think a bit differently from each other.”

“Yes, well, *family* won't be a problem with Isacharact and I, since neither of us have family to speak of, nor do we have friends to bring in. And Isacharact has made choosing who will provide the catering, the decorations, the entertainment, and all the rest, rather simple.”

They came at last to the great entrance to the palace; Zetic barely acknowledged the guards in their stunning armour made of glass who hastily moved out of the way to let him and Lural pass by. Outside, the bright, warming sun that so frequently follows heavy rain was laying down golden hues across the still-wet city.

“She has, has she? And what are the constraints?”

Zetic strode down the main staircase down to the city street, and Lural hopped down after him, four stairs at a time.

“I am to quite simply pick the *best*. No expense is to be spared.”

“You say that like a man who knows he's about to be bankrupted.”

“And quite rightly so; may Waukeen help me avoid being completely swindled! But whatever I pick, I have to pick *quickly*, because who knows – maybe she'll up and change her mind.”

Lural was about to interject that he thought that unlikely, but Zetic saw it and talked straight over it.

“And don’t you try and tell me you don’t think she’d do that. I don’t care what’s *likely*. I’m in love with her, and the sooner we cement our relationship, the better. She has me walking on a tightrope right now, unwilling to give me a ‘final’ answer until it’s really down to the line, and even she herself asked for it to be done quickly, so Torm help me I’ve got to do it. Now, I haven’t a clue where to start getting offers from in this city, so do you want to help me out?”

“Certainly, my friend. You may want to adjust your size, though – the palace might be large enough to fit your natural form in, but I wager that the city’s shops and offices won’t have had dragons in mind when it was built.”

And so, as Zetic shrunk himself down to a human size, they practically ran into the city, Lural leading the way to those businesses he knew of as being capable of furnishing Zetic’s conjugal needs...

Several hours later, Lural was still accompanying Zetic as they returned to the palace, the dragon – now restored to his original size – clutching a leather scroll-case containing dozens of unsigned contracts and price estimates.

“I don’t think I’ll ever see a fellow elf so surprised as when you asked poor Selamar how much it would cost and how quickly it could be done to bake enough rolls, buns, and assorted pastries to feed everyone in the city for a whole day. Do you really intend to invite *everyone* in the whole city to your wedding?”

Zetic replied in a cavalier voice.

“To do any less would be to fail to do my absolute best. And if I want this to actually proceed, I *have* to do my absolute best. I’d rather invite the whole *island* if it were possible – or if I could afford it. But anyways, now that I’ve got these contracts and such, it’s just a matter of making sure I can actually afford to pull even *this* off. Oh... and of course, securing the venue.”

As they passed through the large entrance archway, Lural stretched out his fingers and cracked them loudly.

“You just let Qumara and I handle that, my friend. We’ll make sure her Majesty accords you the use of the palace and the grounds around it; although, to be honest, I don’t think she’ll need much convincing. She’s been very interested in you and Isacharact from the very start; she foresaw all this happening, I’m sure. You know that Amlaruil gave her those head ornaments, don’t you? It was a little scheme they sort of dreamed up to see if she could enrapture you into not going – or, at least, into going and springing right back. And as befits the plan of someone as wise as our Queen, it worked, of course.”

“Hmm.”

They walked side-by-side through the palace's great hallways in silence for a while; Zetic was hurrying, though not nearly as much as he had been hurrying in the morning. After greeting a few friends and acquaintances along the way, Lural began to grow tired of the silence.

"How much did you wind up paying for 'Miishara' anyways?"

"For my foolishness I received a clap on the cheek and a rather stern warning against trying anything like that ever again. But I don't think she really meant the clap... and I have the feeling that she was going to give me the warning whether I had done anything or not."

Lural smiled to himself.

"Ah, so you see? My little story-telling was harmless."

Zetic replied in a clearly enunciated voice.

"I suppose, but what I need now is some peace and quiet, not a caucus of hecklers, thank you very much."

At this, Lural let out a little laugh and pointed a finger at Zetic.

"Oh no, my friend, what you *need* is adventure and excitement: the sight of a foreign land, the sounds of peril, the smell of danger, the touch of death, and the taste of the exotic. It's what you've *always* needed. It's why you've been an adventurer instead of an office-holder, why you were still running around at almost 40 when most humans in your profession think of retiring to a comfortable church somewhere out-of-the-way. And it's why, as plain to see for an elf as sunrise is for a human, you're in love with Isacharact: she promises to give you an endless supply of those things that you crave."

Zetic stopped dead in his tracks and paused, looking at Lural with a worried face.

"Is that really what you think my relationship boils down to?"

Lural smiled.

"What it boils down to, perhaps, but of course, when you boil something down, you've let evaporate most of the 'something' in the first place, and it often becomes quite different. Don't take my words too literally, friend Zetic, although I do mean them. I'm sure that as you aren't a complete fool, you can see it as well. Really, there's no reason to look at me with such a harsh face. You want things she can give you, you love her in spite of your rather considerable differences, and you gave up part of yourself, in a sense, to be with her. It's a union worth at least a bard's tale or two – and elves make the *best* bards, so you're in the right place for it all to happen!"

Zetic turned to look at the ground, and after reflecting for a moment, he let out a half-laugh.

“You know, Lural... You have the ability to break something extraordinary down into something mundane and then rapidly build it back up into something completely different yet equally extraordinary.”

Lural gestured at the walls and ceiling surrounding them.

“Ah, my friend – that’s the whole secret of the elves. Look around you at the palace and at most of the buildings in Leuthilspar, grown up like trees from the ground. An elf so long ago must’ve looked up at the great and extraordinary trees of some forest, broken them down into their basic parts, and from there derived the process for creating these incredible buildings. Men tear down extraordinary things to build the mundane, and I’ll grant that *sometimes* they manage to take the mundane and turn it into something extraordinary. But for the elves – the state of the mundane simply doesn’t exist aside from as a brief transition between extraordinary and extraordinary.”

Zetic smiled and nodded in agreement.

“I see. All right, then. Let’s get to work. I’ve got a lot of accounting ahead of me.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be much help there, Zetic. The only thing I know of mathematics is *geometry*: namely the geometry of the locked chest, the barred door, the hidden passage, and the trapped hallway. I’ll have to abandon you here.”

They had reached Zetic’s room; both seemed oblivious to the four guards that were casually but respectfully placed on either side of the double doors.

“I’ll see you later, then.”

Lural began to jog off, but turned to yell a parting shot at Zetic.

“Good luck counting!”

Drawing in a quick breath and composing himself, Zetic twisted the door handle and hastily entered through the doorway, all ready to show Isacharact the contracts he’d worked up.

He was rather surprised, then, to find that Isacharact was not alone.

With several handmaidens standing around her in a half-circle, Queen Amlaruil sat in a portable throne and appeared to have been conversing with Isacharact when Zetic had made his unannounced entrance. All in the room looked up at him, and Zetic suddenly felt embarrassed at having barged in – not to mention stupid at having failed to recognize the significance of the guards outside.

As soon as he came to his senses, he gave a deep bow.

“Forgive me, your Highness. I didn’t mean to intrude upon your private business. My apologies to the Lady Isacharact as well; I was presumptuous in assuming that the room was empty. I beg the pardon of you both for this disruption.”

Zetic's head was still practically buried in the floor, so he missed the sight of Queen Amlaruil giving the faint, otherworldly smile that was her hallmark.

“You are certainly forgiven, master Zetic. As a matter of fact, my business here is complete, and these chambers may be yours again...”

Two guards who were standing on the inside of the doors walked over to pick up the chair as she gracefully stepped up out of it.

“...Lady Isacharact, as for our conversation, I think your idea is an excellent one, and I will see to it personally that your wish be done.”

Isacharact shot a very brief, bright glance at Zetic – who still bent over in his bow – before replying in a sly voice.

“Thank you, your highness. I will trust you to make whatever arrangements you deem necessary.”

With a nod to Isacharact – returned in kind – Queen Amlaruil, her train of attendants following around her and the guards holding the chair trailing behind, passed by Zetic and out the doors. When the whole train was out, the two guards who had been posted outside stepped in and pulled the doors shut.

Zetic got back up and turned to Isacharact.

“I didn't expect to find you in here consorting with the Queen. What was all that about, anyways?”

Isacharact looked at him slyly.

“Mind your own business, cleric.”

Zetic pulled out a bundle of contracts from the scroll-case and waved them around.

“As a matter of fact, that's what I've been doing all day. I've got all the contracts I need to arrange the wedding. Now, I have to count up their total cost, and then count up my personal fortune, and after that it's a simple matter of determining which number is larger. If it's the former, then I'll be out again tomorrow to get more papers. If it's the latter, then I'll be signing these ones and sending them out.”

Isacharact looked at him with an almost sadistic grin.

“Your personal fortune? You mean you didn't spend it all on *this*?”

She ran the back of her left hand over the wedding-girdle. Zetic looked over at her, and seemed to struggle for a moment to find the right word.

“Well... I *was* planning on having a grand wedding on top of that... Make no mistake, though, that thing was precious indeed, and it together with the wedding is more than liable to reduce my fortune to but a few copper coins.”

Still playful, Isacharact continued to probe him with questions.

“Ah, and this ‘fortune’ of yours. I take it you’re not keeping it in that little bag of holding that you’ve been carrying everywhere.”

Zetic chuckled to himself.

“No, I don’t think it would fit, I’m afraid.”

Isacharact raised up her head and looked down at him.

“So, not so small, then? And yet I thought clerics of Torm were supposed to be generous in their charity.”

Zetic shifted on his feet.

“Well, we *are*. It’s just that, since taking on this new form, I’ve... felt a certain... *urge*... to... um... be... ah... *less* generous than before. I’ve felt compelled to... *accumulate*... wealth.”

Isacharact smiled wickedly.

“In other words, you’ve felt the call to make a hoard for yourself.”

Zetic looked down at the floor, incredibly guilty, as he acquiesced.

“Yes.”

Isacharact laughed lightly at him.

“Oh my, you needn’t say it like *that*, cleric. It’s perfectly natural for a dragon to want to hoard wealth. It’s one of the things that makes us what we are – the lust for treasure is common to all draconic species. But your reply that you couldn’t keep your hoard in your bag of holding only intrigues me, cleric, because no dragon can bear to keep their wealth anywhere except close to them, and yet you are an adventurer, a traveller, so clearly the hoard must’ve followed you, yes?”

Zetic licked his lips and looked up at her, mischievously.

“Yes, indeed. I *have* kept it with me, even as I travelled.”

“Ah, then do pray tell me your secret.”

Isacharact’s eyes followed Zetic as he put the scroll-case and the contracts on a small study desk nearby and walked to the centre of the room.

“Well, at first – that is to say, before I retreated to the Shaar – I was managing it with several magic bags, but it was clear that that was an imperfect solution at best. After my atonement, when I set out to return to you, I went and asked Sayer Mahtaal, one of the Church’s high-ranking arcane devotees, if he had any ideas of how I could store my wealth safely and yet take it with me everywhere.”

Zetic turned and grinned at Isacharact.

“He thought about it for some time, but eventually settled upon an ingenious idea: he would make me a demiplane, a tiny pocket of existence accessible only to someone with the right key and the knowledge to activate it.”

Zetic briefly looked around until he found what he was looking for: a large swatch of fabric that was folded on top of one of the cabinets in the room. It was probably intended to be a bedspread when the room was occupied by smaller individuals, for when Zetic unfolded it and laid it on the ground it covered a sizeable area.

“It took him a week fashion the ‘key’ and another week to ‘grow’ the demiplane, but he said it was easy enough. The beauty of the design is that it is just as portable as a magic bag but much less obvious to thieves and much harder to rob.”

Zetic pulled a tiny black stone out of a small bag slung at his waist and held it in one hand. Speaking arcane words of power, he slowly traced a horizontal circle three feet wide and teen feet high in the air with the stone, centred over the fabric that was laid out on the ground.

When the circle was complete, there was a brief humming noise in the air which soon intensified, and grew louder and higher in pitch until finally, with a loud *SNAP*, a veritable flood of coins, jewels, and other precious items began pouring out through the hole in the air that was a portal to the demiplane. The baubles spilled out onto the fabric, covering it up and forming a nice little pile in the middle, making a tremendous racket as they did so. A few bounced away and rolled onto the uncovered ground; these, Zetic quickly picked up and put back in the pile proper.

After an outpouring that lasted a good ten seconds, the fabric was positively covered with coins and jewels. The final item – a tiny golden ring – fell out of the hole with a *ting* and bounced three times before coming to rest halfway to the edge of the cloth.

Having disgorged its contents, the portal shrank until it vanished into thin air.

Zetic, standing in front of the pile, looked up at Isacharact with a proud look on his face. She glanced at him, at the not insubstantial mass of gems, and then back at him once more before raising herself up and, to Zetic’s surprise and subsequent shock, walked over to the pile of gems and lay herself down straight on top of it.

Isacharact squirmed briefly, flattening the pile out with her bulk, before turning her head to look at him.

“I suppose it’s of a decent size, for only five years’ adventuring.”

Zetic smiled broadly, seeing past the mincing of words at the compliment within. Isacharact looked around her at the mass of jewels and coins, seeming to be searching for something in particular. She soon found it, and plucked from a mass of silver coins a single and rather large diamond. As she began to examine it up close, Zetic started to speak.

“Ah, yes, there’s an interesting story behind that diamond. I found it in the crypt of Tuluk Nyard, an ancient barbarian lord who came quite close to claiming the mantle of Iron Lord of Rashemen purely by force.”

Zetic was oblivious to Isacharact sniffing the diamond as she turned it over in her hand, and he kept talking.

“An evil man, he allied himself with the Durthans, the hidden wicked witches of that land. He also profaned against the ancient traditions of Rashemen by allowing male spell-casters to join the ranks of his troops. His army was eventually put down by the true Iron Lord, however, and afterwards his faithful followers built him a great crypt not far from an even greater Nar ruin, probably in the hope that few fools would venture clo...”

Zetic trailed off, as he watched Isacharact delicately arch her neck back, place the diamond in her mouth, swish it around for a minute as if tasting wine, and finally swallowed it whole.

Isacharact remained silent as Zetic stared, mouth agape at her.

She turned to look at him with a completely neutral face, appearing oblivious to any wrongdoing, and this finally caused Zetic to emit sounds from his mouth – it would be incorrect to call it *speech*.

“You... you... I mea-you... You jus... you took it an... and you...”

Isacharact remained mute and impassive as Zetic struggled for words and finally burst out.

“... You *ate* that diamond!”

With Zetic having managed at last to spurt out a complete sentence, the faintest hint of a grin appeared on Isacharact’s face.

“It was delicious.”

Zetic’s mouth gaped open even more than before, and he looked around the floor as if struggling to find the words to say.

“It was delicious!! It was *delicious*?!? You’re *eating* my money!”

He stared up at her as if imploring. The exclamation seemed to amuse Isacharact.

“Haven’t you?”

Zetic stopped as if he'd run into a solid wall.

“Haven't I what?”

“Haven't you ever tried eating part of your hoard?”

Zetic stood up straight and recoiled at the suggestion, disgusted.

“Certainly not!”

Isacharact turned away and began poking through the mass of gems and coins once again.

“Pity that... Hmmm...”

She soon found another diamond, a small little one that was chipped on one side but had traces of gold as if it had once been a part of some delicate piece of jewellery. Licking her lips quite obviously and glancing at Zetic with a hungry grin, she raised it up and was close to putting it in her mouth.

“What are you doing? Put that down!”

“Come over here and stop me.”

Zetic backed down and seemed a little hesitant, but as Isacharact arched her head back all the way, opened her mouth, and dangled the diamond over her gaping maw, he drew himself up and marched over to her, a firm resolve in his step.

“Alright, but that's really quite eno—”

The final word failed to escape his mouth just as Zetic himself failed to escape Isacharact's arm when she grabbed him by the neck and – relatively gently, it might be added – threw his head down in right in front of her, his cheek almost pressing up against the very bottom of her neck that was lying on the ground.

“Now, cleric, open up.”

Zetic did no such thing and in fact began to clamp his mouth shut, but not before Isacharact could stuff the diamond into it and hold his snout closed. He struggled at first, looking angrily at Isacharact in a manner perhaps not dissimilar from the way he had looked at Swight fifteen years earlier as that fiend had poured poison down his throat.

Except that in this case... after the shock had worn off... Zetic stopped struggling and began to stare up at the ceiling in reflection. The sounds coming from his mouth told Isacharact that he was swirling the diamond around.

“Swallow it.”

Zetic obeyed, and took a second for the thing to go down his long neck. When it finally reached his gut, Zetic's tongue slowly poked out and licked his lips unconsciously. He soon swallowed again, still staring up, stunned and shocked, and Isacharact leaned over towards him, an inquisitive grin on her face.

“Well?”

Zetic seemed to be half-afraid to give her the answer she wanted and still half-lost in his daze, and so he half-feigned misunderstanding her.

“Well what?”

“Well, how *was it?*”

Zetic looked at her, then at the ceiling, and then back at her again, before taking a deep breath and returning to his examination of the ceiling.

“It... er... it tasted... um... *good.*”

This answer seemed to please Isacharact greatly, and she grinned widely at him.

“Ah, now, you see? You had the urge to hoard, but obviously you didn't really feel what other dragons feel about their treasure, simply because you don't see in it all the things that real dragons see.”

She plucked up a handsome ruby from the pile and held it between her fingers a short distance away from Zetic's face.

“It looks nice, doesn't it? But you could appreciate it that way as a human. Now you should learn to appreciate it in other ways, as well. I told you once that dragons eat what they please, with no ill effects, and I meant it. If you found yourself stranded and hungry on the plane of Earth, you could simply swallow a few rocks and derive some sustenance. Although, of course, I doubt that would taste very good at all. Certainly not as good as what you tried just now. But you could still live off of it if it was necessary.”

Isacharact brought the ruby close down in front of Zetic's face; he began to follow it with his eyes, unnaturally captivated by it. Isacharact laughed.

“You're obviously enraptured by its sight. Now try something else: smell it.”

Zetic was shaken from his daze.

“Smell it? Minerals don't have a smell.”

Isacharact closed her fist around the jewel and pulled it away as a sort of punishment.

“And humans can't see in perfect darkness or eat diamonds or *breathe underwater* either. Stop being such a twit. Dragons can do a lot more than you obviously realise.

Honestly, if you can't smell a gemstone I'm beginning to wonder whether you can smell *anything* at all."

"I can smell you."

Instantly he said this, Zetic bit his lip and wished he had kept his mouth shut, fearing she would take his statement the wrong way. But Isacharact didn't seem offended; intrigued, rather.

"Ahh... So you *do* have the Dragon-sense, at least. I was almost worried that Bahamut left that part out. And what does it tell you about *me*?"

Zetic sniffed the air before looking up her neck, from the beautiful girdle hanging off it at the bottom to the captivating face that was examining him at the top.

"It tells me I should be running far, far away from you."

Isacharact seemed very pleased by his answer.

"Then it's working properly, and you must still be a twit for not heeding it. For the Dragon-sense is something really quite extraordinary; a glimpse into the true nature of a creature that cannot be concealed. It's vague, but it's reliable."

"But why is it a *smell*?"

Isacharact paused and looked at him sideways.

"Because that's the way you're choosing to listen to it. For some, it manifests itself as a sight, for others, a sound. Some can even feel it by touch or taste, and a few say they can feel it through all five. The Dragon-sense isn't tied to any one 'real' sense – it comes carried on the back over whichever senses a particular creature *tries* to feel it through. In your case, it's only smell – for now, at least."

Zetic, still lying on his back with the side of his head against the bottom of Isacharact's neck, was an interested pupil.

"And what do *I* smell like?"

Isacharact's eyes narrowed sharply before she brought up the ruby and resumed her diatribe.

"One lesson at a time, cleric. Today, we are talking about *gemstones*. Smell it."

Zetic closed his eyes and Isacharact moved the ruby to the left side of his head. He sniffed the air several times, brow furrowed, apparently unable to find its odour until one particular sniff seemed to bear fruit, and each successive one after that caused him to turn his head towards the ruby itself.

His head moved closer and closer, until he finally bumped his nose straight into it.

“That’s uncanny. It *does* have a smell now.”

“It’s *always* had a smell, cleric. Only now have you awakened the sense to feel it. In any case, I suppose now you see part of the real appeal treasure has for our kind. It’s more than merely pleasant to look at or proud examples of one’s wealth. There’s a flavour to it, a spice it adds to one’s life. A piece of emotional content.”

Zetic nodded and got back on his feet, breathing deeply.

“I understand. Of course, emotions and sensations won’t help me *count* it.”

“No, but I will. You attend to the contracts, Zetic, and I’ll count up your treasure...”

He looked back at her, and she shot him an impish grin.

“...And don’t worry... I promise not to eat it... *much*.”

“Finished your tally? Good, let me see it. I’ve been sitting on this treasure waiting for you almost an hour, now.”

Zetic looked exhausted when he finally got up from sitting in front of the room’s desk, note-papers splayed all over it and on the ground. He bore a single scrap of parchment over to Isacharact, who snapped it up.

“That’s all of it, as near as I can figure. Do I have enough? And how much am I worth, anyways?”

She pulled the paper away from him playfully.

“Ah-ah-ah! A dragon who doesn’t know the worth of his own hoard isn’t fit to be told its value. *Real* dragons know not only the sum total of their hoard but the value of every single scrap *in* it as well.”

Zetic would’ve expressed surprise, if only he weren’t so tired. With one hand he rubbed his eyes and forehead.

“I see... Well, how am I doing?”

Isacharact looked over the parchment a few times again before folding it up in her hands and turning to face him.

“You’re short.”

He replied with the tone of someone who doesn’t want to hear the answer to his question.

“How short?”

She glanced down at the paper in her hands and breathed in and out loudly.

“By more than a few handfuls of platinum, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, dear...”

Zetic took the paper from her and looked it over.

“... And we’d spent so long negotiating everything, I doubt I’d be able to get a better deal for any of the items here...”

He turned back to the desk and sighed deeply, walking over and looking at the tally.

“... I guess I’ll just have to strike off some of these things, and tone down some of the others.”

Isacharact’s eyes narrowed.

“You mean you’ll have to settle for less.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I won’t.”

Zetic stopped and turned around to face her.

“You won’t what?”

Isacharact resettled herself on the pile of gems.

“I won’t settle for less. The wedding had better have *nothing* less than the absolute best, if you expect me to marry you.”

Zetic began to plead.

“But I can’t afford the absolute best right now! Although, I suppose... Perhaps Lural would be willing to lend me some of the difference, and I might indebt myself to someone else for the rest. Except that you say that it’s a rather *large* difference, so I don’t know whether my credit will be good enough here...”

Isacharact crossed her arms.

“Unacceptable. I won’t have you indebting yourself to anyone here; it’s not proper.”

Zetic smiled faintly at having been painted into a corner.

“Well, my dear, either I settle for a lesser wedding or I indebt myself to someone here – there’s really no other alternative.”

She turned her head sideways and considered for a moment, looking him over.

“There is another alternative. You can get a loan from someone else.”

“You mean someone not here on the island? I know quite a few people on the mainland who might be willing, but it’ll take time to contact them all.”

“No, that’s not good either.”

Zetic chuckled and put his hands up in failure.

“Well... if I can’t borrow money from friends on the island, and I can’t borrow money from friends *off* the island, who exactly is supposed to help me finance our wedding?”

Isacharact pulled her neck up high, holding herself aloof.

“*I* will loan you the difference.”

Zetic was stunned.

“*You* will? But I thought you wanted *me* to pay for everything in the first place!”

Emotion crept back into her voice and onto her face.

“Oh, I still do, cleric. I’ll give you a loan, but I expect it to be paid back in full.”

Zetic was still in shock.

“But why you instead of any other? What’s wrong with borrowing money from my friends here and elsewhere?”

She grinned.

“Because, cleric... I’d much rather have you indebted to *me* than to anyone else.”

He looked at her and was on the verge of accepting the situation, but there was still a lingering doubt...

“But what if you say ‘no’?”

Isacharact didn’t flinch.

“Why, then, you’ll be in debt to me, cleric, and I’ll demand *repayment*...”

She took a moment to stretch herself out a little more.

“... But don't worry about that now. Go and get those contracts signed before they expire. You've got a lot of work ahead of you if you want to have this wedding ready in two weeks. And get a separate room in the palace for yourself; I imagine you'll be up all hours of the day and night dealing with the Elves here to work out all the details, and I don't want to be constantly disturbed by your comings and goings.”

However troubling the circumstances, the sheer finality of everything was itself reassuring, and Zetic beamed as he walked over to her.

“Of course, my dear. You're absolutely right about everything. I'll get right on it.”

They shared a brief kiss on the lips, but when it was over and Zetic pulled away, Isacharact suddenly clapped him on the cheek. Before he could recover, she grasped his chin with the same hand and pulled his head straight again, looking at him with an exotic ferocity.

“Don't disappoint me...”

Two weeks later, Zetic was outside in the large city plaza that was to serve as the wedding 'hall'. The plaza was made up of intricately linked paving stones that, when viewed from high up above, formed the mosaic of a circular icon of a great green oak tree.

But today, that carefully-made icon would be invisible to all above, since the plaza was covered with seats, potted plants, banners, banquet tables full of wine and drink, podiums, and other decorations – as well as a veritable army of Elves who were busy setting them all up.

Lural walked onto the great plaza and strode down the gigantic nave that had been left clear, past row after row after endless row of chairs intermingled with giant potted *trees* – oak, maple, fir, and elm – brought in by magic and trolley. To the immediate left and right, Elves were busy making sure everything was evenly spaced. On the far sides of the plaza, another horde of Elves were busy unloading racks of food and drink onto banquet tables that stretched on for the half-a-mile length of the court.

Standing near the centre of it all was Zetic, directing traffic.

“No, no, no! Move it a little to the left or there won't be enough room for us to walk up the nave!”

Lural arrived to find Zetic gesturing frantically at two Elves who were manhandling a pot containing a large bushy sumac – tall and spacious, and with beautiful red leaves.

“Yes, yes. That's much better. Remember, please, everyone, that you need to think in much larger terms. Tails have a mind of their own, believe you me! When in doubt, leave extra space.”

“You look like you’ve got everything under control here, Zetic.”

Zetic turned his head and glanced at the newcomer.

“Oh, hello Lural. Yes, I suppose I do – wait! Wait one minute! That green, I don’t like it. Oh, blast. Out in the sun, it looks darker than it did in the shop. Look, do you have a lighter fabric to use for the banner instead? Yes? Good, can you get it? Thanks.”

The Elf who had been stringing a large bolt of cloth between three poles behind the altar nodded and quickly pulled it back down, hurrying off to find another.

“Aren’t you being overly meticulous, Zetic?”

At that, Zetic turned around so fast and brought his face so close to Lural that the Elf actually took a step back in fear.

“Overly meticulous? *Overly meticulous??* Lural, maybe you don’t realise this, but I’ve only got this *one* chance to get everything right!”

Still speaking in a frantic and frenzied voice, Zetic pulled his head back up and looked around.

“I’ve got to have everything absolutely perfect – *perfect*, you hear me? – if I want to have any chance of seeing this all the way through. I mean, look at the plaza itself! The very stones you’re standing on – and tracking dirt all over, by the way – were completely scrubbed down just last night. I’m leaving nothing – *nothing* – to chance with this.”

With a gesture of dismissal, and in the absence of anything immediate to complain about, Zetic scanned the area around him. Lural took a moment to catch his breath before doing the same.

“What’s that banner over there? I can’t read Draconic, but that’s what it looks like.”

Lural pointed at a large white vertical banner hanging to the right of the altar – the bride’s side in an Elvish wedding. Runes had been painted in deep blue-black ink on top of a stylised blue flame.

Zetic simply glanced at it before returning to his attentive search of the plaza.

“Yes, it’s Draconic. It says ‘Isaana Yevach’.”

Lural waited a moment, expecting more of an explanation, but none came – instead, Zetic was thoroughly engrossed with contemplating the Elves who were putting the finishing touches on the altar built up with heavy, elegant, granite rocks on top of the plaza.

“Very clever, my friend. And when I told you I couldn’t *read* Draconic, what made you think I could *speak* it?”

Snapped out of his daze, Zetic turned back to face Lural and glanced at the banner once more.

“Oh. Sorry. It means ‘Burning Frost’. It’s sort of what you might call Isacharact’s ‘family name’ – or at least, the name of her bloodline.”

Lural contemplated the alien characters once again.

“I see. It’s got a superficial resemblance to her name – are they related words?”

“They are. ‘Isacharact’ roughly translates to ‘Frostblaze’; but there’s a bit more to it than just that in Draconic, so don’t call her by the translation – I’m not an expert in dragon customs, but I’m fairly certain she wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“I wouldn’t have dared...”

Lural watched as Zetic looked down at the plaza floor and rubbed his eyes with exhaustion.

“...Look, my friend, I know you’re a dragon now, but how long has it been since you’ve had any *sleep*?”

Zetic scratched his head and ran his fingers through his hair, still looking at the ground.

“I don’t know... I was last inside the palace a few days ago, but even then I was in conference and not at rest. There’s a lot to do out here; we only started setting up yesterday evening.”

“I hope you’ve had something to eat in that time, at least...”

Zetic nervously licked his lips and looked longingly at the feast being laid out on the tables around the plaza. The gilded and silver-plated dishes and vessels glittered in the daylight, succeeding in making themselves – and the food within them – appear exquisite and delectable, something which could hardly be called a misrepresentation of the truth.

“Not a single bite.”

“Good grief. Three days without food? For a dragon? You must be starving. What’s that Chondathan expression of yours? – ‘Hungry enough to eat a horse’.”

Hearing that, Zetic smiled faintly and turned to face him.

“Well, actually... this one time in the Shaar a few years ago, I found that I’d gone several days without having anything to eat. The local tribesmen were skilled horsemen and it just so happened that they kept their—”

Lural held one hand up in protest as the other clutched his chest.

“Stop right there, my friend! I happen to *love* horses, and I don’t much care for the way this story of yours is going, so let’s change the subject to something else... Have you seen *her* yet?”

Zetic frowned and shook his head.

“Goodness no. It’s not good luck for bride and groom to see each other right before a wedding.”

Lural waved his hand in dismissal as a small cluster of Elves scurried through, carrying another potted plant – this time, a magnificent bundle of blue and violet hyacinth. Zetic’s eyes followed them nervously.

“Zetic, my friend, you’re having an *Elvish* wedding, now, and that sort of superstition doesn’t apply. We have our *own* rules about what a bride and groom can and cannot do – and one of them is that they can’t ignore each other right before the most important event of their lives! Don’t you think you ought to go inside and get everything sorted with yourself?”

Seeing that the workers had managed to set down their charge in what he considered the right place, Zetic hastily turned around and began to contemplate the surroundings.

“No, no. There’s too much to do out here.”

Lural glanced around. As far as he could see, everything was picture-perfect. No-one was doing anything except putting the final, finishing touches on the decorations and the food. Some of the guests were even starting to arrive – several hundred Elves had already taken up places in the general seating area towards the back. It occurred to Lural that, seeing as how the main characters in the play that was about to unfold were three stories tall, even people hundreds of rows back would have a clear line of sight.

Then he shook himself and realised that there really *was* nothing left for Zetic to do.

“There’s nothing to do, my friend. Everything’s been set in place, and if you ask anyone here, they’ll all say it looks absolutely marvellous. So, go inside and get yourself ready. In an hour or two – before you know it – it’ll be noon, and time for everything to start. There are what – just over a thousand people here in the plaza and the grassy surroundings already, including the hired help?. The other *forty thousand* residents of the city will be arriving very soon, and they shouldn’t see you hustling about like a headless chicken. It’s not proper.”

Zetic waved his hand down at Lural as his head darted around like the missing cap of the chicken in question. Nothing seemed to escape his glance, although nothing seemed to hold it for more than a second, either. On the far left, behind the high altar (the size of a very large stage, were it meant to wed anything other than dragons), a cluster of Elven guests were approaching, wearing their finest flowing clothes and chatting joyously to each other. To the right, the palace guards were starting to march in and take their places along the nave and around the whole plaza. To the left, a dozen Elves were raising up the tall and proud banner of Amlaruil. And all around the plaza, a pair of wizards were busy visiting the

hundreds of torches placed all around the plaza, lighting them up with magic fire red, green, blue, gold, silver, white, orange, brown, and more – a different colour for each torch.

“I know, I know, but I have to make *certain*. Everything’s got to be perfect!”

Lural threw up his hands and talked sternly, quickly, and quietly.

“Look, my friend, everyone here is either too polite or too busy to say it, but your normally pleasant saffron fragrance has been replaced with a rather malodorous stench.”

Zetic snapped to attention.

“Are you saying I smell?”

Lural continued to speak firmly, but he was unable to contain his voice, and it increased steadily.

“No, I’m saying you *reek*, Zetic. You got the pungent odour of exhaustion and filth – and that’s not all! Your hair is a tangled mess. Your hands and feet are covered in dirt. Your breath could knock Ogres out cold – and that’s not even taking into account the sleep-gas Gold Dragons can release!...”

As he pointed out every flaw in Zetic’s appearance, Zetic examined the part in question and his expression became ever more aghast. Lural, meanwhile, was practically shouting.

“... In brief, you’re disgusting, Zetic. Forget about the plaza! The plaza looks magnificent! Pay attention to *yourself* – because, after all, she’s going to be marrying *you*, not the sodding plaza!”

Zetic appeared nervous and said nothing; some of the elves had heard the outburst and were craning their necks to see what was the problem, so Lural softened his tone and started to whisper again.

“Look, the river Vaşnaran runs just a bit north-west of here. There’s a little waterfall and pool a few miles upstream. Just leave the rest of the things here to me, and go and wash up. I’ll have someone bring you your garments, all right?”

Zetic looked around and realised that, indeed, he was in far worse shape than his surroundings.

“All right, Lural. And thanks for everything.”

“Don’t worry, Zetic... it’ll go fine. Now go get washed up.”

And with a nod, Zetic took a short jog down the nave and flew off towards the east.

The sun was almost at its zenith when Zetic was just finishing up taking a waterfall shower and rinsing the scum out of his hair in a small grove around the Vaşnaran river. Surrounded by high trees, he took one last swim through the deep water pool at the base of the elegant waterfall before surfacing and stepping out of the river onto the shore.

A violent shake and two strong beats of the wings sent water spraying everywhere and left Zetic little more than merely ‘moist’ – not a bad thing, actually, as the wet golden scales glittered in the sun quite elegantly.

With a sigh, he scratched his right ear to get the water out and shook his head once more, trying to dry his hair. When it was apparent no more dryness was going to be acquired that way, he sat down at the edge of the water. Looking at his reflection, he took strands of hair between his hands, pressing the water out.

Once his hair was dry, he started running his claws through them to try to straighten everything out. A haphazard glance at his teeth reminded him of Lural’s comment about his breath, so he bent over, sipped some water, and vigorously swirled it around in his mouth.

He was about to spit it out when he heard the snap of a branch behind him. Before he could turn around to look, he saw the newcomer’s reflection in the river water.

Instantly, he spat out the water and covered his eyes with his hands.

“What are you doing here? It’s bad luck for us to see each other before the ceremony proper!”

Isacharact’s voice was stern.

“In human tradition, maybe, but not in Elven – or so Lural says. And don’t try to tell me that this is a human wedding; there’s going to be almost fifty thousand *Elves* in attendance, and only one man – and a man-drake, at that. So don’t be silly like this; uncover your eyes.”

Zetic did as he was asked and took his hands down as he slowly and reluctantly turned around to face her. She was holding several things in her hands – his headdress and his sword, for one, but there were others, including a blue cloth he hadn’t seen before.

“Your hair looks good. Here, I’ve brought you your headdress and your sword. Put them on.”

She held them out and he took the headdress, placing it on his head and busying himself with fastening its strap around his chin.

“I thought you didn’t like the sword. You said it was ‘un-dragonlike’ to use one.”

Isacharact held it up, still in its scabbard, with its leather strap dangling to one side.

“It is. But I have to admit, I rather liked the way you looked when you arrived a few weeks ago, holding it up high. It was rather... majestic. You’ll wear it at the wedding.”

She didn't say, "*I want* you to wear it at the wedding" – it was a command with no possibility of refusal. He took the sword and slung it over his shoulder, buckling it up at his chest.

"All right. What else have you got there?"

Isacharact held up a large oak branch, with several dozen green leaves on it.

"For one, there's this branch, which in an Elven wedding you're supposed to hold across your chest when we walk up to the altar. But more important is this—"

She passed him the large packet of silky blue cloth, which he took in both hands, leaving it bundled up.

"What is it?"

Isacharact glanced down once to compose herself, then raised her head and replied, no emotion on her face or in her voice.

"Your wedding present. Unfold it."

Zetic held the bundle of cloth up high and let it unfold all the way down to the ground. Turning it around, he saw that it was in fact a great hooded cloak, with a magnificent embroidered design on the back: a right-hand gauntlet, held upright and made out of grey, bronze, and gold filaments, and around it was wrapped a small dragon figure whose wings were outstretched behind the glove, with only its tail, head, and limbs curled out on the front.

"The symbol of Torm, his armoured glove, with Bahamut wrapped around it?"

"Yes."

"It's beautiful, Isacharact."

She remained apart.

"You're welcome. Put it on; here's the clasp."

Isacharact handed him one more item from her hands: a small golden chain made of large rings, with clips at the ends. Zetic took it as he threw the cloak over his back, clipping it around his neck.

Fastening the clasp, Zetic stretched his wings out, pulling the cloak with the small claws at the tip of his wings until it stretched across all of his back – it was rather large, almost too large for him, and drooped off of the back of his wings all the way to the ground.

With wings outstretched, Zetic stood up tall on all four legs, trying to puff himself up as much as possible, and putting on an air of nobility before speaking.

“How do I look?”

Isacharact ran her eyes over him. His still-moist scales glittered in the soft sunlight that was shining through the tree tops above, and the silvery fabric of the cloak shimmered on his back. In all, he looked bathed in an almost unearthly, majestic glow.

“Like someone who is *worthy*... to be my husband.”

And if there was a glow before, it was magnified by tenfold now.

“Does that... Or, uh, or rather, are you saying that... if, um... I mean, you’ve seen the plaza, and, uh, and you’ve seen me, and, well, does, uhm, does, ah... does everything meet with your... expectations?”

She stood silent for a while and let Zetic’s smile slowly evaporate. When it was only moments away from turning into a frown, she grinned and spoke, prodding him in the chest.

“As much as I enjoy the fun of rattling your nerves, cleric, I’d rather have a perfect wedding, and that’s something that’s hard to achieve with a paranoid groom. When we walk towards the altar, I want you to look your *best*, so that everyone around us will *know* you’re a worthy mate for me...”

Zetic’s smile had returned, and Isacharact blinked slowly.

“... So, know then, that when Queen Amlaruil asks me the question—”

He burst in.

“Queen Amlaruil! I engaged the high priest of Corellon Larethian to perform the ceremony, not the Queen!”

Isacharact appeared annoyed and pointed at the cloak on his back.

“Don’t interrupt me, cleric. Being the one to perform the wedding was part of the price she asked for that cloak.”

Zetic’s eyes went wide and he looked over his back.

“This was made by the Queen!?”

“Partly. Others sewed it, but she wove the enchantments on it herself...”

She noticed the inquisitive look on his face and began to smile.

“... Oh yes, cleric. It’s enchanted, and well enchanted at that. Since, with the exception of being interrupted—”

Isacharact flashed her eyes at him.

“– I have no trouble controlling you, she agreed with me when I suggested warding it against magic influence on the mind. No spell of compulsion or delusion can affect you while you wear it.”

Zetic looked over his shoulders once again and beamed.

“That’s delightful, Isacharact.”

“Quite. Now, *before* you interrupted me...”

He straightened himself out as she continued.

“... *When* I am asked the question... know that my answer will be ‘yes’.”

Zetic was beaming again – except now it was directly focused at her; an intense smile combined with an intense radiance.

“You’ve made me a very happy man, Isacharact.”

Her eyes lit up and she began to grin.

“Wait until after we’re married before you say that, cleric... Here, take the oak branch Lural picked out for your garland; the other one is for me to carry.”

Zetic took the branch and laid it across his chest, holding it one hand, as Isacharact did the same with hers – a branch of magnolia tree, blooming and full of soft-petalled pink flowers.

“Lural picked this one for me, did he? By the size of it, it must’ve been hewn from an ancient tree...”

He fingered the green leaves and brought the branch up to his nose, smelling it deeply.

“... But the leaves are so fresh, the bark so unspoiled... A metaphor for me, an ‘old young man’? If I remember correctly, these wedding-garlands are supposed to be chosen by the parents of the bride and groom, normally... Who chose the magnolia for you, Isacharact?”

She glanced down at it.

“The Queen. If it’s supposed to be representative of the person carrying it, I’m not sure if I agree with her choice.”

Zetic bent over and rubbed one of the felt-like flower petals between two fingers, smiling.

“I think it’s perfect. A delicate plant... for such a delicate beauty.”

Isacharact snapped straight out of the calm demeanour and into righteous indignation.

“Delicate?? *Me??*”

He looked up at her, still cheerful.

“Certainly! Well... maybe ‘delicate’ isn’t the right word.”

She began to eye him menacingly and practically growled out a reply.

“*Maybe.*”

Zetic was unfazed by her annoyance and looked back down at the branch, reflecting.

“No, not delicate... Maybe more like... ‘Cute’... Yes, cute.”

He looked up at her with a smile. She, however, was just barely holding back the fury that was clearly visible in her eyes and on her face. She spoke through clenched teeth.

“Really, cleric, and how, exactly, am *I* ‘cute’?”

The last word was barked out. Zetic’s eyes softened, and he took her hand – though he had to tug a bit, as she resisted giving it to him, for a moment.

“Oh, many ways, my dear...”

He began to gently rub the back of her hand with his thumb, and this simple gesture seemed to calm her enough, such that even the tip of her tail began to flick to and fro – a movement that Zetic seemed to have been waiting for.

“... For one, there’s the way you wag the tip of your tail when you’re amused or interested. The way it flips back and forth playfully...”

Isacharact suddenly stood rigidly still as if shocked; a tiny movement of the head was all that was necessary for her to look back at her tail and silence its movement before she turned back to Zetic, mouth held half-open, ready to growl.

But he, on the other hand, only continued, unimpeded.

“... Or the way your mouth hangs open when you’re angry, with teeth sticking out just so...”

He brought one hand up to her face and was almost about to caress the side of her cheek when she half-playfully, half-angrily snapped at his hand, causing him to almost jump as he pulled it back.

After that little frightening exchange, she grinned at him sideways, and he smiled again.

“... And your eyes, Isacharact. Bewitching eyes, that glitter even in darkness. Eyes that speak more about your temperament than the words that come from your lips...”

Isacharact's left eye flinched. She closed her mouth, and swallowed, still eyeing Zetic, who looked at the top of her neck.

“... Even the small of your neck is cute... And even more, the way you react when it's caressed...”

He bent forward, and she hesitated before tilting her head to the side, turning aside her face so that he could more easily reach the softer spot where the back of her chin joined her neck.

Isacharact inhaled sharply and her shoulders tensed up suddenly when he kissed her there.

He withdrew, and she stood staring at Zetic with an expression that, if it was still showing anger and not pleasure, was at least beginning to show... excitement.

Zetic, meanwhile, ran the fingers of his free hand down the front of her neck.

“... The scales on your neck show it, too. Delicately and ornately locked together. Beautiful, and strikingly so...”

He bent over and kissed her on the neck, halfway down to her torso. Before he could pull back, he found her hand curled around his head, keeping him close, with fingers running through his hair and nails gently scratching behind his ears.

Zetic bent over further, and took her left hand – the one holding the magnolia – in his.

“... And your hands; tender, even when they administer well-deserved slaps...”

She breathed out in an open-mouth hiss when he kissed the top of her hand.

They held the pose for a few moments, and then Zetic looked up with a smile into her bright, excited eyes and grinning mouth.

“... How am I doing so far?”

Isacharact took her right hand off of his head and chuckled amusedly, grin changing to a detached smile as she took a deep breath in and out.

“Not bad, cleric. You certainly get points for originality. I don't think any of my previous mates would've ever *dared* to call me 'cute'.”

Zetic continued to look up at her.

“But do you agree with me?”

She snickered down at him.

“Oh, my dear cleric, when flattering a woman, it’s not a matter of whether she *agrees* with you, it’s a matter of whether she enjoys what you’re saying...”

She brought her hand around his head again and slowly lifted it up to hers.

“... And I do.”

Isacharact was about to bring Zetic’s mouth close enough for a kiss when he suddenly ripped himself free and pulled back, aghast, much to her surprise.

“Whether it’s against Elven tradition or not, I don’t care! *Kissing on the lips* right before the wedding is most certainly bad luck, Isa!”

She resigned herself to doing without, looking at him slyly.

“All right, cleric, if you insist. But if you’re going to short-change me on *quantity*, I expect it to be made up in *quality*. You’d better be at your finest when the Queen gives the command.”

Zetic swallowed.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Shall we go, then? It’s after noon.”

He glanced up at the sun and his face broke out into worry.

“Goodness me, we’re late! Yes, yes, let’s go!...”

Zetic was about to race off, but one look from her was enough to calm him down, and he stopped, and bowed.

“... I mean... At your command, my Lady Isacharact.”

She grinned and allowed her free hand to be taken in his.

“Much better.”

A crowd of people is so very different from a single person. One person moving about makes but little noise; the faint scrapes of his shoes against the floor, the rubbing of his vestments against each other, the sound of his hair against his head – they are all insignificant.

But gather together a great number of people and those sounds multiply and multiply until they become a cacophony.

Almost forty thousand elves made a tremendous buzz out of such little noises as they turned around in their seats to face the wedding party that waited to advance up the nave that had been carved out of the sea of chairs. Forty thousand shoes and slippers scuffed the stone pavement as feet shifted to see the five bridesmaids – Qumara, and four of the Queen’s handmaidens – and five best men – Lural, and four of the palace guards. Forty thousand folds in robes rubbed and chafed as elves twisted in their chairs to get the best view. Forty thousand heads of hair swished as forty thousand necks turned to see Isacharact and Zetic standing side-by-side, holding hands and clutching their garlands.

When the movement stopped, the din that was but a hushed shout died, and the only noise heard across the plaza was the flapping of flags in the wind.

At last, a snare drum began to beat a slow, Calishite rhythm. A slow bolero dance.

The drum was soon accompanied by a soft trumpet, and once several harps joined in, plucking along in the same beat as the drum, the stepping of the feet of Lural, Qumara, the eight other elves in the procession could be heard. From right behind them issued the tap-tap-tapping sound of two great graceful clawed creatures.

Just as the procession slowly and gracefully walked at the half-step towards the chancel, so did the orchestra, seated behind and to the right of the altar, build the music in intensity.

The Calishite wedding-march was one of only two concessions that Zetic had made to his true ancestry; the other was the banner that hung on the left side of the stage: the symbol of the church of Torm in Waterdeep; Torm’s gauntlet superimposed on an upturned crescent moon and set against the blue of the night sky.

As they walked, together, forty thousand pairs of slanted eyes turned to watch them go by, and forty thousand sets of pointed ears heard their footsteps.

And it seemed to Isacharact that Zetic was positively revelling in the attention. Striding gallantly on her right, holding her left hand high aloft, with the hilt of his sword poking out from underneath the great blue cloak that was being held open for all to see by his wings...

Weddings are usually about the beauty of the bride; with the way he was behaving, Zetic seemed to want this one to be all about him.

Isacharact resolved to set things straight. She whispered to him in Draconic out the side of her mouth.

“I haven’t said ‘yes’, yet.”

Instantly there was a change in his attitude. He dropped her hand a few inches and almost lost his step, leg muscles suddenly cramping. His face ceased to beam quite so loudly, and his breathing stopped abruptly.

In short, he narrowly avoided stumbling and was on the verge of breaking into a cold sweat. Having knocked him off-balance thusly, Isacharact sought to reassemble him to suit her.

“... I will, though. Just remember whose wedding this is.”

Hearing these words, Zetic recovered and took a subtle deep breath – too subtle, he hoped, for any of the guests to have noticed. He repositioned himself to walk slightly behind Isacharact, and held her hand up not so much in guidance or in equality as in support, as if merely a guard escorting a princess. He continued to stride boldly... but not quite as boldly as before.

In short, when all this occurred roughly halfway to the altar, the very observant among the audience noticed that there was a change in the procession’s character – instead of Zetic being the centre attention, it was now Isacharact, who strode forward, resplendent in her fineries: the red cloth that was wrapped around her horns, the fine golden gem-studded chains that hung between them, and the two heavy tassels that dangled at their tips. Her wedding-girdle glowed brightly in the sunlight, throwing bright reflected beams in all directions. And flowing over her wings and across her back was a light blue transparent cloth that fluttered in the light breeze.

Even those in the audience who had found it hard to believe the story thus far – a man-drake and a white dragon, who would have guessed! – found that they saw something in her radiance that made it all seem plausible.

The music which had started as a slow, dull, drumbeat had, by the time Isacharact affected this little reversal of importance, crescendoed to a truly grandiose march, with an entire section of brass instruments heralding the wedding train.

It reached its zenith as the bridesmaids mounted the stage, crossing over to the left side as the best men crossed to the right, breaking the symmetry of the bride-versus-groom sides of the altar in the traditional Elvish wedding manner.

Finally, with a single step that was almost a hop, Zetic and Isacharact ascended to the half-height stage, putting the Queen, who stood in the middle, at the highest point, at roughly the same height as their necks.

She waved her hands to each, and each in turn gave her a small bow of the head.

With a final thump of the drum, blast of the trumpet, and crash of the cymbal, and loud pluck of the harp, the orchestra fell silent and, in the soft yet piercing voice of a true aged majesty, the Queen spoke.

“There is an old Elven saying: ‘The sun shines most brightly on those who shine most brightly back upon it’. If this is so, we are witness to creatures that radiate most brightly indeed. For it is beyond a doubt safe to say that no romance such as this has ever graced the fair shores of Evermeet, nor is it likely to do so again – however much we may want it to...”

She clasped her hands together in front of her, holding them at her waist. Though fully occupied with looking at Isacharact, Zetic nonetheless was amazed: in her throne-room, sitting down, Queen Amlaruil had seemed so young, but outside in the sun, her true age

showed: yet her beauty was not diminished for it. Instead, the exotic charm was made into an ethereal grace, and her sharp, angular voice made itself clearly heard across the plaza.

“... But we are glad to have played a part in it nonetheless. For here our part in the play ends; today is a wedding-day, a day for both you, Zetic of Waterdeep, son of Amil, and you, Isacharact of the North, daughter of Isasarach...”

She gestured at each of them in turn.

“... And this, then, is the time to speak your minds freely. You have chosen to come here together, but many more choices are to come. A decision stands at your feet – but it is a decision to be made together. Zetic, what have you to say to one with whom you have come?”

The groom’s speech. Zetic let go of Isacharact’s hand and they turned their bodies so they were sitting facing each other, instead of the Queen.

Zetic took a deep breath.

“When I first realised that I was attracted to you, Isacharact, I will say that in addition to passion, there was a feeling of fear, a sense that I must have been insane to fall in love with a white dragon, and an image burning in my mind: my Lord Torm, furious at such silliness, with his divine boot buried quite deep up my bottom...”

Isacharact stifled a chuckle; the rest of the audience felt no need to suppress their laughter, each one laughing individually, producing a din that took a few seconds to die down before Zetic could continue.

“... And yet when Bahamut but gave me the chance, I perpetuated that same silliness – but in the end, there was no correcting boot, only the passion. Passion and love unlike any I have felt before. You are a creature of frost, Isacharact, but the image of you burns like wildfire in my mind! And I, trapped in the centre of the grassy field, cannot hope escape the flames the rush to consume me – nor should I wish to, for I cannot recall or fathom any means of living without you...”

He paused for effect.

“When we first met, you called me ugly, but said my words betrayed a precious stone within...”

Zetic bowed and gestured at himself, demure.

“The Divine Bahamut must be a master jeweller, for He has cut away the rough; here, then, is the stone within that was hinted at. I have been worked by Divine hands, and, humble as I am, can make myself no finer. I ask only one thing of you: that you take me as I am, to be yours until the end of time...”

He stood back up.

“My Lord Torm must be jealous, to know how much I love you: yet He is full of compassion and mercy, and He will not begrudge the fact that I now worship another before Him.”

Zetic took Isacharact’s hand once again, ending his speech in the manner the Elves love best: with a poem.

“ ‘Frost comes, and the Oak wanes before it; but in time, the Oak shall return, and the frost yield in turn. Take you then a branch of Oak and a mound of snow, and become master of the seasons.’ ”

He held out his Oak branch to Isacharact, who considered for a moment before taking it in her left hand, still holding her branch of Magnolia in her right.

His speech finished, the Queen spoke again.

“The groom has spoken his mind, Isacharact. Your turn has come. What have you to say to the one who professes his love for you thusly?”

Isacharact looked deep into Zetic’s eyes: they were full of tumultuous emotions. Joy and pride at having reached this moment, fear of the outcome, lust for the creature before him, the terror of being up in front of such an immense crowd...

Isacharact smirked.

“If I said you were putrid and repulsive, cleric of Torm, while it would be a horrific lie, I doubt you would diminish one inch. For I have found you to be a creature that is thoroughly unshakable for anything more than a trivial amount of time. I want a mate that impresses me; my past ones were all impressive in one manner or another. But none excited me quite so much or in quite the same manner as you do: you amaze me.”

She looked up and down at him discerningly, speaking almost sternly.

“Horribly disfigured, malnourished and maltreated, and finally pulled out of a hell-hole by friends dubious at best, what did you do? Eat, drink, and sing! Faced with a me, a frightening creature...”

Isacharact grinned.

“... you acted playfully, and gracefully. And when all hope seemed lost, you summoned up your powers and bridged the gap that separated us from victory. You astound me, cleric, and what is more, you amuse me as well...”

She prodded him in the chest.

“You fill me with the same energy and zest that you seem to have in overabundance yourself. And that, *Zetic*, is why I am here: because I am greedy, and I cannot bring myself to leave so vast a source of energy... *un-tapped*.”

Chuckles from the crowd as her tongue clacked out the last three syllables. Isacharact paused to let the laughter die down before wrapping up.

“And you say you find me delicate, like the petals of this Magnolia? Fool, I name you – and a blind one at that. Take then your walking-stick, blind fool, that it will bring you comfort and lead you to the future. But beware: for with it comes *me*.”

She handed him the branch of Magnolia, which he readily accepted.

The exchange of tokens thus complete, both turned to face the Queen, who spoke again.

“So have you both spoken your minds. The moment of truth is before you. Eternity lies ahead of you, and beyond. Will you share it with each other? Will you take Isacharact as your wife, Zetic?”

There was no hesitation; only a courteous pause for Zetic to straighten his neck, holding it up as high as he could, in spite of Isacharact’s earlier warning.

“I will.”

The Queen turned to face Isacharact.

“And will you take Zetic as your husband, Isacharact?”

Isacharact said nothing, only looking sideways at Zetic, who slowly began to diminish as the seconds accumulated. The murmur in the crowd almost became audible.

Seeing that he had suffered enough, she broke her silence.

“Yes, I will take him.”

Hearing these words, the Queen smiled brightly, but she couldn’t match Zetic, who beamed so broadly it was truly a shame that he wasn’t facing the crowd; those gathered were missing out on quite a sight.

“Then you are husband and wife, and you may seal your marriage with a kiss.”

The couple turned to face each other, and the audience caught a bit of his intense smile – but better was to come, for they leaned over to kiss each other, a kiss whose intensity was matched only by its duration.

By the end of it, Isacharact had her hand in Zetic’s hair, Zetic’s hands were stretched out at his sides, fingers twisting in the absence of coherent commands from his head – a head which was turned almost completely sideways, the result of a number of ‘re-kissing’ motions that might have been called separate kisses, had their lips ever truly disconnected.

At last it was over, and Zetic drew back sharply, completely out of breath. But when he breathed out, eyes wide open, his breath had become ice-cold, and made frost in the air.

Isacharact, for her part, breathed heavily through her nose, the first breath carrying with it a large puff of black smoke that must have been inhaled from the other side.

There are times when elves earn their renown as soft-spoken, quiet, and patient beings.

This was not one of them. The whole crowd cheered, clapped, and whistled loudly. Unable to speak to each other over the noise of the audience, and seeing their respective states – Zetic, his arms still clenched in exhilaration, Isacharact, breathing heavily, mouth hanging open in a fierce look of hunger – they could do nothing but laugh along with the audience.

Collapsing sideways onto his back, Zetic breathed out deeply, too tired to care that he had only managed to lie down half on the cushions – his left side was on the apartment floor.

“Oh, Ilmater resuscitate me from coma! I’m completely exhausted.”

With his eyes closed and one hand covering them, while the rest of him was sprawled out, immobile, he looked the part.

Isacharact glanced down at him, but didn’t join him on the bed.

“I’ll admit to being a bit tired myself. That was quite an event. I thought there’d be no end to the well-wishers...”

Zetic only half-moaned in accord. Isacharact turned away and looked out the window. To one side, the plaza was barely visible. Devoid of the incredible crowd it had held, only a skeleton crew was left to clean up the mess.

“... Your friend Lural surprised me, though. He delivered quite a good speech.”

Zetic still had his hand on his head as he spoke in a slow, tired voice.

“Yes. He’s got a knack for public speaking. I daresay he picked it up from me.”

Isacharact turned around and examined her new husband, sprawled out on the floor as he was.

“You’re absolutely exhausted, aren’t you?”

“Heavens, yes. I haven’t slept in days.”

She smirked at him, though he couldn’t see it.

“Hmph. Well, have a quick nap then, because the Queen’s holding a reception for us tonight in the grand audience-hall of the palace. Most of the Elven court will likely stay up until dawn.”

Zetic moaned as if the thought of being forced to party all night made him sick.

“Call in the sages and have them cast a spell of sleep upon me... My head hurts so much I don’t know if I’ll be able to rest.”

Isacharact cocked an eye at him.

“Dragons aren’t affected by such magic. And what’s this about your head hurting? Did you give up your vows and get into the drinks, then?”

“No, the chocolate. Ohh....”

The hand on his head began to massage his brow. Zetic spoke in a pitiful voice full of the remorse of a child who’d burned his fingers by sticking them into a freshly-baked pie.

“...Torm, forgive me! When Lural’s father stood up and gave that interesting speech about his days of adventuring, he had the whole audience captivated, you included. I was so hungry, and so nervous about everything (even though it was all over, thank the heavens!) and I felt so sick, that I got the foolish idea into my head to sneak over to one of the banquet tables and help myself to something to eat.”

Isacharact chuckled.

“So, what? You ate a platter full of chocolates?”

“Yes, silver platter included. Ugh.”

She snorted in reply.

“Oh, come off it. Neither the food nor the silver plate could have made you sick. It’s all just in your head.”

At last, Zetic uncovered his head and raised his neck up. His eyes were all bleary and teary, and he had trouble holding himself up straight.

“Yes, it’s all in my head, and it’s making such a pounding noise against my skull that I’d swear there was a whole Orcish horde tramping around up in there with it.”

Isacharact laughed and walked over to him, taking his head in her hands and pursing her lips, speaking sarcastically as she caressed his cheek.

“Aw, poor little golden wyrmling. Have a nap, then, and I’ll come and get you when it’s time to go to the reception.”

She gave him a little kiss on the lips and had barely gotten two steps away from him when he spoke, some of the exhaustion gone from his voice.

“Where are you going?”

Isacharact stopped three paces from the door and turned her neck around to face him.

“To my home in the North, if you must know. There’s still the matter of the extra funds for the wedding to deal with. One of the Queen’s most trusted war-wizards will be teleporting me near there, and then bringing me back once I’ve gotten what I need. I shan’t be away for more than a couple of hours.”

To her surprise, Zetic actually started to get up. Although barely three minutes had passed since they’d come to their chambers after the wedding event had wrapped up, he seemed to be refreshed.

“Well, if you’re going to go run an errand, perhaps I might do so as well. I’ve been holding on to something that belongs to someone on the mainland, and it would be best for me to return it to them as soon as possible...”

Zetic looked out through the windows. The sun was still up; the day easily held four or five more hours of sunlight.

“... and there’s still daylight in the Dales.”

Isacharact spoke as Zetic put his hands on his back and stretched his chest out forwards, then limbered up his shoulders and fluffed his wings.

“How are you planning on getting there?”

Zetic balled his hands into fists, cracking his knuckles. In spite of the complete absence of rest, he looked as if he’d awoken to a fresh day. It was as if the prospect of the task before him was energizing him.

“I have a wand of teleportation in my equipment bag that has a few charges left in it. It’ll be enough to get me there and back again.”

“I see. And where in the Dales, exactly, are you going?”

Zetic hesitated.

“I’d... I’d rather not tell, my dear. I did something immediately before coming here, and I took a vow not to reveal my involvement in it ...”

Isacharact looked a little annoyed, so Zetic continued with a smile.

“... but something tells me that you’ll be finding out about it soon enough.”

Placated with this response, and perhaps too tired and busy with her own affairs to care more, Isacharact simply nodded and opened the door.

“Alright. See you in a few hours... my husband.”

Zetic bowed as she exited the room.

“In a few hours, my wife.”

It might have still been light on the mainland, but when a small cloaked figure appeared in the middle of the forest, the region called Shadowdale earned its name by shrouding him in the darkness of its high trees.

Zetic looked up into the canopy and saw the yellow sunlight streaking through tall maple trees, casting magnificent rays down onto the deep brown earth that was still quite muddy.

Evermeet was not the only place on Faerûn to have received a generous helping of spring rain, apparently. But whereas the island had been warm in spite of the showers, in Shadowdale the dampness mixed with a lingering winter chill that caused Zetic to pull his cloak more tightly around himself.

As he started to walk towards the town visible a small distance away, he reflected: perhaps it wasn't the dampness. Perhaps it was the feeling of this shape.

For he had changed form into that of a young man, black-haired and tan-skinned, wearing a sorcerer's robes.

It had been almost sixteen years since he'd worn a skin other than one made out of scale. Even though Gold Dragons can change shape at will – many are renowned for adventuring in the guise of humans – and even though he ought to be more used to being a man than being a dragon – thirty-eight years compared to but sixteen – he still felt awkward. Incorrect. Unnatural.

And yet it couldn't have been merely Bahamut's spell that did this, could it? Natural gold dragons have no compunction against shape-changing into almost anything. It had to be something else, but whatever it was, Zetic sighed, pulled his hood up to shield his head from the droplets falling from the trees, resolved to put off his thoughts to a later day, and focused on the task at hand.

One rather mucky tramping later, he arrived in the town of Shadowdale proper. Considering its reputation as a city renowned for adventures (and *adventurers*), it was somewhat curious that he'd never been here before.

He knew the place he sought wasn't far, though, and as luck would have it, even on this rainy, chilly, spring evening, he managed to find someone else in the streets – a farmer, by the looks of him. Zetic hailed him.

“Pardon me, sir! Can you show me the way to Elminster's?”

The man, wearing a straw overcoat on top of a simple tunic and large straw hat – all of which seemed to be thoroughly soaked – gave him a once-over and jerked his thumb in the direction he had come, before walking on, apparently considering that indication enough.

It was. A quarter of an hour later, Zetic had passed the partly ruined Underdark fortress of Old Skull and was just cresting the large hill behind it when he saw what looked like a large old farm-house, a building known to adventurers across the land as the unpretentious dwelling of the single most powerful wizard – or even *man*, as some were wont to claim – in all of Faerûn.

Zetic paused and adjusted his clothing, un-hooding himself before approaching.

The door was an almost rickety-looking thing made out of old, dark, oak. Zetic knocked three times, and then waited.

Five minutes passed, but Zetic didn't dare knock again. He stood and waited patiently, turning around only once, and noticing that the rain-clouds were finally dispersing and the sun was finally coming out. Even though dusk was at hand, the air seemed to be getting warmer, not cooler.

Finally, his patience run out, Zetic raised up his hand and was about to knock again, when the door swung open, revealing an old-looking but spirited man dressed in elegant robes of many colours. Bearded, with neck-length black and white hair – not so much plain grey – he was holding a smoking pipe in one hand and the doorknob in the other. Hanging from a belt around his waist was a longsword in a beautiful gilded scabbard, and serving as a clasp for his robes at the front was a small pewter symbol of Mystra, Goddess of Magic.

“Yes?”

Zetic, although energetic enough to come this far, was still drained of mental capacity, and was too stunned by the sudden appearance to say anything, standing dumbfounded instead as Elminster continued on.

“Well? What is it? I haven't got all day.”

At last, he shook himself awake again and bowed his head.

“Ah... my apologies for disturbing you, master Elminster, but I have something that belongs to you, and have come far to return it to you.”

Elminster looked at him warily, letting go of the doorknob but still standing in the doorway, and putting his pipe in his mouth.

“Have you, now, young sorcerer? Let me have your name, first, then.”

Zetic hesitated for a moment. Too small of a moment, he hoped, for Elminster to notice... but then, more than one evil power’s plans had been foiled by his powers of observation.

“My name is Shardan, master Elminster. I come from the west.”

It would be too much to hope for to not arouse his suspicions, but by the time the wizard decided to act upon them, Zetic hoped the task would be complete.

“Shardan of the west, hm?...”

Surprisingly, Elminster smiled and seemed to accept this.

“... All right, then, my good Shardan, let’s see what it is that you’ve brought me. I don’t remember having *lost* anything, but then, of course, memories are fleeting...”

Poking his head out from the doorway, he looked up at the sky.

“...Perhaps we should step outside? The sun has come out as if but to say good-night, and the light will make it easier to see what it is that you’ve come to return.”

Zetic smiled and nodded, and started towards a small bench and table set a few paces away that Elminster was indicating with his hand.

Behind him, he heard the rough sound of the door closing, its latch holding it in place. It was a calming noise. He was just two feet away from sitting down at the table when he heard another noise that was considerably *less* calming.

“*Nahil’n Majicka.*”

Zetic gasped and his eyes went wide when he heard the two simple words that make up one of the most common of spells in any mage’s inventory: *dispel magic*.

“No, wait!”

He whipped around and shouted out just as Elminster, standing calmly by the door, finished speaking the final syllable.

But there was no stopping it – and so it was that the enchantment that gave him human form was dispelled just as he finished saying ‘wait’; within the blink of an eye he had resumed his normal shape: that of a gold dragon who, standing on his hind legs, reached just a little over sixteen feet tall.

Elminster’s eyes followed Zetic’s head as it sprouted upwards, and when the transformation was complete, he docilely took a puff from his pipe.

“Well. That was unexpected.”

The tone of his voice betrayed no surprise, however. Zetic, meanwhile, was speechless, completely embarrassed at having been unmasked so.

It was therefore up to Elminster to strike up conversation once more. Waving his pipe in the air, he approached the table – which had thankfully been spared any impact from Zetic’s rather sudden expansion.

“And here I was expecting another foolish Red Wizard underling who hoped to get the better of me. I hardly expected *you* to feel the need to disguise yourself when coming to me, Zetic.”

Zetic was stunned at hearing his own name. His head started up, aghast.

“You know who I am?”

Elminster sat down on the bench, crossing one leg over the other and facing his rather large guest, whose head followed him.

“I do. What I don’t know, good cleric, is *why* you have come, though Arveran *did* send word that you would be coming by.”

Another jolt to Zetic’s system.

“He... he did? Hmm...”

Zetic composed himself and sat down on the ground.

“... That *does* change things a bit. I don’t suppose you’d mind if I removed myself to a more manageable size?”

Elminster spoke in-between puffs.

“Go right ahead.”

Zetic called upon his inner power and soon brought himself down to the size of a man – still a dragon, but one whose size wouldn’t be an impediment.

Resting one hand on the table, Zetic pulled the bag off his back and gently placed it in front of him.

“Well, then. If Arveran has already spoken with you, I suppose I don’t need to do anything more than hand back what belongs to the Harpers.”

Elminster said nothing as Zetic reached into the bag and pulled out – delicately – a beautifully and brightly coloured leather cuirass, decorated all over with bits of red, blue, green, yellow, and violet cloth.

“This is the armour of a man whom I believe you knew.”

The wizard, sitting almost sideways on the bench, looked down intently at the leather suit sitting on the table.

“I knew him indeed...”

Zetic paused, waiting for Elminster to look up at him again, before drawing out a second item: a great robe, not quite as brightly coloured as the armour, but ever so much more elegantly made – perhaps of Elven construction.

It was Elminster who identified this next piece.

“And I know those robes, as well...”

Zetic reached in one more time and brought out a short sword in its velvet-wrapped scabbard, which Elminster took in both hands.

“... His sword, too, yes. *Ringsteel*...”

Elminster ran fingers along the scabbard, feeling for the metal designs that he knew must be underneath the scarlet cloth.

When he put his hand back down on the table, Zetic reached into the bag with both hands and pulled out the final item with reverence.

The wizard watched as Zetic laid a small, beautiful, golden harp – with all of its strings still intact – down on top of everything else.

“Arveran told me this was called ‘The Harper’s Harp’.”

Elminster moistened his lips, put down the pipe, and took the harp in his hands.

“Yes. The harp of Asu Narnà, the One Who Harped...”

Still holding the precious little instrument, he looked up at Zetic, smiling gently.

“The Harper’s Harp, indeed. Do you have any idea what a precious thing it is that you have here?”

Zetic shook his head.

“No. I had never heard the name of Asu Narnà before we saw it written on the sarcophagus in the tomb. Arveran recognized it, though, as well as some of the other ones. He said we ought to take the items from within them before we closed the portals and sapped the tunnels. When we got out of there, he insisted that I take the items buried with Narnà and bring them back to you, telling me the name of that instrument. Given where he was buried, he must’ve been a friend of the Elves, one who helped them fight against the Drow when they first broke through the Abbey of the Sword. Beyond that, I know nothing. Who was he?”

The old sage turned the harp over in his hands.

“‘Know nothing’, indeed. You know enough to piece everything together.”

A quiet seemed to come over the clearing. The sun was giving its final farewells over the tops of the trees, casting deep, red, shadows on everything, and the harp’s pristine gold finish began to glitter in the amber light.

“He was one of the founders of the Harpers, then?”

“Yes, and it is for the sweet sounds he made from this instrument that the Harpers are named. I have seen the Blackstaff show true emotion in only two situations: when dealing with Alustriel, his love, and when hearing Asu’s melodies so many years ago...”

Elminster composed himself and pulled the harp up to his chest, strumming a few notes.

“... And it still works. Well, my friend, you have indeed brought me something of great value. And yet I would have more: the full story of how you came to have it.”

Zetic cocked an eye at Elminster.

“Arveran didn’t tell you what happened?”

Elminster smacked his lips and looked off to the side.

“My ranger friend can be a rather hasty fellow, sometimes. He popped in here a few days ago only long enough to mention that a certain Zetic of Torm would be coming by – shortly, he hoped – to give me something that belongs to our organisation.”

Zetic’s jaw dropped.

“Wait, Arveran is a *Harper*? Oh, for the love of Mystra... Why didn’t he bring these to you himself, for goodness’ sakes?”

The old wizard remained calm, almost obsessively focused with his pipe.

“Perhaps it was a feeling he had – that you and I ought to meet.”

Zetic paused to consider the thought.

“Perhaps...”

The old wizard grinned momentarily.

“So, then. Tell me how it was that you came to Asu’s tomb.”

Zetic glanced up at his host.

“I’m... I’m afraid I can’t, master Elminster.”

Elminster puffed at his pipe once again, amused.

“Oh? Why not?”

“I swore a vow to Torm never speak of what happened until commanded by him. This way, the church of Torm might be honoured by others, instead of by its own. It’s also penitence by humility; that I should take noble actions but that I may not sing them, lest fame cloud my mind.”

Elminster suddenly became somewhat stern.

“That’s all well and good, my friend, but remember to whom you are talking, and what you’ve already said. You’ve admitted to blowing up the tomb of Asu Narnà, a tomb which I know to be in Cormanthor, here in the Dale-lands. I doubt someone of your character goes around causing old buildings to blow up without good cause, so it stands to reason that you were there to fight some evil – and there is but one evil worth fighting that lurks in Cormanthor: the Drow.”

Zetic still said nothing, so Elminster carried on, energetic.

“... And it goes without saying that very little happens to the Drow of Cormanthor without the Harpers having had a hand in it. If you won’t tell your story now, I’ll learn the truth sooner or later. Though I’ll wager Arveran will be disappointed to learn that you refused me the tale.”

Zetic shook his head.

“He will have to be disappointed, then. I’m sorry, master Elminster, but in this I must be firm, for I owe my Lord Torm too much already to break – or even merely bend – my vow to him. If you learn the rest of the tale from someone else, so be it. I placed no geas on my companions in this endeavour: they were free to tell or withhold their story, as they wished. With the return of these things, my part in this adventure is now done; the Drow are weakened, and Torm forgives me by my act of bringing him closer both to Corellon as well as Tempus.”

With that, Zetic got up. Elminster casually replied.

“If you say so. I take it you have somewhere to be right now?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’ve just been married only a few hours ago. My wife awaits me to attend Queen Amlaruil’s reception.”

“I do not know your wife, but I can say at least that Queen Amlaruil is a good friend of mine. Her reception will wait a while longer. Sit, my friend...”

Zetic somewhat reluctantly moved forward and sat – awkward, with the shape of a dragon’s body, but still possible. Elminster waved his pipe in the air.

“... All right, so don't tell me your story if you don't want to. Far be it for this old stubborn man to try to budge a young stubborn man with regards to his convictions. At least, let me give you some recompense for the return of these precious things.”

Zetic's lips tightened into a half-smile, almost ashamed.

“No reward is needed, master Elminster. What I did, I did for the cause of Good itself, not the promise of a reward.”

Elminster chuckled.

“Indeed, and no reward was promised. I am offering you one now, after the fact. As I have been known to be rather stingy with such offers, I suggest you take it.”

Zetic smiled broadly and seemed to consider for a moment.

“Well, when you put that way, I suppose I can't refuse. Actually, I do have something that could use your... expert magic advice.”

If the wizard was 'stingy' with offers of rewards, at least he was more than happy to redeem them.

“Certainly, certainly, what is it?”

Zetic reached into a magic bag at his waist and pulled out a leather water-skin.

“*This*... contains a potion that was brewed for me. I don't know if it's actually magical in nature, but whether it is or it isn't, surely there must be some way of making a spell out of it? It would be rather... handy... to know it as a spell instead of as a recipe.”

Elminster took the gourd and un-corked it, sniffing the potion at the opening.

“Ah, but what is a spell aside from a recipe that a mage follows when cooking the Weave? Nonetheless, let us see what we can do...”

Before Zetic could stop him, Elminster took back a minuscule draught of the brew. Zetic was still sitting with one hand held up in caution as the mage swished the potion around in his mouth, apparently taking the time to taste it fully, before swallowing the tiny amount.

The wizard re-corked the water-skin and stared at it in reflection for a moment.

“I won't be fathering any children anytime soon, will I?”

Zetic took the gourd from him and grinned sheepishly.

“Not for a day or two, in all likelihood.”

“Yes, I thought I tasted Cassil in there. Well, no matter. Easy enough to turn into a spell for one with a bit of knowledge of alchemy.”

“I’m afraid I have no such knowledge, and the potion is of a nature that I would rather not trust its transcription to just anyone.”

Elminster ‘hmed’ as he reached into a fold on the side of his coat and pulled out a thin little scroll case, out of which he soon fished a piece of foolscap just barely larger than his palm. From a little pouch on the left side of his belt he extracted a vial of ink and a small pen.

Rolling out the paper and uncorking the vial, he dipped the pen in the ink and hastily scribbled down arcane letters on the parchment.

Once that done, he shoved the paper over to Zetic, who slowly took it up.

“There you are, my friend. A simple formula, and thus a very simple spell, though even the simplest spell is dangerous in a fool’s hands. *That* version I wrote there should last you for about a day and a half.”

Zetic looked at the little parchment, studying it long enough to get a sense for it. A simple spell it was, indeed, and he had it memorized within moments.

Folding the paper and putting it in his bag, he smiled up at Elminster.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much this is worth to me.”

Elminster nodded, and Zetic got up to leave.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure meeting you, master Elminster, and thank you for this gift, but I really should be going, now.”

He bowed briefly and, as Elminster seemed oblivious, began to walk away. He made a few steps before he heard Elminster speak quietly behind him.

“What’s your rush, young dragon?”

Stunned by Elminster’s wording, Zetic’s neck whipped around... But the old mage merely got up and nonchalantly began to gather up the relics on the table.

“... Stay a while, and help this old man put these marvels away.”

Zetic watched, almost in disbelief, as Elminster calmly and gently folded the cloth over the armour, and the sword, forming a large packet on top of which he placed the harp. Just as he lifted up the entire package, Zetic spoke.

“You’re not that old... and I’m not that young.”

With his pipe in his mouth, Elminster walked over and placed the wrapped-up bundle in Zetic’s arms.

“Oh no? How old are you, then?”

He began to walk towards the house, and Zetic called after him, standing where he was.

“Old enough to remember hearing as a child of the adventures of Elminster; adventures that were even then being recorded.”

Elminster stopped, and turned around, beckoning Zetic closer with his hand and a smile. When Zetic at last obliged, he replied.

“I see. And how *young* do you think *I* am, then?”

Zetic seemed taken aback at the question.

“You’re... you’re one of the Chosen of Mystra, master Elminster. You have countless years before you.”

Elminster hummed in agreement.

“Perhaps, perhaps, but youth is measured more in years gone past than years remaining. Though most of all, of course, it is measured by actions: do you still hear of the adventures of Elminster, young one?”

They reached the door of the house, and Zetic seemed uncomfortable.

“No... but they were still being made not so long ago.”

Elminster turned around with a warm smile on his face.

“But no longer. Or at least, no longer quite as flamboyant as before...”

The wizard fiddled with the door-handle briefly before opening it.

“... No, the time has come for me to turn over such responsibilities to young folk such as yourself, my friend.”

Striding into the house, Elminster turned around and saw Zetic merely standing outside the doorway, blankly holding his charge. It seemed to Zetic that while they had been talking, the wizard had made himself seem so very old, but looking at him, Zetic saw the exact opposite: the image of a man at his prime, still nimble, spry, and strong.

As if sensing Zetic’s thoughts, Elminster smirked and made a motion with his finger for Zetic to enter.

“Well, come on in, now. Make yourself useful, like a young man should.”

The little half-joke worked, and Zetic walked in.

“Except that I’m not a young man.”

Elminster turned and proceeded further into the house, with Zetic following behind him.

“No, you’re a young dragon, but having raised a few of them myself – Oh yes, they sometimes give their children up to foster parents, you know – I can say that there is little difference in the amount of discipline that must be instilled in them.”

Zetic only laughed lightly, suddenly glad to be following Elminster, carrying a not particularly heavy object to some back room of his house. He took a second or two to look around, but there was little of the unexpected: the house was somewhat disorganized, with books and potion-bottles and other magical paraphernalia strewn about everywhere, though never so chaotic as to be genuinely messy. Merely... well-used.

At last, passing through a small hallway that went by the kitchen, they came to a door, which Elminster opened, revealing nothing but a tiny, lightless room.

Zetic looked at Elminster with a confused expression.

“A closet, master Elminster?”

Elminster stood apart, motioning for him to go in.

“Quite. In you go.”

“Into the *closet*?”

The wizard suddenly appeared annoyed.

“You’re in a wizard’s house, my boy. Doors are rarely what they seem. Now, get in, or I’ll kick you in myself, stubborn lad.”

With a dismissive chuckle, Zetic crouched his head and went into the closet, and Elminster followed after, shutting the door and leaving them completely in the dark, huddled in the small room.

Inside the pitch-black closet, in spite of the black-and-white dark-vision common to all dragons, Zetic was only just barely able to see Elminster fiddle with the door-handle in front of him.

“I feel as though some Red wizard must be scrying upon us right now and laughing his head off.”

“Shush. Don’t question things you don’t understand. And the Red Wizards don’t have a proper sense of humour, anyways.”

Zetic began to chuckle to himself.

“Maybe, but besides, it’s probably too dark in here for even them to see anything.”

Elminster began to chuckle, too.

“All right, all right, that’s enough out of the peanut gallery. Here we are.”

He calmly opened the door, and although Zetic was prepared for the obvious – that the closet was a portal of some sort – he still was awed by the sight before him.

Elminster stepped out onto a small landing with a tiny staircase leading down to a grand hall that stretched out before them.

Zetic cautiously poked his neck out from the closet and marvelled at the room before him. Although clearly underground, with the thick, stone walls, the room was full of light, provided by small windows near and in the ceiling that admitted almost blindingly bright light. It must’ve been a magic effect, for absolutely no detail was discernable in the pure white of the windows.

The hall stretched on for thirty metres before splitting off into several large corridors going off in parallel directions; Zetic could see intersections further down.

Stepping out, Zetic saw that directly in front of the doorway was a row of solid wooden tables, on which a few people were sitting, reading books or fingering through stacks of papers – all of them, mostly oblivious to the arrival of Elminster and the gold dragon.

On the floor beneath the tables, made out of smaller tiles than the rest of the room, was the instantly recognizable symbol of the Harpers: a white harp surrounded by a crescent moon, set on a blue starry background.

“A Harper library?”

Elminster shut the door behind him, and Zetic saw that it was as unassuming a door as it had been on the other side: simple, wooden, but unremarkable.

“Of sorts. More of a vault, a store of information and magic items.”

Going down the few steps to the level of the main floor, Elminster led Zetic down the right corridor and followed it around several corners. Though well-lit, Zetic couldn’t help but feel as if he were in a crypt of sorts, with the imposing stone walls and curved, solid-looking ceiling.

They soon came upon a large gilded iron fence and gate stretched across the underground passageway. In front of it sat an aging man with a tangled mass of white hair at a sturdy wooden desk, deep in thought as he looked over a gigantic book, apparently a ledger of some sort. It took Elminster clearing his throat for the busy man to look up, peering at the two visitors behind thick glasses.

“Oh, master Elminster. Good to see you again. Deposit or withdrawal today?”

Elminster motioned for Zetic to put the items on the table.

“Both, Praden.”

The man named Praden arched his bushy white eyebrows and seemed surprised, watching carefully as Zetic put the package down on the table. Once so placed, Praden seemed fixated on the instrument on the top of bundle.

“My... That can only be *The* harp...”

He took it up in his hands, holding it almost reverently.

“I’d always wanted to see it. Still beautiful after all these years...”

The vault-keeper closed his eyes and brought the harp close to his ear, plucking the strings one by one. They rang softly, and sounded beautiful.

“And still in tune, too; wonderful!”

Praden exhaled deeply and beamed at Zetic.

“Magnificent. Absolutely magnificent. My thanks to you, friend dragon. This is a priceless treasure for our organization. However can we repay you?”

Zetic was about to politely decline repayment when Elminster spoke up.

“Do you play any instruments, Zetic?”

Zetic paused and turned slightly towards Elminster.

“As a matter of fact, I recently picked up playing the lute. But for the most part, I play it only to accompany my singing.”

Praden, interested, nodded, while Elminster seemed to consider for a moment. Finally, he motioned for Praden to come closer and leaned over the table, whispering into the gate-keeper’s ear.

“I was thinking that perhaps the...”

Though he stealthily strained his ears to listen, Zetic couldn’t hear the rest. There must have been only a few other words, however, for Praden soon pulled back and tapped his right hand’s fingers against his lips as he reflected on Elminster’s words.

“Ahh... Hmm...”

He pulled his hand away from his mouth and held it up in the air.

“Yes, yes! I agree, certainly. Definitely a fair trade, and likely a very worthy owner. Shall we give it to him now?”

Praden made a motion towards the gate itself and Elminster waved his palm to indicate that he should proceed. As Praden pulled out a keychain and worked to open the gate, Zetic looked them over somewhat warily.

“What’s going on, Elminster?”

With a loud <CLACK> as he unlocked it, Praden opened the gate that, in spite of its size, made not a single squeak as the center portion of it rotated inwards. Elminster, meanwhile, put one arm around Zetic’s back and gently pulled him forwards.

“One good harp deserves another, my friend. Come along, now. I think we have something you’re going to enjoy.”

Praden held the gate open as Elminster led Zetic through, then locked it behind them. Scurrying as a man half his apparent age would, Praden’s short tunic and soft-soled shoes made almost no noise as he hustled ahead of them and around the corner.

When Zetic and Elminster reached it as well, the wizard let go of the dragon’s back, for Zetic stood struck with awe.

The narrow passageway had opened up to reveal a gigantic corridor, its ceiling stretching seven stories high, and easily thirty feet wide.

But more impressive than the corridor’s dimensions were its contents: for, arranged row after row were musical instruments of all sorts, piled high on shelves that lined the sides of the corridor.

Not poorly-lit and stony like the exterior passageways, this vault of music had beautiful tile floors and wonderful brightly painted ceilings. Neither was it empty: half a dozen people were balanced on tall ladders on rails, storing, retrieving, or simple dusting or maintaining the thousands of instruments.

As impressive as that sight was, Zetic was in for a bigger one only a few dozen steps away, for the musical instrument-lined corridor opened into a huge circular room, its ceiling stretching up even higher. From all eight directions, corridors similar to the one they had just entered from stretched out, each one equally piled high with musical instruments.

Elminster caught the sight of Praden hurrying down one of them, and with Zetic staring at the painting on the ceiling – the image of gods, goddesses, and mortals, all playing musical instruments in what seemed to be a sort of bacchanalian festival – he pulled him onwards.

They soon came upon Praden giving instructions to one of the workers who was high up on a ladder, five stories in the air, and leaning over somewhat dangerously, groping for an instrument that was out-of-sight to those on the ground, hidden by the wooden shelf on which it sat.

“It should be right up there. Very hard to miss, with those two necks. Have you got it? Yes, that’s it, you have it. Bring it down, would you?”

The worker, wearing the same light brown tunic as Praden, came down, holding a large black velvet bag.

Praden eagerly took it from him and carefully loosened the drawstring around the opening of the bag and removed a lute.

Or at least, Zetic *thought* it was a lute, for it was unlike any he had seen before, for one single reason: it had *two* necks, one slightly longer than the other, and each with its own set of seven strings.

Praden put the strap around his neck and bent his head over to the instrument, plucking the strings one by one.

“It’s a bit out of tune. Just a minute.”

Zetic watched with interest, but seemed confused.

“I would have thought that, in an archive as grand as this, you would use magic to tune the instruments, instead of doing so by hand.”

Praden looked up, appearing almost angry.

“One can’t use magic on a whim, as master Elminster will certainly tell you. And in any case, using a spell of tuning will leave you with tuned instruments but no-one competent to play them. This vault was created to preserve *music*, not to teach children parlour magic. Each and every one of the instruments you see here is tuned *by hand* twice a year, or even more frequently for those that need it, and disregarding of course those that can tune themselves.”

Zetic did a double-take, and Praden grinned as he continued to tune the instrument – and lecture the dragon before him.

“Oh yes, these are no ordinary instruments you see before you, master dragon. All of them have some history or feature that makes them unique. Most of them are enchanted in one way or another. Some of them enhance the player’s aptitude; others play all by themselves. A few are intelligent, and will speak to you, if you’ll listen.”

Finally, Praden stood up straight and presented the lute to Zetic.

“*This* one is called ‘The Orchestrator’s Chitaronne’. A Chitaronne is a kind of Dambrathan two-necked lute; this one’s about as old as I am – which is fairly young, as these things come.”

Zetic took the instrument in both hands and tossed the strap over his shoulder as Praden continue to talk.

“It gives a small boost to your playing aptitude, but that’s just a minor power. For the real treat... Well, why don’t you try it yourself? Pick a tune normally played by a group instead of by a lone performer, and play the melody on the instrument.”

Zetic looked down at the instrument in his hands.

“Certainly, but which set of strings should I use?”

Praden waved off the question.

“Oh, either one. Or both, if you have the hands for it. They’re tuned to slightly different scales.”

Shooting him and Elminster both a rather curious look, Zetic furrowed his brow and began to play a traditional Chondathan song – “November Rose”, a ballad of love usually played with lute, hurdy-gurdy, flute, and cornet.

To his astonishment, after plucking out the first few bars, the other three parts played by the other three instruments could be heard. Bending his ear over to the lute in his hands, he burst into a smile as he recognized that the sounds were indeed coming from inside the very instrument he was holding.

“Why, this is marvellous! Can it do drums as well?”

Praden beamed back, obviously proud of this piece of his collection.

“Drums, tambourines, rattles, you name it! It can even reproduce simple ‘hmm’, ‘aaah’, and ‘ooh’ voices for use as a chorus. Quite versatile, really. I’m surprised they never made more than a handful, but we’re glad to have one here nonetheless.”

Zetic looked up reverently.

“You mean this is your only one? Oh, I don’t know then ...”

Praden waved off the concern.

“Take it, take it! You look like someone who’ll put it to good use. There’s no point in hoarding music to keep it out of the hands of musicians. This is a living vault, my friend: we do not store things here to be forgotten, but to be remembered, enjoyed, used – with care, perhaps, but used nonetheless.”

The old man swept his arm around, indicating all the rooms that made up the archive.

“... Fifteen thousand instruments line these halls, hundreds of thousands of sheets of music are stored in bookcases in vaults beneath us, as are hundreds of books written by the masters of the art of song from ages long past. We wish our collection to grow, but we also wish to keep it fresh, and that means cycling out old pieces to make room for new ones. Take this lute, and make music with it. That is all we ask for returning the Harper’s Harp.”

Zetic smiled and looked around some more – it truly *was* a magnificent place, this hidden vault of music. He glanced down at the lute in his hands, and turned it over slowly. The

delicate blue and red painted inlay on the base of the lute shined softly, and the fine dark-stained wood gleamed in the room's soft light.

“All right. Since you insist so forcefully, how can I refuse? It's an incredible gift; I don't think I shall want for music for the rest of my life...”

Both Praden and Elminster smiled; it was Elminster who spoke, however.

“Glad you enjoy it. Now, if you'll just hold still, I'll send you back to the Queen – and your wife.”

Zetic composed himself and bowed slightly to them both.

“Thank you, master Elminster. And thank you, master Praden. I promise to take good care of this.”

Elminster had already begun to speak the words of a teleportation spell, but Zetic managed to hear Praden's final cry.

“The best way to take care of it is to enjoy it, my friend!”

Zetic was smiling broadly, supremely satisfied with the way everything – the return to Isacharact, the marriage, and the mission to Elminster's house – had turned out when he was about to thrust open the doors to his chambers in the Queen's palace.

But then he remembered his earlier promise to knock first, and did so, entering only when he heard Isacharact say, “Come in”.

“Well. You certainly look pleased with yourself.”

Zetic was still beaming as he entered the room.

“I am. The fates have rewarded me doubly for my actions; and with the reward, my geas is complete, my list of commitments completely cleared, and nothing more threatens to pull me away from you.”

“That's good to hear.”

Isacharact wasn't really paying attention. As she spoke, she lifted something small up to her mouth and swallowed it.

“What's that you're eating?”

“Chocolate.”

“Chocolate? Where from?”

Isacharact looked him over, and then looked in front of her.

It was only now that Zetic noticed the rather substantial addition to their room: a enormous pile of wrapped boxes piled high right in front of Isacharact.

“Goodness! Where did all *those* come from?”

Isacharact picked up another chocolate from a small box she was holding in front of her and ate it before replying.

“Couriers have been dropping them off all afternoon.”

Zetic blinked, flabbergasted.

“Well, what *are* they, anyways?”

Isacharact looked at him as if examining at a particularly unintelligent turnip.

“Presents, of course.”

“Presents? Whatever for?”

Isacharact rolled her eyes; the turnip had somehow doubled in unintelligence. Quickly taking another chocolate, she lectured Zetic.

“Did we not just get married? Is it not a custom of both Elves and Humans to shower newlyweds with gifts? Surely you don’t think they’d all show up to the wedding itself laden with presents, given the sheer number of people, not to mention seeing how nervous and exhausted you were? Of course they’d be smart enough to simply have them sent over afterwards, and so here they are.”

Zetic’s eyes bulged as he looked over the huge mound.

“There must be five hundred boxes there...”

“Five hundred and forty-two, to be exact. There are also some larger items against the wall, over there—”

She pointed at some bolts of cloth and rolled-up tapestries piled together on the left side of the doors.

Zetic shook his head in disbelief.

“Incredible. I hadn’t even thought that anyone might’ve sent gifts, but this is a marvel. Elven gifts! Precious things all, no doubt. I’ll bet those chocolates are exquisite.”

Isacharact popped another one in her mouth, savouring it.

“Delectable.”

Zetic walked over and tried to take one for himself but Isacharact jerked the box away from him, speaking playfully.

“Hands off. Get your own.”

Zetic raised an eyebrow and wore a confused smile.

“I thought these were all *ours*?”

Isacharact put on a false haughty air.

“Ha! It was *my* wedding; it stands to reason that these are *my* gifts. Besides, I didn’t see you here to claim them. Your ‘short errand’ turned out to be longer than mine.”

“Oh, come on. Let me have one.”

She smiled even more playfully and held the box even further away from him.

“No.”

Zetic reached over further.

“Just one, please?”

Isacharact pulled them further away just out of his grasp, and he quickly pulled back, only to reach around behind her neck to get at the box.

Seeing this move, Isacharact quickly rolled over once and, just as Zetic groped once more for the box, she stood up, holding the box out of his reach.

“My, my, my, what’s this? You seem to *really* want these chocolates, don’t you?”

Zetic suddenly became sheepish, but that only egged Isacharact on further.

“... And you ate an entire plate of them at the wedding. Aha! Have we found a little chink of vice in the impenetrable golden plate of the holier-than-thou cleric?”

Put on the defensive, Zetic suddenly adopted the holier-than-thou air in question.

“I’d hardly call enjoying chocolate a ‘vice’.”

“Oho, don’t try and pass this off as mere *enjoyment*, my husband. You haven’t even groped that desperately for *me*, and I should hope that you more than merely ‘enjoy’ my company. I detect the hint of addiction. Can it be that our little cleric has something of a sweet tooth?”

Zetic furrowed his brow and looked away, pausing for a bit before replying in a voice that barely surpassed mumble.

“If you must know, my uncle was a chocolatier in Waterdeep, and I have many fond memories of visiting him in his shop.”

His secret out, Isacharact grinned with satisfaction, but Zetic wasn't done defending himself and spoke up again.

“They remind me of happy times. They're nothing more than a fond memento.”

Isacharact smirked at him and sat down again.

“Oh, justify it however you please, cleric. I certainly couldn't care less whether you had a fondness for chocolate or *pearls*. I simply find it entertaining to finally see some of your more... domestic... faults.”

With that, she held the box out to him, grinning like a devil about to tempt a mortal.

Zetic eyed at her – and the chocolates – with a look of consternation.

“No, thank you.”

Isacharact chuckled at being refused and withdrew the box, lying back down and taking another chocolate for herself. Zetic shut his eyes and breathed deeply.

“How long until the reception? I'm feeling the exhaustion once again.”

Isacharact continued to help herself to the chocolates, licking her fingers and smacking her lips rather loudly.

“A few hours. Why don't you get some rest beforehand, if you're so tired.”

Zetic looked weary enough to pass out right then and there.

“Not a bad idea, but I'm still too excited from everything that's happened today. I can't calm down, I can't relax.”

Isacharact paused with a chocolate in hand and looked Zetic over from the side. Considering for a moment, she flipped the chocolate into the air, caught it in her mouth, swallowed, and spoke.

“Lie down. I have something that'll get you rested.”

Zetic looked at her questioningly, saying nothing, leaving Isacharact to repeat herself.

“Well, go on, then. Lie down on your back.”

Snapping to his senses, Zetic complied, albeit somewhat lethargically.

“All right, though I can’t imagine what you’re planning. If I didn’t know gold dragons could breathe underwater, at least I know that there’s no magic you have that can put me to sleep.”

“Only because I *told* you so an hour ago.”

Zetic yawned, lying on his back.

“See? I’ve been awake so long, my memory’s started to go.”

Isacharact only hummed as she put down the box and got up, walking over to Zetic.

“Ready? No squirming around, now, you understand? I want you to lie *still*.”

Zetic nodded, exhausted, assuming that she was going to cast some other sort of spell.

It was rather a surprise to him, then, when she put one leg and one arm on the other side of him and promptly lay herself down right on top of him, with her tail stuck in his face.

“Mmmph, what are you doing?”

Isacharact looked over her back at him.

“Didn’t I tell you to be *quiet*?”

“Actually, you told me to lie still.”

“Yes, and that includes your jaw. Stop its flapping.”

Annoyed, Zetic went quiet and kept still. Isacharact, for her part, waited patiently until she could feel Zetic’s breathing to slow down. When it seemed to slow no further, she bent her head down and placed her right cheek on the exposed underside of Zetic’s tail.

Zetic’s eyes opened wide and his legs twitched as she proceeded to slide her head all along the length of his tail, from his rear all the way to the tip, pushing down with enough force to flatten the tail against the floor.

She lifted up her head, breathed deeply, and did it again, and Zetic began to feel calm wash over him from the cold tail-massage.

Once more, and Zetic’s breathing slowed even further. His eyelids became heavy.

Once again, and when Isacharact lifted her head up, having reached the tip of Zetic’s tail, she looked back and saw Zetic’s eyes were shut, his head lying sideways on the ground, his arms limp at his sides.

She bent over and performed the slow massage one last time for good measure, before reaching over to the pile of presents, and quietly opening another one, smirking to herself.

Night came, and Isacharact could hear the faint sounds of the court become slightly louder. Clearly, the reception was getting underway – though the guests of honour were, of course, not yet present.

It was time to wake Zetic up, so she began to softly move the base of her tail over his head.

“Cleric... cleric...”

Without even needing to look, she could tell that he was still groggy. The tail movements became somewhat less soft.

“Cleric... It’s time to get up, cleric...”

Finally, at the point where the swishing of the tail was about to become more the slapping of the tail, Zetic awoke.

Except that, instead of remembering that he was underneath his wife, in his semi-consciousness he imagined himself the prisoner of a pack of brutal Orcs, the leader of whom was slapping him awake with a sturdy wooden club.

Reacting to the perceived danger, Zetic quickly reached out with both his arms and seized what he took to be the Orc leader’s head, his claws digging into the tough flesh.

It was Isacharact’s rear.

Her head bolted up and her eyes shot open; she breathed in sharply, her face expressing at once both pain as well as... excitement.

Zetic, for his part, blinked several times, clearing his eyesight, until he could see that what he was gripping was not, in fact, the head of an Orc, but rather the hindquarters of his wife.

A wife who slowly turned her head sideways, looked down at him with one eye, and began to growl.

Zetic gasped and quickly let go.

“Oh! Sorry!”

Isacharact didn’t stop growling.

“I didn’t tell you to *let go* ...”

Zetic’s eyes bulged shortly before she began to slowly bat his head around with her tail. She licked her teeth and spoke on in a guttural voice.

“... And while the reception *has* started, I’m certain they won’t miss us if we take a *little* while longer to show up...”

She bent over quickly and took a fleshy part of Zetic’s tail in her jaw, biting down gently and breathing cold air on it, sending a shiver up Zetic’s spine.

“I’m awake! I’m awake!”

Isacharact let go of the base of his tail, choosing instead to nibble on its tip.

“So am I. It’s good to see you’ve got claws after all, husband.”

Zetic tried to reply only in vain as she swished her tail back and forth over him, trailing his head with it, knocking it from left to right.

“I’m out – I’m out of strength, Isa! If we do as you suggest, then I won’t be making it to the reception tonight unless you drag in my unconscious body.”

Isacharact only chuckled, still using her tail to play with his head.

“So be it. A reception’s but a fleeting little thing, anyways; it’s of little importance. Even if I resisted this human ritual of marriage that you insisted upon, at least I know all of its essential components, of which the First Night seems to be the most important next step. And the sky outside is now dark...”

Zetic began to resist, trying to push her out of the way and struggling against her tail. Isacharact lay her head sideways down on the ground and began to breathe deeply.

“... Struggle all you like, you’re only making it worse.”

With a supreme effort, Zetic let out a cry and pushed with all his force, finally managing to roll Isacharact off of him.

He sprung to his feet almost immediately, chest heaving heavily.

Isacharact lay on her side, looking up at him with excited delight.

“Good, good. There’s a bit of fight in you after all.”

Zetic puffed out his chest and stood up a little taller.

“I’ve been in a tussle or two, you know. And not always with a sword by my side.”

Isacharact traced her finger on the ground, nonchalant.

“Well *I*’ve been more than a few ‘tussles’, cleric – and always won without needing to use a crutch of that sort.”

She pointed at his sword, lying on the ground in the corner of the room. Zetic turned and looked at it briefly.

“I can believe it. But now, fair Isacharact...”

Zetic, his breath recovered, suddenly put on a soft smile and bent over towards Isacharact, offering her his right hand.

“... allow me to help you back on your feet.”

Isacharact considered the proffered hand for a moment, then chuckled and eyed Zetic with a grin.

She put one of her hands in his, but then instead of pulling herself up, she pushed down on it, crushing it against the floor. There was a small cracking noise, and Zetic suppressed a grunt of pain as she stood herself up, left hand still placed on top of it.

“The day you can *pick me up*, cleric, is the day I admit that the sword may be as mighty as the claw.”

Zetic grimaced as he rubbed his hand, verifying that the noise had only been strained cartilage and not broken bones.

“That day may come sooner than you think. If you’re so familiar with marriage rites, then you ought to have heard about wedding ritual of the husband carrying the bride through the ‘threshold’.”

Isacharact cocked an eye at him, then looked at the chamber doors, and then back at him again.

In the mirror, anyone could see she was almost twice his height and considerably more than that multiplier in terms of sheer bulk.

She scoffed, laughing dismissively at him.

“I’d like to see you *try*.”

Zetic looked up at her with a strained grin, still clutching his hand in pain.

“I’d be glad to, *when* we come back from the reception... Assuming I make it there and back in one piece.”

She snorted, smirking at him.

“All right, husband. Fix yourself up and let’s go. And stop whining; we both know I didn’t break anything.”

Zetic hobbled over to the dresser and mirror to get ready.

“No, just made me tired and sore.”

At this, Isacharact let out a wicked laugh.

“Oh, my poor husband! If you’d only known before you’d married me... that being left tired and sore was to forever be your fate.”

“Wait, don’t open the door just yet.”

At Zetic’s request, the two armoured Elf door-wardens stepped back from opening the southern double-doors to the Queen’s court.

Isacharact, resplendent in all her jewellery, looked over at Zetic.

“What is it?”

Zetic, wearing his cloak with his sword slung underneath and lute slung on top of it, looked back at her, a twinkle in his eye.

“Surely, my dear, you wouldn’t dream of joining the court so *plainly*? Merely walking in is no fitting entrance for one of your beauty...”

Isacharact eyed him sideways, amused.

“What did you have in mind?”

Zetic smiled and reached into the magic bag hanging by a belt at his waist.

“A little something from my bag of tricks, here...”

He soon pulled out a small roll of carpet, looking barely big enough to seat a single man.

“... Just a little toy I picked up in Calimport on a hot afternoon a few years ago.”

Isacharact glanced down at it, then looked back at him.

“A magic carpet? I hope you don’t expect us to fly in on that tiny thing, husband.”

“No, not fly – walk...”

He pulled on the ends of the roll, and it became suddenly wider, until he had stretched it out wide enough for them to walk side-by-side on. Giving a little nod to the door-wardens, he set the roll down at his feet just as they opened the doors.

“... But walk with elegance! *Durmuş!*”

As he spoke the command word, he kicked the carpet into the room, such that it unrolled itself straight through the doors – rolling out far more carpet than it seems could possibly have been bundled up in the tiny roll that it had begun as. It stopped only when it hit the opposite wall, whereupon it bounced back and unrolled itself forwards once again – this time for good, laying itself completely flat.

In the end, almost two hundred feet of wide, spacious carpet had been laid out from the single tiny roll. It was of a simple design; a large, mostly plain, red border surrounding a turquoise centre that was filled with small white and blue threads.

Zetic spoke once again in Alzhedo, the language of Calimshan.

“*Ralliat!*”

At this second command word, the threads in the turquoise centre began to ripple and undulate in the plane of the carpet, slowly getting faster and faster, until they produced the captivating illusion of waves in the sea.

A soft light began to emanate from the moving ocean design and the Elves in the room looked upwards to find the ceiling illuminated as if presiding over a pool over water.

Isacharact seemed impressed, and Zetic, seeing this, was pleased.

“Not all Calimshani magic carpets are for flying; *this* one is for swimming – albeit only with one’s mind.”

She looked back over at him, a faint smile on her face.

“Very nice. Shall we?”

Zetic beamed back.

“After you, my dear.”

They began to walk down the carpet as one of the door-wardens cried out “The newly-wed Lady Isacharact, and Zetic, cleric of Torm.”

A small applause broke out in the audience-chamber as they proceeded down the carpet to the other side of the room. The carpet, meanwhile, magically shortened itself as they walked down its length, not rolling up but simply disappearing.

When they passed the centre of the room, Zetic, walking on Isacharact’s left, somewhat hesitantly bent over and picked up her left hand in mid-stride, intending that they should walk on two feet, hand-in-hand, the rest of the way.

Surprisingly, Isacharact didn’t object, and she left her hand lightly holding his as they both adjusted themselves to walk on only their hind feet.

Reaching the opposite wall, they turned around, the magic carpet adjusting itself to be just wide and long enough for them to both sit comfortably down on top of it.

“Wonderful, wonderful.”

They both turned to see the Queen, standing and clapping lightly, with a warm, loving smile on her face.

Zetic began to bow down, and even Isacharact tilted her head out of respect, but both were stopped short by Queen Amlaruil.

“No, no, my good newlyweds. Tonight, we bow to *you*.”

And so they did; the hundreds of Elven lords and ladies in the room, the Queen included, all gave small bows to the newly-made couple.

“... And then she burst in to this very same room, wearing those very same horn ornaments.”

Hours later, the drink was flowing freely and the Elven music was struggling to make itself heard over the numerous conversations being carried out in the audience-hall – though none were quite as loud as Zetic’s retelling of how he and Isacharact had come to meet.

Lural was, naturally, standing close by. Isacharact, having heard the story several times already – not to mention having lived it herself – was helping herself to the wine, only half paying attention to Zetic.

“.... I swear, there was something... *magnetic*... about her that night. I simply couldn’t take my eyes off of her; in fact, I was so distraught that Lural here had to strike me with his sword to snap me out of it... Though I almost regret it; it was an amazing thing to experience, and to not be able to feel it again seems a shame.”

At this moment, Isacharact suddenly butted in.

“Oh? What’s this about never being captivated by me again?”

Zetic half-choked on his drink of juice.

“Well, you know, my dear, I *was* rather disturbed at the time, what with that *Essa-Chakamarul* thing, and being confused about my own emotions and state-of-being. I don’t mean to diminish your beauty, but admit that I *was* at a moment of... weakness.”

Isacharact slyly looked him over.

“So you don’t think I could do it again, do you?”

Zetic smiled warmly.

“Certainly not. Though that’s not to say that I don’t... that I don’t... I don’t...”

He never managed to complete his sentence. The smile on his face disappeared and everyone around him soon noticed that he was staring straight into Isacharact’s eyes with a rather blank look.

As for Isacharact, she was staring straight at Zetic, and they could all feel the tangible presence of supernatural power emanating from her eyes.

Lural broke the tension.

“Oho! Looks like my dear friend has managed to have himself enraptured once again! Well, I’ll soon cure him of it by administering the usual treatment.”

He unsheathed his sword and walked up to Zetic’s right foot.

With a quick glance upwards to make sure that Zetic was still held in a trance, he quickly slashed at the foot, leaving a tiny but surely stinging wound.

But there was no change in Zetic. He was still staring straight at Isacharact, dumbstruck.

“Well, that’s a surprise.”

Isacharact laughed, still keeping Zetic in her stare.

“I’m afraid it’ll take more than a little scratch to get him out *this* time, master Saraendas. You may have to take more drastic measures.”

She bobbed her head up and down, and moved it left and right, and Zetic’s head followed hers exactly, like a puppet on strings.

Lural chortled and raised his sword up high.

“All right, though I hope he can forgive me. Here’s for nothing!”

With that, he took the pommel of his sword in both hands and jammed the tip straight into Zetic’s foot, burying it a good five or six inches deep, almost piercing straight through.

And now, there was a response, as Zetic let out a loud yelp and began to hop around on his remaining uninjured appendage.

With a grimace, Zetic looked down and yanked the offending material out of his foot, breathing in sharply through his teeth as he flexed his toes. He held the sword up to his face and turned around to Isacharact.

“By all that’s holy... it’s gotten *worse!*”

Isacharact grinned.

“Remember what I said when you first set eyes on me? About being able to bear my gaze? One of the features of my bloodline has always been a rather... powerful... stare. In our enemies, it creates tremendous fear, as you felt in Bahamut’s palace. But in our mates... Well, now you’ve seen both sides for yourself.”

She chuckled to herself and took another sip from her goblet of wine as Zetic stared at the bloody sword and slowly handed it back to Lural before casting a quick spell of healing on himself.

Flexing his re-sealed foot, Zetic began to rant.

“I don’t understand, this doesn’t make sense. In any group, I’ve always been the person *least* likely to get dumbstruck by some magical effect. I’m not bragging when I say that it takes a *lot* to overpower my mind.”

Isacharact only smirked, and it was up to Lural to uncover the obvious truth.

“I think perhaps the problem, my dear friend, is that deep down you don’t *want* to resist her, and so that formidable force-of-mind that you’re so proud of is of no use, since you let down your guard as a matter of principle when dealing with her.”

Zetic considered this idea.

“Hum. I’m not sure whether to call that wonderful or frightening...”

He saw Isacharact frowning at him, and a sly smile crossed his face as a good idea entered his head.

“... Perhaps it’s both, just like the terrifying beauty who provokes it.”

Isacharact’s frown disappeared, and Zetic took her right paw, bending over respectfully to kiss it.

When that little gesture was complete, Isacharact spoke up a little louder than normal.

“It pleases me to know that I can enrapture such a strong, handsome creature.”

The compliment – expressed in public; a rarity – let open the floodgates containing Zetic’s pride, and he beamed broadly, sitting up straight and puffing out his chest.

Lural rolled his eyes at the conceited display.

“Now you’ve done it, my lady. Just look at him preen. I daresay a compliment from *you* is worth more to your new husband than the very words of his God.”

Isacharact chuckled as she looked at Zetic, who showed no signs of diminishing.

“Would you have me put him down, instead, then, Lural? In public, just after marrying him? It would reflect badly on me, I should think; I would be seen to have made a poor choice in choosing an unsatisfactory mate.”

Lural smirked at her.

“Not at all! It would merely show that you’re better than him. And in any case, it’s plain to see that he craves abuse at your hands. Why, I’ve never seen him so energetic as he’s been this last week, getting everything ready. He’s not slept even one wink since the day you booted him out of your chambers and ordered him to prepare you a wedding unlike any other. Now that you’re together, I imagine you could kick him out again, refusing to let him in until he brought you the heads of all the Zulkirs of Thay on a silver platter, and you’d find them at your doorstep within the week, with Zetic right next to them, begging your love.”

Zetic cocked an eye at Lural’s hyperbole, while Isacharact merely grinned at him..

“Oh, he’s had a *few* winks; but, I admit, they were only just now. And I certainly wouldn’t order him to assault the Lords of Thay all by himself – after all, I’d want to participate in the fun, myself...”

She turned towards the Queen and raised her voice considerably.

“... which reminds me, my Queen, of the bargain we struck so long ago. Your side is fulfilled; allow me, then, to fulfill mine.”

The Queen, understanding, nodded, and Isacharact pulled a small item wrapped in cloth out from underneath her wedding-girdle.

Unwrapping it and holding it out towards the Queen, Zetic saw that it was a beautiful tear-drop shaped milky-white stone, set in a golden egg-shaped frame. It was marvellous.

“What’s that?”

After handing it over to Amlaruil, Isacharact turned to him.

“Your dowry, husband.”

The Queen smiled and most of the Elves in the room marvelled at the return of one of the Tears of Sehanine – sacred elf-stones of old. Isacharact stared at it with lust.

“It’s a beautiful thing, and I almost regret giving it up, but I’ll admit that it’s not nearly repayment enough for the hospitality I’ve enjoyed here, your Highness, not to mention the thing I received in exchange...”

She turned and looked at Zetic with the same lust apparent in her eyes. Zetic’s gaze switched back and forth between her and the stone, until he settled on Isacharact and smiled.

The Queen was just handing the stone off to be taken away when the couple locked lips in a simple kiss.

“It is good to finally see the Tear of Earth returned to—”

Amlaruil was interrupted by a servant who came running up to her side and whispered something in her ear. Whatever he said, it seemed to upset her, and she suddenly dropped her cheerful demeanour, face showing concern.

“Let him in immediately.”

The servant nodded towards the door-guards at the rear of the room, who opened the doors to admit a somewhat dirty-looking Elvish scout, who hurried forward, paying no attention whatsoever to the festivities in progress or the guests in attendance, prostrating himself in front of the throne.

“My Queen, I have urgent news from Cormanthor.”

“Let us hear it.”

The scout stood back up, and some of the dirt encrusted on his leather armour fell to the ground as he did so. It was fresh.

“Majesty, there has been a great development in the old forest. The portal created by the Auzkovyn Drow from the High Forest to the Abbey of the Sword in Cormanthor has been shut, as have all the others in the tunnels beneath the Abbey; the tunnels themselves are destroyed. But more than this, my Queen, for the faithful ears of your scouts have heard and my own eyes have seen that the Drow of both House Auzkovyn and House Jalere are in chaos, for their demon allies have been banished or destroyed. Eldan Ambrose, champion of Tempus, who fell while battling an Auzkovyn demon that devoured his soul, is returned, and has sent word to Tempus’ faithful to come to Cormanthor to give battle to the Drow, declaring them enemies in the eyes of the Battle-Lord for their brutal raids against the innocents of the Dale-lands. Several bands of the Order of the Steel Fang have answered his call and are en-route. In view of this, many other organizations are moving to join the fight against the Drow; Harpers, Druids, and others have all become or pledged to become more aggressive against the intruders.”

The scout spoke loudly, now.

“A great conflict is brewing in the forest, my Queen, and it seems that the Drow are about on the verge of being driven out of Cormanthor by *men*. A nearly-unseen hand has guided them to this fate.”

Mutters of concern and trepidation filled the room. The Queen, however alarming the news, remained calm.

“Nearly-unseen? What, then, was it not the worshippers of Tempus who sealed the breach; was it not Druids or Harpers who destroyed the demons?”

“No, my Queen. It was all done by a group of adventurers who apparently had gathered but for this one quest; their names are slowly becoming known to us, and to others in the Dales, but their races, at least, we have already learned with certainty. There were two Dwarves, one Gnome, a single half-Elf, and five humans. The stories we hear are that these nine were gathered together and led by a most unusual creature: a gold dragon who is said to wield a sword in battle and who has a... who has a...”

The scout blinked and suddenly noticed Zetic, sitting on his left. He turned over to look at him with disbelief.

“... who has a head of golden hair.”

A hush came over the room, and everyone stared wide-eyed at Zetic – the scout first, but the Queen and even Isacharact as well. Sensing that they expected something of him, Zetic spoke.

“I am sorry, but I am forbidden to speak of this: Torm has commanded it. You may, however, do your own research and draw your own conclusions, and I have little doubt that they will lie very close to the truth.”

Isacharact took his words literally.

“*You* shut the portals in the tunnels beneath Battledale? *You* led the adventurers that sapped the same tunnels and caverns? *You* hunted down the demon allies of the Cormanthor Drow? *You* resurrected Eldan Ambrose?”

Zetic looked away uncomfortably, as one who is confronted by a truth they cannot acknowledge.

“I can say nothing.”

The Queen, apparently, was under no such restrictions.

“Impressive... and pressing, too. This is certainly a matter that requires our immediate attention.”

She got up and motioned for the scout to follow her out one of the side-doors; several other prominent members of the Elven court moved to leave the hall also.

“You must excuse us. We must hear all of the developments in our old home, our ancient seat of power, and decisions of no small importance must be taken based on them. Please, enjoy yourselves in our absence.”

Zetic nodded, and almost a hundred Elven lords and ladies left along with the Queen to confer on the future of Cormanthor.

When they left, Zetic found that Isacharact was looking at him as if studying a specimen.

“What? What is it?”

At his question, she put on a false air of evasiveness.

“Oh, nothing, nothing. Just... wondering about the details of that adventure; how long the quest lasted, how close you came to death, how many fiendish creatures you had to battle, and how often you tried a stealthy approach. I’ve yet to see your style or judge your performance first-hand in a real battle.”

Zetic remained tight-lipped.

“There *was* Swight.”

Isacharact was dismissive.

“You weren’t doing much, then. Just tossing around healing spells and blinding or deafening the occasional goon.”

Zetic was somewhat taken aback at the accusatory observation.

“That’s... that’s usually what I do. Ideally, I mean. I’m a cleric, not a juggernaut of war or a battle-mage.”

Isacharact smirked and jabbed a finger at his face.

“Oh, you *weren’t* a juggernaut or a mage, certainly, but if you put those two professions together you come rather close to what Dragons are; and in case you hadn’t noticed, you’ve been growing into one. By the end of it, that sword on your back will be pathetic next to your claws and teeth, though I admit that your divine powers will never be surpassed by your arcane ones, unless you should put yourself to studying the Art, of course.”

Zetic cocked an eye at her.

“Are you saying I should adopt a more... direct... approach?”

“You can do as you please. I’m only saying that you *can*.”

Zetic considered for a bit, and then spoke quietly.

“Well, *since* it’s just a minor detail, I suppose Torm won’t mind if I tell you that, yes, I *did* take something of a more aggressive posture in this quest. I don’t usually lead raids into enemy territory; I’ve participated in many, of course, but as support, not a front-line combatant. It was... unusual, being in a situation with no hope for negotiation – that’s how I usually fight, you see; I wear the enemy down just enough so that they’re ready to surrender or repent.”

He looked off, as if reliving the battles right then and there.

“... This was a straight fight; no remorse, no quarter. I have to admit, though, even if I wasn’t entirely comfortable, I did feel good about it afterwards. I felt like I had become less Torm’s faithful servant and more... His Champion.”

Isacharact grinned and took a sip of wine.

“I’ve been spoiling for a good fight this last little while. You should’ve waited; we could’ve done it together, annihilating all of the surface Drow, instead of just their pet demons.”

She flicked her tail around playfully, and Zetic realized that she wasn’t *entirely* joking. Together, they would be unlikely to drive the Drow out of Cormanthor, but they certainly could’ve done a lot more damage than just him and a small group of itinerant adventurers.

“Well... I suppose that’s what the future holds for us. It’s... it’s good to know you want us to adventure together, Isacharact. I wasn’t entirely certain of it.”

“Oh no? And how else do you expect I should gain the wealth and glory I seek? I’ve hatched grander schemes than Dragons twice my age, but, just like my mother, I vastly prefer to take things into my own hands...”

She bared her teeth and spread her fingers, revealing the long, sharp, claws.

“... Or did you think that these were just for show?”

Zetic smiled as she put them away again.

“No, not for show. I was just... uncertain... about whether adventuring was on your mind, that’s all...”

Scanning the room, he raised his voice as he noticed that the music had stopped.

“Hullo, now, I see we’ve lost some of our musicians to the business in Cormanthor, and I can hear that the hearts and minds of many of those who have stayed here are still in that ancient forest. Allow me to bring you back to the carefree joy of a wedding-reception, instead of the dire concern of a war-room.”

With that, he chuckled, smiled broadly, pulled his lute off his back, and began to play a simple melody. He leaned over to Isacharact and spoke out of the side of his mouth.

“You know, my dear, if you’re hung up on the ‘First’ this and that wedding rituals, there’s always the *First Dance*. I’m certain we can find some other musicians.”

Isacharact turned her head slowly and looked at him with a scowl.

“I don’t dance, cleric.”

Zetic continued to smile.

“Not even with your new ‘strong, handsome’ husband?”

Isacharact was adamant.

“No.”

Zetic smiled in spite of his disappointment, and turned towards the room.

“My friends, the right – and rite – of the First Dance has been surrendered. Please, by all means, indulge yourselves.”

Switching to a rhythm with more of a beat, with the Chitaronne providing the drums and other percussion, they did. The audience-hall was very soon turned into a ball-room.

Isacharact watched the lively Elven dancing almost with a look of disgust. She leaned over a bit and whispered to Zetic in Draconic.

“What do you take me for, anyways? Some dainty little princess?”

“Not at all. I take you for a beautiful, elegant, creature, with a supple body and whose very touch sends shivers up my spine.”

Isacharact smirked at him..

“Well, if it’s a touch you want, then the bedroom beckons. Otherwise...”

She pinched his arm.

“... that’s all you’ll get from me, here.”

Zetic smiled and continued to play without missing a beat.

“What a shame. I’m sure you’d be a sensation, even all on your own.”

Isacharact shot him a glance before returning to a freshly-poured cup of wine and watching the dancers revel, expecting that Zetic would soon enough want to retire.

Several hours passed and Zetic showed no sign of slowing down. Even though the dancers were becoming scarce, tired from all the activity, Zetic played on for the few couples that remained on the dance floor instead of in their seats.

Isacharact grumbled and looked down at her empty wine-goblet. Zetic seemed to be in a reverie, completely consumed with playing his lute.

She resolved to shake him out of it, and spoke to him quietly in Draconic.

“Isn’t it about time that we retired?”

Zetic looked up from his lute and glanced around the room.

“What do you mean? The party’s still going.”

“Not very strongly, though. You’re wearing out the Elves with that music of yours.”

“You don’t like it?”

Isacharact gritted her teeth.

“I do, but I’m getting tired of it, and of this event. It’s time to leave.”

Zetic frowned but continued to smile.

“Why? What’s your hurry? We’ll never have another wedding-reception, you know; it’s strictly a one-time-only event. I don’t think I shall ever again have a chance to play in such a beautiful hall, either. It’s almost a stroke of fortune that the lead harpist was Amlaruil’s battle-mage advisor.”

Isacharact was taken aback.

“What are you talking about, never being able to perform in a hall like this again? The way you’re playing, I’m sure the Elves would be glad to have you back anytime – and I wouldn’t be surprised if word spreads beyond Evermeet’s shores...”

She stared at him.

“... But that’s all beside the point. I want us to go. Now.”

Zetic glanced at her but was unwilling to let go.

“It’s just... just so delightful here. I’m enjoying myself so much; aren’t you? Can’t we stay a little longer?”

Isacharact glared at him and paused a bit before replying – no longer in Draconic.

“Remember what I said when you returned? I may ask – once – and I might wait – once – but if what I want doesn’t come on its own, then I take it...”

She raised her head up, and put down her goblet, still glaring at him.

“You’ve had your warning.”

Zetic was anxious, torn between staying and leaving.

“Just a few more songs, Isa? By then, everyone will have finished, I’m sure.”

She said nothing.

He kept playing, wrapping up the song he was playing a few minutes later, to general applause from both the couples on the dance floor as well as the fifty or so Elves ringing the sides of the room.

“Thank you, thank you. That was ‘Flavyarissa’, a Rashemi dance. If there aren’t any specific requests, then I’d like–HEURRRRK!”

Zetic’s banter was cut short by a rather thick golden chain that had suddenly materialized and wrapped itself around his neck.

Set up as a choker-leash, even as he struggled to loosen it enough to breathe, he saw Isacharact holding – and pulling rather strongly – on the end of the chain.

“Like to *retire*, is what my husband was about to say.”

With a sweet smile on her face, Isacharact addressed the audience in a cheerful voice even as she strangled her husband.

“... For, however much he has enjoyed this reception, and enjoyed playing for you, he’s become tired – understandable, given all that’s happened today. And, for those of you who didn’t know...”

There was a momentary slack in the chain, and Zetic whispered at the top of his lungs.

“Isa... Isa... I can’t breathe, Isa!”

She only grinned and pulled the chain taut again, shutting off his voice. Some of the Elves were beginning to chuckle. Isacharact spoke through her teeth, holding the chain with both hands.

“... Yes, for those of you who *didn’t know*, my husband has been quite the busy bee these last few days, staying awake constantly in order to prepare the wedding. I certainly hope you can comprehend, therefore, the sheer exhaustion that must be... *gripping*... him, and beg that you will excuse us both as we retire to sleep.”

With a strong tug on the chain, she began to walk towards the door, giving first the command word for the magic carpet on which they were both seated to unfurl itself in the opposite direction, guessing rightly that it was the same ‘*Durmuş*’ as Zetic had used before.

And so, with Zetic holding his lute in one hand and struggling against the chain with the other, she led him out the door, cutting him just barely enough slack right at the end to take in a breath, wave to the room, and say – in a pip-squeak voice – ‘Good-night!’, to general applause and laughter from the Elves, who began to file out themselves.

Once the doors to the audience-hall shut behind them, Zetic found that the chain ceased to be a choker, and merely a simple collar. He also found his breath returning, and spent several moments coughing and catching up on the oxygen he'd missed.

“Good... Good Gods, Isacharact... Was all that really necessary?”

Instantly, she stopped walking forward, whipped around, and yanked him towards her, clutching the collar and staring at him in anger.

“*You* made it necessary. When I say ‘let’s go’, I want to hear ‘how far?’, not ‘can’t we stay?’.”

Shooting him a look of disgust, she tore off again, leading him down the hallways.

“All right, but still... Are you so desperate to get back to our room?”

Isacharact looked over her shoulder at him.

“Believe it or not, cleric, even though I never promised it, I’ve been faithful to you while you were away. I may be spoiling for a fight, but I’ve been starving for company.”

Zetic tugged at his leash.

“What’s that supposed to mean? ... Surely you can’t still be ‘starving’ after the few nights we’ve spent together? I went without companionship of that sort, too, you know.”

Isacharact turned back forwards and let out a dismissive laugh.

“Except that *you* didn’t know what you were missing. As for what we’ve had so far, that’s not exactly been... filling. Less a full meal, and more like an... appetizer. And you certainly can’t count the first time, when you almost *threw up* afterwards.”

Zetic grumbled, still holding on to the chain with one hand.

“If my performance is lacking, I am... open... to suggestions.”

Isacharact came to a sudden stop and turned her head just enough so that he could see her right eye.

“Don’t struggle so much against the leash.”

Zetic looked at her, confused, before he realised she was giving him precisely the suggestion he’d asked for. Suddenly aware of himself, he took advantage of the pause to sling the lute over his back, and then got down on all fours, obedient.

He could only see the corner of the satisfied smile that graced Isacharact’s face.

“Better.”

Her tail came up and gently batted his face before they moved further down the hallway.

“When did you learn this spell, anyways?”

She stopped and her tail came up once again, but this time it administered something of a less-than-gentle slap.

“Treasure is to be seen and not heard...”

Turning around, she let go of the chain, which disappeared into the ether.

“... unless it’s moaning in ecstasy, or grunting in pain. And speaking of pain, here’s your chance to inflict some on yourself.”

Isacharact gestured in front of her; it was the door to their chambers. Zetic gulped as he considered the prospect of carrying her through.

“I suppose I could always polymorph you into a mouse.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You could *try*, and if by some miracle you overcame my spell resistance, I assure you that as soon as I regained my normal form I’d make certain that you left your mark on this palace...”

She grinned.

“... a very *bloody* mark. More of a stain, really.”

Zetic laughed half out of fear.

“I... I actually don’t know that spell, anyways. But would you object if I cast some spells on *myself*?”

“Go right ahead.”

Isacharact lay down on the hallway floor as Zetic began to chant a short spell of strength. With a final spoken word, he seemed to visibly bulk up, muscles rippling outwards almost unnaturally.

She smirked.

“Not bad, but not quite there yet, I should think.”

Zetic flexed his temporarily enhanced arms.

“No, not quite. But I’ve got another trick up my sleeve... *Kirassaa!*”

And with that word of power shouted aloud, he suddenly grew to almost twice his size – becoming equal to Isacharact in almost every dimension.

She smiled, obviously pleased by the transformation.

“Mmm. How unfortunate that I’ll have to wait a few years for that change to be permanent. You tempt me with visions of the future.”

Zetic’s voice had grown deeper.

“And weren’t you the one telling me about Draconic patience? But let’s see you through the doorway, first, before these spells wear off.”

Zetic approached her and was about to try getting a grip when she held him off with a finger in caution.

“If you *drop* me...”

“I won’t.”

“You’d better not.”

She wasn’t joking. Zetic took a deep breath and reached down, getting a hold of her legs in one arm as he gripped the lower part of her neck in his other.

A few huffs and puffs to get started and then – alley-ooop! He grunted with pain as he lifted her off the ground, cradling her against his chest.

Isacharact, for her part, put her arms around his neck, holding herself up as Zetic struggled to simply hold her up.

All in all, it was a very ridiculous sight; Zetic, eyes shut and legs trembling, was just barely managing to hold up Isacharact, who still seemed bigger than him.

“I think you’d better get us through the door before you collapse dead on the ground, cleric of foolishness.”

With a painfully grunted-out ‘yes’, Zetic took a hesitant step forward, and then another, and then another, and then another, until they reached the door itself.

A door which was, at this point in time, *shut*.

Zetic opened his eyes and cursed at himself.

“By Bane’s bald head, why didn’t I open the doors *first*?”

Isacharact chuckled and seemed to be enjoying the bumpy little ride.

“The evidence suggests that it’s because you’re a fool.”

Zetic heaved her up and adjusted his grip.

“Well... Well, since your hands are free, could you possibly open them?”

She smacked her lips and wore a look of ennui.

“Oh... I *suppose*.”

Reaching out an arm, she unlatched the doors and pushed them open.

“Now, inside, before your kneecaps give out.”

Zetic grimaced and took ten steps forward, each more painful and eliciting more grunts and groans than the last.

But with the tenth one complete, they were well and proper inside the room, and Zetic slowly – and agonizingly – bent over to lay Isacharact down on the ground.

With his burden discharged, Zetic bent over double and put one arm on his back.

“Aaaah! I’m never doing *that* again!”

“No-one asked you to do it in the *first place*, fool of a husband. I hope you haven’t injured yourself.”

Recovering his breath, Zetic stood up again, uneasily. He looked about ready to collapse.

“No... just made myself even more tired and sore.”

Isacharact grumbled and got up.

“Well then, Sir Tired and Sore, now that you’ve accomplished your fool’s errand, why don’t you take off your things and lie down on the cushions while I shut the doors and get ready for bed as well?”

“Alright.”

The word barely escaped Zetic’s lips; it was a tiny puff of air from empty lungs. Hastily stowing his sword and lute, and after almost throwing off his cloak, he fell on top of the bed of cushions with a heavy thud.

Isacharact was occupied with removing her jewellery and spoke while facing herself in the mirror, with Zetic mostly hidden from her view – she could just see his torso and tail, lying on the bed.

“I must say I didn’t think you’d make it. Perhaps you still *are* a cleric first and a dragon second; that was some potent divine magic, however temporary.”

In the mirror, she saw him shrink back to his normal size as she pulled off the wedding-girdle and rubbed the part of her neck that it had covered.

“And don’t get me wrong: you play the lute well. I *do* look forward to future performances, and I’m sure others will, as well.”

She bent her head over and pulled off the horn ornamentations – the two heavy tassels and the numerous small chains draped between them.

“I just have *other* things on my mind right now. And I think you do to, deep down, even if you’re uncertain about yourself and still ignorant in the art of love.”

With a satisfied smile on her face, she turned around to face him.

“An ignorance that should be straightaway corrected...”

Walking over, she saw him lying on the bed completely still with his eyes closed and his breathing lethargic.

“Zetic?”

She looked him over with growing concern. Prodding him in the chest, she brought her face right up to his and spoke his name more loudly.

No response. He was completely asleep.

Isacharact sighed and lay down next to him, speaking even in the absence of any listeners.

“So there’s a limit to your energy after all. Two weeks of ceaseless toil topped with several hours of entertaining; not bad, I suppose. Sleep, then. You deserve it. If I have to go without you tonight, it’s a small price to pay.”

Shuffling a little closer to him, she butted her neck up against his, enjoying the feeling of warmth radiating from his body. Bringing her head so that it was just next to his, she shut her eyes and went to sleep.

“Good-night, husband.”

“Good-night, wife.”

Isacharact’s eyes shot open, and she felt Zetic snuggle up to her somewhat, but there was no energy in his movement – he was as tired as ever. Sighing once again, she let him go back to sleep, and did the same.

There was a smile on both their faces.

THE ADVENTURES BEGIN.