

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Hex Zetic
Adult Male Gold Dragon
Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Zacharajakh
Ancient Male Red Dragon

Isasarach
(deceased)
Ancient Female White Dragon

Friends, You May Choose ...

Lounging on his front side, the great red dragon exhaled smoke reflectively, and dabbed at it with the wand of the hookah hose as he spoke.

“So. You have sated my curiosity, for now. I suppose I am ready to hear your questions. Perform this ‘errand’ you spoke of. But I promise no answers.”

Zetic turned away and briefly paced back and forth, his taloned feet scuffling against the dark cavern’s rich rug as he considered how to begin. He glanced at Isacharact, near the entrance of the cave; she was sitting quietly and staring rather intently at the red wyrm. The whole cavern scene was a bit surreal, actually; he’d never before seen a dragon that was larger than her, and she was being unusually calm in the presence of this great red.

Finally, Zetic stopped and stood facing the colossal drake.

“Do you know of my wife, Isacharact?”

“I do, young one.”

“Do you know of her lineage?”

“She is the daughter of Isasarach.”

“And do you know Isasarach?”

“I know *of* her. The Last Dragon Matriarch, The White Queen of the North.”

Zetic’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“You mince words, red wyrm. It is no great thing to say you know *of* her, especially when there’s more: you *knew* her.”

The red dragon fixed his left eye on Zetic.

“And who told you this, young golden one?”

“None but my own golden eyes... Zacharajakh.”

The red wyrm opened his eyes wide, raised his neck high, and boomed like thunder in the cavern.

“No one alive speaks that name! How is it that you know it?”

“Through you, Zacharajakh. My eyes pierce your heart, and through it, you are entirely revealed to me.”

Zacharajakh lowered his head and put the smoke-hose back in his mouth, his eyes showing disinterest, his voice talking in jest.

“Indeed. So two secrets you know, then. My name, and that I knew Isasarach.”

“I know that there is more to it than that, red wyrm. Tell me of you and her.”

“There is little to tell, golden one. I was a... suitor of hers.”

Zetic cocked his head slightly to one side.

“Once again you conceal the truth. But you cannot hide it from me. You were more than a suitor... you were her mate.”

“She had many mates.”

“Perhaps, but her mate you were, nonetheless.”

“Bah! You dig up useless gravel-stones from the past and present them as if they were exotic jewels. So I was her mate. And?”

“And she bore you children.”

“That would be the definition of being her mate, golden fool. I was no eunuch.”

“You had many children with her, but most did not survive.”

“As with her children by other mates, mine were hunted by ‘the good’ and ‘the righteous’ after Isasarach’s death in order to cut off her bloodline, so that her children might not claim her legacy, and slaughtered by others still for so many reasons; to prove their worth, to steal the wealth, to gain glory...”

He sucked at the hose again, filling his lungs with the smoke. The fumes poured out of his mouth and nostrils as he spoke.

“...And so? And so? You speak as if voicing great truths, but your words are mere puffs of air. What of my children, then?”

“Only one of them still lives...”

Zacharajakh blinked and froze in place, saying nothing. The smoke slowly dissipated.

“...That child is Isacharact. She is your daughter.”

Isacharact let out a breathy gasp, for she realised now why she had been staring at the great red dragon before them. The spiral horns, the shape of the paws, the pattern of scales on the neck, the form of the wings; all so similar. She saw herself in him, and knew Zetic spoke the truth.

“So, gold one...”

He took a puff from the smoke-hose, inhaling deeply.

“...Yes, she is my daughter. And the only one of my children left alive.”

Zacharajakh’s tone became sarcastic.

“And now, have we at last arrived at your grand meaning, your great revelation?”

“Not quite, red wyrm. Isasarach, your mate... she was... more than that, to you.”

The red dragon’s eyes became slim, his mouth hanging open slightly. Zetic clenched his eyes shut as he spoke, peering into Zacharajakh’s heart.

“You were mated with her for a long time, especially for a dragon. You even stayed her mate as she took others. And... there’s a feeling... She was... yes, yes, you were... you were...”

The red wyrm’s eyes opened wide, and he bellowed.

“Say no more, gold!”

Zetic’s eyes popped open.

“You were in love with her.”

Zacharajakh’s face turned to a snarl; he looked at Zetic and let out a roar.

“You tread dangerously on the line between truth and fantasy, gold one! By what divination you learned of my name, my history, or your mate’s heritage, I cannot guess, but do not presume to see my heart!”

“I do not presume. *I see*. Your heart lies open to me. You loved her.”

The old wyrm’s voice grew louder and more powerful. His raised his neck, towering over Zetic, eyes boring into the gold dragon before him.

“Red Dragons do not love! We take! Take what is ours!”

Zetic snarled, staring up intently at Zacharajakh, and loudly hissed back.

“No-one could take Isasarach, White Queen of the North! Great Matriarch of Dragons; The Heart of Winter! No dragon was powerful enough to possess her! You did not take her, Zacharajakh – she took you! Body, mind, soul – you were hers! And heart, too, for you-were-in-love-with-her!”

At Zetic’s pronouncement, Zacharajakh swallowed, but still stared at him.

“Yes.”

A pause. He turned his eyes away from Zetic, and towards the wall, and Isacharact saw a glimmer in his eye – the glimmer of a tear. He spoke slowly, and emotionally.

“Yes, I loved her... As much as a Red Dragon can love another, anyhow. I still stand by what I said; Dragons should love to own, and should not simply *love*. And yet... I did. Her love was not a love of flowers, but of ice – pure, cold, and gripping... It was wonderful.”

“Even though you did not own her?”

“That was what made it so intriguing, so captivating, young one. We love possessions, and though it is one thing to possess, and another to *be* possessed, the two are related in feeling. As hers, I felt as if I owned the greatest jewel in the world.”

He lowered his head, his neck curling up on itself as the memories came back.

“Ahhh... Such... such power, such grace, such spirit. It was... a pleasure, to be hers. Subject to her power, standing in awe of it. Watching as she meted it out to those around her, bending them forcefully to her will. Massive hoards of gold and jewels in her keep, veritable stables of male wyrms attending her. It was an impressive scene to behold, and to be a part of.”

He drew another breath from the smoke-hose and spoke expansively, shaking the wand in the air as if to make his point hit home.

“And how she commanded! One cold glance of her eyes was enough to send shivers down any creature’s spine. I saw mighty and proud of all kinds abase themselves at the merest sound of her freezing words. It was beautiful. *She* was beautiful.”

He half-turned towards Zetic and grinned slyly.

“And, ohhhh... in bed...”

A few chuckles, then another pause. The sadness of love long-lost reared its head.

“My Isasarach...”

The tear in his eye rolled down his cheek, and he was silent once again.

“You miss her.”

Zacharajakh, the old red wurm, glanced at Zetic briefly, then stared at the dark cave again. A snort, or perhaps a snuffle, came from his nose.

“Yes.”

Another tear. And with it, another snuffle. His mind was lost in the memory of his love of the great Isasarach. A long pause; he composed himself. His voice was soft, now.

“If your *errand* was to make this great red wurm cry tears of sorrow, golden one, then it is complete... and you should trouble me no longer.”

“That was not my errand.”

“Then pester me no more on this subject. The memories are painful to me.”

Zetic looked at Isacharact briefly, his tongue darting out as he tasted the air.

“A different subject then. A different part of the errand.”

Zacharajakh had only shed a few tears, but his cheek was still moist.

“So long as it does not involve stirring up memories of my past.”

“No, Zacharajakh. This other part of the errand is a request. I come in request of your forgiveness, your mercy, and your blessings.”

At the mention of such words, Zacharajakh eyed Zetic and he raised his head again.

“You come in search of my *forgiveness*?”

He turned to look incredulously at the young dragon before him, head tilted to one side.

“My *mercy*? Ha!”

He showed his toothy maw, though his cheeks still glistened and glimmered from the tears.

“My *blessings*?”

And now, he arched his head backwards and erupted into roaring laughter.

“You jest, young gold one, or you toy with me! – And either is unwise. Had I such things, I would not give my *forgiveness*, nor my *mercy*, and certainly not my *blessings* to anyone, let alone you!”

He settled back down and drew from the smoke-hose, grinning.

“But... I will hear your requests. They shall amuse me.”

“Perhaps they shall.”

Zetic paused and turned towards Isacharact. He spoke loudly, clearly, forcefully.

“Zacharajakh, Great Red Wyrn! I married your daughter, Isacharact, without having obtained your consent!”

He turned towards the red dragon, plain-faced, with neither smirk nor grin, and bowed his head in respect.

“For this I beg your forgiveness.”

Zacharajakh sat and looked at Zetic. He paused before replying, considering his words.

“Dragons – all dragons – *take* what they can. Even gold dragons such as you will fight over possessions, though your fights are less deadly, and your method of dividing more... equitable. But you are strong, golden one, to have tamed my daughter, and the daughter of Isasarach. For that, you deserve her.”

He drew from the smoke-hose.

“...And even so, it is rare for dragon parents to need give *consent* to the suitors of their children.”

“Nonetheless, Zacharajakh. I would not knowingly take the hand of a father’s daughter without his approval. I married your Isacharact without yours. I ask your forgiveness.”

The red wyrn eyed him warily.

“You are... forgiven.”

Zetic again faced Isacharact as he spoke.

“Zacharajakh, Great Red Wyrn! I married your daughter, Isacharact, without having obtained your consent! I have your forgiveness, but I require more. You forgave me for what I have done, but you may still revile me for it. I beg your mercy.”

Zetic turned back, face almost as impassive, head still bowed in respect, but now with a slight twinkle in his eyes. Zacharajakh looked at him sternly. He glanced at Isacharact, who looked on, wondering.

“You... you have my mercy, gold one.”

At this, Zetic raised his head, his face breaking out into his usual smirk, and he held out a hand to Isacharact, beckoning her to come closer. She came, now less afraid of the dragon before them, and took Zetic’s hand.

“Zacharajakh, Great Red Wyrn! I married your daughter, Isacharact, without having obtained your consent! For this crime, I have your forgiveness and your mercy, but one final thing I require!”

He turned again to the red wyrn; head held high and face beaming.

“I desire your blessing for our marriage.”

Zacharajakh puffed at his smoke-hose, his mouth slightly agape, his eyes open wide, staring at Zetic. He licked his lips, and spoke.

“Do you love her?”

“I do.”

He turned to Isacharact, now.

“And do you love him, daughter?”

“I do... father.”

His stern eyes rested on Zetic again, as he puffed the smoke-hose noisily.

“Dragons do not marry. Two may mate, but they eventually split up, in the end.”

“There are always exceptions, Zacharajakh.”

Zetic looked into Isacharact’s eyes, and she looked back into his.

“...*We* are such an exception.”

The great wyrn chuckled.

“All young lovers think thusly. You speak with the foolishness of youth.”

“Do I? Would you have ‘split up, in the end’ with Isasarach?”

The Red Dragon’s eyes closed in reflection, his head looking up and to the side. Zetic pressed on.

“I can still see that love within you. You love her even now, though she is gone. You took no other mates after her, though you were hardly... *undesirable*... then.”

The eyes shut tighter. A tear squeezed out. The head tried to hide itself from those who stood in front of it.

Zetic changed his tack, his voice becoming sympathetic.

“She did come back for a time, you know. You might have seen her again.”

“Yes... Yes, I know she came back. But, as an undead draco-lich...”

The lips kept talking, but the eyes stayed closed.

“... She was changed, using her power to wreak vengeance upon the world, instead of seizing it. She was always cruel, but never to such an extent, so... nihilistic. One with her power should want to control the world, not destroy it...”

He took another puff from the smoke-hose. Still the eyes stayed closed.

“But I had heard of her resurgence only too late, for she was destroyed almost as soon as she was unmasked. Yet even had I learned earlier, I would not have gone to join her. I knew she had changed. She wasn’t... she wasn’t the Isasarach I loved.”

“And yet... and yet there is still something burning inside of you. Not love...”

Zetic’s shut his eyes briefly in contemplation.

“...A question?”

The red dragon’s eyes stayed closed.

“Yes, indeed, gold one. A question.”

“You... You never knew, did you? You loved her, and you thought... you thought she loved you back... but you never really knew.”

“Yes. And that I can never know burns at my heart like you cannot believe. For I did love her, more than you can know.”

“No, Zacharajakh. Not more than I can know. I know your love, for I have it, too.”

The head turned around, the red eyes opening at last. They stared at Zetic.

“For your marriage... You have my blessing.”

“Thank you, father-in-law.”

Zetic released Isacharact’s hand, and relaxed his posture. Zacharajakh put the smoke-hose in his mouth and turned away again.

“Is that all? You have stirred up more miserable memories for me; unresolved and unrequited, they torment me still. I will sleep poorly, if at all, for many days.”

“You are wise, father-in-law, but your memory serves you ill. Do you not remember the old rhyme, ‘Misery loves company’?”

The scaly mass chortled.

“You cannot comfort me with your presence, son-in-law. For just as I could never go far from Isasarach, so I see that you cannot stray far from your Isacharact, and... I cannot bear to have her near me.”

With teary eyes he looked at Isacharact.

“... You remind me too much of *her*, child of mine. I look at you, and the memories and the question come back again.”

“A question that is not unanswerable.”

Zacharajakh’s eyes narrowed, and he turned to Zetic again.

“What foolishness do you speak now? She is long dead, her bones are destroyed, and her spirit is one with the Gods and the planes. No magic can call her.”

“Do you know of my eyes, father-in-law?”

“Only that they see well those things that are hidden.”

“That sight is a gift... a gift from Aō, Lord God of All Creation. God of Gods.”

The red eyes narrowed to slits as Zetic continued talking.

“Aō’s power is beyond life and death, Zacharajakh, beyond all limits. Power beyond the planes, beyond those Gods who hear our prayers. A tiny speck of that power he did impart to these eyes.”

Zetic’s eyes opened wide, glimmering in the dark light, glowing as if surrounded by golden dust.

“...I can call Isasarach to answer your question.”

“That would be a great favour indeed, son-in-law. More so than any of the three things I have granted you.”

“Your pardon, father-in-law, but you have granted *five*.”

Zacharajakh drew from the hose again.

“Have I, indeed?”

“Twenty years ago, we crossed straight through the heart of your territory and were not molested. I learned much later that you have a fierce reputation for killing any Dragon that crosses your lands even in the slightest. Today, we crossed it again, and again you did not rise up against us, though we headed straight for your lair.”

Zetic looked at the wyrm sideways.

“...I believe in luck, but these events were not luck’s work. You purposefully refrained from attacking us.”

“I could not have destroyed my own daughter.”

“But you could have destroyed me; and quite easily, too... the first time.”

“I suppose. Perhaps I acted foolishly in letting you live. And your life is still worth little to me at the moment, husband to my daughter or not. Will you trade the three small favours you asked for today, as well as twice sparing your life, for such a blessing as you propose to bestow upon me?”

“I will.”

A hint of curiosity crossed the old wyrm’s face.

“Then by all means, begin!”

“I need something, first. There is... something of hers... here. An heirloom? A keepsake? Yes, both. Something you remember her by. The last thing you have of her.”

Zacharajakh stared back, mute.

“...It still has her presence, the touch of her spirit. I will need to see it, to hold it, in order to call her.”

Uncomprehending awe showed on the old dragon’s face now.

“Perhaps... perhaps you are indeed blessed by Aō, though he cares not for we on the mortal plane, to have been able to see that which I have kept hidden since long before you were born.”

Zacharajakh wrapped the hose round the narghile's metal form and raised his great bulk up as he moved over to the far side of the cave, though it was only a few steps for him. He lifted up a huge boulder in the corner, and casually placed it nearby as he stared reverently into the hole left behind.

“The last thing I have of her, yes. And though it is precious on its own, the memories it holds are far more so.”

He reached in slowly, as if expecting his hands to be bitten by something inside. The cloth bag he lifted out was small, but he grasped in both hands, cupping it as if carrying water. He walked back to his place beside the boiling water-pipe, but remained standing, still staring at the object in his hands.

“It is the gift I gave to her when we first met, when I first courted her. It cost me almost everything I owned to have it made, but it was well worth that cost.”

Zacharajakh still stood, staring at the bag.

“Open it, father-in-law.”

“I... I cannot bear to see it... the memories it calls forth are too dear. Here.”

He handed it over and turned away, sitting down at the hookah pipe again.

Zetic reached into the fine cloth sack, and pulled out a glittering silver-coloured chain-mail, encrusted with an almost uncountable number of fine white diamonds. He held it out in front of him, a large rectangle, glittering even in the soft light.

Isacharact approached and spoke up.

“It's marvellous... But what is it?”

Without turning to look, the old red spoke.

“A veil. When I went to her court she was already well endowed with rings, amulets, pendants, bracelets, and other jewellery – all studded with gems beyond price, beyond value. She was surrounded by swaths of fine cloth, ornate sculptures of crystal, metal and stone. Gifts from so many suitors, and spoils from so many conquests. But I had always heard that her face went unadorned, though whether by choice or simply because she had nothing to wear, I knew not. I guessed the latter, and poured my wealth into the fabrication of that item before you.”

Zetic shook it gently, and it chimed and jingled in his hands.

“It's very light. Mithril?”

“No, platinum. But pure platinum, not platinum plated steel or platinum alloy. I was wealthy, but not rich enough to gift her a mithril corselet. Nor on good terms with the Dwarves, who are the only good manufacturers of such items.”

Isacharact was still captivated by the veil’s glow.

“For you have to kept it like this... hidden secretly, unwilling to look at it... mother must have appreciated the gift, but worn it only on special occasions.”

“Indeed it was so, daughter. I had been wrong; the reason she adorned not her face was in fact by choice. She kept her face unhidden, so that her stare could pierce the hearts of those around her. But she occasionally chose to wear that veil... for me, I think.”

Both Zetic and Isacharact looked at Zacharajakh as he turned still further away, lost in his memories.

“... You have it in your hands. Now call her, if you can.”

Isacharact still looked at her father, while Zetic turned his attention to the veil.

“I need... I need more light. It’s too dark in here for me to concentrate. I must go outside to focus, but will return when I have her.”

“Go, then.”

Zetic walked out, veil in hand, still looking at it intently as it glittered in his hands.

Isacharact felt suddenly alone in the great cave without him. She tried to avoid looking at the great Red Dragon, smoking in his corner, and instead looked at the other things in the room. It was hard to see in the dim light, but nonetheless she looked over at the hoard of treasures and chests along the wall, the ornate rugs on the floor, the pile of precious arms and armours in the corners, and the delicate tapestries hanging on a few of the walls. Pieces of Zacharajakh’s life since Isasarach left it.

Unable to think of anything to say to her father, she sat down and braced for an uncomfortable silence while Zetic was outside. To her surprise, it was Zacharajakh who decided to break the silence, speaking to her.

“I find your mate a most intriguing character, my daughter.”

She looked at him; he was still gazing off into the darkness, facing away from her.

“I have found him... intriguing... also.”

He turned more towards her, though facing sideways, and still not actually looking at her.

“He is very talkative... even for a Gold.”

“It comes from his past, of which he has already told you.”

“Told me some, but not all.”

“I have met some who knew him before; they say he remains the same as he always was. One of his elvish friends once confided in me that, after having seen him as a gold Dragon, he could not imagine him ever having been any other way.”

“So Bahamut, revered Lord of Dragons, must also have thought, to have completed the transformation, rather than reversing it.”

There was a lull in the conversation, and Isacharact once again felt uncomfortable. Zacharajakh puffed away at his smoke-hose before continuing.

“Yes, an incredible story, though I have heard only a small part.”

“I would be glad to tell you more, father.”

“You would, at that. But be cautious, my daughter. I am your father, but still a great red wrym, and not to be trusted with secrets; yours and his included.”

“He doesn’t believe in keeping secrets.”

“Oh, really? A curious attitude, for one who so easily divines the secrets of others.”

“Beware he who would deny you knowledge, for in his heart he dreams himself your master’. One of his expressions.”

At this, the red head bowed, and Zacharajakh muttered.

“Must everything come back to him, then?”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed.

“Oh, old fool that I am. Unable even to talk straight to my own daughter.”

At last, he turned to look at her, straight on. It seemed to take a considerable effort of will to do so.

“In a very roundabout way, I’m trying to ask about you, child.”

Isacharact smiled faintly back at him.

“Oh, father. What would you have me talk of?”

“Anything, dear, anything. Though I would guess that more has happened in the twenty years that you have known this man-turned-dragon than the almost four hundred you lived without him.”

Now it was Isacharact's turn to look away.

"Yes. He has the body, the soul, and the heart of a dragon, but he's got the energy of a short-lived man, a man who perhaps doesn't know if he'll see the next day."

"That is not a proper way to live... flitting about like an insect."

"Flitting around, perhaps, but not like an insect. And I have exaggerated; he has some consideration for the future. But in truth, I find the action... invigorating."

"You have the constitution of your mother, then, to be able to keep such a pace. But how long can you and he maintain it, I wonder? And no wyrmling, however impudent or confident, would simply waltz into my lair as he did. Telling his story, probing me with questions, asking for my *forgiveness*, offering to speak to my dead love. For one so small and so weak, it speaks of the foolish."

"He's stronger than he looks, father."

"Perhaps. We'll soon see, in any case. Isasarach was formidable in life, and in death will be so as well; to channel her spirit will require fortitude in great quantity."

He turned away again, returning to his smoke-hose.

"...But let us leave it at that, for now. Tell me of your relationship with him."

"Tell you of him and I? I thought we reminded you too much of you and mother."

"Yes, you do. And that is precisely why I want to hear it."

Zacharajakh turned back to her.

"...It is painful for me to recall my Isasarach, but it brings me joy nonetheless."

As he said this, the already ancient dragon somehow managed to suddenly look so much older. Isacharact felt sad for him.

"To speak of us, my husband would be the better. You think him talkative, but he talks well, and tells our story well. Better than I."

"And you talk better still than I can. Or do you think me experienced at telling *my* story to others?"

"I suppose not. But there is so much to tell, where shall I begin?"

"Tell me of... strength. Yes, strength. You are very strong; strong of will, strong of spirit, strong of body. Like your mother. I could never have tamed my Isasarach. Yet he has tamed you."

“Or perhaps it is that he is simply stronger in situations such as this. Social situations, in which the force of *his* strength overpowers mine.”

Isacharact looked off and grinned.

“...But at other times, tame I am not.”

Zacharajakh’s grin matched hers, and he let out a chuckle.

“Oho! I know what those ‘other times’ must be. Your mother was very... public... with those kinds of urges.”

“Then I am like her. Funny... for he, who so often enjoys disrupting order with his forceful charisma, is disrupted in turn by my own actions. But he bears it well, enjoying the small embarrassment, I think.”

The Red Dragon took the smoky wand out of his mouth and looked up into the air as he recalled the past.

“Isasarach was taken to walking right up to one of her mates, clutching him by the ear, and dragging him off, in full view of everyone else. It was... enjoyable, in a sense, to experience. But it was also quite amusing for the watchers-on.”

Isacharact’s grin grew wider.

“More than one court at which we have stayed has seen my proud husband being rather meekly led off to our chambers, a golden chain wrapped around his neck.”

“A golden chain?”

“A small conjuration I learned recently.”

He turned to look at her, head tilted to one side.

“So similar to your mother, and yet the differences are striking. She would never have needed such a... frill... to command a mate.”

Now Isacharact’s grin changed to a smirk

“Oh, I don’t *need* it. I have other ways to... control him.”

“Really? I have trouble imagining him being controlled except by solid manacles.”

“Manacles of cold air, then.”

As she said this, she blew outwards, creating a visible frost in the air before her.

“...Cold that saps his heat, and renders him weak. And yet he seems to draw a certain strength from it as well.”

Zacharajakh put the hose back in his mouth.

“Intriguing.”

A long silence, and now it was her turn to be lost in thought, recalling memories, though more recent than those of the old wyrm. She was almost startled when he spoke again.

“And does it give you... pleasure, to be with him?”

“Yes, it does.”

“I cannot explain it, but that fact makes me happy.”

“Why? What is so inexplicable? Is it not natural for a father to partake in his daughter’s joy?”

“Not for creatures such as you or I. Where do you hear such things?”

She paused in reflection.

“From *him*.”

“Humph. I would almost say he has been a bad influence on you, to replace your dragon instincts with those of men. But there is sense in what you – what *he* – says.”

Silence again.

This time, it was broken by neither father nor daughter.

“I have her.”

Zetic walked into the cave, chain veil balled up in his hands, breathing heavily, eyes closed.

“And you were right; she did change when she came back as a draco-lich. It has been difficult to call up some part of her from before then. So much power from earlier, so much fury from later. In the depths of her soul, so difficult to distinguish between the two.”

He now stood before the old wyrm, still almost dwarfed by the other’s great size.

“...But I have found her, if you are ready.”

Zacharajakh put down the smoke hose and straightened his posture.

“Begin.”

And now Zetic muttered some unintelligible words, a spell of some kind. He held the chain veil up high, and raised his head as if staring at it, though his eyes were still closed. The old red wyrm looked on, as Zetic began to softly chant *her* name.

“Isasarach, Isasarach, Isasarach...”

He breathed in heavily, curled his neck as if wounded in the chest, and lowered his arms to his sides. One hand loosely dropped the veil on the carpeted floor with a soft **chink**. A slight convulsion shook him, and he held his breath in.

A moment passed. The body exhaled and arched its head back, eyes opening wide. And finally, it spoke, but the voice was new.

“I was Isasarach. Who calls me?”

More hiss than speech, with venom on the lips. Air forced out brutally, chest heaving. The head looked around, but seemed to see nothing. Zacharajakh looked on.

“Zacharajakh calls you, Isasarach.”

The head turned towards him, as if suddenly noticing his presence. Words spat out.

“So, Zacharajakh, my red. For what reason do you call your mistress?”

“I call you to answer a question.”

The mouth opened in a growl. The arm reached out, its hand gripping Zacharajakh’s face with surprising strength. The voice was a shriek.

“Answer a question? ANSWER A QUESTION? Know your place! No-one calls Isasarach forth to answer a question; *they* come to *her* and beggeth its answer!”

Zacharajakh drew in heavily.

“You are dead, my Isasarach. No begging will I do of you today.”

The hand released his cheek, face turning to a scowl, looking away.

“Yes, dead am I. Long dead, even. What secret do I hold that you would seek me out now?”

Suddenly, the body convulsed, and Zetic’s voice came rasping out.

“So cold... so hard to contain. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t for long—”

A cry emerged, but it was Isasarach’s.

“And into what feeble vessel have I been poured? Though in truth, none could possibly be adequate. Ask your question, before this one breaks!”

“I wish to ask, Isasarach, about your relationship with me.”

As Zacharajakh spoke again, the head turned towards him, still snarling.

“You were mine. That is the only relationship I ever had with anything.”

“I believe that there might have been more.”

The body convulsed again, turning to one side, and vomiting. Isacharact heard a whimpering that could only have been Hex's, but then it was gone, and the body straightened.

Now a hint of curiosity appeared in the face, and it stretched out its hand again, grasping Zacharajakh's left ear-fin. It pulled with incredible strength, and Zacharajakh's head followed.

“You believe? YOU BELIEVE? Such arrogance! I would not have tolerated it while I lived. Do you presume to know the heart of your mistress?”

Zacharajakh's head was uncomfortably pulled to one side, but he was docile, eyes closed and teary.

“Not to know, but to guess. To wonder whether my mistress felt as I did.”

“And what is it that you felt?”

“Love.”

The head turned sideways, and pressed its eye up against Zacharajakh's own, which now opened. He looked at the golden face and saw only Isasarach's white cheek, with its dark, deep, blue eye looking back at him.

“Love, indeed?”

The head pulled away and the neck arched back, and Zacharajakh saw the head of Isasarach, cold, powerful, terrible....

“I do not know love, Zacharajakh. That emotion never belonged to me.”

The hand grasped the underside of his chin, its claws digging in painfully. The arm pushed it up and once to each side, examining the face which it held.

Zacharajakh looked back, and saw his Isasarach examining him as she did when he first arrived at her court.

“You were my possession, Zacharajakh. Only a possession. Though... a precious one, at that.”

At Isasarach's words, the old dragon breathed faintly, enthralled.

“Yes, Isasarach, I was your possession. But... But did this possession give you... pleasure?”

The hand released his face and moved away.

The eyes clenched, not shutting completely. Another convulsion. The body staggered for a moment, then regained its composure, the eyes opening fully again.

Zacharajakh lowered his head and stared straight at the golden serpent before him, but saw only the white Isasarach, resplendent and furious; and she stared back.

Finally, the head turned to one side, looking away, though the piercing eye of Isasarach still stared at him.

“Yes, Zacharajakh. You gave me pleasure.”

The old wyrm looked at the face before him and saw Isasarach differently, now. Still terrible, still beautiful, but in her eye was the faintest hint, the merest whiff, of compassion, of love. A tiny sliver, but it was enough. His eyes swelled up, watering, until he closed them and saw no more. He turned away as he spoke, picking up the veil on the ground.

“Goodbye, my Isasarach.”

At his words, the face’s eyes clenched shut; the body convulsed and collapsed to the floor, clutching at its chest, and was a nameless body no more.

Isacharact moved towards him.

“Hex?”

Zetic coughed and choked on the ground.

“I’m... I’m all right... It’s just, just so... so cold. So chilling. I can’t, I can’t breathe for the cold.”

Isacharact kept her distance; her own frosty nature couldn’t help him. In his corner, Zacharajakh had put the smoking hose back in his mouth, though his eyes stayed closed, clenched shut.

“Cold... Cold like I couldn’t believe. Elemental cold... so raw.”

Zetic pulled his cloak around himself tightly, though it afforded him no warmth from the cold within. He whimpered in pain.

“Isa, it’s so, so cold, I can’t – I can’t stay awake... Plea-Isa, where are you? I need-you-ra-se...”

Breathing rapidly, his speech devolved into a garbled stream of non-words, and consciousness left him.

“Hex!”

She turned towards the red wyrm, who sat, smoking, still holding the veil in his hands.

“Father, help him! Father!”

Zacharajakh turned sluggishly and looked at his daughter, then at the curled-up figure beside him. He breathed in and faced the huddled golden figure. His mouth opened, and out gushed a stream of fire, blasting Zetic. Isacharact quickly stepped back.

Zetic groaned under the fire, but was unhurt. He raised himself up on his two front arms and breathed heavily, drawing in the flames to warm his insides.

Seeing him recovered, Zacharajakh ceased his fire-breath and turned away again. Zetic coughed and sputtered at the ground in front of him, eyes still closed.

“Thank you, father-in-law.”

“Wake yourself up fully, son-in-law. The only way to fight *her* cold is to breathe your fire right back. Get up, and let’s see a blast from you.”

Zetic pushed himself up further until he was no longer lying on the ground but rather crouched low on all fours. He breathed deeply a few times, then sucked air in and blew out forcefully.

But his breath had no energy. In front of him, only the faintest puff of fire appeared, and he fell back down, coughing and hacking.

“Truly miserable, gold one. If that is the best you can do, perhaps I was wrong after all, and you are not strong enough for my daughter.”

Through his coughs, Zetic cackled.

“So, the old trick of wounding my pride; eh, wyrm? I know it well, and it will not disrupt me. But I’ll play along, if only to give you your comeuppance.”

Zacharajakh’s eyes looked back and saw Zetic unsheathe the great sword on his back, planting it in the ground as he raised himself up on his hind feet. Once up, he stretched his neck and his wings, and breathed deeply, until at last he opened his eyes again.

With a grunt he heaved the sword up off the ground, only to find his balance escaping him again. Isacharact offered an outstretched hand, but he waved it away.

“No, dear, I’ve got to do this all myself if I want to show him up.”

She huffed at him, smiling.

“You’re a fool to try, husband, but I’ll leave you to it.”

He held the sword straight ahead in front of him, checking his balance, then finally hefted it up, holding it by his head, at the ready. Several deep breaths in and out, one final breath in, and then he opened his mouth, and impressively blasted the rocks at the foot of the cave wall with his own fire.

Rather than draining him, the discharge of energy seemed to give him strength, and he staggered no more. He turned back to Zacharajakh.

“How about that, old wyrm?”

“It was... acceptable.”

Zetic burst into laughter and held the sword in one hand.

“Hah! I may have been chilled to the bone, nearly frozen solid by that creature’s heart, but my eyes still work very well, thank you. You continue to try to hide your thoughts from me, old wyrm, and continue to fail. For you, a quarter of that would have been ‘acceptable’, half of it ‘good’, and what I did there, was ‘outstanding’.”

He sheathed the sword and went back on all fours.

“...But fathers are always harsh in judging the husbands of their daughters.”

Zacharajakh seemed not to hear, for he closed his eyes and took the smoke-hose out of his mouth. He arched his head back and then – let loose! A towering column of fire spouted from his mouth, brightening the room and casting a red pallor over everything in the cave.

For twenty seconds the flames crashed against the roof of the cavern, and when he was finished, the rocks high up in the ceiling still glowed red.

“Come back in a few centuries, little golden son-in-law, when you have your true fire-breath, and perhaps I will be impressed. For now, you are weak and lanky, ...”

He turned towards Zetic, a malicious look on his face.

“...no stronger than a golden chain.”

Isacharact started at him, indignant.

“Father! I can’t believe you’d throw something like that in his face! And after what he’d just done for you...”

But the old wyrm only laughed impishly, grinning at Zetic.

Zetic blinked slowly and smirked back.

“She told you about that little... accessory, did she?”

His eyes narrowed as he spoke, head tilting mischievously, face now a grin.

“Were this boorish company, and not family, I would retort that even with that golden chain wrapped around my neck, I still get far more *sex* in one ten-day than you’ll get in your whole life.”

Now Isacharact turned to Zetic, face flush, eyes glaring, even more indignant than before.

“Augh!! I can’t believe you just said that!”

But he paid her no attention; the two male dragons locked their gazes.

And slowly, the great red wyrm began to chuckle. Zetic joined in. The chuckles grew louder, and greater, and in a few seconds they were both laughing raucously.

Isacharact turned aside.

“Feh! Thought I had great dragons for a father and for a husband but, in truth, both swine!”

Teary-eyed from laughter, Zetic turned to her.

“Oh, come off it. Laugh a little, amongst family.”

She looked back, teeth bared, cold eyes boring into Zetic’s head, and a low growl came from her lips.

Zacharajakh looked at the scene, amused.

“My dear child, I hope you weren’t intending to *scare* him with that look.”

Zetic was, in fact, silently looking back at her with a rather curious grin.

“... He seems to be much as I was, and when your mother gave me *that* look, it meant that I was to report to her bedchambers... immediately.”

Her face turned to sneer at her father.

“So much for your talk of the force of my will and of my strength! Can I not even terrorize my own husband?”

This time, it was Zetic who replied.

“Mayhap you can, but not like that. Your father speaks the truth; when one has used a face in love, then that face becomes harder to use in anger.”

She turned her head past his and eyed him sideways.

“So, love has usurped from hatred the meaning of my expression, and stole from me my only means of retribution? So be it! At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that such a law works both ways”

“If you seek to take comfort in knowing that I cannot also scare you, my dear, I’m afraid you are mistaken.”

“Oh? And how is it that you can do to me what I cannot do to you?”

“Simple, my dear. You do not know what can scare me, but *I* know what scares *you*.”

At this, he stood up on his hind legs and turned sideways, closing his eyes. He pulled the sword off his back again, and held it straight up, close to his head, against his ear.

“Do you remember when this sword still sung with the power of Aō? That eerie, but strangely beautiful music? On that frenzied night in Velprintalar, when my sight, enchanted with Aō’s ‘Fifth Element’, sparked our little vampire hunt...”

Isacharact’s face had softened, but she still looked at him coldly. He opened his eyes, looking at the sword he held in his hands.

“It *sang* to me then. Spoke to me in its incomprehensible tongue. Told me of things strange. Forcefully whispered incredible thoughts. With the first four vampires dead, it felt warm in my hand. In the catacombs where we found the others, it burned my hands, yes, and my mind, also.”

She looked on, but her head had turned away somewhat, uncomprehending.

“And then... and then outside, that beautiful final battle with the last two. Chasing them through the streets, into the plaza. With every blow struck against them, the very sword itself was in ecstasy, and it filled me with fire. One monster fell to its power, and my mind slipped for a moment, clutched in the sword’s call.”

Isacharact was now breathing quickly, and her neck pulled back more.

“The second vampire leaped into the assembled crowd, but the sword’s power, and my power, followed it, destroying it, ending the fight.”

He turned towards her.

“But *it* wanted more, and *I* wanted more. To use its power, to feel it ring in my hands. All around us, so many weak little men, in their weak little plate, with their weak little weapons. How grand it would have been to have smashed them all!”

He looked straight at her.

“And you were there, too.”

He moved closer with a toothy grin. Isacharact recoiled slightly.

“Yes, yessss.”

His eyes arched, opening wide, as he drew the last word into a hiss and put his face up against hers. Her breathing had become disjointed, her eyes closed – in horror. He held the sword in one hand and gently stroked her face.

Even as he stopped talking, she was whimpering. As he caressed her, she was close to crying out in terror.

It was Zacharajakh who broke the silence as he started to clap, loudly and slowly.

“An admirable performance, but draw it to a close. Your audience has clearly had enough.”

Zetic stepped back from her, sheathed the sword, and got back on all fours. He spoke, eyes showing regret.

“I’m sorry, my dear. I’ve inflicted my dramatic abilities on you with an undeserved cruelty. But see how I can so easily exploit one of the things you fear – you fear I may go mad, be changed forever, be made something insane, disgusting, vicious, horrible.”

She opened her eyes, swallowed deeply, and wiped the tears from her face, avoiding his look, clearly upset.

Zetic watched her for a short while, then grinned again.

“But you needn’t worry. It would be very hard to make me more horrible than I am at this moment.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, giggling. Her eyes coldly looked back, she scrunched up her face... and could only barely repress the matching laughter that came to her in spite of her fury.

But furious she still was, for she drew close to him and gave his face such a solid slap that his body followed it over onto the floor. She turned up her nose at his form, sprawled out on the ground as it was. Then she grinned and spoke haughtily, looking at him sideways with an enticing eye.

“I concede your point, husband.”

He turned, and stood up. The welt from her strike glowed red on his golden face, and he laughed no more. He still grinned, however, and she did too. They looked into each others’ eyes, deeply.

In the back of the room, Zacharajakh broke in again, this time with a forced cough.

Zetic turned around to look at him.

“Well. I guess it is time that we should be off. My errand is complete.”

He faced Isacharact again.

“...Unless you have anything to speak of with your father before we go.”

She looked at Zacharajakh, and he was looking back at her almost longingly.

“No, I... I don't think so. I'm sorry, that's terrible of me, but ...”

“But I understand, daughter. It isn't easy to sit down and speak with family one hasn't seen one's whole life.”

“Yes... Goodbye, father.”

“Goodbye, daughter. And goodbye... most intriguing son-in-law.”

Zetic bowed his head as he spoke, and his voice was respectful.

“Goodbye, Zacharajakh, Great Red Wyrn, and father of the one whom I love.”

As the couple started to walk out of the cave, Zacharajakh, facing sideways, drew from his smoke-hose and spoke.

“One more thing before you go, my daughter, and my son-in-law.”

They turned back to look at him. He took another long draught from the hose, closing his eyes as he drew the smoke in, and opening them as he blew it out. His eye glanced at the ground as he spoke.

“Come back and visit sometime. But... not too soon.”

Zetic nodded once, and turned to go forward again, cloak and mane billowing in the windy cavern corridor. Isacharact looked back at the red dragon who was her father, saw his eyes gazing off into the darkness of the cave, and walked away, still looking at him.

Ten paces, thirty paces, a hundred paces. The cavern entrance reached, off into the night they flew.

Back in the cave, Zacharajakh took another puff from the smoke-hose, and blew out through his nose. In the wispy white air that floated in front of him, he saw his love, Isasarach; terrible and beautiful. Looking down at the sparkling veil in his hands, he put his head down on his arms, and wept.