

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

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

Isacharact
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Jerold
Old Male Frost Giant

Beowald
Adult Male Frost Giant

Jarl[Chieftain] Regnar
Old Male Frost Giant

Edoch Loromach
Adult Male Dwarf

Re-forged

“We are approaching the settlement; let us walk the rest of the way – I do not want to frighten them with our arrival. And before we get there, I have some... requests... to make of you. This meeting could become very awkward, depending on your behaviour.”

Isacharact looked at Zetic, indignant.

“*My behaviour?* Are you trying to imply something about my actions in the past, husband? Obviously, frost giants are blood enemies with white dragons, but then would you say that we have good relations with Elves? Or humans? Those were your friends, and these are your friends, and you have said nothing of any problems with my behaviour when we were amongst your friends before.”

“I’m not trying to imply anything about the past, dear.”

Zetic turned to her, smiling.

“You know very well that I think you’ve been positively radiant at every court we’ve attended. But this situation is very unique, and very delicate, and as I know the people of this tribe very well, I would like you to do exactly as I tell you.”

“Very well.”

They landed and began walking towards the mountainside before them. The snow on the ground was deep, but well-packed, and it gave them no trouble.

“First of all, you are going to be stared at... a *lot*. You and I grab attention anywhere we go, of course, but Regnar’s people are going to literally stand staring at you, mouths agape, for minutes on end. Regnar might even do so himself, despite being Jarl of the tribe. Do not embarrass him – or anyone else – by looking back or making any sign that you even notice their looks. Look at me, or look around the room. Just do not make eye contact with *them*.”

“I will bear their stares, though it is hard to feel the eyes of others looking at me without being able to know for sure.”

“Oh, they will be staring at you, you can be certain of it. But don’t worry; you will only need to contain yourself when we first arrive. Regnar’s people adapt quickly.”

Zetic took a deep breath in and out, and looked at the ground as he spoke.

“I realise that this is very unusual of me, but I also don’t want them to hear your name right away. We will wait until an appropriate time and speak it when at Regnar’s court.”

Isacharact turned to face him, with a concerned look on her face.

“That *is* unusual of you. What is wrong with telling them my name?”

“It is a dangerous name here. More than that, I would rather not say.”

Zetic looked back, apologetic.

“Of course, I will deny you nothing, and you may ask again, and I will tell you my reasons. I simply think this encounter would go better if they did not know your name, and you did not know why. If someone directly asks your name, we will speak it. But in the meantime, I simply don’t want to volunteer it.”

“You behave most strangely today. What is so special about these frost giants?”

Zetic turned forward again.

“I am the one responsible for... civilising... this tribe. There are other things as well, but to tell them would be to reveal that which I have already asked you to let me conceal.”

“Your words have only confused me more, husband... but I will be patient, and trust in your silence, and do as you ask.”

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“You are not often wrong about people, after all.”

It was snowing heavily, almost a blizzard, though the wind was not strong. In the distance, Zetic caught sight of the cave entrance, and of the guard posted outside. They continued closer, until the giant was clearly visible through the snow.

“Stay here and wait for my signal to approach.”

Zetic walked on, until the guard took notice of him – for frost giants cannot see as well as dragons, after all. He saw the guard stand to attention and hold his spear.

“In the name of Jarl Regnar, who goes there?”

Zetic stopped.

“Hex Zetic, Gold Dragon, and cleric of Torm, goes here!”

“Zetic? Zetic? I know that name. Come closer, and let me see the face that I recall going with it.”

Zetic approached further.

“Why, Zetic it is! You have grown since I last saw you! Ah, taller than old Jerold you are, now.”

“Jerold! I barely recognized you in that fine hauberk! You have trimmed your fantastic hair, as well. But, regardless, it’s good to see you again.”

Zetic came close. Jerold relaxed his stance; the newcomer was recognized as a friend, now.

Jerold wore a shimmering chain mail hauberk which went all the way to his knees. Peeking through from underneath the metal was a blue tunic, and capping it all was a helmet trimmed with fur and adorned with gigantic horns. Of average height for a frost giant, Jerold’s head came roughly to Zetic’s chin when the dragon was on all fours.

“And to see you again, too, Zetic! Things go well since you stayed with us, and for that we remain grateful. What brings you back here? Certainly, not the human cities around us, for no trouble have we caused them – far from it, in fact! They benefit greatly from our trade.”

“I come with a request, Jerold. The sword that Dureagak forged me is great, but I have grown greater, and though it has served me well, I need it made stronger.”

“Oh, alas! Dureagak is with us no more. He died two years ago.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Jerold. Dureagak was by far the finest blacksmith I have ever met.”

“Take comfort, then. He died of old age, and he died content. And if a smith is what you seek, then fortune still finds you. For Dureagak’s apprentice, Beowald, is as skilled as his master, and may grow to be even more so.”

“Indeed? I would very much like to call on Beowald’s services to have the sword re-forged, then.”

“I have no doubt that he will grant you your request. But, come in out of this snow! I should first take you to see Regnar, the Jarl.”

Jerold half-turned to go in.

“Hold a moment, Jerold! I have a companion with me... my mate. May she come in as well?”

Zetic waved to Isacharact, and she walked closer. Jerold wore a confused smile.

“Of course! I could not deny entrance to any companion of yours.”

She came closer, and Jerold saw what she was. The look of confusion changed to one of deep reflection.

“Oh... oh... A white dragon, you have for a mate? And a very large one, at that... This is ... unexpected.”

Jerold turned back to Zetic.

“But... but nonetheless, I cannot bar entry to anyone who you call companion, and certainly not to your mate. You should both be brought before Regnar. Come, follow me.”

They all entered through the cave-opening and Isacharact gasped in awe. She and Zetic had walked in great halls before – but never the halls of *giants*. The palaces of Evermeet or of Waterdeep, though mighty, had after all been designed to be large by Elven and human standards.

This home of frost giants, however, was designed to be large by frost giant standards – and that was quite large indeed. Had the ceilings been any higher, she and Zetic would have been able to fly around inside.

Isacharact almost felt like commenting on the size, but then remembered Jerold's words and realised that her presence clearly made the giants uncomfortable. To speak – at least now – might only make them more so. As they walked through the corridors – corridors which, for a human, might have been entire homes – she noticed a few other giants, and in her scattered glances, she saw that Zetic had been correct.

They did indeed stare, mouths agape, at her. She saw giants sitting at giant tables drinking, and as she walked by, she heard mugs loudly being put down. She heard the clattering of armour and weaponry from guards and soldiers when she passed. She heard discussions – loud ones, in giant voices – stop abruptly as she approached.

And everywhere... hushed gasps, and whispers.

It was rather scary.

But then she remembered herself: you are Isacharact, powerful White Dragon, and wife to Zetic, who is a friend of these people. No harm would he allow to come to you here, and in truth, no harm could these people possibly do you, for you are far stronger than them.

They turned into a doorway, and entered the Jarl's throne room as Jerold left them. It was smaller than the other rooms, for the frost giants consider that which is large and spacious, mundane, and that which is small and cozy, regal.

Seeing Zetic, Jarl Regnar got up from his seat. His great white beard rippled as he spoke.

“My dear Zetic! It is a pleasure to receive you once again!”

Zetic walked forward.

“Ah, my dear Regnar! It has been too long!”

Isacharact entered the room, and Regnar suddenly stared at her. His mouth hung open, and he blinked.

The guards in the room, too, stared at Isacharact as she entered the room and took her place beside Zetic... though something told her it would be best if she sat ever so slightly behind him, as if deferring to him.

Regnar was still standing stupefied. Zetic cleared his throat, noisily.

“I have heard, Regnar, that Dureagak is no longer with you. I grieve for him; the sword he gifted me is one of the finest I have ever known.”

Regnar still stared at Isacharact.

“Oh... oh, yes. A fine sword, yes. And... and so... so sad, uh, that he is, ah, gone.”

Zetic leaned over a bit, trying to position his head to block Regnar's line of sight to Isacharact.

“Nonetheless, I came to have the sword re-forged. I have grown, but it has not grown with me. I hear tell that Beowald is the new master smith among you, and an excellent smith at that.”

Regnar at last shook himself out of his trance.

“Uh... Ah, the sword, re-forged? My dear friend, of course we can do that for you! You don't know what it's been like these last fifteen years since you came! Once, we were starving in famine, and now we prosper and are made wealthy! Why, just look at me!”

Zetic did. Regnar was wearing a simple but elegant gold crown and was clothed in beautiful flowing light blue robes, though they were relatively trim – for he was, after all, the tribe's chief warrior, and expected to be battle-ready. He was also wearing a great leather belt, gleaming with fine buckles and buttons.

Quite a difference from the ragged tunic he had worn years earlier when Zetic had come to the tribe's rescue.

“And I have even learned of ‘courtesy’ from the visiting merchants and dignitaries. Though I care not for some of their customs. It is one thing to ‘behave well’ as Jarl of the tribe, yet I hear tell that some human Kings behave as if the men around them were not men at all, but rather objects. Loathsome! As is their habit for referring to themselves in the plural as ‘we’ or ‘us’. Despicable! I am first amongst my people, not more than all of them!”

Regnar turned back to Isacharact again, and though he looked straight at her as he spoke, he was clearly not so dumbstruck as he had been.

“But, you, my friend... You come to us with an extraordinary companion. Who is this white dragon with you, wearing that exquisite girdle, and with the golden tassels draped on her horns?”

Zetic spoke curtly.

“She is my wife. I met her before I came here so long ago. We were finally married several years ago.”

Whether because he missed the absence of her name, or because he chose to ignore it, Regnar spoke on as before.

“Well, I believe it is customary, then, that I should invite you and her to sit with my wife and I for tea sometime.”

Zetic let out a laugh and tilted his head at Regnar, as he moved his neck back to a more natural position.

“I didn't know you liked tea, Regnar! From where did you acquire *that* taste?”

“From you. A merchant offered us some in trade for our steel, and though I would have refused, I remembered that you had commented on liking it. We bargained him down – for I wanted to try it, not buy a year’s supply! – and since then, it has grown on me. As well as several other tribesmen, actually. Hot water alone is not appetizing, but with the bitterness that the tea leaves add... it’s rather good. Gives one something to think about. Even better when flavoured with a bit of mint, too.”

Zetic chuckled.

“Well, you learned more from me than I thought! We would be glad to join you for tea sometime, Regnar.”

“Of course, of course... but, surely, do you forget your manners, or have I simply learned etiquette incorrectly? For though you have told us who your companion *is*, you have yet to introduce me to her.”

Zetic turned to look at Isacharact.

“Of course, Regnar, you are absolutely correct. I present you Isacharact, my wife.”

The old Jarl’s eyes narrowed, and he spoke slowly.

“*I-sa-cha-ract?* Not... not Isacharact–”

“Yes, Regnar. Isacharact, daughter of Isasarach.”

Regnar’s eyes went wide, as if they were going to pop out of his very head, and he staggered back a few steps. All around the room, the other frost giants let out gasps, murmured incredulous statements, and had begun muttering loudly.

Isacharact suddenly felt... threatened. But Zetic was still looking at her with an impassive face. She decided to look around the room in order to distract herself from the stares. She looked at the walls and the tapestries on the floor, at the furniture of the room, and at the banners hanging from the ceiling.

“By Auril... Isacharact... a descendant of the White Queen...”

Isacharact wasn’t paying attention to Regnar’s breathy words. One of the banners had caught her attention. There was something... familiar... about the designs on it. She had seen them before, somewhere... and she sensed a hidden meaning was contained within them.

As memories from her childhood sprung to mind, she suddenly recognized the cloth’s patterns, gasped, and spoke out in surprise.

“You are one of the tribes of the *Gherak Aunarak!*”

Regnar swallowed deeply, still staring at Isacharact.

“Yes... The *Gherak Aunarok* – The Legions of the Lady of Frost... Isasarach’s slave-army... And you... you are one of her children...”

Regnar seemed to consider for a moment, and then took several steps towards Isacharact. He got down on one knee, held out left his palm with thumb slightly angled towards Isacharact, and bowed his head slightly.

Isacharact was confused at this display, but Zetic motioned to give him her hand.

She placed her paw in his, though even his large hand was far too small to hold it entirely.

Regnar bent and kissed it. Then he put his right hand on top and spoke, with his head still bowed from the kiss.

“I am Jarl of this tribe, and Zetic is our honoured saviour... but you... you, my lady, you are a princess amongst us. For in times long past we were known as the tribe of *Inn Shok Branad*, The Honoured Guards, and were the favoured warrior-slaves in the *Gherak Aunarok*, the army of The Heart of Winter, of Isasarach... your mother.”

There was a great clattering of metal and sounds of scraping all over the room as all the other giants got down on their knees out of respect.

Zetic broke the uncomfortable silence.

“My dear, I hope you see now why I asked you to remain silent at first. And you, Regnar, now you see why I waited so long to introduce her. If I had told Jerold her name when we first arrived...”

Regnar looked up at him, and nodded reflectively.

“Yes, yes... He would have run in, screaming for his life, shouting that our Queen had returned to take possession of us all. There would certainly have been bloodshed, and I might have been attacked, for there are still those who crave the old ways. The arrival of Isasarach’s daughter would set them off on a rampage.”

The Jarl looked at Isacharact, then at Zetic again.

“And you have married our Queen’s daughter. Did you know who she was when you came to us? When you married her?”

“I knew she was Isasarach’s daughter when I was here, but I did not learn of your history until after I had left.”

Regnar released the hand, and stood up again.

“Incredible... absolutely incredible. You come here both, not to reclaim us, but as friends. If anything will convince those old stubborn ones among us to abandon the old ways for good, this will be it. No more battle-lust will we have in the name of our Queen.”

The Jarl turned once more to Isacharact.

“Yet, the Queen’s daughter you still are, my Princess. Regnar’s tribe stands at your service. Nothing of ours will be denied to you. Ask, and we, your servants, will *do*.”

“I desire nothing that you have, Jarl Regnar, save your hospitality. It was my husband’s wish to come here, and not mine. He knows your people, whereas I am ignorant. I bid you instead listen to his requests.”

The other frost giants in the room still remained on their knees, awestruck by the presence of the daughter and heir to their Queen.

“Let us go to Beowald and the forge, then.”

They walked through the halls, Regnar leading, with Isacharact behind him, and Zetic in the rear – it was no longer appropriate for him to be in front of her. She walked differently, now; she felt able to look back at the people around her. The other frost giants had all heard; they stared, but no longer did they gawk. They understood, now – she was not here to be their Queen. No more would the bloody banner of the *Gherak Aunarok* fly over their heads as they butchered entire peoples in *her* name.

The tribe of *Inn Shok Branad* was fallen. Long live the new tribe of Regnar. Long live the Jarl, and a life of mining, of smelting, of smithing, and of trade. A life of prosperity, of peace.

Some in the tribe were afraid of such a life, and some reviled it, and some were indifferent, and still others embraced it openly. But is it not always so when a brutal people becomes docile, or a docile people, brutal?

They came at last to a great forge-hall, with a gigantic furnace along the side. In rows in front of it, twenty giants worked their art, forging swords, axes, spear-tips, armours, chains, and all other sorts of metal works.

The frost giants here were unfazed by the presence of the two dragons and of their Jarl. They had already heard the news, and they had work to do – for blacksmithing is difficult, gruelling work, and it requires the smith’s full attention.

One of them turned towards the new arrivals. It was the leader, Beowald.

“Hail, Jarl Regnar. Hail, Princess Isacharact. And hail, Zetic.”

“Hail, Beowald. You have heard, then?”

“We all have, Regnar. And we are glad. Yet we work on; the forge must be hammered.”

“That is good to hear. I will leave you to it.”

Regnar turned to the two dragons.

“I go to arrange rooms for you. In your stay here, ask of us anything, and it will be yours. Nothing could we deny to the heir to our Queen, nor to the one who pulled us out of the darkness.”

The Jarl walked off. There was much to be done; his people had heard of Isacharact’s arrival, but perhaps not fully understood. He would have many meetings with the other elders of the tribe before the day was done.

Beowald watched him leave, then turned to Zetic.

“I have heard many things about you – about you both – and will likely hear more before our task is done. But no stories for now; let me see the sword.”

Zetic unbuckled the strap on his chest that held the scabbard on his back, and pulled it off. He unsheathed the sword and handed it to Beowald. The smith turned the blade around in his two hands checking its sharpness, its straightness, its form.

Satisfied with that examination of workmanship, he held it as a sword-fighter would. Though he was more than strong enough to hold it, the blade was longer than he was, and it looked strange in his hands.

“Torm.”

At the sword’s command word, it erupted into red fire with a great blast, spitting sparks and glowing embers all over the ground. The crimson flames settled, running the length of the metal blade. Beowald swung it around in place.

“Impressive. This is definitely one of my master’s finer works. The already exquisitely crafted blade is enhanced significantly by the fire enchantment.”

“It has served me very well. But I desire more.”

The smith, his face having been completely neutral so far, suddenly turned to a grin

“Don’t we all. And that is the essence of sword-making, I have found. The secret is all in discovering an appropriate time to stop. Given enough time, any blade might be made perfect – but then one would have no time for *other* blades. The creation of a sword is like a problem to be solved.”

Beowald handed the blade back to Zetic, and he began to practice with it, that Beowald might learn his technique, and so determine the best way to improve the sword.

“Aye, and a difficult problem to solve at that. Dureagak solved it well. But now, the problem has changed. He made the fire to match my own, and to prove his worth as a smith – that, in spite of his cold nature, he could make fire. Yet there is a problem: the fire overlaps with my own, rather than complementing it. And, of course, no sword could grow physically as I have grown in stature. When I came here, I was a wyrmling. Now, a young adult. I will grow further, of course, but it’s more than size – it is power. The flames strong, but they are not enough, any more.”

“Perhaps frost, then? I know many frost enchantments.”

Zetic turned to Isacharact.

“Redundant, I’m afraid. I fight always by Isacharact’s side, and my fire complements her frost.”

Isacharact looked at him sideways. He had said by *her* side rather than the other way around. Was he deferring to her because of the current situation... or was that actually the way he thought?

“Lightning, then. Thunder to blow down your enemies.”

“Maybe. But I would also like a holy light, for I fight only evil, and whereas cold, fire, and lightning may be resisted, no evil can resist divine illumination.”

The smith laughed and took the sword.

“Then all four, we should make! Fire, ice, lightning, and goodness! The tribe of Jarl Regnar owes you much. Owes you *both* much. There is only one problem... It is the coal. The shipment from Evereska is late, and we are using inferior coal from Neverwinter. It will not yield as good a blade as this.”

He put the sword down, and looked at Zetic sideways.

“But there are stories... of swords forged in the flames of dragons...”

“Say no more, Beowald! I would be horrid indeed to be unwilling to help you forge my own sword!”

Now Beowald turned to Isacharact.

“And there are also stories, my princess, of great swords tempered with the frosty breath of dragons, too...”

Isacharact grinned.

“It would be a pleasure to help you make my husband’s sword.”

“Then all the ingredients are in place. We have the steel, and the fire, and the cold, and the smith. Go to your quarters. Today, I will plan the sword. Tomorrow, we will begin the work.”

He turned back to work, but Isacharact interrupted.

“Surely you will not let us waste the day away? My cold is ready to serve as your chilling water, and my husband’s fire stands ready. Let us help your forge today. At the very least, it would be good for us to practice.”

The smith’s eyes gleamed.

“So... a generous princess, we have. It is good. Come with me, and I will show you your job. Your husband should have no trouble with his.”

Isacharact began to move away, but Zetic put his hand on her shoulder, and whispered into her ear.

“You learn well. I can see good beginning to flow from you.”

“But not quite as much as from yourself.”

He kissed her on the cheek

“No. But I will make you a true queen yet.”

Another kiss, and he went off to the furnace door, where one giant was shovelling coal, and another was working the bellows. The one shovelling coal spoke to him.

“Anytime you are ready, master Zetic. Breathe your fire as much as you can, though it would be best to time it with the strokes of the bellows. I also advise removing your robes.”

The giant pointed to a rack of pegs on the nearby wall, where those in the room had already placed excess clothing. It was very hot in the forge, after all. Zetic hung up his cloak and put his headdress on the ground underneath it.

Then, off to the fire! After a few warm-up puffs, he stuck his head straight into the furnace – for fire cannot harm a gold dragon. He breathed the burning hot air, and made his flame, in time with the bellows-pump. It was already hot almost beyond belief in the furnace, yet each one of his blasts seemed to heat the coals more, so that even the smiths at the very end of the forge noticed that their work went quicker, and the metals seemed to shape better.

Hours passed. It was simple work, but exhausting. Twice, Zetic pulled his head out of the fire to cast a spell of rest or of strength on himself. The giants tending the forge around him seemed to have no such troubles, silently keeping the pace.

Finally, the work-whistle sounded. It was mealtime; Zetic retired with the others to a large mead-hall just outside the forge. He met up with Isacharact, who looked completely winded.

“I never realised blacksmithing was such exhausting work!”

Dragons do not perspire through their skin, but Isacharact’s scales glistened from condensation, and it made her look as if she’d been sweating heavily. Zetic grinned sarcastically.

“Incredible! I would have never thought that there could be something in this world which was capable of tiring my Lady Isa.”

“Humph. You do not look so energetic yourself, husband.”

“I am indeed tired. But I have been a blacksmith’s apprentice before, and I am well aware of the gruelling nature of the work. After I worked the bellows in master Krondike’s small forge in Torm’s church at Doherry for a month, I felt as if my arms had grown in thickness by an entire inch – and those were *human* arms, mind you!”

Isacharact laughed at his joke, if only briefly.

“It seems so strange, though... it is noisy beyond belief in the forge, but the giants themselves are silent.”

Zetic nodded in agreement, as they moved towards a food-table to take some dinner.

“I taught them productive work, but not how to take joy in such things. I had hoped they would find that themselves, but perhaps another... push... is required.”

Zetic searched the room for something. In a corner he spied exactly what he had been looking for: a dwarf, clad in a simple shirt and shorts, and with a great tattoo on his thick left arm.

As they took some meat from the food table, the two dragons were generally avoided by the giants. Not surprising, given that one of them was their Queen-heir, and they looked up to the other almost as if he was their King.

Zetic pushed through some of the crowd and arrived at the table where the dwarf was sitting.

“Ah, a dwarf among us! Are you here to study the art of the forge from them, then?”

Surprised at being addressed, the dwarf choked on the ale he had been drinking.

“Oh, uh, why, er, yes... Lord... ah, Zetic. The giants trade with my settlement, and I have come here to learn some of their art.”

“And what is your name, then my friend?”

“I am Edoch Loromach.”

“Well met, then, Edoch.”

Isacharact had arrived. They sat down in front of the table with the dwarf and two frost giants, who resumed eating their food... though slowly, and respectfully.

“Well, Edoch, what do you think of these frost giants of Regnar, then? Have you learned much from working at their forge?”

The dwarf choked on his food again and turned towards the dragon.

“Uh, I... I suppose... I...”

Zetic looked straight at him.

“Is there something wrong, master dwarf?”

“Well, it’s just, uh, I mean... you’re, these people’s saviour, you know... and she’s... she’s the daughter of their Queen.”

“Ah, so that is what bothers you? You obviously do not know us well. When I came here fifteen years ago, it was not to be the giants’ dragon-lord. I came to determine why Regnar’s tribe was so desperately raiding the townships, and I discovered the reason: it was famine. I put together a solution; and taught them to trade. And so, they trade and prosper.”

The dwarf still looked up at the dragon. Zetic continued to speak, switching to the harsh but flowing Dwarf language.

“In the end, I was and still am simply a humble cleric of Torm. Isacharact is simply my wife, simply a fellow adventurer; regardless of lineage. I would beg you to treat us as such.”

Edoch shook himself.

“You speak Dwarven? Strange, for a dragon. How did you come to learn it?”

“Look at my wife’s girdle for the answer. See your people’s handiwork in it.”

The dwarf leaned over, looking around Zetic at Isacharact. He spoke back, but no longer in Dwarven.

“By Moradin’s hammer... That is... incredible. But you are right, it is Dwarven in manufacture.”

“Of course I am right. I was the one who commissioned it, after all. Now, are we friends? Are we good company? May I speak without you trembling at my words?”

“I... Of course, of course.”

“Good. Because I have a question I want to ask you, and to ask the room entire. It is time to break this sombre mood. It is time to teach these giants the meaning of pride, of joy.”

Zetic tossed the last piece of his meal into his mouth, then stood up, on his hind legs, and stretched out his wings, and otherwise did everything possible to tower over the thirty-some giants in the room.

“Giants of Jarl Regnar! Your attention, please?”

The whole room turned to face him in complete silence. Most of the giants had eyes as wide as the dinner plates from which they ate.

“You work the forge well; I have seen you. But you do so silently. Why?”

Someone spoke up.

“The work is all there is. The work gives us meaning. That is what you had said.”

“Yes. But there can be more. There can be *joy* as well as meaning. To take *pleasure* in one’s work is a great source of strength. And it is by that strength that mere work turns into artistry.”

He turned to the dwarf.

“Edoch, what does Clangeddin do under his mountain up in the heavens?”

“He works his divine forge, of course. Any Dwarf-child knows that.”

Zetic grinned.

“Of course... but what does Clangeddin do *while* he works his forge?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Let me rephrase. If you were to visit Clangeddin’s forge, what would you hear?”

“The thunderous song of pounding metal.”

Zetic burst out in laughter.

“Ah, you almost had it! Song, yes, but of both pounding metal and of voice! Song, which keeps even the saddest men going, and gives them cheer! Song, which is what lacks in this great forge of the frost giants. I taught you all to work your trade, but now I will teach you to sing it, too!”

There was a great murmuring of excitement. After all, the last time Zetic had taught them anything, it had brought them from famine to prosperity. What would this new knowledge impart? All were eager to learn.

And so it was that, before the meal was done, Zetic had taught them all to sing a great rousing naval song of the Sea of Fallen Stars, that rowers on galleys sing to keep in time, and to keep their spirits warm. A song sung in the face of the cold winds that blow across that great body of water, as the seamen ply its trading lanes.

The giants returned to work with the song on their lips. They were miserable at first, for giants are not natural singers, but as the hours wore on, they became progressively better, and better, until by the time the day was done, they were relatively on-time and in-tune, and not displeasing to the ear.

On the morrow, Beowald began the work of re-forging the sword, adding some new metal, and undoing the old enchantment in order to add new ones. Zetic continued to blast into the furnace, and Isacharact continued to act as source of cold to temper the steel. Both were exhausted at the end of each daily shift, but there was a certain feeling of satisfaction in the work, and though they were too tired to make love, they slept together contently.

And the giants sang on; each day, Zetic taught them some new song. Rowing sea-chanteys were especially appropriate, given the tempo of the work, but he also taught them some scattered other tunes; Mulhorandi dance tunes, or a riding songs from Calimshan. They progressively grew more adept, until by the third week, they might almost have been able to make a decent career as a travelling bardic troupe.

Of course, it was not their ability to sing well that Zetic had been interested in developing. When he occasionally took his breaks from the furnace, he noticed that they seemed to work *better*. There was emotion in the work; not blind devotion as there had been before, but awareness and spirit. They wore smiles or frowns as they saw fit, and they sang loudly or softly as it pleased them – they took pleasure in the work, and Zetic was satisfied.

Still they worked on, knowing that their tribe's prosperity depended on the products of the forge.

Beowald worked on, too, perhaps even the hardest – for a sword worthy of magical enchantment must be made very fine, indeed.

Yet there was something unusual about his actions. An enchanted sword might take two weeks to make, perhaps, but three? To Isacharact, who sat near him, it seemed as if Beowald was becoming... frustrated. As if he was unable to coax from the steel the sword that he wanted.

At last, one day, he announced that the blade was finished, and took the sword elsewhere to finish it in detail, and weave his enchantments.

A week passed, until one morning Beowald awoke Zetic to come to the finishing room alone, where a new sword lay on his great workshop table, on top of a fine purple cloth, and next to a solid wooden scabbard with a leather strap.

Beowald seemed tired, and did not look at the sword when he entered the room, but rather went to his tool cabinet, and busied himself.

“It is done. I am sorry that it has taken so long, but I have wanted to make you a sword of the finest quality, and there were some difficulties in making it.”

Zetic looked over the sword on the table.

“What sorts of difficulties?”

“Oh, nothing of import. Most likely a problem in combining the two steels.”

Beowald turned briefly and looked at Zetic, but still did not see the sword on the table.

“Well, pick it up, then, and feel it in your hand!”

Zetic did so. The sword was beautiful, and glittered as if made of silver rather than steel. It was now a much larger two-handed sword, appropriate for his size, and he guessed that he would not outgrow it for a hundred years, at least. The handle was simple red wound cloth, the hilt a plain brass-plated fitting, but the blade...

The blade was something else.

It veritably radiated light itself, for it glowed more than seemed possible from simple reflection in the well-lit workshop. It was thick at the bottom, but tapered down until nearly at the top, where it became thick again and curved almost in the elvish style, as if more a scimitar than two-handed great sword. The tip was ornately decorated with a wispy engraving, and ended in small spikes of metal facing away from the main cutting edge.

“It’s beautiful. Interesting that you decided on a curved style after all. I thought you had said you believed a straight blade would be best for my fighting style.”

A crash came from Beowald’s tool cabinet.

“No! No!”

Beowald turned, and wailed when he saw the sword in Zetic’s hands.

“By all the Gods that I know, it’s impossible!”

He rushed forward, and looked at the sword closely.

“It is impossible, yet it is true! Oh, am I becoming mad then?”

Zetic tried to comfort the smith.

“Be at ease, Beowald! It is a wonderful sword. What could be wrong?”

Beowald sat down heavily on a nearby stool.

“It is wonderful, yes... but that blade is not the sword that I wrought.”

“What?”

“I tell you – I pounded at that hunk of metal for three weeks to make it straight, but the metal itself seemed to insist on being curved at the tip. Finally, one day, it seemed to obey the will of my hammer, and I pulled it out of the forge to work on its enchantments and decorations... but what you hold in your hands does not resemble in the least what I laid on the cloth last night, yet no-one has tampered with this workshop! Oh, what sorcery is at work here? Blades do not re-form themselves!”

Zetic didn't know whether to stare at the sobbing smith, or the mysterious sword in his hands.

He decided on the sword.

“It does not matter what shape the sword has, truly, so long as the sword works. Do the enchantments still activate with the same command-word?”

Beowald was weeping deeply.

“They do.”

Zetic grasped the sword in both hands, and spoke.

“To—”

But the sword activated before even he could speak its command word, the name of his God. It burst into white flame, launching sparks, and embers, and bits of ice, and rays of light in all directions.

The flashing settled. The sword burned a white flame that flickered gently as it went the length of the blade.

“It seems alright. Aside from the activation, nothing unusual.”

Zetic was wrong... there *was* something unusual about it after all.

He barely heard it at first, but there was a sound coming from the sword... it progressively became louder and louder until it was quite clear.

It was song. It was the sound of *chanting*.

Fearful deep voices sung eerie low notes as the flame grew brighter.

The voices grew louder, and the flame grew brighter still, and larger, and it burned loudly, as if he held a great torch in his hands.

More voices... higher in pitch, stacked on top of the low notes, they pierced the room.

The cacophony of song grew louder. The flame grew brighter, and now it sounded to Zetic as if he was holding a roaring bonfire in his very hands.

At last, no louder did the voices get. But instead, the chanting grew even more strange... voices went up and down in pitch, almost in confusion, though there seemed almost to be some system to their shifts.

When the singing had started, Beowald had turned and stared at the sword. Now, he spoke, deathly afraid.

“My Gods... I have had strange and terrible dreams of that music ever since I began work on that weapon.”

Zetic looked at the smith. A look of horror was on the giant's face.

“Of that singing, yes, but also of the shape of the blade. And there was more... Two words, repeated over and over again. Two words: ‘Hapax Legomenon’. It gave me nightmares. I do not know their meaning.”

“Neither do I, though I know many languages. A name, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. But, swords are given names! They do not take one for themselves.”

“Apparently this one has.”

“And I have heard of swords that can speak or otherwise communicate with their masters... but to speak with their *maker* as they are being *made*? It is disturbing.”

“As is the song. This is a very strange sword indeed.”

“Oh, I am sorry, lord Zetic. This is my fault in some way, I am certain. I have failed; perhaps I have marred my master's enchantment somehow. Or failed to properly harness the magic of your fire-breath and Isacharact's ice-breath. Or perhaps I have been driven insane from some malady. But whatever the cause, I beg of you! Leave the sword with me, and I will see it destroyed, and a new one made for you!”

The smith stretched out a single finger towards the sword. He was terrified.

“For that blade... that blade is *cursed*.”

“You speak madness, Beowald. There may be something deeper at work here, but the sword is *not* cursed. I am the servant of Torm. Were this evil, I would sense it.”

“But do you sense goodness within it, lord Zetic?”

Zetic paused for a moment.

“No... No, I do not. Save for the holy light that you have enchanted it with, I sense neither good nor evil in this sword.”

“Then I beg you once more to leave it with me, and I will rid the world of it!”

“No, I cannot, Beowald. Such a mystery as this sword must be investigated, not kept hidden.”

Zetic approached one of the target dummies, and readied himself to give it a test slash. The voices seemed to grow louder as he did so, until, as he drew his arms back to deliver the blow, the voices grew almost deafeningly loud.

Zetic struck the target straight on the side with the middle of the blade, and the blade sailed straight through, though the target was made of stone covered with leather. With the cut complete, the voices softened, and Zetic stared at the dummy. What had happened? Had the blow not hit the target?

It had indeed.

The target slab grumbled, the leather on top of it flopped onto the ground, and the top half of rock slowly slid off the bottom and crashed onto the floor.

“Ohh, incredible! I have never seen so sharp a blade! It has sliced straight through the thick leather, and straight through solid stone!”

The smith wiped the tears from his eyes, and Zetic turned to face him once again.

“Yes, an excellent cutter, it is... But I still fear it! Please, one last time, my Lord. Let me melt it down again. There is something not at all right about it.”

“I have already said no, Beowald. Torm does not care for hidden mysteries, and His will would be that I root out the meaning of this one. But I shall at the least take it away from you quickly, so that it will trouble you no longer.”

Zetic looked at the sword.

“And now... how to turn it off?”

As if by its own will, the magic of the sword shut off. The flame disappeared, and the singing ceased. Zetic put it in the scabbard, which apparently had also changed shape overnight to suit the sword.

“Whatever your feelings of the sword, Beowald, you still have my thanks. Despite its strangeness, it is extremely fine, and is of excellent craftsmanship. Your master would be proud of this work. And I will get to the bottom of its nature, I promise you.”

Beowald was sad, but showed a hint of relief at not having to see the sword any longer.

“As you wish, my Lord...”

Zetic returned to Isacharact in their chambers.

“Come, my dear. It is time to go. I have my sword again, but there is more we must do.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is something very odd about this sword, and it has been enchanted in a very strange way. I must find out what is behind that enchantment.”

“How will you do so, husband?”

“Simple. I will ask the greatest wizard I know to have a look at it.”

He pulled her shoulder.

“We must go now. There is a sense of urgency attached to this, and it is a long flight, to visit Elminster of the Dales.”

TO BE CONTINUED
IN
“THE WITCH-QUEEN OF AGLAROND”