

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Zetic

Mutated Aberration (Man-Dragon)

Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact

Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Meer-Khail

Young Male Avoral

Krasswéh

Ancient Male Black Dragon

Lural Saraendas

Young Adult Male Moon Elf

Queen Amlaruil

Ancient Female Sun Elf

Wizard

The Courtship of Isacharact

Under the perpetual evening sky of The Seven Mounting Heavens, near the shore of the wine-dark Silver Sea, nestled up against mount Celestia, the enormous palace of the dragon-God Bahamut glittered in all its splendour.

Built of solid marble and ivory, with windows made out of giant gemstones and fine crystal, the immense building was a true testament to the fortunes of dragon-kind.

Bahamut may have been a Just and Good God, but He was still a dragon, and where other greedy drakes built great halls in which to stash their hoard, for Bahamut, the palace practically *was* His hoard, so positively dripping with wealth was it.

Yet, within its hallowed and magnificent halls, He kept many precious items that were not part of the palace itself.

And precious creatures, too...

It was now the third day since the defeat of Swight, and the third day since the audience with Bahamut, and the third day since the Lord of Dragons wove His spell of changing.

For those three days, Isacharact had stayed in the room with Zetic as he was changed in his deep slumber by the God's magic.

The first step had been to reverse the wicked Red Wizard's corrupted transmutation, and on the first day, Zetic had shrunk and returned almost to the point of being human again.

Isacharact had watched closely, curious to see the cleric as he had been before they met, but she got only a muddled glimpse, for Zetic had kept his wings, and tail, and rubbery grey scale-less skin.

On the second day, he changed little on the outside. Instead, the magic worked on his insides, igniting the great flame that burns in the bellies of gold drakes, changing his heart to beat to a draconic rhythm, and reconstructing his mind.

During the many long hours of that day, he shivered in his sleep as if caught by a demonic fever. At first, this happened while Isacharact had been buttressed up against him, but as the tremors had become fiercer, she had been concerned her own frigid body was causing it, and withdrew.

But then Zetic seemed only to shudder and shiver even more, so, an hour later, she returned to settle in at his side. He had become very warm to the touch, and she could feel pulses of heat that coincided with the beatings of his heart.

It was uncomfortable for her to bear, but her presence – however cold and frosty it was – seemed to bring him comfort, for he curled up beside her, no longer trembling. Soon enough, the intense hot pulses settled into deep, even throbs.

Her sleep having been troubled by Zetic's spasms, Isacharact awoke late on the third day, intrigued as the final stage of spell began.

By the time she awoke, Zetic was already half-covered in golden scales, a dull aquatic yellow on the back and sides and a more solid-looking gilded bronze making up larger, tougher plates along the front. She watched as they quickly spread across his body, covering him before her very eyes. His head had taken on a new shape, with a pointed snout, a tuft of golden hair, and two thin brown horns peeking out from the back. The body changed form, becoming longer and sinuous, more serpentine. Four bundles of whiskers – two from the cheeks, two from the chin – grew out from his face, and a few pointed canine teeth began to poke out through his lips.

As the morning wore on, the transformation continued. His hair grew to several feet in length, while his horns curved ever upwards and outwards, away from each other. By

midday, his figure was all but complete, and now he began to grow, from a human-sized wyrmling to a juvenile gold dragon of twice and twice again that length – for it was no longer appropriate to speak of his size in terms of height – in mere hours.

And then... it had seemed to stop, and Isacharact was confused.

He was about the same size as he had been as an aberrant grey, but that was still much smaller than her, and for a gold dragon, he looked like he was barely an adult. Zetic hadn't been an old man, but he certainly was not a child. Why, then, would Bahamut place him into the form of a juvenile dragon?

The immense door of the great room creaked open, and a silver-skinned and blue-eyed man slowly walked in, as if to answer her question.

“He has much to learn, little one. It would not be proper for him to leap so far forward into dragon adulthood, without having passed through youth first.”

Isacharact was taken aback to see Bahamut this way, for it was obviously the Dragon God in human form. No blinding divine light, no thunderous voice. Not even an imposing physique; just a slender man of unusual colour. Looking like this, any fears she had of Him seemed to disappear.

Bahamut walked over to Zetic and touched him on the forehead, examining His own work.

“The spell is not complete, however... Zetic will continue to grow at a quicker pace for quite some time.”

“How much time?”

The God took a few steps away from Zetic and looked up at Isacharact.

“Enough. Enough for him to have learned what it means to be one of us. When he reaches enlightenment, the spell will be over, and he will be an adult.”

Her eyes narrowed in response to that statement.

“That will not be an easy journey, for one who already reached adulthood as so different a creature.”

The human avatar clasped His hands together and displayed the smallest and most humble of smiles, speaking in soft tones.

“I am sure that help will present itself.”

She looked back at Him, and barely restrained speaking in an offensive tone – she *was* speaking to a *God*, after all.

“You expect *me* to ‘teach’ him how to be a dragon?”

The smile grew almost imperceptibly larger.

“You are free to do as you please, daughter of Isasarach. Am I not the patron of bards and artists? I do not bind those who serve me, for artistry requires freedom. But...”

He gestured at Zetic.

“... you did do well in teaching him to fly. Why not continue your lessons? I’m sure that he would appreciate your efforts...”

Isacharact’s eyes followed the God as He noiselessly backed out the door, almost tip-toeing on his fine silk slippers.

“... and so would I.”

With a humble bow, Bahamut turned and left. The heavy metal door slowly closed, pushed by some gentle force. It shut with only the faintest *click*, and Isacharact was alone with Zetic once more. She looked down at his sprawled-out body.

So... Bahamut wanted her to help raise this man, and turn him into a real dragon?

Well... maybe. She had to admit that Zetic had so far been amusing. There was no pressing reason to leave, and the cleric’s point about the Gods helping mortals when they needed it certainly had been proven in the face of *two* divine interventions, one straight after the other.

Isacharact walked over to a large marble-topped sideboard beneath the room’s enormous window and re-filled a platinum goblet from a decanter of the Dragon Lord’s fine wine. Some unseen servant had kept the spread meticulously arranged and fully stocked over the course of the three days.

She lifted the goblet to her mouth and drank, looking out the window, a magnificent view of the Silver Sea. Bahamut’s palace rested today – for it was a mobile castle, carried aloft on magic winds – not far from Lunia’s shimmering shores. Here and there, sailboats plied its gentle waves, fishing its abundant waters or merely cruising for pleasure. Isacharact had briefly visited some of the *lower* planes, on matters of business, but had never before been on any of the heavenly planes. The soft, glittering feeling of contentment was overpowering. No wonder so many living mortals came here.

She turned away from the magnificent ocean and looked back at Zetic.

Thinking pragmatically, it didn’t seem like a bad idea to do Bahamut – and Torm, too – a little favour by teaching Zetic. The two lawful Gods were known for repaying their mortal creditors well, and this debt might be worth something down the road.

And, of course, she had *already* decided to remain here in this room with him, instead of keeping her own company. His physical transformation was nearly complete, and it had been quite a thing to behold, but surely his mental transformation would be even more so... Yes, it would be curious to see, and interesting to *guide*.

As she was thinking on this, Zetic's breathing changed. It was no longer shallow and spread out, but sped up, became deeper and quicker. He was about to wake up.

Two yellow-scaled eyelids opened, revealing underneath eyes the colour of molten gold.

Lying on his front, Zetic raised his neck up a few feet, his mouth hanging open, his head shaky, and voice raspy.

“Is this another dream?”

Isacharact lay back down on cushions in front of the window, placing her cup on a nearby end-table.

“You do not dream, cleric.”

Zetic blinked, but didn't move. He was facing away from her, staring at the wall, eyes cringing, still adapting to the light.

“Then... is my transformation complete?”

“Sufficiently so.”

Zetic looked around the room; his pupils were barely distinguishable against the golden background that was the 'white' of his eye, but Isacharact could nonetheless tell that they were darting around in their sockets.

“Is there a mirror in the room?”

His voice sounded calm, but Isacharact could tell that he was trying to hide his nervousness.

“On the wall behind you, cleric.”

Zetic sharply turned his neck around to see it, and Isacharact could see the worried look on his face. Slowly, he tried to rise up on his hind legs to walk over to the mirror, but his limbs were stiff and sore from slumber, and he was forced to almost crawl on all fours instead.

An enormous hinged looking-glass sat on a dragon-sized dressing table, and Zetic slowly walked over to it, his head hung low, staring at the ground. He sat on all fours in front of it, dejectedly avoiding his own reflection, clearly afraid of what he'd see.

Though he kept his head held low, for brief moments, Isacharact could see his eyes dart up and down; he would catch a glimpse of himself and then look away again.

Finally, he closed his eyes, closed his mouth, swallowed, tilted up his head, and opened back up to stare himself in the face.

Zetic looked in the mirror, and at last beheld what he had become. Atop a long golden neck sat his pointed snout of a head. Two large shimmering eyes of pale amber sat in wide sockets far apart at the front, almost on the sides. Hanging behind him was a mane of golden hair, and rising between its hairs, curving away from each, other were two slender gazelle-like brown horns.

His eyes pored over the reflection, and when his mouth started to hang open, he noticed more. Sprouts of long whiskers, two each on his upper and lower lips, wiggled when moved his jaw or flared his nostrils. Behind his lips hid sharp, curved, ivory-coloured teeth; each easily two inches long. He closed his mouth again, and noticed that several of them didn't quit fit inside.

Reaching up his left hand to poke at a wayward tooth, he suddenly noticed its shape as well. Three fingers with short, thick claws faced forwards while a clawed almost-thumb faced back. Straining himself, he tried to touch the tips of his fingers to the tip of his thumb... but it was impossible. He got close, but the best he could manage was to press their sides together instead.

Zetic put his hand – his paw – back down, and stared at his face again. His mouth hang agape, and, after a few moments, a slow trickle of tears ran down the sides of his cheeks.

“What have I done to myself?”

Isacharact blinked, surprised. Given his enthusiasm for flying, and how he had asked for this without any prompting from Bahamut, such a response was unexpected. He hadn't allowed Swight's hideous half-transformation to phase him even in the slightest, but now he was upset at being made a dragon proper? Surely, this outburst was just due to shock.

He spoke on, muttering slowly, half under his breath.

“I've... I've made a terrible mistake.”

Isacharact saw her opportunity.

“You *made* a *request*. Did Bahamut make a mistake in granting it to you? Do you dare to question the will of a God?”

Zetic turned his head to face her, cheeks wet, as she spoke on.

“... Swight would have envied what you have become, and many are those besides him who would say you had been given a great gift.”

He faced himself in the mirror once again.

“A gift?... A gift for a fool, maybe. For I have been acting the part of one ever since I was freed from my imprisonment.”

If he keeps setting himself up for such obvious counters, Isacharact thought, this argument was going to be easy.

“Oh? Does Torm the True suffer fools, then? If your Lord had disapproved of you, would He have answered your call for help during the battle with Swight?”

Zetic had no reply, and sheepishly turned his head down, looking over his hands – his *forepaws* – once again. Isacharact saw she was winning, and chuckled with delight.

“A fool you have been indeed, cleric, but not in the way you think. You overcame Swight’s potent magic barrier and called down your God’s power, you’ve met and have been given a tremendous gift from Bahamut, King of Good Dragons, Patron of Bards, and Lord of the North Wind...”

She picked up her goblet and spread her arms wide, grinning as she motioned at the surroundings.

“You are now here in His magnificent palace, with exquisite things all around... And yet... you have the *audacity* to believe...”

Isacharact took a deep drink of the fine wine, licking her lips and taking her time putting it back down.

“... that you are being *unjustly* rewarded for your foolishness.”

He silently stared at her as she lectured to him, his eyes looking at her, but his head still turned downwards. One hand came up to wipe his cheeks, and then shortly after the other. She pointed a commanding clawed finger at the mirror.

“Look at yourself, unless you truly are a cleric of Idiocy instead of Torm! Do you think Bahamut would have granted you this shape, were it a foolish request? And do you think your own God disproves of this, either? Surely He would not allow His faithful servant to be changed against His will.”

Zetic looked back at himself in the mirror. He swallowed deeply and wore a look of concern, but no more tears came forth, and he no longer tried to look away. Isacharact spoke louder, her verbal victory almost complete.

“And one final thing, even! You taught me a lesson in *faith* when I first met you, though I was not ignorant of the Gods themselves. Yet now you seem to have forgotten your very own religion.”

Isacharact leaned forward with a grin on her face.

“So, I ask you, who is Torm? How does your Lord appear?..”

Zetic took a deep breath, and looked up at the ceiling, shedding his misery and becoming more determined by the minute. Isacharact was pleased to hear the strength return to his voice as he repeated what must have at one point been a rote memorization.

“Torm, The True, The Loyal Fury. A mortal man who selflessly and faithfully followed the commands of His good king, sacrificing His life in the line of duty, and raised to godhood because of it. He appears as a greying raven-haired man in golden-coloured armour, wielding a greatsword, ‘Duty’s Bond’.”

When he stopped without saying more, Isacharact seized on the pause to lean her neck even further over, egging Zetic on.

“All very true... But how does Lord Torm travel?”

Another deep breath from the man-turned-drake, and with a snuffle and two quick paws of his face to wipe away any remaining tears, his composure was fully regained.

“He rides Sharamétan... a Gold Dragon.”

Isacharact breathed out strongly through her nose and showed a toothy grin, reaching over to grab her goblet of wine again, curling her neck back, very satisfied at this little verbal victory.

“There you have it, then. Not so far from your God, after all.”

Zetic turned back to the mirror.

“You are right, Isacharact... My Lord Torm must love me still, and He and Bahamut have given me a great gift, an incredible reward for my humble service... But, even so... it’s such a tremendous change, with so many things to discover! I managed to figure out flying, but I couldn’t even grasp eating or drinking on my own...”

He held his clawed hands up to his face.

“... And if I have been given gifts, then I have also lost much. The hands with which I wrought so many good deeds have been replaced with new and uncertain ones, and I don’t have any of my old possessions. I don’t have my armour, or my cloak, or my ordained vestments, or even my sword! How am I supposed to do battle without a sword?”

Isacharact let out a growl.

“You’re still playing the part of a fool, apparently. Dragons do not *need* weapons, dragons *are* weapons. I was quite easily destroying more foes than all the Red Wizard swordsmen combined during that battle with Swight. If you had had any thoughts of remaining a dragon back then, you should’ve been paying more attention to me.”

Zetic glanced at her, then looked down, biting his lip.

“As a matter of fact... I... *was*... paying attention to you... though... for... *other*... reasons...”

His eyes flashed up at her and he swallowed again before returning to staring at the ground.

“...*unworthy*... reasons.”

Beneath his golden cheek-scales, some red began to show. Isacharact’s eyes narrowed and her mouth clenched shut.

So... This man-dragon *was* enamoured of her! She had suspected it, given how he’d behaved in front of Bahamut. ‘Tasted of the beauty of Your kind’, indeed! What a saccharine way of describing his infatuation.

And yet he did seem to have some... interesting... qualities. A powerful spellcaster, that much was made obvious in battle. Hardy – with a strong will to survive. A good speaker, possessing a certain degree of... personal charm. Determined in flight – and not half-bad, considering the pathetic state of his former body,. And it *had* been a while since she had left her last mate. Perhaps it was time to take another.

Yes... and if it was not time to accept a new one, then at least it was time to let one *try*.

Very well, then! Let the courtship games, the mating rites, begin... but first, a test... to see if this cleric was *solid* enough for her... and a demonstration, too, to ensure that he knew what he was getting into.

Barely five seconds had passed since Zetic had last spoken, and he was still staring at the floor, flush and embarrassed.

It came as quite a surprise to him when Isacharact abruptly slammed her goblet down on the banquet-table, raised her head up high, stared straight into his eyes, and began to emit from deep in her throat what sounded like a cross between a purr and a low growl.

He turned to face her... and gasped when he felt her sharp gaze.

For a brief moment, as she stood near the window, it seemed like her eyes were catching the reflection of some brilliant star; the light seemed to dance in them, flickering and twinkling like moonlight on the sea.

Zetic suddenly felt the urge to look away, some part of him sensing that he was under attack, and he shook his head to try to break her stare. But as much as he tried to close his eyes, her powerful, supernatural gaze burned into him, and he could neither look away, nor shut his eyes.

From inside his own head, Zetic heard a high-pitched whine quickly grow in volume, and it threatened to drown out his thoughts. Gritting his teeth, he squinted and tried to bring one hand up to block the line of sight, but it was hopeless. A moment later, it was all over.

Zetic's hand slumped back down. His mouth hung limply open, and all he could do was stare into Isacharact's eyes, completely fascinated.

Still holding him in her powerful gaze, eyes opened wider-than-wide and shimmering hypnotically, Isacharact chuckled wickedly. She bobbed her head up and down, and side to side, keeping him in her sight. She wasn't the least bit surprised to see his head mimic her own actions.

“Stand up on your hind feet.”

Unable to resist, Zetic complied, and slowly stood himself up, still captured in her gaze, a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Isacharact tilted her head back and grinned, open-mouthed.

“On your toes. And stretch your arms out behind you.”

Somehow, Zetic managed to slowly do so. He looked ridiculous, balancing on his toes, trying not to fall backwards.

“Lift one foot up in the air.”

Carefully, he did so. Now his arms were spread wide, balancing precariously with the same stupefied appearance.

Isacharact gave Zetic one last look, then turned away to refill her goblet.

A moment later, she heard the expected yelp and *thud* as the formerly-fascinated gold dragon fell backwards. With cup in hand, she turned around to see Zetic sprawled on his back, one hand on his head, trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Pathetic, cleric. I would've thought you'd be stronger of will.”

Zetic could only look around, mute, completely confused.

“Well, come on, get up.”

Slowly turning over to sit properly again, Zetic managed only a few struggled words.

“What... I... I remember... Your *eyes*...”

Isacharact spoke casually before taking a drink.

“Yes, yes, that's all they *ever* remember.”

Zetic squinted at her.

“No... I remember... *You* told me to stand up like that.”

Behind the goblet, Isacharact's eyes flashed open. Remembering what had happened under the effect of her gaze was quite unusual. He must have been *very* close to breaking out.

Zetic continued his line of thought.

“What *are* you, Isacharact? Dragons are magical beasts, possessed of many fantastic abilities, but since when can white dragons strike with their eyes alone?”

She finished her drink and replaced the goblet.

“You are more resilient than I thought, cleric. You surprise me. Perhaps I will tell you what that was, *if* you continue to impress me. But now, I wish to eat. The ballroom feast in Bahamut's palace is legendary, and I have not left this room since we arrived.”

Zetic looked towards her warily, his head held off to one side, squinting as if ready to turn away at any moment, unsure if he should completely avoid looking in her eyes. Good, thought Isacharact, he *should* learn to fear her!

Except that a moment later he seemed to decide one way after all, and stood tall, looking her straight and true, eyes locked. His next words wiped the grin from her face.

“I may be out of my element, Lady Isacharact, and you have so far bested me in every challenge, but I still have my wits about me. I will not fear or shrink from your gaze. I will, however...”

He walked over to the doors, and pulled both of them open, holding one in his hand.

“... humble myself before you, and bow before your exquisite grace.”

Isacharact eyed him suspiciously, incredulous at his speedy recovery. But he did as he said he would, holding the door open while deeply bowed before her.

That would do, she thought. That would do.

The white dragon gathered herself and proudly walked out the door on all fours. It was good to see a bit of humility.

As she passed Zetic by, she inhaled deeply.

Yes... an interesting courtship it would be, indeed. For he was an amusing character, pleasant to be with... capable of standing up to her even in defeat... and now, with this transformation...

Not at all displeasing to the eye.

Isacharact half-shut her eyes in contemplation of delights to come as she walked through the door, grinning to herself.

Zetic was still bowed and facing the ground when he felt something whip by in front of him, almost striking his head. Looking up, he saw Isacharact's tail wagging in the air behind her as she walked off.

Had she intentionally flailed it out near his face?

He followed the tail with his gaze, watching it wave in the air. It was very... teasing. Without realising it, Zetic's own tail began to slowly wag from side to side, sliding back and forth on the ground as his eyes intently followed Isacharact ...

I think... Yes, I *think* she's interested.

Zetic's forked tongue darted out between his lips, tasting the air of its own accord, and its sudden appearance made him jump with surprise. Opening his mouth, he pulled the strange thing out again and stared at it for a bit, examining it. It certainly was *long*.

Coming to his senses after staring at his tongue for a while, Zetic quickly shut the door and hastily hurried along after Isacharact, trying to walk tall on his hind legs.

That was a mistake. The same beautiful, exquisite, rich marble floors in Bahamut's palace were also far too slippery for his novice feet to handle. Barely did he shut the doors that he fell flat on his back again. And this time, he had no-one to blame but himself.

Undefeated, Zetic gingerly got back up. Come on, it couldn't be that hard, could it? Dragons could walk on just their back two legs if they wanted to, couldn't they? If he wasn't able to manage this, he certainly would never be able to swing a sword again.

Back up once again, he resolved to take things slowly, coming to a stop and almost sitting back down with every step he took.

Quite some time later, he found himself at the end of one hallway, and now he felt confident to try walking at a normal pace. His forked tongue dangled out through the side of his mouth in concentration as he rounded the corner and pushed onwards.

To his satisfaction, halfway down the second hallway he realized he could manage rear-leg walking just fine. Hah! Zetic of Waterdeep would wield a blade once more! With a grin on his face, he swung his arms high in triumph, as if holding his old greatsword in the high guard. And, of course, this motion caused him to nearly fall backwards again – except this time, he instinctively slapped his tail on the floor, pushing down with it like a third leg.

Zetic turned his head around to see how he'd managed to stay upright. Ah! So *that* was that thing was for! Onwards, then!

More ambitious, now – it wouldn't be enough to slowly stride into battle at a walking pace. True battle swordsmanship required moving at a healthy trot. Perhaps the tail would help with that as well?

He started walking towards the next intersection, which was quite a ways away, and he slowly quickened his pace, until, by the time he reached it, he was jogging at an impressive speed – torso bent slightly forward, head held high, arms stretched out for balance, tail flailing out behind him, and even wings slightly unfolded for stability.

It was a good thing there was no-one there to watch him, not only because of his ridiculous appearance, but because as soon as he tried to round the corner to the right, he started slipping, clawed feet scratching uselessly against the floor.

Eyes bulging, rear legs splayed, wings flapping, tail whipping to and fro, Zetic groped for something to hold on to with his arms and missed spectacularly, falling sideways and sliding a considerable distance past the corner.

A bit too ambitious there, Zetic. Also, perhaps some *boots* might be in order.

The great dining-hall of Bahamut's palace has all the characteristics that one might expect it to have, and more.

Immense size to hold huge numbers of dragon-sized guests. Brilliant, sparkling illumination from gorgeous crystal chandeliers overhead. Wondrous tapestries, curtains, and banners woven from the finest silks, hanging from the walls and sometimes hovering of their own accord as dividers. An incredible collection of statues sprinkled about, carved from obsidian and marble. Ornate wall torches, free-standing candelabras, and decorative fixtures made of precious metals and studded with untold numbers of gemstones. Great square windows in the ceiling admitting the pale celestial star-light. A completely open wall leading onto a patio paved with fantastic tiles, and looking down the slope of Mount Celestia onto the shimmering Silver Sea below. Behind the scenes, an uncountable number of servants preparing and serving an equally uncountable number of dishes.

And, of course, a host of powerful and mighty guests – dragons, heroes, and celestial creatures – though no doubt many of the palace's residents, temporary or permanent, took their meals separate from the great hall.

Zetic was awed by the magnificence of the affair... and he breathed in deeply, wishing to take in the crisp celestial air, and the wafting odour of the sumptuous food which had already caught his eye.

It smelled delicious, and his mouth started to water even as he noticed Isacharact in the middle of the room, walking towards the buffet.

Around the room, eyes had stopped what they were doing to watch her enter. Most of the guests were well aware of the fact that it had been a considerable length of time – centuries, maybe – since a *chromatic* dragon, a creature of evil, had been in Bahamut’s palace. On the other hand, as gossip travelled quickly in the palace, they were also aware of the rather special story of her, of Zetic, and of their victory over Swight.

Isacharact returned the stares while still walking towards the food, and all those upon whom she cast her gaze soon averted their eyes in the face of her chilling look.

She smiled to herself, smug and satisfied, and walked on as Zetic stood standing in the doorway.

He sensed something new... There was another smell... no, wait, other *smells*.

Zetic sniffed at the air several times, and suddenly realised that he could... smell... the other dragons.

It wasn’t that they were actually giving off a new odour, or that his sense of smell had been honed to an existing one; instead, it was as if someone had cast a spell called ‘detect dragons’ upon him, and its effect was to grant the ability to sense the presence of dragons by experiencing a new ‘scent’.

Stopping the useless sniffing, he looked around the room. The smells seemed to match up to what he saw. A large silver wyrm smelled young. A pair of brass drakes smelled mated. He could practically *taste* the power that radiated from a colossal gold. The other several dozen dragons in the room all had their own unique ‘scent’ which revealed some important aspect of their nature.

And then... and then there was Isacharact.

The cleric-turned-dragon’s eyes went wide and he felt a sudden urge to back away and out of the room, for whatever this new sense was, it was telling him that she was *dangerous* beyond belief, and that he was a fool for not having already started to run.

The sense of terror decreased as she got further away... but not by much.

Zetic was taken aback when he realised that, had he been able to feel her like *this* while in the grips of Swight’s foul transmutation, things certainly wouldn’t have worked out this way. He wouldn’t still be here, he probably wouldn’t be a dragon, he wouldn’t have learned to fly... and so much more.

As it stood, all he’d managed to do without this “dragon-sense” was to get himself into trouble completely over his head, with a she-dragon who was completely out of his league.

One supposed that avoiding this kind of situation was precisely what that sense was for.

He swallowed deeply and headed over to the banquet table. The ‘scent’ was even making him feel weak at the thought of having to remain in the same room as her.

Remembering his failing only moments ago, Zetic decided it would be wiser to get back down and walk on all fours, lest he foul up in front of such a large host.

“Is this all that you have?”

Isacharact was looking over the massive table of foods and speaking to a lantern archon petitioner – a glowing ball of light that was the embodiment of some long-dead good soul.

“All that we have tonight, yes. Was there something in particular that you desired?”

The archon was speaking back in a typical almost-musical voice, apparently unaffected by Isacharact’s somewhat offensive tone.

“I usually prefer my food more... *frozen*.”

Zetic came and stood by her, marvelling at the incredible feast before them. The colossal banquet table had literally one of every dish he had ever heard of, and all that only took up a tiny sliver of space. Whenever someone took a piece of food off the buffet, it was immediately replaced by another, exactly the same in every way.

Eyes still poring over the magnificent spread, Zetic spoke.

“You didn’t seem to mind Captain Montague’s roast lamb.”

She looked up at him, wondering whether he had managed to make it to the feast-hall on two feet. She’d certainly heard him try.

“It was a tolerable diversion. The hot meat from their grill was adequate while out on campaign, but this is a palace of untold luxury, and I am a creature of ice. I prefer to eat things served very cold.”

The archon, meanwhile, had already thought up a suggestion.

“I cannot think of any frozen *food* on the table tonight, my Lady, but we do have frosty *drink*: ice wine, from Silvermoon.”

Isacharact looked up at the archon, and it talked on.

“We have stocked several vintages, even. I recommend this year’s, as it has so far won great acclaim amongst our Lord’s guests.”

“That sounds interesting. How about you, cleric?”

She turned to him with the archon standing by.

“None for me, thank you. I don’t drink.”

“No?”

“No. I swore an oath of temperance upon entering Torm’s service.”

The archon left to obtain Isacharact’s drink.

“What a shame, cleric. You’re missing out on the delights of the world. And after all, what’s the point of having life – and wealth, too – if you can’t enjoy it?”

Zetic seemed indignant.

“As a matter of fact, I *do* enjoy life, and quite well enough without alcohol.”

“Whatever you say, though you needn’t worry about becoming *drunk*, now. Dragons eat and drink what they please, and there are seldom ill consequences of any kind for what they consume.”

His only reply was to snort as they both began to take food from the table and place it on plates. In-between choosing items, Isacharact glanced over at Zetic.

“Have you taken any *other* vows?”

Zetic continued to look at the food, though he spoke in an animated voice.

“Oh, not really... Well, except for one...”

She looked at him sideways.

“... Just a little vow... of chastity before marriage.”

And now it was Isacharact’s to snort. ‘Little’, indeed. Zetic, meanwhile, was staring at a bowl full of small white spheres.

“Are those... *pearls*?”

She glanced over at the bowl.

“Yes.”

“For *eating*?”

“One would presume so, cleric, given that they are on a table of *food*.”

Zetic shook his head dismissively.

“Eating and drinking what they please is one thing, but some dragons certainly have very strange tastes.”

Isacharact smiled slyly at him.

“Actually, pearls are considered a delicacy by *gold* dragons.”

The golden cleric started up at her, incredulous, before looking at the bowl again.

“Perhaps I should try one, then.”

She opened her eyes wide and spoke with good humour.

“Perhaps you should.”

He picked one up and put it in his mouth, as if eating a sweet candy. But pearls are most definitely *not* sweet, and Zetic scrunched up his face as if he’d just eaten a lemon.

“Ohhh... it’s *incredibly* salty.”

His eyes became watery, but both of his hands were presently holding his plate. It seemed only natural, therefore, that his tail should come up to wipe the tears.

Seemed only natural – except to Zetic, for when he realised with what appendage he was presently mopping his face, his head recoiled from it, and he watched it closely as it returned to its normal place behind him.

“*That* thing is still going to take a little getting used to.”

Isacharact chuckled, having watched him while she finished filling up her plate.

“At least you haven’t tripped over it... yet. But, tell me... What happens if you violate any of those oaths of which you were just speaking?”

He replied stoically.

“I would have to atone. There would be a... penance... to pay.”

A rather mischievous grin escaped Isacharact’s face.

“Enjoy your dinner, cleric.”

Flashing her dark eyes at him, she turned and left.

Zetic looked around the room. There were a few clusters, but generally speaking, the guests were keeping to themselves. Not entirely a surprise, given that most of them were dragons,

and dragons are reclusive creatures. Even Zetic now felt somehow naturally compelled to avoid the other drakes, and though he had no trouble suppressing the urge, he decided it would nonetheless be best *not* to seek them out for ‘chit-chat’.

He still wanted company, though, and with Isacharact clearly wanting a bit of privacy, he turned his attention to the non-dragons as he circled the room, walking past tables and chairs, flowers and statues, trying to decide with whom to sit... Not those tall, purple-skinned Mercanes who seemed to be caught up in their own internal discussion, though one of them gave a small bow as he walked by. Nor the band of lupine Hound Archons who were looking at him somewhat warily – as they were looking at everyone, really. *Definitely* not the group of rather secluded-looking storm giants who barely glanced his way.

Having passed by half the room, Zetic suddenly felt watched... and he looked across the room, where a solitary winged Avoral was standing just outside on the patio, staring intently at him.

Seeing that he’d caught Zetic’s eye, the celestial nodded ever-so-slightly.

Zetic headed over.

“Gree-tings, I am Meer-Khahi.”

Speaking with an almost mechanical rhythm that made him pronounce all the syllables evenly, the Avoral bowed his head slightly as Zetic approached.

Zetic bowed back.

“I am Zetic of Waterdeep, cleric of Torm.”

Meer-Khahi’s head moved around with a darting motion and he replied in the same flat, even-paced tone.

“So I have-heard. It is a plea-sure to meet you.”

Zetic looked over the creature before him as he sat down on the marble floor. Standing a hair under nine feet tall, Meer-Khahi seemed to be a typical Avoral – at least, typical so far as Zetic had heard, for he had never actually *met* one before. The celestial creature before him had the general shape of a man-sized hawk, but able to stand fully upright. Brown-feathered arms trailing great wings ended in taloned hands, one of which was presently holding a small bowl of soup.

Though he looked imposing enough without it, Meer-Khahi was also wearing a solid-looking breastplate decorated with gold trim that covered his chest from the shoulders to the groin. There were two long hand-and-a-half swords slung crosswise on his back, in addition to a quiver of arrows.

Far more prominently displayed, however, was a bright-red and very fine-looking small bow that was hanging off a belt on his left side, still strung tightly.

Zetic may only have been a true expert at swordplay, but he knew other weapons well enough, and based on the bow's ornate, composite construction he guessed that it could take a man's head off from over a mile away with great accuracy, assuming its wielder was strong enough to draw the tiny but extremely stiff bow, as well as being far-sighted enough to *see* the target.

With his long, powerful arms and eyes the size of ogre fists, Meer-Khahi looked the part.

“What is it that you do, Meer-Khahi?”

The enormous eyes stared straight at him emotionlessly, though the head in which they were embedded seemed to now have a little less difficulty with speaking.

“I am a hunt-er of e-vil dra-gons. To-day, and for the last twen-ty days, I am rest-ing after a ra-ther fierce batt-le with a black dra-gon.”

“I trust you were victorious.”

“I al-ways am.”

The resolute answer sparked a certain curiosity in Zetic.

“You're not native to this plane of Celestia, are you, Meer-Khahi?”

“No. From the neigh-bour plane of Ar-cadia, I am. Place of jus-tice applied vi-go-rous-ly to the bene-fit of all.”

Arcadia was much like Celestia, a place of goodness and lawfulness, but tilted slightly more towards law. Perhaps that explained the mechanical form of talking.

The avoral paused, but Zetic decided not to ask another question, sensing that he was going to be asked one in turn.

Meer-Khahi took a sip from his soup before continuing.

“I have heard some of your in-cre-di-ble sto-ry, Ze-tic. De-feated a man who would make him-self a red dra-gon. Ve-ry diff-i-cult, I am sure. I un-der-stand that you have e-ven met Ba-ha-mut Him-self...”

Zetic was surprised.

“And you haven't? Aren't you His guest here?”

“Tech-ni-cally, yes, but I have ne-ver met Him in per-son...”

Another silence, and another sip from the bowl of soup.

“...Hence why I would be most pleased if you would tell me the sto-ry of how you came to meet Him.”

Zetic smiled at this statement, having anticipated it.

“Gladly.”

And so, he told the Avoral of everything that had happened since his adventuring band had entered Swight’s castle on that fateful day. He casually trimmed down his flight tutelage with Isacharact; Meer-Khahi didn’t seem to be too interested in *those* aspects of the tale anyhow, mostly asking questions about the battles and the soldiers.

By the time he was done, Zetic’s plate was empty, Meer-Khahi’s bowl was drained, and the ever-starry sky outside had grown just a little darker.

“A ve-ry in-ter-es-ting story, friend Ze-tic. I won-der... you said that you did batt-le with a two-han-ded sword be-fore. Will you con-ti-nue to use swords as a dra-gon?”

“I shall certainly give it a try. But to tell the truth, I haven’t even held a sword in my hands since before Swight captured me. I wonder what happened to my own ... it’s probably long-lost by now, but, you know... one develops a certain attachment to one’s equipment.”

“Yes, quite na-tu-ra-lly. I would be ver-y up-set to lose a-ny of my batt-le gear, though much of it is re-place-a-ble. Still... I have a pro-po-si-ti-on you may per-haps find in-ter-es-ting. I pre-fer to fight with the bow, but I re-ly al-so up-on the sword. In my time rest-ing here I have been look-ing for a sparr-ing part-ner, but none of these dra-gons use swords, and the other Cel-es-ti-als re-fuse me.”

“Really? They refuse you? Why?”

“They say I am too young to spar with them. They cod-dle me.”

“How old are you, actually?”

“One hun-dred and sev-en-ty-se-ven...”

Meer-Khahi saw the look of astonishment in Zetic’s face.

“... but that is con-si-der-ed quite young for a Cel-es-ti-al.”

“I see. Well, I would be glad to train with you, though I’m afraid I haven’t got a sword to train *with*.”

The Avoral didn’t really have lips to make the expression, but Zetic could swear he was smirking as he put down the empty bowl on a nearby table and reached both of his arms over his head to draw his two bastard swords at the same time.

“Not a prob-lem. I al-ways car-ry a spare. Per-haps you would like to fight now?”

Zetic looked around; while there were chairs and tables of varying sizes and shapes set up on the patio, they looked to be made almost of mithril, and nothing Zetic and Meer-Khahi would do could possibly mar them. Turning back to look inside the hall, he saw that there were no other guests nearby. He also spied Isacharact sitting alone in a far corner, an empty platter beside her, and a large gold goblet in her hand. No-one would get in their way.

“Why not?”

Meer-Khahi flipped the sword in his left hand into the air and grabbed it by the blade, turning himself sideways and stretching out his arm to offer it to Zetic pommel-first, the other sword held in his right hand with the flat edge resting on his shoulder. A determined warrior’s stance.

As Zetic stretched out his hand to take the weapon, the magic sword sensed its new bearer and re-sized itself, growing quickly in length and breadth, the better to suit the huge dragon that was about to wield it. But there was still the problem of *holding* it.

Furrowing his brow, Zetic gently wrapped the three fingers of his right hand around the grip, but the fourth, the almost-thumb, he couldn’t quite get into the right position to hold the sword securely.

Meer-Khahi waited patiently, watching with interest, as Zetic withdrew his hand and, biting his lip, flexed his fingers in and out repeatedly while staring eagerly at the blade in the Avoral’s hand. Maybe regular dragons couldn’t pick up swords, he thought, and maybe he ought to learn to fight without one, but surely Bahamut wouldn’t have taken years of swordsmanship away from him? He’d never heard of dragons having anything like hair either, and yet there was a golden mane hanging behind him. Clearly, the Dragon-God must have made some “adjustments” to what was the norm for gold dragons.

Suddenly, he looked down and realized he’d succeeded in balling his hand up into a fist, thumb properly opposed. So it was just a matter of stretching and practice, after all. Good!

Now confident, Zetic took up the blade in his right hand, finding his grip very loose. He methodically flexed the fingers of his left before clasping them around the handle as well. The two dragon paws could not as yet hold the weapon as tightly as he would have liked, but they managed to hold it strongly enough that he felt confident in sparring. In any case, the practice would do him good.

Some of the guests turned their attention towards the impending show...

Meer-Khahi stepped back, spoke a word of command, and his sword became wreathed in flame. He twirled it around in one hand, walking in an arc and spinning the blade through the air in a display of showmanship.

... And now a few more of those in the dining-hall peeked over at the pair of swordsmen out on the patio.

Zetic, his hands in no condition to show off his own skill, pointed at the fiery weapon.

“A flaming sword? Yet I can see clearly enough that this one you’ve given me is without such an enchantment. That hardly seems fair.”

The huge eyes blinked twice.

“You must be jo-king, Ze-tic? You are a gold dra-gon. Fire can-not hurt you—”

Zetic frowned. Of *course* fire couldn’t hurt him. He had known of dragons’ various immunities since a young boy. But the thought of projecting that knowledge onto himself had never really occurred to him.

“—and it is sure-ly *you* who has the ad-van-tage, for you-can *breathe* fire as well.”

Meer-Khahi’s words made Zetic do a double-take. Of *course* he could breathe fire.

“You’re... you’re absolutely right, Meer-Khahi. I had completely forgotten what I’ve become. As for *breathing* fire... I’m sure that I can, but I never *have*.”

The Avoral lowered his sword.

“One of my mas-ters al-ways says, ‘there is no time like the pres-ent’.”

Zetic grinned and turned slightly to one side, facing the open sky and descending terrace.

“All right, let’s give this a try.”

He drew in breath several times to warm up, and then puffed outwards as hard as he could.

Only the sound of air came from his lips.

Zetic tried again.

And again.

And again.

No luck creating fire, though! He only managed to create the rather embarrassing sound of exhaled breath.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Zetic heard the booming words, and could ‘smell’ the powerful white dragon behind him. The aura of threat was considerable, and it took effort to maintain his composure.

“I am trying to breathe fire, obviously.”

Isacharact snorted amusedly as she continued past him, coming to sit down on the patio nearby.

“No, dragon-man, you are *failing* to breathe fire, making a fool of yourself out here, instead. Be thankful that Bahamut personally beseeched me to make myself your mentor, or else you would continue to make a fool of yourself for quite some time.”

Zetic turned to face her, curious. He didn't notice that Meer-Khahi was now intently staring at Isacharact.

“Lord Bahamut asked that?”

Isacharact seemed disinterested.

“Yes, he visited us both, shortly before you awoke.”

“And... you agreed?”

Now, she was annoyed.

“Am I not sitting out here with you, man-dragon? Be quiet, and take your lesson.”

Zetic recomposed himself, sitting down but with chest held out.

“Now, try again, but breathe from the belly, not the throat.”

Zetic tried to do as she asked, but obtained only the same result as before.

“No, from the belly. Take a deeper breath.”

Another puff, but still nothing came out.

“Put more power into it.”

The same as before.

“Try swallowing deeply first.”

Again, nothing.

“Far too shallow. Breathe deeply, completely *fill* your lungs.”

All Zetic managed to do was put out a very loud and drawn out ‘pehhh’ sound. He was becoming slightly annoyed at Isacharact’s instructions, which had so far proven useless.

“My Lady, with all this talk of breathing from the chest, I can’t tell whether you are teaching me to summon forth fire or to *sing*.”

Isacharact had been growing impatient at Zetic's failures as well, and she quickly snapped back with a growl.

“Then sing instead, cleric, if that is all you can do!”

Having said this, she turned away from him, looking off towards the Silver Sea in frustration.

Zetic realised that his snarky comment had been a mistake, but there didn't seem to be any way of directly undoing it, so instead he did as she suggested, and, with a deep breath, began to sing a marching-song chorale.

Meer-Khahi briefly switched his attention to him, but when Isacharact turned back to face them both, he resumed his guarded watch of her.

The choral, “Verdant Justice”, is a popular one in the Church of Torm, a generic hymn for soldiers of justice. It begins slowly and softly, but very quickly becomes rousing, and can be sung as a marching-song. It is best performed by a dozen or more deep-voiced men with a large drum beating out a regular rhythm. Zetic made good use of the opportunity to test his new ‘pipes’. He seemed to be able to hit all the notes that he used to; the extremes of his old high and low ranges seemed a bit easier, even. Perhaps his range had widened in both directions? That would be quite marvellous.

But the tune is fairly short, at least without repetitions, and Zetic soon reached the end, with Isacharact – not to mention many of the other people in the dining-room, save Meer-Khahi – looking at him as he held the last note for several seconds.

He had intended to hold it for several more, but suddenly his voice disappeared, his eyes bulged out, he turned to face away from everything, and he threw his hands around his neck, apparently choking on something.

Zetic sputtered loudly and then turned his head up, swallowed, opened his mouth, and blew out a column of fire that stretched almost a hundred feet into the air.

Thankfully, he was outside, so there was no danger to anyone or anything, and Zetic quickly snapped his mouth shut again... but he felt like some muscle in his throat was *stuck*. He could feel fire burning at his palate, and smoke and flame hissed and steamed out the sides of his mouth.

The feeling of a muscle being ‘caught’ intensified, and Zetic, letting the borrowed sword clatter to the ground, covered his mouth with his left hand while he manoeuvred his right behind his neck and started to repeatedly pound on the back of his head in an effort to ‘unstick’ the fire.

It wasn't working, though. He opened his mouth a tiny crack, and flames poured out everywhere as he spoke.

“I'm... It's stuck!”

He was still pounding away when Isacharact got up, turned to one side and, wearing an amused open-mouth grin, solidly walloped him square on the back of the head with her tail, sending him flying thirty feet forward and skidding another couple dozen along the patio, coming to a rest just before a low hedge that served as fence to the lower level of the terrace.

The sudden jolt worked, though, and Zetic could breathe normally again. He raised himself up back on all fours, caught his breath, and strode back over to his previous position, picking up Meer-Khahi's sword as he transitioned back to two feet.

“Ah... Thank you, my Lady Isacharact. Your help is most appreciated.”

Suddenly confident, he brought the sword up to his mouth and, with a little effort, aimed a smaller blast of fire down the blade, briefly giving it the appearance of a flaming sword.

“... And your advice was useful, after all.”

She smirked back at him.

“Very good. But don't get let it get to your head. You still have plenty to learn about control... and *power*.”

With that, she quickly blew out a small cone-shaped blast of cold that hit Zetic straight-on and startled him into nearly dropping the blade a second time.

Meer-Khahi immediately readied his sword in response, gripping it tightly with both hands, tip angled towards Isacharact.

But Zetic was not gravely harmed. He felt incredibly awake... as if he had been suddenly dunked in frigid water, head-first.

He stood still for a few moments, shivering, his eyes wide open, his breathing slowed and stuttered, head and neck covered in a thin web of frost, icicles already dangling from his nostrils, and his breath visible in the still-frozen air air.

My Gods, the frigid River Styx in the hells below has *nothing* on her!

And yet... and yet the blast was so *invigorating*, as well.

But Zetic was pulled from his thoughts as Meer-Khahi began to talk in a harsh tone, moving forward past Zetic, closer to Isacharact, almost putting himself between them.

“Step a-way from him, white she-dra-gon!”

Isacharact began to growl at him, and the Avoral tensed up further.

Zetic turned his head to look at the celestial, causing crackling noises as the frost on his neck shattered and fell.

“What are you doing, Meer-Khahi?”

He glanced over at Zetic.

“Stop-ping *her* from harm-ing you fur-ther. Ve-ry dan-ger-ous, this one is.”

The avoral was right to call her dangerous, but Zetic had suffered only superficial wounds from the blast of frost. Of course, that only proved how potent the real thing must be. It was quite possible that catching just one direct hit from a genuine attack would be enough to end him. For her to have such control that she could perfectly attenuate her power to produce merely ‘decorative’ effects... Zetic was only just now truly learning about a dragon’s breath, but he felt certain that it couldn’t be easy at all.

And difficulty was just it. She had so far been composed, determined, and focused in her tasks. This almost-harmless blast of frost only compounded the evidence that she knew exactly how to handle herself.

Isacharact was a deadly instrument, but precise and expertly controlled. She would never do anything that she didn’t completely intend.

In spite of the dragon-sense shouting at him otherwise, he felt perfectly safe in her company.

“Having seen her fight, I agree. But I’m not in any danger.”

Isacharact was still growling at Meer-Khahi, and the Avoral, unwilling to let her out of his sight, was forced to switch his gaze back and forth between the two dragons.

“Oh rea-lly? Do you know with whom, ex-act-ly, you are dea-ling?”

Zetic stood up all the way and spoke definitively.

“She is Isacharact the White.”

“And is that *all* that you know a-bout her, Ze-tic?”

“So far, it is all I’ve needed to know.”

Meer-Khahi guffawed, lowering his sword, and Isacharact stopped growling.

“Not a-ny more!—”

He looked straight at Zetic, gesticulating at him with his free hand.

“—For this is no mere white drake, norm-all-y the wea-kest spe-cies of dra-gon-kind. *This* crea-ture is the last sur-vi-ving daugh-ter of I-sa-sa-rach of the North.”

Meer-Khahi saw Zetic flinch at this.

“Ah, I see that you do at the least know of her mo-ther.”

Zetic swallowed and glanced up at Isacharact, who was still staring at Meer-Khahi. Hearing the name of ‘Isasarach’ recalled a book he’d read on the history of the North. The scent of danger started to overpower his earlier reasoning.

“I have heard some of the stories.”

Meer-Khahi continued, intent.

“Let me to re-fresh your me-mo-ry, then. Over se-ven hun-dred years a-go, I-sa-sa-rach ruled the North. She was a cruel and visc-i-ous ty-rant, pil-la-ging the lo-cal set-tle-ments un-til she had built up e-nough wealth to found her own em-pire, and it was only on the ve-ry eve of that foun-ding that she was slain at last.”

He paused only to verify that Isacharact was still glaring at him

“Yet up un-til then, for well o-ver three hun-dred years, her reign was al-most un-chall-enged, and she and her brood wreaked ha-voc, en-slav-ing whole ci-ties and hol-ding huge swaths of ter-ri-to-ry. E-ven the frost gi-ants, who are the na-tu-ral en-ne-mies of white dra-gons, could do no-thing to stop her, and were them-selves en-slaved.”

Zetic had swallowed again; Meer-Khahi pressed on, heedless of Isacharact’s frigid stare.

“And do not think that she waged war on the frost gi-ants to free the white dra-gons that can of-ten be found cap-tive a-mong them, for she *slaughtered* any dra-gon who was not her mate or her child.”

His story near its end, Meer-Khahi turned back to Isacharact.

“Though e-ven be-ing fam-i-ly was no guar-an-tee of safe-ty.”

There was a very long pause as Isacharact and Meer-Khahi looked at each other with ferocious intensity.

In spite of the danger, or more likely perhaps because of it, the Avoral was thoroughly unaffected by the white dragon’s supernatural stare, and as an experienced dragon-slayer he paid no heed to her general frightful presence.

Isacharact looked ready to pounce, and Meer-Khahi looked ready to jump right back at her with his still-flaming sword.

All inside the hall, a great tension seemed to have been cast, and it suffocated the other guests. Hearing the angry shouting, they had gone completely silent, unable to fathom what would happen next between the two as-good-as-declared foes.

But it was Zetic who spoke first, after first very carefully considering the situation.

“Is that all, Meer-Khahi?”

Meer-Khahi turned briefly towards Zetic but spoke while facing Isacharact.

“What do you mean, ‘is that all’? Is that not e-nough?”

“No, it isn’t.”

The Avoral turned again.

“I know plen-ty of o-ther sto-ries about I-sa-sa-rach’s reign, if you wish me to teach you more a-bout the e-vil of the crea-ture be-fore us.”

The phrasing of Meer-Khahi’s words was an opportunity, and Zetic decided that he would try to twist them back at their owner.

“You cannot teach me about Isacharact.”

“I do not un-der-stand you, Ze-tic. I al-rea-dy *have* taught you much a-bout her.”

Zetic smiled, capitalising.

“No, Meer-Khahi. You have only taught me about Isacharact’s *mother*. You’ve told me of her *lineage*, but nothing else.”

“You ques-tion the judge-ment of a Guard-i-nal? She is born from terr-i-ble e-vil, and she is e-vil her-self, that is suf-fi-cient!”

Some part of Meer-Khahi may have suddenly realised that he was mistaken, for he lowered his sword a bit more, but Zetic pressed on regardless, angry and stern.

“Is that how you think, Avoral? That the child of a monstrous creature must necessarily be just as monstrous? That is a flawed way of thinking, not becoming of a Celestial, and you shame your heritage because of it.”

Meer-Khahi grumbled, and his head darted around anxiously. Zetic’s softened his tone.

“Have you ever climbed Mount Celestia, Meer-Khahi?”

“No. I am not yet old e-nough to learn its less-ons, not rea-dy.”

“But in need of the lessons you are, nonetheless. I have never ascended the Seven Mounting Peaks and learned the Seven Great Truths which all must learn if they wish to proceed, but I know that one of the very first lessons is that you shall judge people fairly, based on their actions and not on merely their birthright. For, if we all followed faithfully in the footsteps of our parents, then never would we have great kings who left tyrant heirs, or evil men who sired compassionate children.”

Meer-Khahi had lowered his sword and was now humbly staring at the floor, his righteous anger drained by the truthful pronouncement. Zetic, meanwhile, strode forward and turned up to Isacharact.

“So *I* judge Isacharact on what she has done... And she has done a great many good things. She rescued me from Swight’s dungeon. She helped see me through my abominable form. She taught me to fly. She defeated Swight. She has even, just now, taught me to breathe fire.”

With Isacharact’s eyes following him, Zetic walked over to stand in front of a sombre-looking Meer-Khahi.

“And all that, at least, can hardly be called evil.”

“But... but sure-ly she has done e-vil in the past? You your-self told me that Monta-gue said she was vi-cious. Sure-ly she has com-mi-tted crimes in the past, and sure-ly those past crimes do mat-ter!”

“They do, but not right now, and certainly not if you don’t even know what they are. And in any case, they can always be forgiven—”

Meer-Khahi looked back up at Zetic.

“—for forgiveness is the essence of *true* goodness.”

The Avoral stared at Zetic for a few seconds, embarrassed to have been taught a lesson in justice from a mortal. Sighing in defeat, he motioned for Zetic to move aside, and strode forward, then planted his sword in the ground and kneeled before Isacharact, his head bowed.

“I a-po-lo-gize for my be-ha-vi-our. I should not have pre-judged you so.”

However sorry he was for his actions, Meer-Khahi still mistrusted Isacharact and certainly didn’t expect her to deign to answer him.

So, naturally, he was quite astonished when she did.

“Your apology is accepted, Avoral.”

Meer-Khahi got back up again, sheathing his sword and bowing to her.

“Thank you. If there is an-y-thing I can do to make a-mends...”

“As a matter of fact, there is...”

Isacharact looked at Zetic and noticed the surprised look on his face.

Good, good! Let him be confused.

This one needed a short leash. Look at him, *defending* her in such a manner! He would definitely have to pay for *that* misstep. It ought to have been quite clear to him that *she* needed no defending, especially not from a little bird-man Celestial!

And ‘coming to her rescue’ in front of everyone, too, like some chivalrous knight protecting a dainty lady of the court... Disgusting. Openly proclaiming her ‘virtues’, as if to make public his claim to her. Such *presumption!*

Oh, he needed a short leash indeed.

So let us yank that leash a bit, and remind him exactly *who* is holding it now.

Isacharact licked her lips.

“I have understand that Avorals have exquisite song-voices...”

Meer-Khahi’s eyes brightened, and he tilted his head to one side.

“... So, perhaps you would care to honour me with some music?”

The Celestial beamed with delight.

“I... Av-or-als do in-deed have a re-pu-ta-tion for sing-ing. I would be ve-ry glad to sing for you. But per-haps...”

He looked over at Zetic.

“Per-haps, Ze-tic, as your voice soun-ded quite good on-ly a mo-ment a-go, you would care to ac-com-pa-ny me in a du-et?”

“Er... why, certainly.”

Isacharact grinned maliciously.

Perfect. Another challenge that the cleric couldn’t win. *That* ought to show him up, and take him town a notch or two.

Neither of them was paying attention to her expressions at the moment, however.

“Do you know the Mul-ho-ran-di op-er-a, A-sii-da?”

‘Asiida’ was one of the few pieces of Mulhorandi performance art that had made its way to the West, a magnificent and easily-adapted piece about love and honour set during the first Unther-Mulhorand wars over a thousand years ago, and it was a favourite of dozens of

touring companies, not to mention their patrons. Zetic wondered if Meer-Khahi had seen such a wandering performance while fighting on the Prime Material plane, just as he himself had seen several performances in cities across the continent?

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Nu-mé, Guard-i-an and Pro-tec-tor’? I will sing the part of Ram-fis.”

That was one of the more simpler pieces in the opera, a majestic bass-and-tenor duet, accompanied by a chorus as well as instruments. Each part was only two couplets long, but it was the harmony that made the tune enjoyable. As a human, Zetic hadn’t been able to sing the deep part of Remfis, so he was more familiar with Radames’ tenor.

“All right.”

Meer-Khahi took in a few deep breaths and shortly thereafter launched into the great song that praised Numérak, one of the Mulhorandi’s ancient and long-dead Gods, beseeching him to watch over the land and protect its soldiers in war.

And Zetic was *completely* flabbergasted, for the Avoral’s nasal, staccato, high-pitched, stuttering and wordy speaking voice had been entirely replaced with an incredibly deep and amazingly rich bass voice that projected inwards from the balcony and reverberated back into the dining hall, easily filling the whole room.

He stared agape as Meer-Khahi sang on, and Isacharact saw that he was so bowled over by the change that he came very close to missing his own cue. Joining in with gusto, Zetic couldn’t come close to matching the Avoral’s powerful sound, and his voice felt flimsy and inarticulate compared to it.

With nearly the whole room watching and listening at the patio performance, Isacharact began to look around, showing off. Her lips were shut, but her eyes were silently saying, ‘There now, you see? *I’m* holding the reins on him’.

She turned back to Zetic.

He was looking straight back at her... and there was a hint of defiance in his eye as he poured all his energy into the duet, trying his best to approximate Meer-Khahi’s sheer power of voice.

Meer-Khahi sang on, heedless of their interchange. The song reached its end, and he and Zetic both held the last note out for a while...

A bit long of a while, actually, for the Avoral glanced over at the gold drake and seemed *delighted* to see that Zetic was rapidly running out of breath.

Taking some small satisfaction in this little victory, he nevertheless stopped short of holding it past Zetic’s limit – though when he actually did cease singing, he calmly stood as if nothing had happened, whereas Zetic doubled over immediately, choking and panting, reminded of the aerial acrobatics less than a tenday ago.

Recovering slightly, he sat up again, only to see Isacharact grinning greedily at him.

Hah! Put that failure in your hat, cleric.

The way his chest was heaving, he must be completely winded, whereas the Avoral looked as though he could have held the note for another hour.

Although... the look of defiance hasn't gone away, and even though he's out of breath, he looks ready to do it all over again.

If I'm the one holding the reins, then this horse is chomping at the bit, raring for more, daring me to send another challenge his way.

And even in defeat, he was victorious! For his singing had been good, in spite of the presence of a superior.

With the two of them still staring at each other, Isacharact became angry; furious, even.

So much for deflating him; this little scheme seemed only to raise him up higher – in front of the whole room, in spite of being the worse performer, he'd proudly shown off his not inconsiderable ability.

And by looking her in the eye while he was doing it – whereas Meer-Khahi had been looking away, or had had his eyes closed, focusing on the music – it had seemed to all as if *Zetic* had been the one singing to *her*, with the Avoral performing for everyone *else*.

The gold dragon stared at her, determined, his chest flexing in and out ... Such energy, such spirit, such a display for her benefit!

Perhaps it was delightful this way, too.

Isacharact kept her frowning eyes, but her mouth opened at last, and from it came the same growl that *Zetic* had heard from her earlier.

Or not the same, really – for it was more of a content *purr* than an angry rumble.

He had once heard a rich merchant's tame leopard make a similar noise, when it was being scratched behind the ears...

They were still staring at each other, though the stares had changed in character. Meer-Khahi looked back and forth between them.

“Well. That was en-joy-a-ble, but I must take your leave. I... should per-haps reflect on what has hap-ened. I hope we will meet a-gain, Ze-tic.”

Zetic turned his head.

“I hope so too, Meer-Khahi... If you are still here tomorrow, I should welcome the opportunity to spar. And perhaps in a few years, we can return here to climb the mountain together.”

The avoral put away his sword at last.

“I will be here, Ze-tic. Good-night.”

Meer-Khahi took the second sword back – and Zetic could swear there was a smile on the Avoral’s frozen, immutable, beaked face as he bowed and walked away.

Zetic turned back to Isacharact.

She had stopped purring.

If we can’t pull on the reins to control it, let’s tug at the leash of this strange meadow-lark instead, and see if it comes along.

“My meal is finished. I’ll go see the grounds outside.”

She shot him a glance as she turned to leave.

The leash was indeed short, and Zetic followed after her.

If the inside of Bahamut’s palace is a testament to wealth built from stone, metal, and gems, the grounds are a testament to wealth built out of nature itself. The trees in Bahamut’s garden grew to incredible sizes, with beautiful emerald green leaves and flowers of all colours. Trim grass and meticulously made flagstone walkways let visitors walk beneath the shady canopy, while a cornucopia of heavenly birds and other animals frolic all around.

Zetic was marvelled by the gardens, but Isacharact almost didn’t seem to be paying them any attention, striding along as if they weren’t even there.

A beautiful celestial bird with a long colourful tail perched on a low branch began to call out in the evening, and she stopped to look at it, reflecting.

“Tell me, cleric... Where did you learn to sing?”

He beamed with pride.

“My Lady, you are in the company of an ordained Senior Brother, a Hieromonk, in Torm’s *Glorious Order of the Chanters*.”

Isacharact turned to him and cocked an eye.

“So... you were a choir-boy?”

Zetic snorted, annoyed.

“I joined the Chanters at the age of 14. That’s hardly a ‘choir-boy’.”

Isacharact laughed amusedly, having succeeded in disrupting his calm demeanour. The disruption was only momentary, however, and Zetic turned the conversation around.

“And when, exactly, did you develop this recent ‘liking’ for singing?”

“My dear cleric, *all* dragons are appreciative of fine art. Do you recall what I told you outside Swight’s keep? About seeing the world as made up of the works of mortals, not gods? The conversation went elsewhere, but a corollary of what I had said is that dragons appreciate what it takes to make great things: skill, effort, and time. Anything that results from a combination of those three is apt to impress a dragon.”

Zetic nodded his head slowly.

“I can understand that... I only asked because you did not seem interested when I sang for the war-band at night. They made requests, and sang along, while you sat calmly to the side, as if not really paying attention.”

Isacharact’s expression turned to ice.

“Do not expect me to clap my hands, and stomp my feet, and dance about gaily just because someone is singing reasonably well, cleric. I am connoisseur of refinement, not a silly young maiden, drunk with mead at a harvest festival.”

For Zetic, who had happily entertained great men and women of all kinds, to great acclaim, from as high as a King (once) and down the social ladder from there all the way to the bottom, that last barb was painful. He swallowed, and looked away. So much for impressing her with song. Perhaps this really was all a foolish endeavour after all.

Zetic’s mind wandered, and he remembered a bard he’d once adventured with. She shared his morals, she was intelligent, and quite attractive, and also great fun to be with. They had had many good times singing together in taverns and courts. But he’d never felt a ‘spark’ with her, and in the end, though he thought she might have wanted more, he came to treat her like a sister, not a lover.

If he really was ready to ‘settle down’, maybe he would do better to seek her out again, or find someone like her, instead of bumbling around in a God’s palace trying to court a great

white dragon, thinking he was doing a pretty good job for a novice, but in reality only managing to look like an idiot.

And isn't that what the stodgy old high priests of Torm had always accused him, and in fact continued to accuse him, of doing? "You think you know better than our Lord Torm, do you Zetic? He tells us evil must be destroyed, and you go and invite it over for tea and biscuits! And not one word from your lips about how it 'seemed right' to you, or about how it worked 'just fine' in the past! That it happens to have worked for you so far is no excuse to disobey the will of our God!"

Perhaps the priests were right, in the end. Following one's heart was a risky endeavour, fraught with the peril of failure. Obedience was the safer path. The only problem was that it didn't always feel *right*.

The singing-bird continued its cry, waving its tail each time it sang its little song, looking around to project its call in all directions.

After several minutes of silence, Isacharact spoke.

"I am tired. I will return to the room."

Despite his misgivings about the current state of affairs, Zetic was still quite awake.

"Already? The evening is still young."

"I have been awake since before dawn, cleric, while you only woke up after midday. And your sleep was most agitated last night; you thrashed violently under the effects of Bahamut's spell, and I was constantly awoken by your spasms."

"Oh... I had no idea. I'm terribly sorry."

"Do not apologize, cleric, for something beyond your control. And besides..."

Her head pointing up towards the stars, she deigned to look at him sideways. The last time Zetic had seen that look in her eyes was just before she dove down to the tree-tops, after he'd goaded her into showing him some aerial acrobatics.

"...It was *my* choice."

The walk back had been in silence, but as Isacharact bedded down on the room's plush cushions, Zetic spoke up as he closed the door behind them.

"Er... If you, uhm..."

He turned around to face her. She was looking at him with a tired, and slightly irritated, expression.

“Might it be better if I slept off to one side? I, er... I wouldn't to disturb you in the night, if my sleep should be 'agitated' again.”

Her eyes narrowed.

What foolishness was this? After all the things he'd done today without asking her leave, now he was hesitating before doing the *one* thing she had already invited him to do? The mention of 'disturbing' her in the night was clearly a misdirection; there was something else. Perhaps her last sting had finally put him in his place.

Zetic looked genuinely apologetic... and perhaps a bit afraid.

It couldn't just be the result of a pointed insult. He'd been nervous to sleep with her on the first night, which was understandable enough, but for the next two, while they travelled in the Thayan hunting preserve, he'd clearly become comfortable beside her.

Ahh... But that yearning look in his eyes when he'd asked Bahamut for this form... He hadn't worn it while they were flying playfully above the forest. Then, he had only thought of her as a friend, as a *comrade*. This morning, however, he had hesitantly declared himself her suitor, and now things were different.

His code of chivalry told him: 'Until you're certain she's yours, you can look all you want, but don't touch'.

Amusing.

He could seem so mature with his eloquent speech, and so youthful with his abundant energy, but now he seemed childish by holding to a taboo which had no place in the current context.

It was disrespectful. Did he think her at his mercy? Did he think she would allow him to take a 'liberty' he had not earned? If she had not wanted him to sleep next to her, tonight, she would have long ago told him to get another room.

It would be for the best to stamp out such foolishness before it could grow worse, but first... perhaps a little inspection was in order?

“The day isn't completely over yet, cleric. Worry about sleeping arrangements later. For now, go over to the mirror, and let's have a look at you.”

“All right.”

Perpetually under starlight, Celestia never truly got either bright or dark; while daytime was slightly darker than an overcast day on Faerûn, night time, conversely, was slightly brighter than a moonlit night. Bahamut's glittering palace did not rely entirely upon the natural sky, however, and magical lights in small alcoves high up on the walls provided illumination automatically, as the occupants desired. As a result, it suddenly became quite bright in the room.

Zetic walked over on all fours to the mirror and sat down, staring into it, still not quite comfortable with what was staring back.

Isacharact paced around him for a few minutes, sizing him up.

“Well. I wouldn't say that you are ugly, but you are certainly the strangest-looking gold dragon that I have ever heard of, let alone seen.”

“How so?”

“There are many differences. First of all, there's the hair –”

She took some of it in her hand, lifting it to feel its weight, and then squeezing it to feel its consistency.

“– which I have never seen on *any* dragon before, though I have heard tell that those in the land of Kara-Tur far to the east of Faerûn have manes such as yours. For hair, it is quite heavy and thick, yet it is also flexible. I do not think it will be easily cut, and it might even serve to ward off the occasional blow. As for its appearance, though very unusual, I would say that it gives you a rather... regal... look.”

Hearing her words, Zetic began to feel less uncomfortable with the reflection of himself in the mirror. Isacharact released the bundle of hair, letting it fall back down.

“And then there are your horns. Gold dragon horns are usually flat-surfaced, golden-coloured, very short and very thick, and sprout straight out from the sides of the head. Yours are spiralled, brown, long and thin, and curve outwards from the back of your skull.”

She reached up and grabbed one, feeling its texture.

“I know of no dragon horns that truly resemble yours; those of red dragons are of roughly the same length, have a very similar texture, and start from the same place on the head, but theirs do not curve in the same way, nor are they as darkly coloured, and they are not nearly so thin..”

Isacharact tugged on the horn, pulling down. Zetic allowed his head to tilt a bit, but he resisted the pull.

“In spite of their fragile appearance, they *do* seem solid, but I would not trust them in a fight. The Lord of the North Wind must have chosen these for their aesthetics.”

Letting go, Zetic's head returned to its normal position, and while Isacharact circled around to the other side, he ran both hands along the horns, feeling them for himself.

“Your eyes are different, too. They're the right colour and shape, certainly, but they're large – very large, even.”

And now Zetic turned his head to one side, putting his right cheek close up against the mirror to examine the same side's eye.

“Anything else unusual about my face?”

“A few things. Your head is considerably longer than normal for a gold dragon, but as they are the most squat-skulled of all dragon-kind, I would consider your a considerable improvement. Also unlike normal golds, instead of many tendril-like whiskers of scale and flesh jutting out from your cheeks, lips and chin, you have four bristly bundles of hair.”

He looked at the mirror straight-on again and tried to wrap one of the whisker-hairs around a finger, but it was stiff, and it refused to curl.

“How about the rest of me, then?”

Isacharact looked him over.

“Minor differences from the average. With the mane, perhaps it's no surprise you don't have the usual pair of frills running down the back of your neck. The wings, slightly shorter but significantly wider,—”

He flexed them in and out.

“—larger back legs,—”

Zetic got up on two feet and took a few steps around. Nothing had really changed with him physically, but the floor didn't seem so slippery any more, and he didn't feel like he was about to fall.

“—and longer arms.”

Sitting back down, he stretched them out in front of him, examining the clawed hands at their ends. He grinned to himself when he realized that he could now touch his fingers to his thumbs, if only just barely.

Isacharact backed away and lay down on the cushions again.

“All in all, unusual-looking for a gold dragon, but you're still immediately recognizable as a member of that subspecies. It goes without saying that you look much better as an elegant gold than as a hideous grey, of course.”

Her summation shifted Zetic's attitude. He was no longer horrified by his appearance, but was becoming... proud... of it, instead.

Zetic tilted his head and smiled at himself in the mirror.

Really, you don't look bad at all, do you? A bit imposing maybe, definitely quite alien, but... somehow warm, perhaps even handsome... And *she* had even said you looked *regal* and *elegant*.

The memory of those particular compliments made him want to sit up a bit straighter and puff out his chest, though the only one really paying attention to him at present was his own reflection.

Yes, how's that for Torm's servant, now? Stride up to some cleric of Bane or Cyric and see them tremble before His power. Open up a crypt full of undead and have them run in fear of His divine light. Break down the door of some evil wizard of Thay, and see...

And see the faces your companions.

This has all turned out well for *you*, but what about *them*?

Zetic's smile disappeared.

I... I really ought to go and speak with Ravel's family in Cormyr, and the Knights of the Purple Dragon, and tell them her story. And I must make a pilgrimage to one of the monasteries of the order of the Yellow Rose to pay my respects to Shi'lk. And Methalas... someone should to send word to Evermeet of his fall – and that someone should be *me*. Jeck hadn't seen her family in the Great Dale in a long time; they would be anxious to hear news of her, even if it was sad news. And Nicholas... Nicholas was not a member of any orders, nor was he close with his family, but he *did* have a brother in Baldur's Gate. A brother who deserved to be paid at least one last visit by Zetic.

'They who are dead leave their work behind, and they who live must bear the burdens of the fallen. But if you live, bear those burdens well, for such is the order of the world.'

The gospel of Kelemvor, God of The Dead.

“Well? Are you finished in front of that mirror, cleric?”

“Yes... Yes, I suppose I am.”

He turned around, and Isacharact saw sadness on his face.

“What's wrong?”

“I... I was just remembering my companions, who fell in Swight’s castle. The memory of them makes me feel sad, to know that they will be absent forevermore. As I am a cleric and was their friend, there are... errands... that I should run, to honour them. And even though I had only known them for a few short months...”

He looked down at the floor.

“... I still miss them dearly, and am lonely without them.”

Isacharact turned to one side, considering for a moment, then turned back to look straight at him.

“I am tired, cleric, but *you* have not slept well for three days. I did not know your companions... but I think I know you, and I can imagine who they must have been, for their deaths to trouble you so...”

Zetic looked up into her icy gaze.

“...I know much of the dead, cleric, and the dead are *patient*. You will not serve your friends by being troubled in your sleep. Until we return to the Realms, put them out of your mind.”

Looking away to consider her words, Zetic rubbed his palms together as if in prayer, nodding.

“Yes... I will. Thank you.”

He looked back, smiling gently. But her expression had become colder.

“Good. Now... Get something *else* in your head, cleric.”

She almost snarled at him as she spoke the next words, enunciating them clearly and slowly through clenched teeth.

“If you intend to continue with what we’ve been doing all day, you will very shortly find me unreceptive, even hostile... *if* you also persist in treating me like someone who can’t defend herself...”

Zetic gulped. A frothy mix of emotions was welling up inside of him.

“... So, put ‘chivalry’ out of your mind. *I’m* not some helpless maiden, and *you* aren’t my noble knight in shining armour...”

After a moment, her eyes went soft, and her expression changed into a grin as she looked him up and down.

“... even if you *are* armoured... and shining.”

The cauldron of disparate feelings inside of him continued to bubble and boil, but one of them rose above all: *relief*.

So... He'd made some mistakes, but she was still interested, and she was giving him another chance. He'd better stop making a mess.

Zetic bowed, and put one arm across his chest.

“Lady Isacharact, you are powerful and wise, and I am but a humble fool far out of his element. You have been abundantly patient with me, and I—”

“Shut up and come to bed, cleric.”

She interrupted him harshly, her patience worn thin.

With his mouth still half-open, Zetic stared at the floor for a moment in shock.

So much for not making any more mess.

He abruptly turned his head up, slapped an uncomfortably apologetic look on his face, put his front legs down on the ground, and trotted over to her left side under her watchful, wary, gaze.

Zetic took a moment to settle and arrange the cushions a bit more to his liking, and then, with an exaggerated air of casualness, plopped himself down beside her, but not touching her, and laid his head down, shutting his eyes.

Isacharact looked down at him, then rolled her eyes, looking away and sighing with chagrin. Beating some sense into him might actually require *beating* some sense into him.

Zetic smacked his lips and tried to go to sleep. He started to doze off, when suddenly Isacharact rolled over on her right flank, grabbed his back with both her left legs, and rolled him over onto his side as well, pulling his back tight against her chest. The sudden chill of her body against him shocked him awake.

Isacharact grinned contentedly. He was tremendously warm to the touch, and this only made her want to envelop him further.

Zetic shivered and tried to pull away, but Isacharact only dug in her claws and pulled him back harder. He blurted out in surprise.

“You’re... you’re so cold...”

Isacharact's grin widened, and she pulled him even tighter, sending more shivers down his spine. Surprisingly, he was still quite warm, but his temperature was dropping quickly. Not even her red had been *this* hot-blooded.

“You hadn't noticed?”

Her frigid touch was almost sapping the air from his lungs, and his breathing became laboured.

“You weren't this c-c-cold before, in the forest.”

“Oh, but I *was*. You just weren't a creature of flame, then.”

Zetic was panting heavily, almost in a panic, and Isacharact started to chuckle. She had always found the clash of temperatures tantalizing... even though, with every single one of her mates, she had always won.

“Don't fight it. You can't win...”

She reached her hand down and gently caressed his chest. The cold dug into him, deadening his senses and his shivering stopped.

“... Go to sleep.”

Enveloped by cold, a sudden wave of exhaustion overcame Zetic, and he fell into a deep slumber.

“Was what Meer-Khaii said yesterday about your mother true?”

It was morning again, and Isacharact and Zetic were outside in the garden after breakfast, walking slowly along one of the paths.

The night's rest – frigid though it was – had brought renewed self-confidence to Zetic. Looking in the mirror provoked no thoughts of regret or remorse, although when he had made his morning prayers, it had still been a tremendous divine reassurance to feel his God's power energize him once more.

He was also becoming more comfortable around *her*, for when he had awoken, she was still soundly asleep, a grin on her face. Sometime in the night she had relaxed her grip, and he was no longer pressed tightly against her, though her left forepaw was still lazily draped over his chest. And the 'scent' of terrific power was gone, as if it had been switched off sometime in the night.

It was around again now in the garden, however... though it seemed to affect Zetic a little less.

Still, when he asked this question, Isacharact coldly stared forward at the pathway, her upper lip curling briefly into a snarl.

“Yes.”

As they walked together, Zetic pressed on in spite of the cold answer.

“I... have heard only a few scattered tales of her rule over the Northlands. I never realised the scope of her enterprise...”

Isacharact tilted her head, mulling over the past. She didn't seem to particularly want to answer Zetic's implied question, though she did so anyway.

“There isn't much that I can tell you first-hand, cleric. I was born very near to the end of her reign; one of her youngest children. I was but a youth when she finally fell. My elder siblings occasionally told stories from before my time, but no doubt much of it was fantasy.”

“She never spoke to you herself?”

“Very rarely. We had tutors, and guards, and a window onto her court, and that was the most I saw of her. She believed in survival of the fittest, and she deliberately pitted us against each other, the nursery more like an arena.”

“What about your father? Did he never speak of the past?”

“I do not know my father.”

Zetic was aghast.

“What? How could you not have met your father?”

She snorted indignantly.

“Your ignorance of dragon-kind is deplorable, cleric. Even *metallic* dragons may lay eggs in a secluded cave and then depart, trusting in the hatchlings to fend for themselves. Isacharact ‘displayed’ many of her mates at court, and my father might have been any one of a dozen of them, or he might have been hidden away, or been driven off or killed before I hatched. She did not permit any of the males access to the crèche; she considered all of the offspring her own personal property.”

“It doesn't sound like she loved her children very much.”

“No, cleric, you're wrong; she cared for us a great deal. She believed that we would not survive without quickly learning of life's constant struggle; we were always under pressure to not only endure, but triumph. Her ban on the males was so that they would not interfere with the natural order of things, giving unfair advantage to their own progeny.”

Zetic began gesticulating with his hands, agitated.

“Your cradle sounds like a crucible. What happened to the children who failed?”

Isacharact spoke flatly, her voice determined.

“By failing in the nursery they proved that they would fail in the outside world. The consequence was the same either way.”

Zetic stopped and stared mutely at the ground, unable to fathom such a childhood. Walking a bit past him, Isacharact twisted to look at him down at him, speaking slowly.

“... Do not think her methods so alien, cleric. Most dragons, myself included, have taken a similar approach with their own children, if not quite to her extremes.”

He looked up at her.

“You’ve had partners before?”

Offended, she erupted into furious emotion.

“Of course! What do you think I am, some kind of undesirable old maid? You’d have difficulty finding a male dragon, chromatic or metallic, who *isn’t* interested in mating with a daughter of Isasarach. You may only know about my mother in particular, but dragons prize strong bloodlines, and I am but the latest of a very old and distinguished pedigree.”

Zetic swallowed as she walked away. Wonderful; the old fool of a cleric has fallen not just for any dragon, but for a dragon *princess*.

It’s not too late to go running to Bahamut to ask him for your old form back. You’re not too old; you can still go and find a pretty woman to settle down with. If your friend the bard is already taken, well, wasn’t Archdeacon Spaqué trying to fix you up with his paladin daughter last summer? She seemed a bit keen on you, you know.

He caught up, wondering once again if he ought to reconsider, just as they rounded a corner and started down a path between two very neat hedgerows that were presently bursting with fragrant purple blossoms.

For the moment, Isacharact’s rage seemed to have been contained to that singular outburst.

“And what about *your* family, cleric?”

“My family are tradesmen, honest and hardworking... but humble.”

“I am not surprised. Your behaviour marks you as someone who had neither to fight over scraps nor was born into privilege.”

“Yes, we had what we needed, and a little more.”

How very strange, to see him reserved and terse. No long-winded stories and flowing prose about his childhood. It might be interesting to discover why.

“Hmm. And was one of your parents a priest?”

“No. Nor did either of them worship Torm. I made that choice on my own.”

Isacharact noticed that he did not volunteer anything further. Did he have something to be embarrassed about? Perhaps a compliment would loosen his tongue?

“I have seen your spellcasting, cleric. Your control of the divine is considerable. Have you tried your hand at the arcane?”

“I was tested, but I haven’t the aptitude for it.”

She cocked an eye him.

“You do now. It is within *all* dragons to cast spells, and we do so in much the same way that men do. This is no surprise, however, for it is from us that the Elves learned magic, and from them it was passed on to Mankind. With your ecclesiastical abilities, you already draw upon the divine side of the Weave – the Power; now, you should learn to use the arcane side – the Art – as well, like this...”

They stopped in front of a large field ringed with trees, and Isacharact stood up on her back feet. Zetic had to crane his neck up to keep her face in his sight.

Waving her hands at the field, she spoke loudly, and Zetic was taken aback at her voice; he could swear he wasn’t listening to her speak, but rather hearing some raging torrential snowstorm in the mountains of the North.

“Rrassa ’shé ssuumi Norkéjjomu d’yyauus!”

Zetic was intrigued by the words themselves, but his attention was quickly drawn to the field before them, where a grey cloud had fallen and a storm was now in progress, completely obscuring visibility along the whole half-mile.

He could tell that Isacharact cancelled the spell before it could do any real damage, wanting to show off the potential power rather than actually wreck anything in the Dragon-God’s garden. The cloud lifted to reveal grass and shrubs covered with a thin layer of snow – and trees too, with icicles dangling from their branches.

Isacharact looked at Zetic smugly, fists planted on top of her hips.

“Well?”

“It’s beautiful...”

He looked around; it really *was* beautiful, the way the white snow shone brightly. But then he thought back to Isacharact's casting of the spell, and turned to her.

"Was that Draconic you were speaking in just now?"

"Yes, the language of dragons. Do you know it?"

"I never learned it ... but it's the strangest thing. I feel like I understand what you said... Was it 'Summoned forth, the sleet-storms of the North are'?"

"Roughly, yes. There isn't an exact translation into the Common tongue of men, but that is quite close. Your ability to comprehend me is Bahamut's work, no doubt."

"Yes, He has given to me the knowledge to hear Draconic."

And Zetic immediately did a double-take, for the sounds that had actually come out of his lips might've made him choke on his own tongue, were he still human, and he still almost felt like gagging now. Isacharact amusedly watched him as he coughed away in a fit of as-yet-unsuppressed automatic human reflexes.

"He gave you the knowledge to *speak* Draconic, too, apparently... and with no noticeable accent, either. Men usually can't summon up the proper amount of throatiness to pronounce Draconic correctly."

Zetic's coughing ceased.

"I can see why. It's an interesting language, but I think I prefer Elven."

Isacharact, still standing up on her hind legs and towering over him, gave a dismissive snort.

"Bah, Elven. It can only be spoken delicately. There isn't any way to project real power through its flowing verses."

Zetic knew a little bit about ancient Elven sorcery.

"Ah, but Elven High Magic is powerful, all the same."

Her face brightened, and there was a playful energy in her voice.

"Wrong again, cleric. Elven High Magic is cast in Seldruin, not common Elven."

Zetic raised a finger and opened his mouth as if to speak, but comically conceded her point by the distinguished absence of any words coming out. Isacharact chuckled at the mimed action before he moved on to make a point of his own.

"All right, so Elven doesn't sound powerful... But is there any way to project *delicateness* through Draconic's harsh words?"

“Is Bahamut not the Lord of Bards, cleric? Draconic is an elder tongue – some even say it is the *eldest* tongue – and to this day there are constantly fresh compositions added to its considerable wealth of poetry.”

“Hmm. I’ve never heard of draconic poetry. But the language’s words now dance in my head... I wonder if I could make some?”

And Zetic began to recite the simple and well-known poem ‘On a Bough and a Shield’, which tells of the midsummer’s romance of a paladin of Cormyr and a druid from Amn at the festival of Shieldmeet, translating it into Draconic as he went along.

It didn’t *quite* translate exactly, however, and Isacharact, who knew the original poem, began to cringe, and then found herself laughing out loud at some of the more hilarious results. Even Zetic had trouble focusing long enough to finish the recital.

“Cleric, copper dragons are great appreciators of poetry and music, and they are also forgiving souls. But were you a human bard and you recited *that* mess to one of them, you would find yourself *eaten* as a warning to anyone else.”

Zetic bowed flamboyantly, pleased that he had at least elicited a laugh. But at the bottom of his bow, he tilted his head up mischievously.

“Would my Lady grace me with a poem, then, to show me the correct way?”

Isacharact grumbled.

“You are developing an annoying habit, cleric, of failing miserably at something, and then twisting my insult in order to goad me into showing you up.”

Zetic, still smiling, slowly raised his head back up, sitting down.

“Well, it *is* said that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones.”

She replied with a mixture of anger and sarcasm; it wiped the grin from his face.

“Is that what you think, cleric? That I am made of glass? That I sit beneath a fragile dome, throwing stones like a delinquent? Perhaps you think it is because I am chromatic, that I must take every opportunity to insult everyone?”

He wanted to interject, to try to correct himself, and claim that wasn’t what he had meant, but she carried on.

“... I *choose* my battles, cleric. I am strong, but even the strongest can fall if they are not also cautious.”

Zetic, frustrated with himself, didn’t know what to say. Wasn’t he engaging in the same kind of playful banter as before, the same kind which had encouraged her to show him ‘good flight’? Weren’t countless of his friends also won the same way? Why wasn’t it working here?

Or maybe it was *almost* working, and while he could do better, she was just playing with him, using his missteps as excuses to pour out her frosty wrath in order to see what would happen.

For Isacharact quietly sat down, tilted her head up high, and began to recite the very same poem – with considerably different choices of words – in as elegant a manner as he'd ever heard. The beautiful poetry rolled off her tongue like meltwater dripping from an icicle. Every word was savoured, every syllable cherished. Now and then, she closed her eyes, almost losing herself in the recital.

Zetic's mouth hung open.

Isacharact rolled the 'r' of the final word for an extended period of time, finishing the poem. Seeing Zetic's expression, she reached over and patted him on the cheek.

“Now, go and spar with your little avoral friend. I will spend the day making good use of this rare opportunity see the rest of Bahamut's palace and grounds.”

“I... but...that...”

She strode comfortably off, ignoring his stupefied mumbling. Zetic called after her.

“... How did you manage that so quickly???”

She stopped for a moment, and turned her head. There was a satisfied grin on her face.

“My dear cleric, ‘On a Bough and a Shield’ was *written* in draconic. You know only the vulgar Chondathan version. Trying to translate it back was bound to fail.”

With a contented laugh, she left, leaving him to ponder things for a moment before deciding it wiser to obey, and left to find Meer-Khail in order to at least practice one thing he *was* good at.

Night came again. Isacharact had returned to the room first, and was already laying down by the time Zetic arrived, exhausted from an entire day of training with a weapon he wasn't quite comfortable with using hands that didn't quite respond to everything he wanted them to do.

He shut the doors, and didn't make the same mistake twice. He lay down by her side, this time close enough that their flanks abutted. She purred very softly as he did so; at least he'd managed to behave as desired this time.

Closing his eyes, he whispered a near-silent prayer to Torm that she wouldn't force her cold on him as she had the previous night. Gods knew, there was so much of her that he adored

and craved, but she could still terrify him. He begged his patron for a little more of the former, and a little less of the latter.

Perhaps Torm was listening, but if so, he was not the only one.

“Cleric.”

“Yes, Isacharact?”

She lowered her voice until it was whisper.

“You’ve never tried to *sneak up* on a dragon, have you?”

Confused, he replied in a whisper as well.

“Er, no?”

Her volume decreased further still. Zetic had to strain to pick out her voice over the sound of the softly-swaying trees outside in Bahamut’s garden.

“It is not an advisable course of action. Our senses are very keen.”

He still didn’t quite grasp her point.

“Ah? I shall remember that.”

Finally, she became so quiet that even the sound of his own breathing was louder, yet he still found he could pick out her words clearly.

“Not even your *God* could convince me to do other than what I please.”

Zetic clenched his teeth when he realized what she meant. Shutting his eyes, he braced himself for another harrowing experience.

While he lay there anxiously, Isacharact stopped purring, lifting her head up.

And Zetic nearly gasped when she placed it down on the other side of him, draping her heavy and very cold neck across his. She moved it around a bit – caressing him, maybe? Or maybe she was just trying to find a comfortable position.

Either way, when she was ready, she began to purr again.

Zetic could *feel* the vibrations in her throat.

Isacharact grinned to herself, enjoying this sensation as well.

When he was sufficiently acclimatised to the experience, he spoke up in a hushed voice.

“Isacharact?”

She replied where she was, in an equally hushed and soft voice.

“Yes, cleric?”

“We –”

No reaction from her at the use of that particular pronoun. Zetic swallowed, and continued.

“– We can’t stay here in the palace forever, I think.”

“No. Bahamut’s galleries and grounds are magnificent, but I have had my fill.”

“Where shall we go? I... I don’t know if I can go straight back to the church, to my life from before Swight. I’m not ready to face those I knew from before. I need more time before paying my respects to my friends.”

“Come with me to my home, in The North.”

“What is it like, there?”

He couldn’t see it, but Zetic could feel the grin on Isacharact’s face.

“Cold.”

“When shall we leave?”

“I leave tomorrow.”

“Then... then I will come with you.”

“Good. Sleep well, cleric.”

“Sleep well, Isacharact.”

Before he fell asleep, Zetic felt a frosty paw rest on top of him shoulder. One clawed finger slowly dragged up and down his chest, stopping at each ridge between the scales.

They left late the next day, after dinner. One of Bahamut’s attendants, a great gold wyrm, took them to a grand summoning-chamber and opened up for them a shimmering magic gateway from the divine realm back to the mortal plane.

With one last farewell look at the magnificent palace of the dragon-deity, they stepped through the portal. But as they did so, Isacharact could swear the attendant winked at her...

What an odd thing for a gold dragon to do... unless he wasn’t–

Her thoughts were cut short as they were hit by the cold of the North where a veritable blizzard was in progress. Isacharact came to her senses and shouted to Zetic so that he would hear her over the roaring wind.

“Take to the air, cleric! My lair is not far from here.”

Ordinarily, she wouldn't have waited for him, but the winds were tremendous, and she knew he had never flown in anything but clear skies, so she remained on the ground, patient. ‘Survival of the fittest’ was all well and good, but one couldn't throw a child into a wolf's jaws and expect it to win.

Zetic's determination surprised her, however, and after a brief struggle, he figured out that he needed to take off into the wind, and got himself unsteadily airborne, climbing slowly but resolutely. As he started to disappear into the falling snow and fog, she took off after him, and being completely comfortable flying in such a squall, quickly overtook him, leading him to their destination.

Flying in the ferocious storm was bound to be difficult for a novice, but Zetic had learned flight as a weak aberration and now, as a strong, fully rested, fully healed, and almost-adult gold, he was tackling the job well. Isacharact glanced back at him and was even a little impressed at the way he was flying, managing to keep at a fairly consistent distance behind her and slightly to her side without too much apparent effort.

And the way he flew... hair billowing about in the wind, head thrust forward determinedly, arms and legs held tightly close to the chest, wings beating deep flaps... he looked good; the experience of flying as a deformed grey had forced him to develop good flight habits, and he hadn't forgotten them.

A *born* dragon of his apparent dragon age would be doing better in the storm, Isacharact reflected, but not by much. That was high praise.

They soon reached the small outcropping of rocks that marked the entrance to Isacharact's home.

Buried deep inside a great glacial shelf, walls of ice formed a labyrinthine passageway to Isacharact's cavern. What little light that passed through the frozen ceiling was too dim to illuminate the interior and only served to give the whole place a ghostly appearance. Despite the darkness, Zetic found he had no trouble seeing far enough in front of him to follow Isacharact.

The frozen cave was an alien environment to Zetic, but the realization that this sort of environment might be completely ordinary for Isacharact was... disconcerting.

And yet... Isacharact was still there in front of him, leading him deeper into the icy den. Only that thought, and the knowledge that it was *her* icy den, brought him any comfort.

“Here we are.”

After almost an hour of slow walking down slippery, ethereal corridors, with the howling wind slowly diminishing in volume until it was completely gone, Isacharact moved off to one side as the somewhat narrow corridor which they had been prowling through opened up into a great cavern, nearly three hundred feet wide and double that in depth. It was more brightly lit than the tunnel passage had been, though that was all relative, and it was still quite dark.

Dragons have excellent eyes, however, and Zetic could clearly see the room.

And what he saw *in* it made him gasp.

An enormous amount of treasure was piled before them. Coins of platinum, gold, and silver were heaped in the millions, almost completely covering the floor. Gemstones of all sorts were scattered between them, glittering in the dim light with such brightness that the crystalline walls paled in comparison to their shine. Along the walls, all around the room, were stacked a hundred other kinds of treasure – precious items of all sorts, from cloth, to artwork, to books, to weapons, and more.

Isacharact, sitting comfortably just inside the room and facing him with her treasure displayed behind her, saw the awe on his face, and chuckled.

“Surprised? Well, what were you expecting to find?”

Zetic was still marvelling at the incredible hoard.

“I... I don't know.”

“It didn't occur to you that a powerful adult dragon would be rich?”

“Well, yes, but... I mean, there's 'rich' and then there's *rich*. This... This is the price of whole kingdoms. However could you have acquired this much?”

Isacharact glanced back at the treasure.

“Most of it is inheritance. I already told you that what Meer-Khahi said was true. Isasarach wanted to build an empire, and was accumulating wealth to that end. When she fell, that wealth was divided up amongst her family.”

He turned to her, mouth still agape.

“You mean there are *more* dragons with hoards like this?”

Isacharact suddenly dropped her playful attitude.

“No.”

Zetic’s eyes narrowed... He didn’t like the sound of that.

Remember what she is, Zetic. Chromatic dragons are selfish and evil. And she was the child of a chromatic dragon empress, even...

“Ve-ry dan-ger-ous, this one is.”

Isacharact had said twice, now, that Meer-Khahi was speaking the truth. Did her affirmation include *that* statement of his as well?

Zetic turned to look at the treasure again... It looked different.

It was still marvellous, but now there was a deadly scent about it. For it had been Isasarach’s blood money, intended to pay the Queen’s way to domination through war.

And now it was Isacharact’s bloody treasure, paid for with the lives of her siblings.

How many of them had she slain for her to have acquired so much of it all? And what about Isasarach’s mates? Had the ambitious daughter hunted them down, too, her step-fathers and perhaps even her father as well, greedy to take her mother’s inheritance all for herself?

Isacharact saw what was going on in Zetic’s mind.

“You’re wondering about how I acquired it. What you’re thinking... is true.”

Zetic had no words to answer her with, and continued to stare at the hoard in silence, eyes following peaks and valleys of the mountain of treasure.

“I won’t apologize for what happened, because that would mean apologizing for what I *am*. If you find unbearable the idea of staying with a creature who fought and killed her extended family in order to claim her dead mother’s inheritance... then turn around, and leave. The storm above has abated, and you will have no trouble reaching warmer climes. But before you go, let me tell you one thing:”

Isacharact leaned over towards him. He turned to her, and a chilling wave washed over him. In this sparkling room, her eyes once again seemed to brilliantly catch the light; but there was no supernatural effect now, only the cold gaze of an even colder creature.

“Of my mother’s brood, I may have been the strongest and the cleverest, that I should have reached this point, alive and wealthy... but we were *all* ruthless and determined... In the wake of her death, everyone seized what they could, and the infighting began immediately. I was determined, I was skilled, I was lucky... And if *I* hadn’t

been the one to eventually gather up all the pieces of Isasarach's hoard... then I would be dead, and one of the others *would* have all this, instead."

She pulled back to continue.

"White dragons are a cruel and unforgiving race, cleric, and I am no different. But what produced the treasure you see before you is in the past. The last time I had anything to do with a member of my mother's family was over fifty years ago, long before you were even born. I'm no more 'noble' than I was then, but it was a war, a fight to the death, and I otherwise would be much more... restrained."

Zetic turned back to the cave. Isacharact watched as he thought things over, wondering what he was thinking, and waiting for his reply.

It took a long time.

Still enamoured with her, idiot of a cleric? What were you thinking, exactly? That her restraint was a sign of goodness?

Look at the treasure – this was a work of *lust*. Lust for wealth, lust for that which shines brilliantly, lust for that which others possessed and her heart desired. If she's interested in you, if she's – Gods help us – *attracted* to you, it's lust, not love. She just wants to possess you; she doesn't know love – not even for her own family, not even for her own *children*. You're stupid, Zetic, to have stuck around her for this long. Unless you're even more stupid, thinking you can somehow 'change' her. You haven't beaten her *once*.

Except that wasn't true – she admitted the possibility defeat on the very first day, when he had preached to her about the Gods. Three days later, two divine interventions, one right after the other, had driven the point home, and she had conceded it.

Was the massacre that gained her this wealth truly in her past? If they should stay together, would it be within his power to keep her in check? He should beware the story of Scyllua Darkhope, who heard the honeyed words of a pit fiend, took pity on him, and was eventually turned to evil, herself.

Now Scyllua slays innocents in the name of Bane. Was he in danger of sliding down the same slope?

And yet here he stood, by the grace of two Gods, standing before a treasure carved in the blood of countless dragons, madly in love with the one who had carved it. He had known her for less than two ten-days, a miserable pittance not just in dragon-years but in human terms as well. But his determination had carried him this far...

Being back in material plane, back where he at least understood the general rules, emboldened Zetic, and when he finally made his decision, he felt confident when he turned to face Isacharact, even though she was wearing a chillingly stern expression.

“I can live with your nature, Isacharact, and your past.”

Isacharact almost winced. Considering he was a cleric of Torm, the Loyal Fury, she had expected some kind of further debate, or at least an expression of horror and disbelief.

Full of surprises, this man-dragon...

In spite of her surprise, she maintained her calm composure.

“Well, then. You should also know... You are the first creature I have ever permitted to be here.”

Zetic’s eyes narrowed.

“But you said you had had other mates?”

“I did. But I would never have brought them here.”

It took Zetic a moment to think that statement through.

“... Because they would crave the treasure? You don’t think I’ll try to *rob* you.”

Isacharact smiled.

“Of course you won’t, cleric. I saw the look in your eyes. This treasure awes and frightens you, it doesn’t attract you.”

He managed a glance at the monstrous hoard once more. It was beautiful, but no less repellent than it had been a few minutes ago.

“That is true. And you had expected that of me?”

“Yes, although I thought it unlikely that, having seen it, you would choose to stay.”

“Then why show it to me at all?”

“Because I am now mature, cleric, and my tastes have shifted. I have many hundreds of years before me, but I am no longer a young wurm, impetuous and headstrong. In my youth, I chose mates based on my impulses, chasing after the wealthy or powerful, conquering the attractive or challenging. I lied, I cheated, I stole, I raped, and I killed, all to get whomever I wanted, when I wanted, and to dispose of them as soon as I was done.”

Isacharact turned away with a smile on her face.

“Ah... the indiscretions of youth...”

She faced him again. The grisly black humour had actually managed to elicit a half-hearted laugh from Zetic, and he now wore a curious grin.

“... But merely bedding who I want is no longer enough to interest me. I could set out now, and return in a tenday, covered with the blood of a great gold wyrm, but bearing gold-white eggs. It would be a challenge, but not enough to keep my attention.”

She paused for a moment to let the claim sink in. Zetic showed no sign of arguing with her.

“I have thought of a new game, now. How long can I keep an amusing little cleric of Torm around without pretending to be someone other than myself? Will he eventually flee in horror, or capitulate and descend into corruption? Or is it possible to keep him intact at my side, with the right poking and prodding?”

Isacharact grinned and stood up tall on her legs, spreading her arms wide to show the room.

“Here, in my home, you see me as I am, *Zetic*. Avaricious, powerful, and capable of doing anything. But you already knew that, didn't you?”

Zetic blinked, pausing before answering.

“I think I did, even if I didn't admit it to myself.”

“Well then, cleric, now you know why I have permitted you to stand here. And also why I will permit you to leave here, *alive*, whenever you should wish, as otherwise the game is spoiled.”

“This is a most disturbing and depraved game.”

She jumped on his words instantly, sneering as she slowly stepped towards him.

“Is it, cleric? Haven't you *already* been playing the very same game of trying to keep the magnificent great white dragon Isacharact around as long as possible? Aren't you in constant terror of falling from grace in the eyes of your God, because you feel challenged to please and ingratiate yourself to such a villainous creature without betraying your own morals? And don't you greatly desire not to fail at this game?”

By the end of her tirade, she was standing right in front of him, head-to-head. Zetic needed a moment away from her gaze before he could reply.

“I... suppose when you put it like that, I have indeed been playing the same game, though I did not quite realize it.”

Now her expression became playful, and she backed up towards the treasure once more.

“Ahhh, you have indeed... And you had not even the common courtesy to formally declare the game afoot.”

Recognizing the criticism of his own half-hearted attempt to woo her, Zetic smiled and clasped his hands together.

“I plead ignorance of the rules.”

She was stern, but exaggerated her haughtiness.

“Your pleas will not be heard, cleric, for the hour is late, and court has already adjourned for the night.”

“Then I should straightaway go to sleep, to be first in line at the arbiter's office in the morning. Would you kindly direct me to the dormitories?”

Her playful smile reappeared.

“I sleep right here.”

Now serious again, Zetic was incredulous.

“What, you mean your bed is this pile of coins and gemstones?”

“Yes, of course. It's a very common thing amongst dragons, you know.”

Zetic was wearing a very strange expression on his face, as if the thought of sleeping on top of the hoard was as appetizing to him as trying to eat another salty pearl. Seeing his look, Isacharact strode over to the treasure, lightly bounding over it until she was some fifty feet in, then she laid herself down, stretched herself out on her side, and spoke in a slow and commanding voice as she lifted up a handful of coins and let them slowly trickle out of her hand.

They fell on her flank with a clink-clink-clink, pouring down the side of her body.

“Don't give it that look until you've tried it.”

The sight of her like that – one incredible treasure compounded on top of another – was fit to make Zetic's knees feel a bit weak. But he had to admit that her statement was a good rule to follow in general, and walked over to join her.

Surprisingly, despite the bulk and weight of so many metal coins, he immediately found that it was like walking on soft gravel. Looking down, he realized the problem: his feet were all enormous, so by comparison, walking as on coins as a dragon as roughly the same as walking on gravel as a man.

Zetic had to step as lightly as he could, or else his feet would dig in a bit with each step. Coins and gems sloshed to and fro as he tried to stay above them, and in the end he wound up almost bounding over to Isacharact, amazed at how the treasure felt underneath him. It was very easy to forget where it had all come from, and just how bloody it all was... But when he saw her there before him, lounging comfortably on her side, with her alluring eyes staring up at him, he didn't care.

With an amused grin on his face, he lay down beside her, and even tried to settle into the hoard a bit, wriggling around a bit to try to form a comfortable depression.

When at last he was comfortable, he put his head down and closed his eyes.

“Good-night, Isacharact.”

“Good-night...”

There was a strange sound in her voice when she replied, but Zetic, exhausted from the gruelling flight, long tunnel trek, and wrestling with his inner demons, didn't pick up on it.

Suddenly he was grabbed from above and below, as Isacharact reached over him and under him, grabbing his chest with all four legs and pulling him tight. As before, the abrupt sensation of intense cold shocked him awake, and he struggled frantically against her grip even as the freezing sensation crept ever deeper into him.

Resistance was useless, however, for she held him tight. All he could manage was to bleat out weakly:

“Not again, Isacharact, Please! You're too cold!”

She pulled even tighter, wrapping even her tail and neck around him.

“And you're so *warm*...”

Zetic's breathing slowed, and he could feel his body start to shut down again. Isacharact only grinned.

“... but not for long.”

“Is that the best you can do, cleric?”

A week had passed in the bitter cold of the North, though Zetic hadn't paid much attention to the passing of time. Since they had arrived, Isacharact had been tutoring Zetic in various sundry topics. On windy and stormy days, she had trained him to fly in difficult conditions. When it was clear, she had him practice breathing fire, setting up dummies of snow in lines or cones in order to have him melt them, or marking off a target area and having him strafe it from the sky.

Today, outside, in the snowy landscape, Isacharact was trying to teach Zetic how to fight like a dragon, though the lesson was not going *particularly* well.

“I used a sword for almost twenty-five years; I'm not used to fighting without one.”

Another one of his swipes – more a punch, really – went wide, and Isacharact got in a sturdy counter-slash that hit his face and caused him to gasp and recoil in pain.

“You’ve had enough for today, cleric. It’s clear to me that you’ll take a long time to learn to fight in *this* manner.”

Zetic dabbed at the light wound with his hand, making sure that it wasn’t bleeding.

“Don’t trouble yourself too much with this lesson; I can always get another sword. And until then, I can summon up a magic one out of the divine ether.”

Isacharact only turned partially away, her face showing a muted disgust.

“Maybe so, but you ought to learn how to fight properly. It isn’t dignified for a dragon to have to use a weapon of steel.”

A grin crossed Zetic’s face.

“Oh, no? Don’t talk about it that way until you’ve tried it – or at least, seen someone else try it.”

She looked back at him with a sly air as he waved his hands and made barely audible implorations to Torm, summoning up a greatsword from the divine ether. When it appeared, long enough to reach from the ground to his head, he grasped it in both hands, stood up straight on his back legs, held it solidly in the air, and flexed his wings out at the back, staring at her the whole time.

“Well?”

Isacharact looked him up and down.

“Not bad, I suppose...”

Zetic beamed back, and Isacharact took notice of his pride.

“... But if you’re going to use magic, you might as well at least use it for something truly impressive...”

She shot him a smirk.

“... if you even *can*.”

His apparent pride didn’t diminish as he flicked his wrists, dispelling the ethereal sword and sitting back down. Turning to one side to face the small bowl-shaped valley that stretched out before them as they sat at the top of a large ridge, he took a bit longer to cast this second divine spell.

But when he was done, Isacharact was briefly taken aback as, with a bright flash of light, the entire valley exploded into a flaming fire-storm, melting the snow clean off the rocks and sending a very noticeable wave of heat at the pair.

The once-glacial valley was now grey and muddy, with a dusting of ash, and a cloud of steam was rising in the air. Zetic turned to her again, an even larger grin on his face.

“Well?”

Still facing the blackened and charred valley, she looked at him sideways.

“Not bad at all.”

Zetic noticed that the shockwave of heat didn't seem to have affected her in the least.

“You didn't seem to mind the blast of that spell, and I didn't see you try to duck away from my fire-breath, yesterday. I thought creatures of cold were more vulnerable to fire, just as creatures of fire are more vulnerable to cold.”

Isacharact turned towards him, grinning widely.

“*Ordinary* creatures of cold, maybe. One of the legacies of my bloodline – and the source of my name, by the way – is the *Isaana Yevach*.”

“Draconic for ‘Burning Frost’?”

“Yes. Because of that trait, fire has no special effect on me.”

He looked genuinely surprised in response, and she noticed it.

“...Or at least, no *harmful* effect. For in truth, rather than being hurtful, I find the challenge of heat...”

She licked the side of her lips.

“...invigorating.”

Zetic gulped as she took a few steps towards him and jabbed him in the chest with a claw.

“And how about you and cold, cleric?”

“Er...”

He was wavering, so she poked him again.

“You *are* a creature of fire, now... And you've had plenty of time to feel the chill of ‘the North’.”

The way she said it made it clear she wasn't referring to the weather.

“I’ve, er, I’ve developed something of a... of an *appreciation* for frost.”

Isacharact grinned wickedly in reply, and moved the talon that was poking his chest up along his neck, scraping it lightly along the way.

He swallowed, and his already-large eyes bulged even more as she reached the underside of his head, ran the claw along under his chin, and finally flicked it off at the front.

Seeing that he was still staring at her even after she was no longer touching him, Isacharact gave him two hard pats on the cheek to bring him out of his trance.

“Shall we get back to the lesson, fiery little golden student of mine?”

The next week passed much like the first.

And yet... Isacharact noticed a change in Zetic, and she often caught him staring at the hallway, or sitting just outside the entrance to the cave, gazing off into the distance. She had once asked him what he was looking at, and his reply had not been, ‘Nothing’, as one might’ve expected, but rather, ‘I don’t know’.

Each night, when they bedded down to sleep again on the hoard, Zetic had started to feel very odd. It wasn’t about Isacharact, or training with her, about the cold, or about lying on the coins, or even about knowing the terrible story behind the hoard...

He felt... *lured*... to the cavern’s exit, and stared at it in confusion.

It was as if some tiny voice was saying, ‘Get out there! See the world!’.

But it didn’t make sense, for he’d *already* seen much of the world...

Zetic shut it out and went to sleep.

In the third week, a thought poked through her mind. Bahamut had said that it would take a long time for Zetic to reach ‘enlightenment’, and there was only one thing she knew of that would fill such a gap of time. There is a great step that all young dragons must take; one that Zetic had not yet taken. He was at the right theoretical age to experience *it*, as well, and the beginnings of *it* would surely cause him turn his eyes to the horizon.

So *that* must be what's going on, here. Well. An enjoyable few weeks, at least. Too bad. There really isn't anything that can be done about *it*, however hard one tries or however much one wants to overcome *it*.

No wyrmling she had ever heard of had ever been able to resist *it* once it showed itself.

And *it* finally showed itself publicly at the end of the fourth week, just as they were outside eating supper – tonight, a woolly Rothé, common herd animal of the North, with Zetic's charred by fire and Isacharact's frozen in ice – and watching the sun set against the backdrop of white-tipped mountains.

"Isacharact... I feel strange. I feel... I feel like I should be elsewhere."

She was fairly certain she knew what was going on, but hid that from him.

"What do you mean, elsewhere?"

"I don't know, exactly. It's just... it's just that I've been here for a month, and I... I almost feel *bored* with this place. Or not quite bored, actually, for there's really nothing wrong here, just that I feel like being somewhere else. Anywhere else, even."

"Where would you rather be?"

"I don't know... it seems like there are so many possibilities."

"There are. It's a big world out there, you know."

But her playful remarks seemed to simply bounce off of him. Isacharact turned back to her meal as Zetic looked around for a long time, slowly scanning the horizon to the South and to the East and West, until by the time he was done the sun was long gone, and the stars twinkled brightly above their heads.

"Evermeet."

She looked up at him.

"Evermeet, the island of the Elves?"

"Yes."

"That is where you would rather be?"

"I think it is. I adventured with a young Elf for ten straight years some time ago, and through a series of calamities we became fast friends. After one particularly nasty encounter, he decided to go back to live on Evermeet for a while, to grow up a bit more – for he was merely a youth by Elven standards, only sixty-two. He left me an open invitation to come visit him sometime. I don't think he expected me to take him up on the offer, but I do think that it was sincere."

“Well, it’s good to know that you would be welcome there, my dear cleric, but *reaching* Evermeet is a great challenge in and of itself.”

“Actually, Saraendas provisioned me for the trip, as well. When we adventured, he helped me learn the Elven tongue, and we used to sing together. Before he left, he taught me an enchanted song that, so he said, when sung by a friend of the Elves, would point the singer in the direction of Evermeet. I’ve tried it before, and it points me west...”

“No surprise, since the only one thing that *anyone* knows is that it is to the west. Beyond that... there are no certainties.”

“Perhaps. But I am confident that the song will not fail.”

Isacharact felt her grip on Zetic abruptly slip away. The connection to a friend from his past was unusual, but then wyrmlings have no past friends to speak of, when *it* grips them. If it was now time to let him go, then it was time to let him go. She wouldn’t hesitate to argue with *him*, but she wouldn’t argue with what was now in his *nature*.

“Then, if you feel like being elsewhere, you should go. There is really only so much I can teach you on my own; *real* wyrmlings learn their lessons from the world itself.”

But something happened next that she did *not* anticipate.

Zetic looked at her, and spoke.

“You... you wouldn’t want to come along?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’d want me to?”

“Well... yes. I haven’t forgotten your game, or mine.”

Isacharact eyed him.

Intriguing...

It ought to drive him away from her. *It* ought to make him want to go anywhere that she – or any other dragon, for that matter – wasn’t.

And now he wanted her to go with him?

Very strange... He was, of course, clearly under the power of *it* to have felt like simply ‘being somewhere else’, but perhaps there was something more...

“All right, cleric. I will join you on this trip.”

Zetic smiled, and turned to look at the western sky; Isacharact did so, too. Once supper was finished, with the sun to guide them westward, he insisted that they take off, flying towards the shore of the great Trackless Sea.

Ten days of flying took them from The High Ice north of the great desert of Anauroch to the Sword Coast all the way on the western side of the continent of Faerûn. Each morning, Zetic briefly sang the song, and picked up the south-west heading to Evermeet.

They flew at top speed. Zetic seemed to be driving as fast as he could, and Isacharact was soon being challenged to keep up; a challenge she met easily, but as his technique improved and his drive seemed to increase, the challenge steadily mounted.

But there was an opportunity to slow down on the eighth day, just behind the coast, near the Lost Peaks of the High Forest. She interrupted him during their flight.

“We had best be on our guard while in this area. I know of a dragon who lairs not far from here. He could cause... trouble for us.”

Zetic turned to her, still flying level.

“What do you mean, you know him? And what sort of trouble?”

“This dragon... He is a former suitor of mine. A rather... belligerent... one, at that.”

“I take it you refused his advances?”

She looked straight forward and tilted her head, smiling.

“With tooth and claw.”

Night fell, and they landed to sleep their last night on the mainland, guarded only by the shining moon above.

But shortly after bedding down, they were interrupted by a deep, powerful, and rich voice that came from the shadows of the forest.

“So, Isacharact. You said you thought it would be wise if I never came knocking at your home again, and now here you are, lying on the doorstep of mine. What wind, good or ill, has blown you this way?”

They both started up at the words, but while Zetic scrambled to his feet in anticipation of a battle, Isacharact responded with exaggerated sluggish movements, taking her time to sit

up, projecting disdain for the speaker – a disdain that was embodied by the venomous way she spoke his name and the disgusted look on her face as she said it.

“*Krasswéh.*”

A gargantuan black dragon, easily the same size as Isacharact, if not a bit larger, stepped out of the shadows, his immense chitinous forward-curved horns poking out menacingly like a bull.

“It’s good to see that you remember my name, at least. But *I*, on the other hand, could never forget *anything* about you...”

Krasswéh slowly strutted forwards over on all fours, his head standing just a little bit above hers.

“...Ah, I can see that you’re just as beautiful as you were back then...”

He reached out a hand to touch her face, but a look in her eyes and a loud growl from her mouth made him stop a few feet away.

“... *And* as deadly.”

The black wyrm chuckled menacingly, and Isacharact’s expression changed from anger to scorn as she looked him up and down.

“I remember you too, Krasswéh... You were weak, ugly, and loathsome, and I can see you’ve aged only to become weaker, uglier, and more loathsome. You disgust me.”

Her insults washed straight off the dragon’s thick black hide. His reply dripped with sarcasm and venom.

“Oh come now, Isa dearest, is that any way to talk to an old flame? You must admit that there were at least a *few* good times shared between the two of us.”

Isacharact grinned, showing off her teeth.

“The only good time I had with *you*, Krasswéh, was when I had the great pleasure of kicking you out my door.”

She was finally getting to him, and his haughtiness diminished. He paused, and clicked his tongue before talking on.

“Well, perhaps not exactly good times *shared*, then... But who is this one you have with you, now?”

He turned to look at Zetic. What he saw didn’t impress him, and he chided her.

“A little golden drake? Really, Isa, keeping a young stud around for your own pleasure is one thing, but robbing the cradle in such a manner? And one of those metallic

mockeries of dragon-kind, even! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Despoiling dragon parents of their hoard is one thing, but *stealing their children*? How long ago did you snatch this one, then? Ten years? Twenty? It couldn't have been more; he barely looks fifty. And what did you do to his parents, I wonder?"

She only sneered at him, and that sneer gave him the incentive to speak to Zetic.

"Run along now, little one. Let a *real* dragon take care of this Lady of Ice."

But now it was Isacharact who had an incentive to speak to Zetic, and she talked sideways, still staring at Krasswéh.

"See how he considers himself a *real* dragon, Zetic? He's proud of his ancestry. Too bad that it's nothing of significance."

This jab at Krasswéh's family history provoked an angry flinch from the black dragon, which she quickly seized upon.

"Very proud, even! And unable control himself. So much for this poor excuse for a dragon's ability to project confident power."

Krasswéh grumbled.

"I didn't come here to discuss matters of lineage, Isacharact."

"Oh no? Then what *did* you come here to do, Krasswéh?"

"I should ask you the same thing, since it is *you* who are intruding in *my* territory, but since you asked first, I will oblige."

He snapped his fingers, and sounds of the scuffling of foliage came from all around as a dozen armed men emerged from the forest into the small clearing. Zetic anxiously turned to examine them, and even Isacharact's eyes darted from side to side at their arrival.

The presence of his little band of mercenaries allowed Krasswéh to regain his calm, menacing, demeanour.

"I've had my eye on you for a long time, Isa. You rejected me as a mate, and I can live with that. But I am a dragon as well as a lover, and when I came to your domain, I was looking for more than just *you*."

He cleared his throat to speak, but Isacharact already knew what his words would be.

"You're going to come with me, Isacharact, whether you want to or not. And then I'm going to take you to the North, where you will reveal to me the location of your hoard."

Krasswéh's voice changed to mockery.

“It’s such a shame, really. If only you hadn’t hidden your treasure-den from magical scrying, I could’ve found it long ago, and taken what is rightfully mine without having to resort to such... unpleasantness.”

He waved a hand at the soldiers who surrounded them, and began to grin again.

“But things will be as they will be, and who am I to make them different?”

She only stared back at him, furious.

“Oh dear me, Isa, I’m far above being entranced by that sneaky little gaze of yours. You ought to have remembered that it didn’t work on me last time, either.”

He turned briefly to Zetic.

“And as for you, little golden one... I suggest you leave immediately. *When* I win this fight, I will have no use for you.”

Isacharact glanced back at Zetic.

Would *it* cause him to abandon her now? *It* ought to. Here was a difficult battle that he had no need to fight, and the promise of travelling far from these two dragons ought to have appealed to him significantly.

But Isacharact’s intuition was once again wrong, for Zetic puffed out his chest, made himself look as large as he could, and tried his best to speak in a commanding tone.

“I will stay by my Lady Isacharact’s side, Krasswéh, until *she* tells me to leave. You shall have to defeat both of us.”

“My, my, what a shame for you, and what a bother for me.”

Krasswéh didn’t seem the least bit bothered as he readied himself and ordered his men to attack. Predictably, Isacharact lunged straight at him with a blast of cold, and they began to tear viciously into each other as Zetic turned to engage the fierce-looking men.

Some very surprised fierce-looking men, actually; Krasswéh had told them of Isacharact’s companion; having spotted the targets a few days ago, he had scryed upon them in a crystal ball – but he couldn’t have known that Zetic was a powerful cleric of Torm.

So, naturally, the soldiers – swordsmen, wizards, and archers, all familiar with hunting dragons – were quite startled when the gold dragon’s first action was *not* to breathe fire or to cast one of the pathetically weak arcane spells that a juvenile of his age ought to know, but instead to summon up a divine light that threw them back into the forest and blinded half the group.

When Zetic's *second* action, made before they had even recovered from the first, was to cry out 'Hear the word of Torm, and repent!', a holy phrase that deafened those who weren't already blind, the whole of the mercenary company began to have a sinking feeling about the outcome of this battle – regardless of how their black dragon patron fared with the big white monster.

Still reeling from the first two blows of divine magic, the cohort of soldiers had barely gotten to their feet when the very earth beneath them began to tremble and crack as Zetic conjured up a 'small' divine earthquake.

A wise man once said that mercenaries are brave amongst their friends and cowards before a real enemy, and that they avoid defeat only so long as they avoid battle with said foe.

That pronouncement was proven true once again on this evening, for Krasswéh's hired backup, the deaf leading the blind, dodging around the fissures formed in the ground by Zetic's spell, fled for their lives.

Smiling briefly to himself at this first taste of victory since the battle with Swight, Zetic turned back to see Isacharact and Krasswéh duking it out.

Krasswéh seemed to have the upper hand, but only barely so; no doubt he had expected his mercenaries to help him defeat Isacharact – after killing or driving off Zetic first, of course. But now, without his hired help, he was almost as bloodied from the savage struggle as Isacharact was. One of the dragons was bound to break the grapple soon, for neither could hold out much longer, and if they continued rolling on top of each other, scratching and biting away, then the victor would be up to chance more than skill.

Or at least, it would have been up to chance, except that all of a sudden Zetic blasted Isacharact with a surge of healing energy from thirty feet away.

With suddenly renewed vigour, she took a moment to grin down at the mighty black wyrm beneath her; except he wasn't looking so mighty any more with all those scars over him. Even as Krasswéh landed more blows, Zetic hurled another divine spell, this time one of protection, and she glowed with an astral light. The blows started to bounce off, and the other wyrm's expression started to shift from anger to... desperation.

Shooting Zetic a mischievous grin, Isacharact actually began to laugh as she handily trounced the black wyrm, scratching deeply with her claws and biting him down almost to the bone, until finally Krasswéh had had enough. With one mighty kick, he tossed her off of him and quickly got up. With only a brief parting snarl to them both, he took to the air, taking one last jet of cold air in the back as he went.

"Just remember, Krasswéh! The only reason I'm letting you leave here alive is because it'll make a far better tale to say how you fled like a dog from your own ambush! If I so much as catch a whiff of your foul odour again, it *will* be your final hour!"

She cackled loudly after him; when it was clear that he wasn't coming back, she gave one final dismissive 'Ha!' and then turned to Zetic.

He felt her eyes grip him again...

She advanced quickly, drawing close before the fascination attack even had *time* to take effect.

“You’re quite handy to have around, cleric.”

There was an incredible brilliance in her eyes, and an excited grin in her face as, still panting from the battle, she bowled him over onto his back, climbing on top of him as he lay on the ground.

“... How did your first battle feel?”

It was obvious from the energy she effused that *her* experience had been exhilarating. Zetic, on the other hand, stuttered in the face of her presence and at her sudden bulk on top of him.

“Uh, well, it wasn’t... it wasn’t exactly my *first*.”

She tilted her head, but still stared straight into him.

“I meant your first as a *dragon*, obviously.”

It was difficult, but somehow Zetic managed to overcome her gaze – not to mention the uncomfortable closeness of her body – and show some strength of will by making light of the present situation.

“So did I.”

Her laugh was little more than a sharp exhalation, and her breathing slowed back down. The heat of the moment died down, and her eyes resumed their usual sly demeanour.

She backed off of him and sat nearby, looking at him sideways.

“I suppose that’s true. And if I say, ‘I meant your first as a *real* dragon’, is there any chance of you answering my question the way I intended it?”

And now it was Zetic’s turn to laugh, smiling as he got back up.

“All right, all right. It was an interesting experience... though, in truth, I made no use whatsoever of my newfound abilities.”

Isacharact turned away to look at the now-empty battlefield.

“In this case, that was probably a good thing. No doubt the men would’ve come prepared for a dragon’s assault, and the unexpected use of your divine powers impressed upon them the value of retreat.”

“Yes, no doubt.”

She looked back at him... and, thought Zetic, there was that wonderful glow in her eyes again...

“And *I* was quite impressed, too. Krasswéh should’ve been a tough opponent, but with all the spells you cast on me, it felt like there wasn’t any way I could lose.”

Her tail came up and brushed against the underside of his neck.

“... I rather enjoyed that feeling.”

Zetic gulped, but all she did next was lie down again, and set about getting back to sleep.

He looked on, hesitating.

It was very strange... on the one hand, he was drawn to her side, and at the same time, he felt repelled by it, urged to continue onwards without her.

Unable to sort out the confusion of forces, he decided to simply do what he had been doing for the last several weeks, and slept next to her.

The next day, across the great sea! Island-hopping – for the magic of the song was well-crafted, and it led its singer from safe haven to safe haven on the way to Evermeet.

Six days of flying ever westward...

And during each of those six days, he had grown increasingly distracted, becoming less and less aware of his environment, and more and more agitated.

Zetic was becoming lost to *it*, and each of those six nights the force that wanted him to pull away from Isacharact grew stronger, though he still managed to shrug it off.

But on the afternoon of the seventh day, he seemed to calm down, and he was his normal self again.

For, flying high up in the heavens above, they had sighted land.

Evermeet, island of the elves. Rivers of grass in an ocean of trees, and just peeking over the treetops, the tips of crystalline cities and metal fortresses built in the last century. The long Retreat of the Elves was over, but it had been going on for many long years, and the new inhabitants of Evermeet had had plenty of time – and motivation – to build solid defences.

Defences that seemed quite oblivious to the presence of Zetic and Isacharact, actually, though Zetic and Isacharact both guessed that the song which allowed him to home in on the island also told the Elves of his arrival, and they disregarded the two dragons in the air.

They were over land, now. Leuthilspar, the capital, was less than an hour away.

“Well, where do we go from here? Shall we simply drop down and ask a passer-by where your friend lives?”

Isacharact was glad to hear Zetic laugh – after they’d left the mainland, he’d been very sombre, almost as if sulking.

“Nothing so crude, thankfully. The song is keyed to the House of Saraendas, and I can feel exactly where it is.”

“The House of Saraendas? He is nobility, then?”

“Yes. His father is third cousin to Queen Amlaruil, I believe.”

Nothing further was said, nor needed to be said, for shortly thereafter, the silver mansions and homes of the Elves showed themselves, and even after having seen Bahamut’s palace, both of them were captivated by the unearthly beauty of the organic Elvish structures, woven in amongst the trees.

Eventually, they landed on an elegantly-paved stone patio in front of a large manse, only a few miles from the Palace of the Queen, and Zetic sat up in contemplation.

“Hmm. I wonder how to work this? It’s going to be rather hard to go into his house while I’m this large.”

“Make yourself smaller, then.”

“What?”

Isacharact restrained her annoyance, but it was still visible on her face and audible in her speech.

“You keep forgetting yourself, cleric, or else you simply don’t know much about dragons at all. Gold drakes like you can change their form at will. You could even make yourself appear human again, if you wanted.”

And who hadn’t heard ancient tales of wyrms in disguise, helping or hindering men as they pleased? Zetic could’ve nearly slapped himself for forgetting them.

But he didn’t feel right making himself human... So instead, he simply shrunk himself, and knocked on the door as a human-sized dragon.

Zetic could hear the soft pattering of feet inside the house, and the door was opened by a young, fair-haired, and very fair-skinned elf man.

“Yes? Who-”

The slanted green Elven eyes bulged a bit at seeing the creature standing before him.

“Er... What can I do for you, master dragon? Do you seek my father, Dorval, perhaps? He is presently at court.”

Zetic grinned. Lural had always talked quickly, chattering at the pace of a robin, and nervousness only made it worse.

“I do not seek your father, Lural. I come in search of *you*.”

“Me? Well, uh, what do you want with me?”

“Only to see my good friend once again, and receive the hospitality he offered me.”

There was a pause as Lural tilted his head and closely examined the dragon at his door.

“I don’t under-... Wait... wait a minute... *Zetic?*”

Zetic burst into a smile.

“So, those green eyes of yours can still see well! Yes, Zetic!”

Elves are more often amused than surprised, but right now Lural was plenty of both.

“By Corellon’s Golden Hair! Here it was *I* who was said to be the reckless one of our little adventuring band, and now you come knocking on my door, like this??”

The Elf waved at Zetic’s form, flabbergasted.

“It’s a very long story, Saraendas.”

“Well! Come in and tell it to me, then!”

But then as Zetic began to walk in, Lural saw Isacharact outside.

“Oh, but I see you’ve brought a friend, as well! Perhaps you should tell the tale outside, so that we can all stay together.”

Isacharact was very aware of the fact that Zetic had managed to completely forget her, walking straight inside without even a glance backwards. She didn’t feel like being around him right now, if he was going to be like that.

And of course, because of *it*, he *was* going to be like that, and there was very little that could be done to make things different.

“Do not concern yourself with me, master Saraendas. I am tired from the flight, and if it will not disturb anyone, I would prefer to rest out here for a while.”

“Sleep where you please, of course! Come on in, Zetic.”

The two joyous friends entered the mansion, while Isacharact put down her head and tried to sleep.

It was difficult, though. She was thinking too hard.

“That’s an incredible story, Zetic. Simply amazing. I’ll bet my father – and the rest of the court, even, would love to hear it.”

The elf was sitting at a table, Lural enjoying a glass of wine while Zetic sat on the floor, sipping tea. He had tried sitting at the table, of course, but neither a bench nor a chair agreed with his new shape very much.

“Oh, well, you know, we each think our own stories are the most fantastic. I’m sure the Queen’s court has heard plenty of tales better than mine.”

“Don’t be too sure, my friend... I think... No, I must! I must go immediately and ask my father what he thinks of this. And I can tell them of...”

The spirited young elf became calm at last. He paused before continuing.

“I know of the Starfire family; they are distant relations of one of my uncles, I think. Their family home is not here in the city of Leuthilspar, but rather on the other side of the island, in Nimlith. Let me take your tale to the court, and the sad news of Methalar’s fall will quickly and graciously reach the ears of those who loved him.”

Lural stood up to go, and despite Zetic’s calm and friendly protestations, refused to do anything but run off to the palace as fast as his legs could carry him.

“I see you’re still Saraendas The Swift. I hope your father has learned to tolerate your hastiness.”

“And *I* see that you’re still the calm cleric, more interested in talking than doing.”

They had a little laugh before Lural went off in earnest.

“Help yourself to anything while you’re here, naturally. I won’t be long.”

He wasn't, and returned within an hour, with the sun now fully asleep on the other side of the world, and only the twinkling lights of stars, the soft rays of the moon, and the magical Elven-lights left to illuminate the great Elf city.

“Well, that's done. You are to be presented at court immediately.”

Zetic quickly stood up and promptly hit his head on the ceiling. Even shrunk down in size, his neck *was* rather long now.

“What? Immediately? But... it's night!”

Lural grinned.

“Night is when men sleep, maybe! Here in Evermeet, night is when things start to liven up! Court is ordinarily in session for another five hours, at least.”

“Well, then...”

His own words suddenly reminded him of Isacharact, still outside...

“Oh, and what about Isacharact?”

The Elf was hastily leading Zetic out the door.

“I already had a little chat with her, my friend. She said she wanted to head over to the court to speak with the Queen before we got there. Had some urgent business with the court, and that they would not refuse her entry. Can't imagine what her business could be, but I imagine we'll soon find out, one way or the other.”

“I have a hard time imaging her being accepted before the court.”

Lural waved his hand dismissively as he started out the door.

“Oh, I know, I know. Isasarach's daughter and all that. Really, you ought to have been a stodgy old Dwarf, to get so worked up about ancient things. It's plain enough to anyone – or maybe just any *Elf*, if *you* can't see it – that she's not here to cause trouble.”

Zetic grinned in amazement.

“You know, Saraendas, you're almost twice my age, but sometimes you make me feel like I ought to be your grandfather, that I should always call you impetuous.”

“What can I say, Zetic? Maybe there's a bit of Gnomish blood in the family.”

They laughed and walked off, Zetic resuming his normal size – that is to say, his normal *dragon* size – along the way.

Bahamut's palace, made of stone and metal, was possessed of a stunning glory that radiated outwards from the sides of Mount Celestia.

The palace of Amlaruil, Queen of the Moon and Sun Elves, on the other hand, was a delicate beauty, its architecture blending into the trees that surrounded it, and Zetic was captivated by the glow.

Inside, fair Elves walked in corridors that might be mistaken for being made out of the stars themselves, such did they glitter. Light came from beautiful chandeliers, and the twilight streaked in through windows...

And Zetic was looking *out* said windows, unconsciously longing to be somewhere else. For he had unconsciously picked up Isacharact's 'scent' once more... Now that force which only *she* recognized was again driving him away from her.

He was just beginning to become aware of his own subtle internal workings when they reached the doors of the court proper, and he had to shake himself awake.

“Ready to go in? Not many humans get to see our Queen, you know.”

“I'm not exactly human any more.”

“Oh, you seem the same to me, really, but let me tell you that even *less* dragons have been at her court.”

He nudged Zetic in the side.

“The only thing I can think to say – though maybe I don't need to say this to *you*, if you've still got that vow of chastity before marriage hanging over your head – is to remember that no matter she does, or how she looks, or you feel... she's already *married*.”

Zetic snorted and chuckled in reply, and Lural gave a signal to a guardsman to let them in.

The double doors opened, and revealed inside a busy yet somehow ordered scene, where clusters of Elves were standing, sitting, walking around, talking amongst themselves, or enjoying the music that was coming from a raised platform at the back of the room...

And on that platform was an ornate chair upon which sat Amlaruil, Queen.

Lural had been right to warn Zetic, vow or no vow, for the Queen of the Elves was easily the fairest of them, as well...

The two of them walked straight up the nave to bow before the throne. The other Elves in the room, however, paid them on a little attention – when one lives to seven hundred years, after all, one sees many strange things, and tends to take each new experience calmly.

Over the soft mutterings of the other courtiers and the sweet melodies from the musicians beside her, the Queen's delicate voice was easily heard.

“Welcome, Zetic of Waterdeep, cleric of Torm, to Our court. The young Saraendas spoke highly of you with his father, and as the elder is Our cousin, we heard the son’s words, and are glad to receive you as a guest.”

She smiled an incredibly warm smile as Zetic raised his head up again, and even though his head was nearly higher up than her throne, it felt like he was looking quite far *up* to face her.

“Thank you, my Queen. I’m... humbled... that my tale has caught your attentions.”

“It has, but We have only heard some. Yet you have already told it once tonight. Let your voice not be exhausted. You may tell it tomorrow, if you please. For now, We invite you to partake in Our hospitality, and join us in joyous remembrance of Methalar, one of Our own who was taken from us all too soon.”

She nodded, and Lural led Zetic off to one side of the room.

Time seemed to slow down in the marvellous court, in the presence of the fairer-than-fair Elves, and Zetic, a cup of nectar in his hand, forgot all that he had been thinking about as he chatted with Lural’s family and others who came to speak with him.

And yet...

It was still in him, and when there was a pause in the conversation – as there often was, for Elves are slow and meticulous speakers – he became aware that he was looking out the grand open balcony behind the throne, and thinking of other places.

All very confusing, for he did not know why he should be behaving thus. Even Lural noticed that Zetic was becoming increasingly agitated, and queried him.

“You seem uncomfortable, my friend. Is everything all right?”

“I don’t know... it *ought* to be, really, for I’m in a magnificent palace, amongst friends, safe and sound... and yet... and yet even though I’ve only *just* arrived, there’s something that makes me want to pull away, as if I should be continuously gambling what I have for a chance at a better life somewhere else.”

Lural chuckled and swirled the drink around in his cup.

“And you were saying something about *me* seeming young? You talk as if you were going through adolescence.”

“Well, I suppose I might be, given my apparent age in dragon-years...”

He trailed off, and took a final swig from his cup, emptying it. Lural was about to say something in reply, but then the side doors just near them opened, and both of them – and, indeed, many people in the room, too – were captivated by what entered.

It was Isacharact, striding in majestically.

Zetic tilted a bit as he craned to see around a pillar that was blocking his view of her head. She was now wearing a set of gold gem-studded chains that were draped between her horns, and they glittered in the light.

But that wasn't all. As she walked across the large room to the other side, two heavy-looking black leather tassels on long red cloth tethers were dangling from the tips of her horns, swaying with her step.

She nodded at the Queen, who smiled in return, and then looked straight forward as she took up a place on the right side of the raised dais, sitting at the Queen's left hand.

And Zetic...

Zetic was dumbstruck.

Lural glanced up... It would've been an insult to the cleanliness of the room to say that Zetic was catching flies, but that's the image that came to mind as he saw the cleric's mouth hanging open, a blank look on his face.

With an amused smile, he elbowed his friend in the flank and whispered.

“Psst... Zetic. You're *staring* at her.”

No reply. Zetic continued to look straight at Isacharact, who was herself completely avoiding his gaze.

“Zetic! Zetic!”

Two louder whispers provoked no response, and the other Elves near Zetic were beginning to grin – and even chuckle a bit – at seeing the obvious infatuation.

Isacharact tossed her head back, and as the chains and tassels bounced around briefly, the Elves' barely-audible laughter doubled in volume as Zetic's head wobbled a bit, and the cup he was holding escaped his hands and noisily clattered onto the ground.

Zetic remained oblivious to that noise as well as the growing murmurs of amusement.

Hey! Hey! Look over here! Why isn't she looking at me? Lord Torm give me strength, I can't – I can't *think*! She's got that... Oh, and those chains... And then with the eyes...

Zetic's internal ranting was cut short – literally, as Lural had drawn his sword and given his comatose friend a tiny but stinging scratch on the right paw.

The dragon's body jumped, and let out a gasp, turning to look at what had struck him.

Seeing Lural, sword in hand and smirk on face, Zetic realised that the striker was, in truth, not the Elf, but *Isacharact*, and he hastily picked up his cup, embarrassed.

Yet... as the grins died down, and life in the hall returned to normal, he slowly turned back to her, managing only just barely to stay aware of himself.

She continued to look elsewhere as the night wore on, completely indifferent to his attentions... and that indifference only served to excite Zetic even more. He barely even noticed when Queen Amlaruil announced that the day was over, and the people began to stream out of the hall, returning to their homes.

Isacharact stayed seated where she was, and she, Lural, and Zetic, were, only a few minutes later, the only ones left in the room.

Lural followed Zetic's gaze, looking at Isacharact as he spoke.

“You've been given a room in the palace, I gather. One of the guardsmen will show you to it, whenever you're ready... In the meantime, I'm going home.”

Zetic was still in something of a daze, and was still staring at Isacharact.

“Yes, yes... Thank you, my friend. Good night.”

Lural left, his eyes darting between the two dragons. He motioned at the guards and they went outside the room, closing the door behind them.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then Isacharact at last slowly turned to look at Zetic.

He breathed in deeply as she got up and softly walked towards him, prowling forward, purring enticingly.

Halfway to him, her eyes started to shimmer again... Zetic didn't even try to look away, even knowing that he was under attack, welcoming the opportunity to gaze into them after having been denied it all night.

Isacharact managed a faint grin when she saw he was captivated again... But that grin disappeared when, barely two steps later, she saw his eyes dart past her to the balcony beyond.

She stopped purring, looking behind her to make sure there was nothing there. Dismayed to find that there wasn't, she turned back to him.

“You managed to break my gaze?”

“I... I did... but I don't know how. I didn't even try.”

Zetic's breathing accelerated as he was torn between his desire to stay with Isacharact, and the secret *it* which was driving him away.

Isacharact took a deep breath.

“I know how.”

Zetic looked up at her as she turned away, walking back towards the balcony.

“... It is the *Essa-Chakamarul*.”

“The ‘Wander-Lust’?”

Isacharact sat next to one of the alabaster pillars that held up the graceful arches that demarcated the entrance to the balcony, and looked out at the forested valley below.

“Yes... *It*, the wander-lust, grips all young dragons just before adulthood, and drives them away from their parents, and their clutch-mates, and any other dragon besides, making them want to fly far, far, away, and find their own place in the world.”

Zetic approached, and she turned to look at him. Passing underneath an arch, they stepped out onto the balcony at the back of the room, and looked out at the stars.

“And now *it* has you, and there's nothing you can do, save follow its commands, and leave to find your destiny elsewhere. Leave *me*, that is.”

“I don't *want* to leave you.”

There was a chilling warmth in her eyes.

“That much is plain to see; that you should have lasted this long is quite incredible. I was expecting you to depart alone the very moment you said you wanted to leave for Evermeet... for *it* overrides all, even the fascinating gaze also granted to me by the Isaana Yevach. So go, now; there's nothing here for you. You won't find solace anywhere, until *it* has passed, and you are free from the wander-lust again.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Years. Decades, even.”

Zetic looked up at the stars.

“So... then *this* is the bitterness of which Bahamut told me.”

Isacharact followed him in looking up at the heavens above. Despite the light from the elven city, the sky was unspoiled and the stars were clearly visible.

“Some of it, at least. Nothing can defeat the wander-lust; no wyrmling has ever conquered it, nor should they want to, for it is the essence of what we are.”

She leaned over at him.

“*We* are dragons, and our way is a way of independence and individual strength. The *Essa-Chakamarul* ensures that this spirit of solitary power continues. It would be foolish to try to resist its call.”

There was a long pause...

Still looking at the stars, Zetic broke the silence.

“But if I cannot resist it, I must at the least subvert its commands...”

He turned back to her and spoke slowly, laboriously.

“... For I’m in love with you, Isacharact...”

The stout cleric looked more broken-down than he could ever have been while in the dark cellar of Swight’s dungeon.

“... and I’ll... I’ll come back to you... if you’ll wait for me.”

Isacharact stared back into his teary eyes.

“Oh, I’m not in *love* with you, cleric...”

The sarcasm practically dripped from her mouth, but Zetic was so dishevelled and worn from his emotional torment that he completely missed it, and his sadness seemed to be magnified a thousand-fold.

She began to grin, and turned her head up at him.

“... but I’ll wait for you... I’ll allow a little ‘intermission’ in my game... at least until someone better comes along.”

Finally catching the meaning of her words, Zetic’s eyes lit up.

He took a few hesitant steps closer, brought his mouth up to Isacharact’s, and as she didn’t move away, he kissed her softly on the lips.

Isacharact kissed back. They closed their eyes, and she brought one clawed hand up into the hair at the back of his head.

A few seconds passed, lips locked... but then Isacharact's hand suddenly clenched, pulling Zetic hair and yanking the head to which it was attached a few feet away from her. Zetic gasped in pain and briefly struggled, but Isacharact didn't seem to care.

She looked him up and down, licked her lips, and opened her mouth in a greedy, toothy grin. There was a feral quality to her voice, and hunger in her eyes.

“Hurry back.”

He swallowed deeply as she began to purr menacingly. They held the pose for a few seconds, until Isacharact at last let go of his hair.

Zetic backed off, bowed deeply, and turned around and bent over, intending to jump off the balcony into flight...

... only to first start up as he received a solid tail-smack on his bottom from Isacharact.

His eyes bulged as the creature behind him began to purr again...

Without looking back, he swallowed again and launched into the air. Isacharact looked up as he flew East, back to world of men, and the world to which he was not drawn, but driven – driven away from her, by that which all young dragons feel when it is time to abandon their clutch-mates and strike out on their own.

“You are out here alone, White Princess?”

Queen Amlaruil had stepped out onto the balcony.

“Yes, he is gone.”

“Will he come back?”

“He has promised to. But I have never heard of such a chain remaining unbroken...”

Isacharact turned to face the Queen.

“... Thank you for your handmaidens' help tonight.”

There was a soft, reassuring, smile in the old Elf-Queen's face.

“You are very welcome for the ornaments, White Princess. For the gift which you pledged to us earlier, we owe you much more than mere decorations, I think. Whenever you are ready, come back inside the palace. There is much to be done...”

The dragon got up and walked forward, shooting the Queen an inquisitive glance.

“Much to be done for what?”

“Why, to prepare for his return, of course.”

ZETIC AND ISACHARACT WILL BE REUNITED
IN
“THE RETURN, AND THE KING”