

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

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

Isacharact
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Queen Amlaruil
Ancient Female Sun Elf
Wizard

Lural Saraendas
Young Adult Male Moon Elf
Rogue

Skii’ina
Juvenile Female Wood Elf
Ranger

Saeval Nuén
Ancient Male Wood Elf
Druid

The Return, and the King

“‘Much to be done’, indeed! I wasn’t planning on doing anything at all.”

“No? It seems to me that there ought to be many things to think about and to have done before he returns to you.”

Isacharact and Queen Amlaruil were back inside the palace’s immense and now-empty main chamber that served as the throne-room of the Elven Court.

“I don’t see that there’s anything to think about. In all honesty – and by your leave, of course – I was planning to simply remain here for a ten-day to give him a head start on

returning to the mainland, and then go back to my home in the Northlands, there to continue with my life as before, all the while awaiting him.”

The Queen smiled her ever-so-faint and delicate matronly smile once again as she stood facing the white dragon.

“My dear princess, only ten days? You are more than welcome to stay here as long as you please. And it seems to me, in truth, that it would be more fitting for you to await his return *here*, since here is where you parted.”

Isacharact’s features became more defined as her face tensed up.

“I think you misunderstand my intentions, Queen Amlaruil. I *will* wait for him, yes, but I will not do so as some lovelorn maid, doting on my mate, waiting with abated breath, as if unable to live without him. I have my own life to live; if I should choose to live it with him, I will still live it on my *own* terms.”

The old Elf-Queen laughed lightly.

“You liken staying here to giving up your freedom? Very amusing; I would never have thought that someone could suggest that living amongst the free-spirited Elves would be *confining*.”

Isacharact relaxed her tone.

“That’s not how I meant it to sound... It’s going to be a long wait, and I don’t want to simply sit idle; there are *other* things of interest in the world besides *him*.”

“Many things of interest in the world, yes – and many things of interest *here*, too.”

The white dragon’s piercing eyes turned away from the ground and looked over at the Elf, who spoke on.

“Of course, you should go where you please, but I think you would do well to stay here longer than a ten-day, and if you leave, I think you ought to return.”

“Fly back and forth between Evermeet and the North? It would be quite a confusing enterprise for Zetic, then, to try and find me when his wandering is finished – where he ought to go would depend on where *I* am, and where I am would depend on when he decides to return.”

A youthful male voice broke out from across the room.

“Knowing Zetic, regardless of when he *feels* like returning, he’ll probably choose to return on the same day that he left...”

Queen Amlaruil and Isacharact both turned to see a young Moon Elf come out from behind one of the room’s ornate supporting pillars.

“... He has quite a passion for clichés, you see, and in his mind the idea of ‘making an entrance’ by proudly returning on the date of his departure will be irresistible.”

Isacharact clicked her tongue before addressing the upstart Elf.

“I thought you said you were going to go home, Master Saraendas.”

Lural only smiled in response to her chiding.

“Ah, but this *is* my home, for *any* Elf is at home in the Court of Evermeet!”

A snort from the White Dragon; Amlaruil remained faintly amused.

“Perhaps, rather than hiding behind pillars and snooping on the conversations of others, Master Saraendas, you ought to take up conversation yourself, and enlighten this creature as to the nature of the one who has her heart. I, meanwhile, must go to deal with matters of state. The two of you, stay here as long as you please.”

The old Queen nodded gracefully as she turned to leave, receiving a similar graceful nod from Isacharact, and a deep bow from Saraendas.

At the side of the room, a door opened for the Queen, and the chattering of voices could be heard as she went off with an entourage to one of the many meeting-rooms of the palace, where the private affairs of the Elves are dealt with.

Isacharact and Lural were alone in the main hall.

“Well. What do you want to know about my good friend Zetic?”

“I suppose, considering what I intend, that I ought to know everything.”

Lural smiled widely.

“In that case, my lady, perhaps you should tell *me* what you know of him first, that I will know what gaps in your knowledge need filling.”

Isacharact chortled and grinned in return.

“I know nothing. Or next to nothing, at least. I’d only been with him for a month before he left tonight. A mere month! A minuscule fraction of my life for me, and even for you, an Elf, a short period of time...”

Isacharact looked out at the sky through the entrance onto the balcony. No trace of Zetic remained.

“... How long did *you* know him before you called him friend?”

“Hah! I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, my lady, because at whatever precise point it was during our few years of adventuring that he ‘became’ my friend, it had suddenly seemed to me as if he had *always* been my friend, and so now I cannot distinguish between the two periods – not as if there is much of difference between them, really, for he treats almost everyone in the same, friendly, way.”

Isacharact harrumphed.

“That much, I know. I’m certain he has no love for the Red Wizards of Thay or for any of their minions, and yet he got along with the soldiers of the Zulkir so well, and so effortlessly. Even I, who had *chosen* to work with them, reviled them to a certain extent. There he was, *forced* to work with men who ought to be his enemies, and who ought to have considered *him* an enemy, and yet instantly he charmed them all. That first night, I could’ve sworn I was watching a group of lifelong friends in revelry, not a pack of evil men mingling uncomfortably with a paragon of good.”

“Yes, he’s surprisingly apt at ‘subduing’ evil in that way. Somewhat to the embarrassment of his church, actually. You noticed, I’m sure, that he’s a cleric of no small power...”

“I did notice. You’re going to tell me why he isn’t an Archbishop or occupying some other high post in the Church of Torm.”

“I am. Torm is a God of duty, and Zetic *does* do his duty, but he tends to pervert the instructions he’s given, tossing out the particulars of the execution.”

The White Dragon’s eyes flashed as she grinned to herself.

“He said as much about the Wanderlust, when he left – ‘if I cannot resist it, I must at the least subvert its commands’. The drive of the Wanderlust is to seek out a new pasture for oneself – to get away from everything that one already knows. Taken literally, that would include *me*... but in the *spirit* of the impulse, it might not.”

Saraendas pointed a finger in the air, becoming excited.

“Precisely – that’s precisely it! He holds true to the *spirit* of the orders he’s given, but not to the orders themselves—”

He began to chuckle.

“—Oh, oh... This reminds me of one of our funnier adventures together. It’s a perfect example of what I mean. Zetic, myself, and several others were adventuring along the Sword Coast, and one mining town where we stopped was apparently being plagued by a pack of reptilian Kobolds. The owner of the mine – and mayor of the town – approached us and asked us to get rid of the little creatures that were seriously disrupting his mining operations – attacking miners, collapsing tunnels, and so forth. We accepted, of course, for the fighting was not likely to be challenging, and the reward was handsome. But before we headed into the deeper parts of the mine where the Kobolds’ lair surely was, Zetic pulled us

all aside and told us he had an idea, and that he might be able to achieve an excellent result, if only we could all try to not outright kill any of the beasts.”

Isacharact cocked an eye at Lural, who began to grin mischievously.

“It took a bit of convincing on his part, but eventually everybody agreed, and we soon hit upon the Kobolds’ den. A day later, we returned to the mayor, and... oh, hah!”

Lural was having trouble containing himself.

“Oh... Oh I’ll *never* forget the look on his face when Zetic told him that *not only* had we *not* killed the Kobolds, but we’d signed them up to work in the mine, for an appropriate share of the profits!”

The Elf’s self-restraint failed and he burst out in laughter for several seconds before continuing the story.

“The mayor was completely aghast! He couldn’t believe that we would’ve done such a thing, even though it *did* solve his problem. Eventually, Zetic managed to persuade him to accept the deal, and what a deal it was! For Kobolds are skilled miners after all, and last we heard from the town, the profitability of the mine had increased far beyond what it had been before. The mayor even personally wrote a letter to the Church of Torm, praising Zetic’s wisdom and extolling the virtue of his judgement. *That* raised a few eyebrows and drew out a few grumpy snorts at the bishopry of Torm, I’m sure.”

Lural composed himself.

“But it just goes to show you how Zetic likes to work. Because he doesn’t always follow orders to-the-letter, he’s earned the ire of the leadership of his church, even though he’s probably more powerful and almost certainly wiser than the lot of them.”

Isacharact smiled, amused by the story.

“That seems to fit in with how I perceived him. A perfectionist, perhaps. Striving for the ‘best’ solution instead of merely the demanded one.”

“No, not quite a perfectionist, I think. He can achieve the impossible, and he tries to be everyone’s friend, but he doesn’t try to be everyone’s *best* friend or to try to obtain the impossibly best solution *all* the time.”

The young Elf became a bit more serious – something a rarity for Moon Elves in general, and particularly so for *this* spirited example of that species.

“He’s probably the most purely ‘good’ person I’ve ever known. It’s hard to imagine anyone who tries so hard – and succeeds so well – at helping everyone get along ...”

Lural’s eyes darted up at Isacharact.

“... Which brings me to my one real question about his relationship with *you*, Isacharact. You needn't answer it if you don't feel like it, but I'm very interested to hear your reply, if you'll give it to me.”

She eyed him warily.

“I may. What is the question?”

The Elf took a deep breath, and then spoke calmly, his head half-tilted.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Isn't the question obvious? ‘*Why* is it that you are attracted to him?’, of course.”

Isacharact chuckled deeply.

“Isn't the answer obvious?”

The Elf's musical voice became excited.

“Well, no, not at all! I don't mean to presume anything, and I certainly don't want to insult you, but *Zetic* is good – good to the bone, good to the core – and you, a chromatic Dragon, *are* evil. You *must* know that he won't put up with people being evil around him, even if usually he deals with it diplomatically as with the Kobolds in my story or the Zulkir's men in yours. So given your nature, why would you have wanted to be with him?”

She smirked back, looking at him sideways.

“Master Saraendas, there are many kinds of evil. There is evil that hates. There is evil that wishes to destroy, evil that wants to inflict pain, evil that finds joy in the suffering of others...”

Isacharact blinked, and ran her tongue along her teeth before continuing.

“... And there is *also* evil that is selfish. Though I may dabble in the other fields, for the most part, I fall squarely into the last category.”

Her eyes seemed to light up, and she bent her head over closer to the Elf. Saraendas suddenly felt a powerful chill go down the back of his neck as her words hit him.

“Would you say that I am greedy?”

“Ah... I would say... I would say that dragons *in general* are greedy.”

Isacharact swung her head back and laughed. The heavy tassels hanging from her horns swayed back and forth briefly before she returned to staring at him head-on.

“Very wisely put, Master Saraendas! But you needn’t have been so cautious; I *am* greedy, and that is why I am attracted to him.”

“Alright... But I’m afraid I still don’t grasp your meaning.”

“No? Well, wouldn’t you agree, even disregarding his transformation at the hands of Bahamut, that Zetic is an extraordinary creature?”

Still not comprehending, Lural nodded in agreement, anxious for the final solution.

“Yes, I would.”

Isacharact returned her head to its proper high place, put on a sly expression, and waved her right hand dismissively.

“Then there you have your answer, Master Saraendas. I am greedy; I want to surround myself with exquisite items, I want to take as much as I can for myself, I want to possess extraordinary things... and he *is* such a thing. That much was hinted at to me on the first day I met him, and it became only more obvious as time went on.”

Lural began to smile again.

“Ahh! Ahh! Now I understand! And yet... if that is your explanation for why you are attracted to him, surely you can see why the Queen was so insistent that you stay with us here on Evermeet...”

The curious glance on Isacharact’s face told him that she did not, so he continued.

“... for we Elves are also ‘greedy’, in a sense, and though the fact that Zetic is involved makes the story plausible to me, it is still an extraordinary thing that a human cleric of Torm should charm a white dragon, and have her fall in love with him.”

Isacharact’s eyes narrowed, but the Elf only gave a shallow bow, smirking.

“...On Evermeet, we, too, wish to surround ourselves with extraordinary things, and you are part of an extraordinary and wondrous event.”

With a smirk that matched his, Isacharact turned her head sideways and blew out through her nose.

“All right, then, Master Saraendas. Perhaps I *will* stay a little longer.”

“I am glad to hear it, and I’m certain that our Queen will be happy as well. While you are here, I’m sure that my good friend Zetic—”

Lural bowed slightly, his left hand behind his back and right hand held out towards Isacharact with its palm facing up.

“—would not mind if I was to take charge of his lady in his absence.”

At this, Isacharact snorted loudly.

“I think I see, now, the source of Zetic’s unmitigated gall and general spirit of presumption.”

Lural continued to hold his pose, but looked up.

“Oho! I would say, rather, that I obtained such characteristics from *him* than the other way around. For, just as Zetic has the unusual property of having always seemed to be one’s friend, he also has the similarly unusual property of always seeming to be the same. If he ever acquired some new personality trait, I dare say that those around him would swear up and down that it was always a part of him. Even earlier today, when he knocked on my door, no longer a man, but a dragon, instead, I now have trouble remembering him as being anything *but* a dragon in the past.”

“Perhaps that explains how he was able to so quickly function normally in the horrific form that was foisted upon him by Swight.”

“And how he could’ve chosen to take on another equally alien form, as well.”

Isacharact looked down at Lural, who was still holding his hand out to her. There was indeed something of Zetic in the Elf – or vice versa. She saw in Lural the same sort of ‘laissez-faire’ attitude; a kind of adherence to some universal rule that courtesy and almost-overbearing friendliness could overcome even the greatest of differences.

Zetic had only been away an hour, but even so... It felt good to be reminded of him.

“Indeed.”

With a smirk on her face, she placed her large paw in his hand. One may say she did so half-mockingly because of the simple fact that her paw was roughly the size of the whole Elf, and if she had let him support the full weight of even just the paw alone, it would very likely have caused him to collapse to the floor.

Still smiling, Lural led her off to the room which had been first assigned to sleep two, but now was fated to hold only one.

“A very entertaining story. The change of perspective compared to Zetic’s is refreshing; don’t you think so, Master Saraendas?”

It was late afternoon of the next day and court was back in session; the magnificent palace room was full of people once again. At mid-day, just after lunch-time, Queen Amlaruil had bidden Isacharact tell her version of the tale which, previously, her Majesty had only heard through Lural’s second-hand retelling.

“Yes, my Queen, though I think I see a few details missing from both.”

Lural, contrary to his appearance the day before, was garbed this time in full family regalia. In these more proper clothes, he looked much less the young roguish Elf and much more the young nobleman, ready and waiting to assume the leadership of House Saraendas.

“I am no bardic storyteller, Master Saraendas. If you think I have missed something in the telling of this story, then ask for it.”

Isacharact sounded vaguely offended, so Lural decided to be tactful.

“Well, I simply wondered what fortune was promised to you that you should have left your home in the North and agreed act as an auxiliary to Zulkir Rhym’s men.”

The white dragon’s eye winced, and she seemed to stiffen; Lural was afraid he’d insulted her, but this was incorrect – it was not his question that made her anxious... but its *answer*.

“The prize offered to me was...”

She paused and self-consciously smacked her lips.

“...one of the Tears of Sehanine.”

The mention of the name of an Elven God brought a few sharp glances and surprised mutterings from the assembled crowd.

Queen Amlaruil managed to remain calm.

“A famed jewel of Elven-kind such as one of the diamond Tears would make a handsome reward indeed.”

Isacharact’s neutral tone matched hers.

“I have yet to claim it. Although, now...”

She trailed off. It was apparent that Isacharact was not particularly thrilled with any of the apparent resolutions to the present quandary. To fail to obtain her payment from Rhym would be foolish, but so too, it seemed, would be to turn over the great old Elven heirloom to its rightful owners, and yet it would be tremendously awkward to simply keep the jewel to herself, after admitting to owning it in front of those to whom it truly belonged.

A solution was on-the-way, however. Amlaruil is the Queen of the Elves not merely by decree, but by virtue as well, and her diplomatic tact is unparalleled.

“It would not be proper for you to go away from this adventure empty-handed, Isacharact. Claim, then, this jewel that was promised to you... And keep it until the jewel which became yours by chance, is in your hands once again.”

There is no such thing as a perfect compromise, but still... when all the parties involved are patient and wise – the Elves, able to wait a few more years before one of their race’s magnificent millennia-old heirloom jewels was returned, and Isacharact, patient enough to wait for Zetic – a compromise such as that proposed by Queen Amlaruil works to the general satisfaction of all.

“That sounds like an excellent idea, my Queen. I look forward to conducting a... ‘jewel exchange’ with you, in the future.”

The tension of the situation was defused, though the general air of anxiety still hung over the room, and there was a very rare awkward silence at the Elven Court.

It was broken by Lural, whose impulsive young attitude loudly burst out of the confining clothes he was wearing.

“Well. *Speaking* of jewels, you really *must* try to tell us all a bit more about Bahamut’s palace. From what I’ve heard, it’s second only to this fair city of Leuthilspar in sheer beauty...”

That slightly mocking tone... The sly look on the teller’s face... The ridiculous – and yet almost not – suggestion that a Godly realm could be surpassed by a mortal one...

It all added up to a typical Moon Elf joke, and most of the people in the room laughed as Isacharact elaborated on her story.

A month passed, and after enjoying the hospitality of the Elves, Isacharact bid them farewell and returned to her home in the North, vaguely agreeing to their implorations to return again a year later – and every year after that, to arrive shortly before the anniversary of Zetic’s departure, and leave roughly a month afterwards.

The year went by, and the time of her expected return approached.

Selfish and chaotic creatures often lie, but only when they feel it would benefit them, and Isacharact had nothing to gain in failing to honour her promise to the Elves. Nonetheless, she was a bit surprised to find that, far from being a frivolous trip, a boon awaited her.

For the story of herself, of Zetic, and of Swight had spread. The agents of the Elven Court stationed on the mainland had become aware of it, and when sightings and reports that matched Zetic came to their ears, they passed on the information to the Court.

In the first year, the reports said, a Gold Dragon who claimed to be a cleric of Torm had made himself known in Mulhorand – an exotic land far to the East, inhabited by a people who place the worship of their strange, foreign, deities first and foremost in their day-to-

day lives. The Elves have little presence there, so Zetic's exact actions were unknown, though it was rumoured that he had undertaken some quest in the great metropolis of Skuld and had been decorated by the prominent church of Horus-Re because of it.

The news in the second year was more scattered. Sightings and tales of an unusually active gold drake came mainly from the Western coast, everywhere from the city-state of Waterdeep up to Icewind Dale at the top of any sailor's navigational map.

The third year, almost no news at all; only one Elven adventurer who claimed to have seen – and been helped by – a Dragon calling himself Zetic in the deep depths of the torturous prison-plane of Carceri.

“It occurred to me that I ought to know something of Zetic's history, Master Saraendas. Perhaps you would care to enlighten me.”

“I would be glad to... except that I'm afraid I can't tell you much. Zetic was so open and friendly about everything, freely volunteering information about himself, that it rarely hit upon any of us in the adventuring party to ask him questions of our own. He never really spoke about his youth, and we never asked.”

“You make it sound as if he was purposefully avoiding speaking about it, distracting you with other bits of knowledge.”

“Actually, I think that's what he was doing. I'm not sure why he would do that, though I *am* sure that *if* anyone had asked, he probably would've told. You could ask him yourself, when he returns, and I doubt he'd deny you.”

“Interesting. And as for his travels – Mulhorand, then the North-East, and now a completely different plane... quite the globe-trotter.”

“Now that, I can tell you about – he simply loves travel. I know he can sit still perfectly well, but if unshackled from any major commitments, expect him to want to go to the furthest, most obscure place he can think of.”

“He's certainly succeeding at that.”

A few weeks later, the visit of the third year was ended.

A fourth year came and passed, and Isacharact visited again to learn that Zetic had apparently been in Calimshan – exotic, sunny land in the deserts of the South-West of the continent. It was, like Mulhorand, a place of few trees, and hence, few Elves, so no details were forthcoming.

But the fifth year... Details of the fifth year were even sparser.

Almost nonexistent, to be precise. Only a single, very inconclusive sighting by a ship crossing the Lake of Steam, that saw a young Gold Dragon pass overhead, heading from the West - towards Calimshan - to the East - towards The Shaar.

And that was it for the fifth year, but there's more: it was so for the sixth and seventh years, as well. Zetic seemed to have simply vanished from the face of the world, and the absence of news only seemed to spark a greater curiosity in the agents of the Elven Court, so that, if he showed himself, he could have scarcely been missed.

But in spite of all the very well-attuned Elven eyes on the lookout for him, there came nothing in the eighth or ninth years as well.

The tenth year arrived. The end of the first decade.

Ten years is a very small time for an Elf, who can live past seven hundred, and even less time for a Dragon, who might live to be a thousand. But for Zetic... more than a quarter of the years he had already lived had just passed, and even though he was not around Isacharact and Lural, some of the feeling of it being a long time was impressed upon them.

“How long is the ‘*Essa-Chakamarul*’ supposed to last?”

Isacharact and Lural were standing outside near the waterfront on a glorious summer's day in Evermeet.

“It varies from species to species, and from individual to individual, but usually spans between five and twenty-five years.”

“How long was yours?”

“Seven.”

Lural gazed off at the Eastern horizon.

“Are you... worried... about Zetic?”

“I suppose... I suppose I am, a bit. It seems a bit unusual that we should have no news of him whatsoever, given all the agents that the Queen has keeping their eyes open. But he would not be the *first* wyrmling to wander to his death.”

Still looking at the horizon, Lural spoke in almost a whisper.

“He’s not dead, I’m sure of it.”

“How so?”

The Elf took a deep breath.

“Last year, I made a pilgrimage to the temple of Corellon Larethian, on the North of this Island – it’s something most Elven youth do when they are about to reach manhood. There, I asked the oracle several questions, and made several implorations. Some of them were about Zetic. I asked if he still lived, and begged for his safe and swift return.”

Isacharact was surprised.

“Why would the chief Elf-God care about what happens to Zetic?”

“Because my Creator cares about what happens to *me*, and my fate was once tied to Zetic’s... Did he ever tell you why I returned to Evermeet?”

“Only that you came back here after a ‘nasty encounter’.”

“Nasty... Petrifying is more like it.”

He looked aimlessly at the ground.

“When an immense diamond golem raised up its greatsword as I lay battered, bruised, and helpless before it, I saw my own death. It was only Zetic’s intervention at the last second that I was spared that day, for he turned away from the foe he was fighting, and thrust his own sword sideways in front of me, blocking the tremendous blow. I fell unconscious from my previous wounds and the shock alone.”

“And that encounter is what spooked you into returning to Evermeet?”

“It is. Corellon knows that I owe much to my friend, so when I ask for favours on his behalf, The Protector is likely to accept my request. The Oracle told me that Zetic *is* safe, and my request that he return safely *was* heard.”

Lural looked up again, a faint smile on his face.

“Then, as now, I worry... but I don’t doubt.”

Isacharact looked back with eyes that looked to one side and veiled her thoughts.

“Interesting. I might even say that I feel the same way.”

“Perhaps you ought to do as I did, then.”

She looked straight down at him.

“What, make a pilgrimage to Corellon’s temple?”

“Goodness, no. Well, not unless you *really* wanted to, of course. I meant that you should pray to one of the Dragon-Gods.”

“Perhaps.”

Summer came again without Isacharact having taken Lural’s advice, and she left for the North once more.

However, in the chill of winter many months later... a sudden and unexplainable sense of loneliness struck her.

What she had told Zetic on the first day they had met was true; most Dragons receive the gifts of the Gods mutely and without thanks. Some more pious ones might keep a small shrine to Bahamut, if they were metallic, or Tiamat, if they were chromatic, but aside from that, the only true worshippers of the Dragon-Gods are the cousins of Dragon-kind; the half-Dragons, the Dragonkin, and other related creatures.

Isacharact maintained no tabernacle to either of the chief Dragon-Gods in her lair and did not intend to carve one out now, regardless of any emotional impulses she might feel.

But surely, some voice said to her, a *small* imploration would cost her nothing, and surely Bahamut would honour her request. For her part in the downfall of Swight, as well as her tutoring of Zetic, He owed her a debt.

And so, in the dark crystalline cavern that was her home, a brief prayer escaped her lips; she hungered for Zetic’s company, and asked Bahamut to send him back to her.

On that cold night, with the sky clear and the stars shining bright, no reply came.

She skipped her visit to Evermeet that year, the eleventh year. The year after it, as well – year twelve. There were other things to do, she reasoned, than to keep fruitlessly visiting the Elves. Lural would not see her in the thirteenth year, either, nor in springtime of the fourteenth, but in the winter that marked the changing of fourteenth to fifteenth, she at last acceded to some nagging thought that implored her to go, and left for Evermeet a month earlier than she had done previously.

“You’ve come back at last, wonderful! We’ve had word of Zetic once again; sightings all across the continent over the last five years.”

Isacharact had just barely landed in front of Lural's home when the energetic Elf had rushed out.

"Really? It would seem that your prayers to Corellon worked, then."

She spoke with a proud and disinterested air, but Lural didn't catch the hidden subtext.

"Indeed they must've! I feel certain that his travels are nearly over. Ah! I'm too impatient; I can't wait for him to meet Qumara."

"Who is Qumara?"

Lural's only reply was to raise up his right fist, showing off a golden ring that lay on one of its fingers.

"You're married?"

"Engaged, actually; though as good as married, with the wedding a certainty and only a year away."

"It's been less than five years since I last saw you, Master Saraendas. I thought Elven courtships were supposed to go on for decades."

The Elf had a mischievous grin on his face.

"Well, if I'm to be Saraendas the Swift, I might as well go all the way and be just as fast with my choice of wife as I am with everything else, no?"

Isacharact wasn't particularly paying attention, but she managed to squeeze out an amused grunt.

"Humph. I suppose so."

"In any case, you're surely tired and hungry from the trip over. Excuse me for a moment while I fetch you some food and drink."

He went off, and Isacharact sat down on the stone patio that was rapidly warming in the full sun. She felt awkward; more so than when she had visited previously. Fly to Evermeet, visit Lural for a month, sit in on the Court, hear the occasional report of Zetic, enjoy the hospitality of the Island, and then leave. The Queen had been correct; being with the Elves wasn't confining... by *itself*, that is, for it was the *routine* of it all that felt restrictive.

Isacharact *hated* routines. If there was one thing she had admired about Zetic, it was that he liked to break with procedure. Frankly, she was frustrated with herself at having settled so easily into a predictable pattern of behaviour. She'd continued to adventure in the North, of course, but it just didn't seem as interesting to pillage the lair of some beast – or even a village. It just wasn't entertaining or to be hired at great cost to trample some invading force, or to spend hours counting her own accumulated wealth. And as for mates... the few suitors who called on her seemed to be worthy only of sticking in the trash.

As she was reflecting on her life in the period of time since Zetic had left, a small gold-coloured canary landed on a nearby bush, and began to chirp very loudly.

She turned to face it, and it only seemed to chirp louder, as if taunting her. Isacharact reflected: here she was, ‘mingling’ amongst Elves who, far from being *afraid* of her, welcomed her with open arms... one supposed that the next step was for her to become so innocuous that even woodland creatures no longer feared her.

This blaringly loud little canary suddenly became something of a symbol to Isacharact; a symbol of her own decline from a creature of power to something... inoffensive. Its joyful song was suddenly infuriating, and Isacharact found herself growling in disgust at it, hoping to scare it away.

But the tiny creature only seemed to sing louder, and – the most extraordinary thing – it actually seemed to be looking straight back *at* her.

Isacharact was in a rage at such insolence. She soon resolved to take no more from the little bird, and decided to snatch it up and squeeze the life out of it in a fit of frustration, when, quite unexpectedly...

The bird stopped singing...

... and *winked* at her.

Isacharact was dumbstruck.

She could do naught but stare, open-mouthed, as the canary took off and flew almost straight up into the sky. It was only after it was at last lost in the sun’s yellow glow that she came to her senses.

There had been only one golden creature who had winked at her that way, just about fifteen years ago, in the palace of Bahamut...

“Here we are, then, I’ve got some venison, cooked with spices that will–”

“Never mind the food. Zetic is going to return this year.”

“He is? How do you know?”

“I saw a sign from Bahamut.”

“Well, then! We’d better go see the Queen and prepare for his return!”

It is said that no-one knows how to throw a party like the Gnomes, that few engagements have more pomp and circumstance than one put on by the Mulan of Mulhorand, and that a magical evening of festivities in Calimshan is a night to remember like no other...

But the Elves of Evermeet know how to put together a welcoming committee that would honour even a God.

A month later, on the day of Zetic's expected return, one of the large palace courtyards that faced the Eastern Sea was almost packed – but not quite, for Elvish occasions always have a certain degree of delicateness to them – with exquisite decorations. At the far end of the long stone avenue, near the shore, hung banners of all colours, held in place by solid golden rods and crested with wreaths of ivy. All along the pathway, hundreds of Elves mingled in the bright sunlight, shaded by the great trees above, and held back behind two solid rows of royal guards, resplendent in their Elvish chain mail.

Just off to the side of the avenue, banquet tables watered and fed all those present. The gathering had begun in the morning, though it seemed likely that Zetic would arrive sometime in the afternoon or the evening. But the Elves would accept almost any reason for festivities, and there was no harm in having the celebrations start early.

In spite of all the splendour ringing the avenue, the real centrepiece of the event was at the foot of the great palace, and the head of the long courtyard. There, the Queen and her closest retinue sat and stood on steps that led up the palace proper. And beside them...

Isacharact was sitting, head held high, resplendent in the golden headdress the Elves had given her years ago. She was paying little attention to the people around her, far more interested in what was to come.

And come *he* did, just after midday, with the sun still high in the heavens.

“My Queen, we've spotted him coming in. He should be here any moment, now.”

“Thank you, Captain. Isacharact?”

She didn't turn from her Eastern watch, but began to grin.

“I can see him already.”

It wasn't long before the others could see Zetic as well.

He'd grown larger. Much closer in size to Isacharact, though still noticeably smaller – maybe half her volume, though, sinuous as his form was, they were roughly the same height and length. Because of this, one could now stand them next to each other without seeing too great of a discontinuity.

His colours had shifted, as well. The dull yellow had become more golden; the scales, larger and more metallic, with a small, faintly brilliant sheen to them.

In the air, still a few minutes away from landing, Isacharact noted that there seemed to be something different about the way he was flying. It seemed more natural, less laboured. More like a Gold Dragon ought to fly – serpentine, as if not flying, but gliding through the air as a snake zips across sand.

And then his face came clearly into view. The determined look in his now completely-golden eyes, the way his hair was billowing freely in the wind, held in check only by what appeared to be a headdress of some sort: two thin, geometric golden flanges of metal hanging down from the sides of his head, shining brightly in the full sun.

At last, he came in to land at the foot of the avenue, in the middle of the circle of banners and pageants. Everyone present looked on, and there was no doubt in their minds: Zetic and Isacharact, still several hundred feet away from each other, were staring directly into each others' eyes.

With a large, friendly, smirk on his face, Zetic reached over his back, and pulled out a sword – easily as long as he was tall – from the sheath that was slung there.

“I have returned... in the name of Torm!”

On pronouncing the last word of that sentence, the sword's blade positively exploded into flame, flinging a sizeable amount of ash and embers onto the avenue's pavement. For the Elves, who are master wizards, it was an impressive, but obviously quite minor, enchantment. From the audience, some satisfied mutterings could be heard over scattered bits of applause.

Zetic started to walk forward, holding the still-burning sword in both hands.

“Returned from a voyage that tore me away from those close to me. Returned from an expedition that I undertook only unwillingly, and only after making promises—”

He paused, and stood tall.

“—Promises which I have kept, and to which I have been faithful!—”

Returning to his normal height, he continued to walk in the somewhat jilted two-legged gait that was characteristic of most Dragons.

“—And receiving promises in return.”

He had reached the head of the boulevard and was standing only a dozen feet away from the throne. Isacharact was still looking at him straight-on, wearing a very satisfied expression. It was rather thrilling, to have him put on such a dramatic performance.

“I come to call in those promises – but first, to humble myself before my Queen...”

All watched as he took one hand off of the handle, tilted the blade sideways, and held the sword on both hands, presenting it to the court. Zetic bowed his head, and, with the flames of the blade licking his left hand, gently placed it on the ground before Amlaruil – though it was rather clear, as he had been staring at Isacharact the whole time, that the display was intended for *her*.

And what a display it had been, for Isacharact found the whole experience enthralling: First, to have him come in, full of pride and glory, displaying his power, and then, to literally and metaphorically lay himself at her feet...

It was positively intoxicating, and her eyes half-shut in delight. Zetic could almost hear as her breathing become a little more pronounced.

“You are welcome back amongst us, Zetic of Torm. Chance has lent us mouths through which some of your travels were spoken of, though details were lacking. We look forward to hearing their tales in entirety, but more so, we look forward to seeing you reunited with Isacharact...”

Queen Amlaruil turned in her seat and gestured at the White Dragon beside her.

Zetic looked up at where she had indicated. Isacharact’s piercing eyes were still boring straight into him.

“I’ve waited a long time for this, my Isacharact.”

The incredibly vain and satisfied expression on her face gained a hint of curiosity as Zetic unbuckled a strap that diagonally crossed his chest. In a single sweeping gesture, he brought around a large velvet bag that had been on his back and carefully placed it on the ground before her.

“Isacharact, white jewel of the North, Queen of my heart...”

He reached into the bag, and in the crowd, which had presently gravitated towards the head of the boulevard, a tremendous succession of gasps could be heard as he pulled out a gigantic, glittering girdle, encrusted with so many gemstones and made of such fine metal that it seemed as bright as the sun whose light it was reflecting.

“... will you marry me?”

Even Isacharact managed to let out a gasp; her eyes bulged open and her mouth hung slightly open in surprise – both at what Zetic had *said* as well as the stunning thing which he was presenting to her.

After she'd stared at it for a few seconds, she recovered her demeanour, and winced, turning her head slightly to one side.

“Marriage is a *human* – and Elven – concoction, cleric.”

Still delicately holding the wedding-girdle by the ends of its heavy leather straps, Zetic smiled back.

“I was born human. This is a concoction that will ever be a part of me.”

Isacharact unconsciously licked her lips as she looked at the incredible prize once again.

“Still, I think we ought to... discuss... this proposal before I can give you an answer, cleric. If you'll excuse us for a moment, my Queen...”

Faintly amused by the proceedings so far, Amlaruil nodded; Isacharact turned and walked back towards the palace. Zetic quickly put the offering back in its container, picked the sack up, and, with a bow and a smile to the Elf-Queen, followed after his love.

“Close the doors behind you.”

Only a few minutes later, they had arrived in the palace room which had been allocated to them. Isacharact walked straight in, without turning to face Zetic as he arrived only a few seconds after her. When she gave her instruction, he placed his bag off to one side and turned to shut the inward-swinging double doors.

When Zetic turned back around, the doors now closed, he was rather surprised to find Isacharact directly in front of him, staring straight at him with a brilliant grin.

“Marry you, hmm?”

Zetic gasped and shivered for a second as she began to press herself against him, bringing her left hand up to caress his face. He didn't object to the attention, but the doors behind him began to protest, groaning under the gradually increasing strain as she squeezed closer.

“Ah... Ah, yes... Marry me.”

His breathing had become shallow and his eyes were open wide. Inhaling through her teeth, Isacharact forced herself closer, a seductive look on her face and a soft growling voice on her lips.

“Oh, but I barely know you, cleric. Let me at least... familiarize... myself with you a little more.”

She smacked her lips.

“I could give you my answer later tonight.”

The golden creature presently being squished between Isacharact and the heavy doors turned his head to one side, clenched his eyes, and whimpered loudly as she began to press against a more *sensitive* area of his person.

All he could manage besides that was to choke out a meek and raspy reply.

“What about my vows?”

At this, Isacharact snorted amusedly, pulling away from him – much to his relief, as well as the relief of the no-longer-buckling doors.

“So... No sampling the merchandise, hmm?”

He turned his head towards her and swallowed deeply as she moved back to the far side of the room and laid down sideways, right flank on the ground.

“In that case...”

She clicked her tongue, and her eyes darted between Zetic and the velvet bag.

“... Let me see the ‘ring’ again.”

When his breath was recovered, Zetic’s face broke out into a smile as he reached into his bag, pulled the girdle out of it, and held it out towards Isacharact as he walked over to her.

The object wasn’t shining nearly as much as it had been outside, owing to the much-dimmed light, but it still managed to sparkle most beautifully in the shady interior of the palace, and in the quiet of the private room, the soft tinkling of its chain tassels was no longer being drowned out by a crowd of Elves.

Isacharact reached out a hand and examined the offering.

“Very nice, but why this instead of an actual ring?”

“The idea of a wedding-girdle came to me when I visited the Yezideem tribes of the Calim Desert. Their brides wear these heavy, savagely beautiful girdles of silver-plated lead and semi-precious stones... They reminded me of you. Besides, a ring didn’t quite seem appropriate. For one thing, wouldn’t it be awkward to wear when you walk on all fours? It would scrape against the floor, getting scuffed up. It also wouldn’t be particularly noticeable, either.”

Hearing this very technical explanation, Isacharact gave him a quizzical look. He caught it and began to grin widely.

“And, of course, a single, simple, ring could not possibly be enough to propose to *you* with, my dear.”

She grinned back.

“*That’s* more like it. I take it the Yezideem don’t marry Dragons, so where did you find this?”

“I saw it in the realm of dreams. I drew up plans and had it commissioned.”

Isacharact seemed impressed and wiggled in place a bit.

“A unique piece? You’re definitely on the right track to my heart, cleric. And how did you know that I liked sapphires?”

“Er... I didn’t.”

“Well, I suppose two out of three isn’t bad. What’s it made from? Not lead, I hope.”

“No, steel. Silver-plated steel, and lots of it – it’s rather heavy. As for the stones... Six diamonds on the front, two pearls on the sides, and twelve sapphires ringing the outside as well as a handful of other minor gemstones for the embossed designs. The whole thing is supported by fine leather from Amn.”

“Quite the long list of ingredients. Who were the cooks of this recipe?”

“As I knew I wanted it to be silver plate, I thought it most appropriate to have it forged by the Dwarves of Mithral Hall, in Silverymoon. Let me tell you, they were quite taken aback when I told them what I wanted, and who I wanted it for...”

“Well, Master Dwarf, what do you think of my idea?”

“I think you’re daft, Dragon, to want to spend that much money on a woman. This ‘girdle’ you want us to make is a royal gift.”

Zetic, shrunk to the size of a man and standing in front of the Dwarven forge-master inside his workshop, grinned.

“It’s appropriate, then; a royal gift for a royal princess.”

The old Dwarf leaned back in his chair and laughed, pushing his feet against the table so that the wooden chair was balancing on its back two legs.

“Oh, a princess, eh? Bof! I’ve heard plenty of men call their women thus; you exaggerate just like the rest of those love-struck fools.”

“Not at all, I play down her image, even! Given her birthright, she is no princess, but an Empress!”

“An Empress, you say? I should think that there are very few Dragons who would fit that title. What is the name of this creature, pray tell, for whom we will be fashioning a wedding-band?”

Zetic’s grin disappeared.

“Her name... is Isacharact.”

The Dwarf’s chair loudly clattered upright as he put his feet down and sat straight up.

“What’s that? *Isacharact*, you say?”

“Yes. You’ve probably heard of her mother.”

“Not just heard... An uncle of mine...”

He swallowed deeply, head sinking and eyes looking at the table with regret.

“... Well... Let us simply say that they... crossed paths.”

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that... I don’t know what to say, other than to suggest that she’s not like her mother in that regard. If the memory of your fallen uncle is too painful for you, I beg you to forget this order, and I will go trouble someone else with it.”

The old Dwarf bit his lip and suppressed thoughts of what had happened so long ago.

“No, no, you needn’t go anywhere else. You *shouldn’t* go anywhere else, regardless of how I feel. You want the best forged silver for your love? We here in Mithral Hall make the best. It is no more complicated than that, and I won’t tarnish our reputation by turning away such a magnificent order. We will fashion this gift for you.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I, too, would have been disappointed to have to settle for... inferior artisans.”

The smith’s spirits seemed to brighten, and he stroked his beard reflectively.

“Hmm. A silver tongue in that golden head of yours, I see. How about your purse?”

“Full of silver, as well. Here.”

Zetic tossed a heavy-looking bag onto the wooden table. It landed sideways and spilled out hundreds of platinum pieces onto the paper drawings and designs which were currently covering the workshop desk.

Two greedy but respectful Dwarven hands reached out to pick the coins up.

“Great bearded Dwarven Gods! I don’t think I’ve seen so compact a fortune in my life. This is almost enough to have it done by *tomorrow*, let alone a few months from now!”

Zetic chuckled.

“That won’t be necessary, though; there is plenty of time. I only need to pick it up before spring next year. But you are the expert metal- and jewel-worker between the two of us; if there are any funds left over, make improvements as you see fit.”

“Improvements, humph! We’ll have these sketches of yours turned into something truly magnificent when you return in the winter. But, still... you must have bottomless coffers to afford this wedding-gift.”

“Maybe not bottomless, master smith, but ordinarily I live cheaply. When I spend money, I make sure to spend it as well as possible.”

Zetic winked. The Dwarf snorted in reply.

“Hum. Make sure that this woman doesn’t bankrupt you, then. She might be ‘different’ from her mother, but I can’t picture the daughter of Isasarach as being any less avaricious than the rest of her family.”

“Oh, certainly. But then again, I wouldn’t have her any other way...”

Isacharact had been examining the girdle the whole time that Zetic had told this story.

“You really spent a wallet full of platinum on this?”

Zetic’s eyes bulged a bit and he looked at the object in his hands in disbelief, having trouble believing he’d actually spent that much.

“Yes, I did.”

“Far too cheap, cleric. My wedding-band ought to cost a *mine* full of platinum.”

Isacharact grinned, and Zetic decided to play along, adopting a mocking tone.

“Give me another fifteen years, then, and I can bring you something better, my dearest. But for now, this is all I have in stock.”

“Well, *if* this is all you have, I *suppose* it’ll have to do...”

She straightened her neck and sat up straight, facing him.

“...Down on your knees, then.”

“Uh... The tradition is for the male to get down on *one* knee.”

Isacharact hissed at him wickedly.

“And you know I demand *more* than what is ordinary, so be thankful that I don’t ask you to prostrate yourself on the floor, because – I assure you – your arms are not long enough to reach all the way to my neck when you’re lying on your belly!”

It was sarcasm, and Zetic knew it – but even so, he swallowed nervously. It was almost conceivable that she’d make him propose that way.

He got down on both knees, as demanded.

“Er, once again, from the top? Isacharact...”

Zetic held the girdle aloft and filled his face with respectful cheer.

“... I offer myself to you in marriage. Will you take me?”

She smirked at this change of wording, and leaned her neck over.

“I will.”

Zetic, still on his knees, shuffled a little closer, and began to fit the girdle to her neck.

“I hope it fits; obviously, you couldn’t be there for a fitting, so I had to guess a bit at your measurements.”

“You seemed to have guessed correctly enough.”

The girdle went on without any trouble, and his head was just underneath Isacharact’s as he began to tie the laces at the back.

“It’s not too heavy, is it? I wanted it to be suitably massive, just like the originals I had seen, but then again, *those* are only worn up to and during the wedding, not forever after.”

It *was* heavy, and Isacharact found herself leaning a bit further forward under its weight, but she soon compensated. The solid metal at the front wasn’t constricting, and the leather at the back wouldn’t chafe.

“It’s fine. I rather like the feeling of it.”

Zetic was still fiddling with the laces. He was being too delicate; on the one hand, he wanted to make sure it was fastened absolutely correctly, and on the other hand, he was still a bit squeamish when it came to touching Isacharact. Being this close made him nervous, and he compensated with chatter.

“Good, good. There are actually several enchantments on it as well. The first is, quite naturally, a ward against tarnishes, scratches, and the like. There’s a small magical armouring on it as well, something to help you in a fight, but the third... the third is a little unique.”

Isacharact was still looking straight at the opposite wall, neck bent slightly forward, with Zetic almost completely out of sight.

“Really?”

“Yes. I thought it up, and the Dwarves loved the idea...”

Talking was slowing him down from his work of attaching the girdle, but Isacharact didn't mind – she was enjoying the feeling of having jewellery fitted. He pulled his head back into her line of sight.

“... I never want to be away from you again, Isacharact... and this is more than a symbol of that. For, as long as you wear it, a divination spell embedded in it will always tell you how far away I am.”

She smiled at him before he returned to fiddling with the straps.

“This dog comes with its own leash! You really know how to sell yourself, cleric.”

A chuckle in reply from below her, and Isacharact noticed something more, too... Just as he was finishing up, having tied the last strap, she bent over a bit more and began to sniff the top of his head.

“Alright, then. I think that's fitted correctly. The straps aren't too tight, are they? I hope I... What are you doing?”

She continued to sniff, eyes closed.

“Taking in your scent.”

He backed off sharply, offended.

“I bathed before I came here!”

Isacharact kept her eyes closed, breathing deeply.

“I didn't say it was a *foul* scent.”

“But... I'm not wearing any perfume either.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Of course you're not. You have the natural odour of a Gold Dragon.”

“What natural odour? I never noticed such a thing!”

“Why should you? It's always with you; I doubt you'd be aware of it.”

Zetic was no longer quite so offended, though he was still confused.

“Well... nobody *else* ever said anything about me having an odour before.”

At this, Isacharact had to laugh.

“Oh, indeed! You obviously don’t realise what you’ve become, my dear cleric. I assume you lived among humans and other such creatures for the last fifteen years, yes? Tell me then, if you please, what idiot of a man is going to walk up to a huge Gold Dragon and say, ‘Pardon me, master Dragon, but you smell?’”

Zetic forced out an uncomfortable laugh in return.

“I suppose no-one. So... what *do* I smell like?”

“I already told you. Like a Gold Dragon.”

He rolled his eyes at her.

“Of course, but what do *Gold Dragons* smell like?”

Isacharact closed her eyes and sniffed the air again, drawing in his fragrance.

“Saffron... and incense...”

She opened her eyes and stared straight at him.

“I like it.”

Zetic was gripped by the supernatural stare once again as she advanced on him, running her paws down her neck and over the heavy girdle which was wrapped around it.

“So, now, cleric. Is *this* married enough to satisfy your vows?”

He started to back up.

“Ah, er... Uhm... About that... Ah...”

If doors could think, the ones in this particular room might’ve groaned in anticipation of being put under undue stress once again, for Zetic was soon being pressed against them by Isacharact.

Clawed hands began to roughly paw his head and neck.

“Yes, cleric?”

Her calm, enticing, voice was in noticeable contrast to his breathless mumbling.

“Ah... Ah... I was wondering if, er, if perhaps we could, ah, *hold off* on, ah...”

She pressed closer. A gurgle and a short, high-pitched, squeak from him...

“...On, ah, on *celebrating* our nuptials.”

Another push from her. Another squeak from him.

“Hold off, hmm? And why should *I* do *that*?”

“Well, uh... To be perfectly honest with you, Isacharact, even though I’ve been in this form for fifteen years now, there are-Ohh!”

She grinned as he whimpered in the face of being squished against the doors once again. It took him a second to regain his breath.

“... There are still some things that I’m uncomfortable with.”

Isacharact, barely listening, ran her nose from the bottom of his neck up past the top of his head, drawing in the scent that seemed to excite her.

“Obviously... But you’re going to have to ‘face your fears’ sooner or later.”

“Uhm, well, I... I think perhaps you... uh... you’re mistaking exactly *what* I’m uncomfortable with.”

At this point in time, Isacharact wasn’t particularly interested in playing games – or at least, not of the variety that *Zetic* seemed to be pushing for.

“Then stop being so evasive and spit it out. I’m getting a bit tired of all this.”

Zetic swallowed deeply and just barely managed to suppress his stutter.

“Fifteen years barely makes a wyrmling from an egg, Isacharact, and such a creature at least has the advantage of not having been anything else previously. This is a big change from being human.”

“You seem to have adapted well.”

“I have... and then I haven’t. Despite any outwards appearance, there are still things about this form I don’t comprehend...”

He tried to gently push her away.

“...How can I bring children into a world I don’t understand?”

Isacharact... just looked at him, making certain he wasn’t joking or toying with her. When she decided that he wasn’t, she spoke in a very slow, certain, and harsh voice; all seductiveness gone.

“You’re being foolish, cleric. You seem to me like you’d make an excellent father.”

“But how could children respect a parent who knows less about being an adult than they do? Dragons hatch fully aware of themselves, but here I am, still struggling to find my way in the fog.”

“Then don’t raise them! Clutches of wyrmlings can fend for themselves, and often do. Younger couples tend to lay eggs and leave before they even hatch.”

Zetic seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“But that’s just it, right there! To have children, and then to simply *abandon* them like that? I... It’s just too strange, too alien. I couldn’t possibly do that – ever – and I’m not ready to raise children in the normal way, so... so I... I hope you’ll understand what I’m saying, and what I’m asking.”

“Oh, I *understand*...”

She pulled away from him, suddenly quite angry.

“But if you think I’m going to *marry* you like this, you’re quite mistaken!”

Isacharact scowled at him and backed off; Zetic began to plead with her.

“I know you’re upset, but please! Bear with me a while, it’s just one more small step; it will only be a short wait.”

“A ‘short wait’? A *‘short wait’*? Just who, exactly, do you think I am, that I should agree to wait for you *again* after having already waited fifteen years?”

With the confidence that he had displayed outdoors returning to him, Zetic took Isa’s hand, bowed with a flourish, and kissed it.

“I think you’re Isacharact, the most beautiful creature in the entire universe.”

She stared at him with her eyes half-closed, smirking and squinting at the same time.

“Ahh, and you’d be *right*! But who are *you*, then, who are so backwards that you can claim to predict when you will change, but not be able to change whenever you please? And what makes you think that it will be only a ‘short wait’?”

“Lord Torm told me.”

Her tone became mocking.

“You asked your *God* if it was all right for you to have sex? I’ve heard some men boast of being ‘divine’ lovers, but *that’s* pushing it.”

Zetic swallowed and glanced at the ground, taken aback and suddenly embarrassed by what he had previously thought was a perfectly normal action.

“I... In a morning prayer not long ago, I told Him of my discomfort, and I asked what I could do about it. His reply was only that a ‘solution’ would present itself shortly.”

“And what kind of ‘solution’ would that be?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

Isacharact harrumphed in frustration and turned aside. Standing on two feet with body stretched out sideways and her tail uncoiled she looked singularly imposing, and Zetic felt as if he’d suddenly grown much smaller.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this. You come back, full of zest, full of riches, bearing expensive gifts, asking for – and *receiving* – my hand in marriage, and then at the end of it all, you spring this ridiculous condition. I am *not* one to be treated this way.”

“I’m sorry, Isacharact. I’m sorry to have told you about this so late... But look at all the trouble I’ve had just telling it to you here, in private. And if I’ve concealed the truth, I’ve spoken no lies. I believe my Lord Torm when He speaks to me of my fortunes, and if you don’t trust in Him, then I beg you to trust in *me*.”

“Trust in you? Trust in *you*? *Trusting in you* is something I’ve been doing for the last little while, in case you hadn’t noticed, and frankly I’ve had enough of it. I’ve made my investment – and not a *small* one either, mind you! I had to turn away some *very* eligible suitors over these past years...”

She glanced at him and was reassured by the look of sharp anxiety in his face; the little lie had worked. A magnetic charm crept into her voice once again as she turned around to face him head-on. She moved a few steps closer to the doors against which he was still cornered, intending to make sure he got the full brunt of her frosty words.

“I may ask – *once* – and I might wait – *once* – but if what I want doesn’t come on its own, then I take it myself!”

The only reasonable reaction to that statement that Zetic could think of was to do as she asked, and come on his own.

With her stare still piercing him, he took a step forward, and kissed her on the lips.

Isacharact didn’t budge.

Shortly after the first kiss was complete, a second, and a third, and then a fourth came in quick succession, all of them cooperative ventures by both, and then at last the fifth came along and lasted a little longer, with both of them closing their eyes.

The sixth kiss began, and Isacharact started to breathe faster and faster through her nose until, suddenly realising what she was doing and the effect it was having on her, she opened her eyes wide, pulled away – much to Zetic’s surprise – and then slapped him harshly across the face.

It took Zetic a second to make sure his face was still attached to his head.

“What was that for?”

“For starting something you can’t finish!”

She licked her lips, breathing rate still returning to normal.

“... But I *suppose* it will hold me over... for a *little* while.”

Zetic was, in fact, relieved, though one wouldn’t know it from looking at him, petrified as he was.

An awkward moment passed.

“Well, then... Ah... Perhaps we should return to the festivities outside?”

“I suppose so. You look a little dishevelled, though. Fix up your hair, first.”

Zetic walked over to a mirror and began to fiddle with his headdress.

“Never mind me; how about those poor *doors*? Weren’t you concerned about breaking them?”

“Not really.”

“No? I, for one, would’ve found explaining how we managed to destroy the doors to our own room more than a little awkward.”

Isacharact chuckled deeply and came over and began to adjust Zetic’s hair for him.

“I wouldn’t. It would be amusing to say that I managed to break the doors before I managed to break *you*.”

His hair finally arranged, she gave him the same solid slap on the bottom that she had fifteen years ago. Zetic managed to start up with the same surprised expression, exactly as before. Isacharact laughed and began to walk away, having seen the look of shock on his face in the mirror.

“Come along then, cleric.”

There were cheers and applause from the crowd when the pair returned, hands held together in the air, Isacharact displaying the girdle openly.

“You’re back, and wearing Zetic’s present, too. I take it you accepted?”

“I did, my Queen.”

Lural, standing nearby, piped in, enthusiastic as usual.

“So... When is the wedding?”

Isacharact glanced over at Zetic before replying.

“We’ll have the wedding when we’re good and ready, Master Saraendas. For now, consider us merely engaged.”

“All the better, then! I would hate to interrupt *one* party just for the sake of hosting another! And on such a lovely day, too!”

With good cheer, the revelry continued for the rest of the afternoon, ending a few hours later when Zetic confessed he was exhausted from the flight to Evermeet, and begged to be excused from the celebrations.

Isacharact left with him.

“So you’re really all tuckered out? And here I was, hoping that was just an excuse to get us away from everyone else.”

Back in the room, Zetic had silently shed his headdress and casually flopped down on the carpeted floor, clutching at the cushions as he shut his eyes with a yawn.

“Get us away? Get us away for what?”

“Oh, I think you know.”

His eyes opened again and were startled to see Isacharact’s toothy grin only a few feet away from his face.

“Ah!”

The bulging eyes remained open, but the startled yelp changed into a closed-mouth whimper when Isacharact grabbed his head and pulled it up as she raised her own, claws digging in to the top of his snout and thumb pressed firmly on the softer part under his chin. She spoke firmly, pronouncing every syllable distinctly.

“You’re obviously very tired, and from what Lural has been telling me these past fifteen years, that’s something of a rarity with you, so I’ll let you sleep in peace – tonight. Just remember, though: what we have here is a *temporary* arrangement, and a *temporary* engagement. I know enough to not throw good money after bad, and that goes for my *time* as well. If you take too long to find this ‘solution’ promised to you by your God, or if you turn out to be... deficient... in certain areas, I *will* forget about you and move on...”

Isacharact tilted her head and stared into his eyes.

“... So just you watch yourself.”

When she let go, Zetic was relieved that he could at last swallow the saliva that had been pooling in his mouth. Even so, he still couldn’t think of anything to say; not that it mattered, as Isacharact barely let him recover his breath before speaking again.

“Well come on, then. Put your head down and get some sleep. No use standing there like some Dragon-twit.”

He did as he was told, and with a half-scared and half-confused look on his face, put his head back down and gathered a few pillows to him once more.

Shortly after he was settled in, while he was still feeling quite petrified from Isacharact’s angry pronouncement, he felt her lie down not *next* to him, but practically on *top* of him, cozing up to him, wrapping herself around his body, and placing her head just next to and in front of his.

Zetic couldn’t be certain, but given that she chuckled shortly thereafter, he reasoned that he had probably moaned rather loudly when she began to purr, her neck superimposed on his.

Still, if he wasn’t able to control his motor functions, at least he was capable of realising that she was giving him quite the hot-and-cold treatment if there ever was one. Angry and dangerous threats on one side combined with gentle (and even not-so-gentle) petting on the other.

And he was capable still of realising that there wasn’t a fireball’s chance in the river Styx that he would be able to resist her wiles and charms.

Not as if he *wanted* to, of course.

Zetic and Isacharact were left well enough alone the next day; Lural and the rest of the Elves who were interested in them recognizing that, after fifteen years apart, two lovers might want *some* degree of privacy while they ‘caught up’.

And so they did. Almost the moment he had woken up, Isacharact had demand that, *if* he was going to be unable to ‘perform’ because of his qualms, then she would require some kind of other entertainment as a substitute in the meantime.

The obvious surrogate was, of course, for Zetic to regale her with tales of his adventures alone, which happened to be something he'd wanted to do and she'd wanted to hear anyways. He took the windowed side of the room, opposite the doors, to be his stage as she settled in against the wall on the left, lounging decadently on the huge mass of pillows.

With his style of expressive storytelling that skilfully combined an excellent voice with simple little tricks of magic to delight and entertain, Isacharact was held in a faint thrall, barely even aware of the servants who, beginning on the second day, occasionally knocked on the doors to deliver meals, gifts, or messages of congratulations.

Perhaps one reason she didn't mind was because of the complete absence of any restraint on Zetic's part when it came to display his affection and adoration of her. He used every possible excuse to break off in the middle of his tale to elegantly and romantically supplicate himself before her and kiss her on the cheek or on her hand.

By the fourth day, when Zetic had still only barely scratched the surface of his adventures – for, after all, a lot had happened in his time abroad – word of the epic story-telling had spread from servant to master and the few messengers had been replaced with their few senders, who dropped in on their way from the Elven Court.

Eventually, however, Isacharact began to be annoyed at the flow of people who were being graciously invited in by Zetic – who, if he had worries about making love, certainly had none about displaying it. It was romantic of him, and the stories were interesting, and she certainly enjoyed the physical attention, but the people simply made her a little... uncomfortable. And besides, Zetic was beginning to showboat.

The 'hot' treatment had continued too long; it was time to make things 'cold' again.

It was early afternoon, just after lunch on the sixth day, when Isacharact decided to act. Zetic was telling a story from his brief time in Rashemen, a land of mystery and natural beauty that has had the cruel Red Wizards of Thay clutching at its throat continuously for the past five hundred years.

“I'm sure you've all heard of Jhuild, the Rashemi fire-wine. Some of you have probably even had a taste, though usually the versions of that drink that make their way this far West have been watered down so much that, while they still beat any native ale for punch, they can't compare to the original version.”

Isacharact spoke out from her seat that was effectively the room's throne.

“Are you saying that *you* have tasted it, cleric? I thought you abstained from all forms of alcoholic drink.”

“Well, my dear...”

Without missing a beat, he stepped over, took her proffered hand, and kissed the top of it.

“... I wouldn’t drink on my own volition, but when one is in one of the longhouses of the Great Stag Berserker Lodge, participating in an initiation rite that involves an all-night suite of drinking and brawling games... Tradition demands that I drink, and so I did.”

Lural, who was presently in the room with some of his family, including his father and his fiancée, piped in.

“Friend Zetic, you might be energetic, but compared to a Rashemi warrior, you’re practically a stone statue. How did you manage to be admitted to one of their lodges of half-insane fighters?”

“Dearest Lural, I never said I was *admitted* to the Great Stag lodge. In fact, the initiation rites were mocked, since I am not consumed by the battle-rage that must possess all true lodge members. But nonetheless... I managed to impress them greatly, both with my ability to take the punishment of their drink as well as the pounding of their blows. I think I jarred them a bit at the beginning, though; in Rashemi warrior society, it is considered honourable to fly into a furor in battle. When I wrangled with the members of the Lodge, however, I maintained my usual calm demeanour.”

Zetic pulled out his sword and pantomimed a swordfight.

“After the third fight, I noticed the rather stunned look in the onlookers’ faces. Even for a non-barbarian, the ability to remain as calm as I did is quite unusual; they must’ve found it difficult to conceive that *any* creature, even a man-sized Dragon, could resist showing a warrior’s fury. Eventually, I realised that it was a mistake to be so reserved; but I didn’t quite feel right in raging, so instead...”

Holding his sword in one hand, he held up a finger and smiled.

“... I began to *sing* during the fights, and while *that* caused even more of a shock initially, halfway through the night I had most of them – even my opponents, sometimes – singing along to rousing folk tunes.”

The play-fighting resumed, but this time Zetic put a bit more energy into the actions as he sang a rowdy sea-chantey.

Isacharact, however, interrupted.

“All right for the fighting. What about the drinking?”

“Oh, it tasted all right, I suppose.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“That’s it? Your first taste of liquor and that’s all you can say?”

Zetic lowered his sword and began to smile.

“Well, no...”

He closed his eyes in reflection, smirking.

“... I did manage to drink the lodge leader under the table.”

An eruption of laughter followed by applause from the five-person crowd.

And something most unusual as well – for Isacharact clapped as well, and so loudly and forcefully that she attracted attention to herself; Zetic recognized that something must’ve been amiss, as she hadn’t done anything like that for the previous oes.

“Another story well-told. But I’m afraid, just as that binge was the last thing you did on that day, so too must its tale be the last thing you recount on *this* day. We are guests here in the palace of the Queen, guests here in the realm of the Elves, but in the guise of guests we have played the role of hosts. A role we must suspend, if perhaps temporarily.”

She turned to face Lural and his family to her side. Zetic was barely able to pick out the meticulously well-suppressed hint of annoyance. If he was good at using his charm in the role of storyteller, she was *very* good at using her charm to deceive.

“You will excuse us, Master Saraendas, but there are some stories that must be told in private. I am sure that Zetic will be glad to resume where he left off at a later date.”

“Oh, of course, my Lady. I wouldn’t dream of interrupting anything of yours.”

With cheerful goodbyes, Lural’s family hastened out of the room. They hadn’t picked up on Isacharact’s true intention but instead had come to the sharp realisation that, even if they had been invited, they *were*, after all, intruding on the lovers’ reunion, and it was only polite that they leave when asked.

The room was soon emptied of all save Zetic and Isacharact, who got up from her seat.

“I find this palace confining. Let us go into the forest.”

It was not a request.

A half-hour’s flight later, they found a clearing deep in the deepest parts of the great forest.

“I’m not complaining – these trees are awe-inspiring – but did you have something particular in mind by suggesting we come out here, Isacharact?”

“Yes. I wanted to get away from the palace and the people in it. I didn’t feel comfortable with such a crowd around me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry... I invited those people to come in because you seemed to be generally indifferent to their presence, and so I thought, well... share and share alike.”

“But not *my* possessions.”

Isacharact smiled wickedly and brushed her hand against his chin in a ‘come-along’. Zetic obeyed and briefly lost his breath and concentration.

“Ah... But, you must know, I only offered my tales to others because I thought it wouldn’t diminish your share. If I’d known it was upsetting you even in the slightest, I could’ve booted them out myself.”

She sighed deeply, shaking her head at him dismissively as she lay down on her side.

“Well in any case, I’ve had enough of the stories. They’re not bad, though. I *might* even say they were well-told.”

The slightest hint of a satisfied smile on Zetic’s face was enough to make Isacharact become stern and almost scowling.

“... But don’t fool yourself. Interesting as they were, they are *not* what I wanted to be doing right now.”

“What *did* you want to be doing?”

There a sly attitude to her voice.

“You already know the answer to that question, cleric. And all this time you’ve been telling stories, you’ve also been noticeably inactive in searching for your ‘solution’.”

Zetic stiffened a bit.

“Torm said it would present itself. I took that, and continue to take that, as meaning that it will show up all in good time, with no special action required on my part.”

“I’ll have to continue to get satisfaction from somewhere else then, so I suggest you pull a rabbit out of your hat, conjure up a fiend to fight, or otherwise... amuse me.”

She pointed a clawed finger at him.

“...But don’t lose sight of the end objective. Your entertaining story-telling might’ve bought you a little breathing room, but time is still running out.”

Isacharact began to settle in comfortably.

“... Just remember... If I wanted someone who could tell me tales all day, I’d enrapture a bard. And if I wanted a Gold Dragon to fawn over me and give me expensive gifts, I wouldn’t have any trouble charming one of those, either. I’m not saying I *don’t* want those things, but if you want me to marry you, you’d better show me a complete package that has *all* the qualities I’m interested in.”

Even in the face of her anger, Zetic was briefly held enthralled as she shadows cast by the leafy branches above played upon her scales, throwing some parts into darkness and making others shine brilliantly. And the way she was looking at him... that delicious sly, half-interested look. He had to blink and shake his head to wake up.

“Well. It’s a good thing I brought my pack with me, then. I just so happen to have something to entertain you with right here...”

Undoing the strap and taking off the makeshift backpack, he reached in and pulled out a large, short-necked lute.

“I thought singing was your art, cleric. And maybe story-telling.”

“They are, but when I first got back to the mainland, I was stung with pangs of loneliness. Almost the first thing I did was have a carpenter fashion me this simple lute, that its music might keep me company, since *you* could not.”

Closing his eyes, Zetic began at once to play a soft, arrhythmic solo – or *Talcksim*, as such performances are called in the desert-lands of Calimshan. With the soft breeze and the quiet rustling of trees to accompany him, the music was as enchanting as the forest which seemed to echo it, and Isacharact found herself closing her eyes, sensing only the sounds, feelings, and smells around her.

“This isn’t quite the right instrument for that piece – in Calimshan, they use a sideways-lying lyre of several dozen strings called a Kha-noūhn.”

Isacharact opened her eyes, but could still hear faint reverberations of it in her head.

“It was wonderful. We had heard at the Court that you were around Calimshan in your fourth year abroad.”

“I was. Order rules that land, but it’s a *corrupt* order, and I endeavoured to endear myself to the ruling Pasha, Ralan el Pesarkhal, in order to change it. I think I helped a bit, though not as much as I might’ve hoped. Perhaps I’ll go back and try to finish the job later. For now... another piece?”

“Certainly.”

A second tune, faster and more vibrant. The forest itself seemed to change moods to suit the faintly sour but still energetic melody.

“The way that one seems to try to top itself at every refrain reminds me a bit of your little ‘musical duel’ with Meer-Khahi.”

“It’s a *Nikreez* – a kind of Mulhorandi solo piece based on intricate and complicated rules of composition, named after an ancient city from before the Mulan emigrated here.”

“I take it you picked it up there when you were in Mulhorand in your first year?”

“Yes. My headdress is from there as well; a little gift from the priests whom I helped by dealing with an infestation of undead in the capital city’s sewers. A *Yüksek Rahip’n’Shapka* – ‘Headdress of the High Priest’. It has a few minor enchantments to boost the wearer’s ability to communicate diplomatically, but mostly it’s an honorary title – it’s quite rare for them to bestow such a title on a foreigner.”

“The Mulan respect no outsiders, only magic.”

“True. And I think that the fact that I now command both the arcane and divine varieties impressed them quite deeply. But if you’d like to hear more about my adventures instead of music, just ask, and I will tell.”

Isacharact breathed deeply, and smiled.

“Maybe I was a little hasty in dismissing your stories. Hah! Here I was, worried that I’d be bored until the ‘solution’ arrived. It’s good to have you around again, Zetic... you’re entertaining.”

It was the first time she’d addressed him by his proper name since being in Bahamut’s palace fifteen years ago, waiting for the God’s magic to take effect. A token of respect? A symbol of closeness? A sign of friendship? Yes, to all?

“... But really, there will be time to tell stories later. I just feel too tired to pay attention to them right now. Play me something relaxing.”

Zetic reflected for a moment, considering what to play, and then, with a smile, launched into a fast piece that, to Isacharact, didn’t seem to fit in with her request.

Until the *real* melody began, that is, and Zetic began to sing along. It was a bittersweet love-song, something a suitor might use to serenade an unresponsive sweetheart.

This was the longest piece yet, and Isacharact, head lying on the ground, had almost fallen asleep when it was over.

She spoke with her head still resting on the forest floor.

“That was very pretty. What’s its name?”

“*Courtship by Moonlight*. A very old, and very poorly known, traditional Rashemi song, taught to me by a bard in a brief adventure across the planes. Do you know anything about the *dajemma* tradition?”

“It’s a coming-of-age ritual where young men of Rashemen set out and journey the world for a year, often with a Rashemi witch, serving as her bodyguard.”

“Yes. Not surprisingly, the witch and the young man often fall in love, and in ancient times the ritual served as a kind of match-making system. But a long time before it achieved *that* status, such romances were considered taboo, and often forbidden by the Hathrans, the elder Witches of Rashemen.”

He began to strum the tune again.

“A young man, the story goes, who had fallen deeply in love with the witch with whom he had been paired for his *dajemma*, was heartbroken when her elders sequestered her away from him at the end of their year-long travels, in order to teach her higher magic – for she was destined to be a powerful spell-caster. Having not yet professed his love to her, and unable to live without doing so, he journeyed to the tower where the greatest secrets of Rashemi magic are taught to female adepts – a place forbidden to men, who are taught a different kind of magic; the magic of crafting enchanted items.”

Isacharact, head still on the floor, at last opened her eyes and watched Zetic with interest. She had to admit, he *was* good at telling stories; even if they weren’t his own. But however good that property of his was, it still couldn’t make up for missing parts...

“The witches refused him entry and turned him away, denying him the chance to appeal to her virtues. They forbade him to return, on pain of death – for this was before the death penalty was institutionalized for all those who enter the secret parts of Rashemen without permission. In one last, desperate attempt, he hid near the citadel and waited for nightfall. When the world was only illuminated by moonlight, he came out and began to sing a song and dance a dance for her, hoping that she would see and hear him, and come out to accept his overtures.”

Zetic smiled.

“In the end, he managed to impress not just *her*, but almost everyone in the tower. Unable to allow such a tremendous romance to be broken up, the ‘Moonlight Courtship’ became famous as the elder witches allowed the two lovers to live together. Shortly thereafter, there was a rage of repeat performances all across Rashemen, until, within twenty or thirty years, the taboo was replaced with a ritual – and then, a half-century later, nothing at all.”

He stopped playing.

“Today, the story, and the ritual, is nearly forgotten within Rashemen.”

“How ironic, for today, it is remembered in Evermeet! Well played and well told, master Dragon!”

Isacharact, believing that they had been alone, started up and tried to see where the voice had come from. When Zetic turned around as well, they at last both spotted the source of the interjection.

It was a young olive-skinned and black-haired Wood Elf, garbed in deep brown leather and soft forest-green and copper-red earth tone cloth, with one of her legs casually dangling off the side of the low tree-branch on which she was sitting.

“I applaud you for your dramatic ability.”

With a wide grin, the youth – who might’ve actually been older than Zetic, though of course the fair Elves do not show age as humans do – began to applaud.

Zetic smiled back and gave a bow.

“Why, thank you, young Elf Mistress. I’m glad you enjoyed my performance.”

“I hope I am not interrupting anything, but it *is* quite rare to find two Dragons romancing each other in the forests of Evermeet. Yet we hear of such things deep in the woods – that a she-Dragon waited many years for her lover to return, and that this year was pleased to add their reunion to its calendar. Would you be that couple?”

Isacharact, reassured that the spy was no threat, put her head back down and spoke with good humour.

“We would be.”

“I am glad, then, to have found you, for as you are friends of our Queen, our King wishes to meet you, as well.”

Zetic broke in with surprise.

“Your King? But King Zaor is dead, murdered in his bed by the Drow so few years ago in the centre of all the splendour of this realm.”

“King Zaor is dead, yes. And Amlaruil, still grieving, has not taken another husband – formally. But all who hear the words that the trees whisper know that her heart is already wed to the King of the Wood Elves – *our* King. And *he* wishes to see you.”

She got up and stood on the branch – small and covered in slippery moss, it would have been a mean feat for a human, but she balanced on it as if it was sturdier than a flat stone floor.

“My name is Skii’ina. Follow me.”

Zetic and Isacharact walked in silent wonder, following the Elf as she handily skipped and leaped from branch to branch, never touching the forest floor for more than a few seconds at a time.

An hour later, Skii'ina stopped and bowed respectfully. Ahead of them was a tall Elf man wearing a long sky-blue robe without designs or patterns. He spoke slowly, with his hands held out in front of him, fingers pressed against each other.

“Welcome. There are those who call me King of the Wood Elves, but you and they both may know me as Saeval Nuén.”

Zetic bowed.

“Your majesty...”

As if not quite believing the scene, Isacharact merely nodded, and received a slow nod in return.

“We welcome you both among us. The hospitality of the Wood Elves is not well known, but those who know it, speak well of it.”

Isacharact was confused.

“Among you? I don't understand; we're in the middle of the forest, without an Elven home in sight.”

Saeval's eyes glittered as his solemn face betrayed a smile.

“Oh? Look around you again, she-Dragon.”

She did, and it took a few seconds, but when at last she could see that they were, in truth, standing in the middle of a veritable Elven city, with earthy huts high up in the trees all around, she gasped.

Zetic noticed them too, though, more used to Elven customs, he wasn't quite as surprised as she was. But even *he* gasped – as well as her, a second time – when they both realised that, in addition to the dozens and dozens of Wood Elf homes, they were literally surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of Wood *Elves*, who had managed to stand so still and make so little noise that they had gone completely unnoticed as the Dragons had approached.

Isacharact staggered, unable to believe how numerous they were that she had nonetheless failed to notice them upon arriving.

“So many Elves...”

Zetic remained calm as he scanned the assembly.

“It is true indeed what they say about Evermeet: a wonder full of forests, and a forest full of wonders.”

“Your words honour us, Dragon. Will you do us more honour, and tell us your tale? As you can see...”

He waved a hand around them, indicating the assembled crowd which was looking on with curious eyes.

“... We are very interested in hearing it.”

At this request, even Zetic was a bit flustered.

“I will do my best...”

His best was more than good enough. Isacharact had trouble deciding between paying attention to Zetic’s enchanting storytelling and gazing at the Wood Elves as they exhibited their legendary patience, sitting almost completely still. But as he became more comfortable in the telling, so too did the Elves seem to become more comfortable in the listening, becoming animated, chatting with each other, and giving Isacharact the peace of mind needed to pay full attention to Zetic’s recounting of the events up to their parting.

He skipped over the details of the wandering years, for the hour was growing late, and instead wrapped up with the story of his return – though, somewhat to Isacharact’s consternation, he casually left out the not insignificant part about his ‘problem’ and the expected ‘solution’.

“A wonderful story, Master Zetic. You tell it well. We are impressed. But tell me now: you are romantic, I see, but surely... you did not intend to spend your first days back singing songs and telling tales to your love?”

“Er...”

Seeing his indecision, Isacharact brushed him aside and spoke bluntly.

“He’s afraid to have children.”

Some of the Wood Elves began to giggle amongst themselves, and even Saeval raised an eyebrow. Zetic was thoroughly embarrassed, and his golden cheeks turned a distinct colour of pink as he looked around uncomfortably.

“Ah, I see... Hmm... Skii’ina?”

Skii’ina got up from her seat and walked over.

“Yes, father?”

Zetic’s embarrassment was suddenly replaced with a sense of dawning comprehension.

Queen Amlaruil’s husband, King Zaor, had been dead just over fifty years... Skii’ina looked to be about sixty, and her skin was of an unusually bright colour for a Wood Elf – it was more *Sun* Elf in colour...

Isacharact shot Zetic a look as she, too, realised the significance of the situation.

“Take two sprigs of Cassil, a ground leaf of Fennel, two strips of birch bark, and a single Yarrow flower. Grind them together and bring me the result dissolved in seven quarts of fresh water.”

“Yes, father.”

She bounded off towards one of the huts behind him. Saeval watched her go for a moment, and then turned back to the Dragons before him.

“I hope that you will one day see that children are not something to be feared, but cherished, no matter what the circumstances of their arrival. Still... You seem to be wise, so I trust you have a good reason for your behaviour. And you may be an old man, but you are a young Dragon. I let my daughter roam as free as her spirit wills, yet I take care to shelter her from what might hurt her. I think you deserve to be sheltered as well, protected for a time from what you fear.”

Zetic could find no words to answer Saeval with, so Isacharact answered instead.

“I heard you mention Cassil. I’ve heard of that herb, I think... Doesn’t it induce a temporary infertility in human men?”

Saeval remained completely peaceful as he replied.

“Yes, and in Elves, too. But for a Dragon... a little more is called for; Cassil alone is not enough. This brew which I have asked my daughter to prepare will work for you, Zetic. A dollop of it will affect you within an hour, and the effect will last for two days.”

Before he had even finished speaking, he held out his hand beside him as Skii’ina returned, a large water-skin in hand. He took it from her and removed the cork to smell it, verifying that the mixture was correct.

It was. He sealed the container once again.

“Take this as my gift to you. I must try to match the generosity of my Queen, who has blessed you in the past, and will likely continue to do so.”

Slowly and quite nervously, Zetic reached over and received the container from Saeval.

“Thank you, my King... You have fulfilled a prophecy that confused me, for my lord Torm told me that my anxieties would be sated by an unknown source.”

Saeval nodded, and turned slowly to the west, pointing with an outstretched arm.

“There is a large island in an archipelago west of here called *Ozassélé* – ‘Far Cry’. It is a paradise of nature, a sacred place, where sometimes single Elves go to reflect in

solitude... or pairs of Elves go to reflect upon each other. If you wish to go tonight, you ought to be able to reach it before the sun meets the sea.”

Isacharact’s eyes brightened up, and she suddenly became excited.

“You are too generous, my King. Come along, Zetic. I’ve had enough of the Island of Evermeet for today; let us go and see this ‘paradise’ of Far Cry instead.”

She plucked the water-skin out of his hands and turned to go, pulling him by the arm and giving the King a hasty nod.

At the first sign of a clearing, she took off, and Zetic took off after her.

They reached Far Cry within the hour, and the Sun was just starting to lose its yellowish tint in favour of a reddish glow.

Isacharact saw a large cave reasonably high up on the island that looked out to the sea, and rapidly came in to land in front of it.

Zetic followed after her, and was about to go with her into the cavern, when she turned around and stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Uh... I assumed you needed me to do this.”

Isacharact chuckled.

“My dear cleric, have you ever done this before?”

“Well... no, obviously.”

“Then please, make no assumptions. *Obviously*, I need to first make sure this place is suitable, and to prepare it if it is. Make yourself useful by taking a sip of the potion. Otherwise, wait out here until I call you.”

With an amused look, she handed him the water-skin and hurried in, disappearing into the darkness.

Zetic stared after to her, unable to see more than a few hundred feet into the cavern which seemed like it could’ve stretched on for a good few hundred more. At last, he came to the realization that the potion *did* need time to take effect, and that he might as well drink it sooner rather than later.

Facing back towards the setting sun, he uncorked it and drank. It had a cool, mint taste.

He turned around. There were no sounds coming from the inside, and she hadn't called him yet, so he sat down and watched the sun set.

It was all *very* awkward. Such a confusion of emotions...

Far Cry has a well-deserved reputation for being a centre of meditation, for the sunsets seen from its shores are some of the most beautiful in the world, and Zetic was soon lost in thought as he watched the scattered patches of clouds in the sky slowly and beautifully gain a crimson tint.

The bottom of the scarlet round orb that is called the Sun was just kissing its reflection in the deep-blue sea when Zetic was interrupted.

“Come in.”

With a look of sheer dread that might've been that of an adventurer who had just discovered a colossal golem standing right behind him, Zetic turned around and got up, removing his cloak, headdress, and knapsack, and placing them with the potion-bag just inside the entrance of the cave.

Simply too nervous to stand on two feet, he went in walking on all fours instead.

A soft glow came from the far side of the cave, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Zetic became aware that the entrance was little more than a long tunnel that must've led to some deeper chamber.

“Did you hear me, Zetic? You can come in, now.”

“I heard you; I'm on my way.”

He followed the tunnel. And now, the moment of reckoning! So long, obsolete vows! So long, fragile innocence kept long enough! So long, all, and fare thee well!

Zetic rounded the corner at the end of the hallway and paused in an antechamber. Beyond the low arching rock that served as a doorway, he could see Isacharact, surrounded by small glowing lights of magic. She was lying flat on her front, tail curled around her side, head above her shoulders, neck coiled slightly back upon itself, arms folded in front of her, and face... face looking straight at the wall in front of her, instead of at Zetic, to her left.

It was strange, but the fact that she *wasn't* looking at him somehow made the whole thing a little more comprehensible, a little less frightening, and Zetic, swallowing the butterflies which seemed to be rather ravenously clawing at his throat, started to approach her.

He didn't get more than halfway before he had to stop, for she'd turned her left eye to look at him, and slowly batted its eyelid – twice.

As she made no further moves, he was able to gather courage once again, and prowled closer.

He made it halfway again – that is to say, three-quarters of the total distance – before he had to stop. This time, not just one eye, but the whole head turned to face him, wearing a seductive stare.

Zetic managed to take about two more steps closer, before he was completely rooted to the ground, unable to approach.

Isacharact flashed her eyes and grinned with an open mouth.

“You’re afraid?”

His voice, nearly lost, was almost drowned out by the silence of the cave.

“A little.”

She ceased being a statue, and shuffled herself around on the ground, partially raising herself off of it and bringing her tail back behind her.

“Well. *Ordinarily* when one partner is experienced and the other is not, now would be the time when I’m supposed to tell you not to worry, because I’ll be gentle.”

Zetic was completely captivated by her eyes, so that he barely noticed the fact that she was no longer lying on the ground but was turning to face him.

“Except that I won’t, because, quite frankly...”

His eyes opened wider than seemed feasible as she pounced on him, bowling him over on his back and landing on top of him, face right up against his.

“... I haven’t the patience to be gentle with you, man-dragon.”

If Zetic thought anything of that notion, it was completely lost, muffled by the gurgling noise that came out of his mouth as Isacharact planted her hands on opposite sides of his head, growled in his face, and whatever little patience she had carefully saved and portioned over fifteen years... ran out.

A few minutes later, if Zetic was being roasted on a spit, one would say that he was now ‘well done’, and it was time to remove him from the heat. But the fire that was cooking him in this case seemed to be oblivious to the condition of the rôti – indeed, when Zetic indicated that he was *quite* finished by clawing the ground with his hand and half-sputtering incoherent syllables, Isacharact seemed to only want to turn up the flame, as if desiring to burn the meal to cinders.

Or not quite to cinders – just past the point of where Zetic would be classified as being ‘burned’ – or what we might call *unconscious*, to break out of the metaphor – she relented and climbed off of him, much to his relief.

Without wasting a single moment, he scurried over to the furthest corner and bent over double, coughing and hacking in dry heaves.

Isacharact sat back down and watched him, faintly amused. When at last the not-quite expectorating convulsions seemed to slow to a reasonable rate, she spoke up.

“How do you feel?”

Zetic didn’t bother looking away from the ground which had so far managed to remain free of vomit.

“I’ve got a pounding headache...I’m in pain all over... I feel like throwing up... And I can’t even remember my own name.”

She looked at the claws on her hand with disinterest.

“Your name is Zetic, and whenever you feel that you’ve recovered from your temporary illness, come back over here so we can make love for real.”

The last few words in the sentence were all that Zetic heard, and he turned up from the corner that was serving as a makeshift quarantine.

“What do you mean, ‘for real’? What was that just now??”

“*That* was a rude awakening. A wake-up call; something to shock you and bring you to your senses.”

Isacharact looked at him with cold, piercing eyes.

“Not everyone’s ‘first time’ is uncomfortable and awkward, but I knew that *yours* would be. So, wanting such awkwardness to be over with quickly, I did the simplest thing that came to mind—”

She began to grin wickedly.

“—I gave you the most forceful, uncomfortable, and awkward first time I could, in the hopes of completely purging your system. It’d be hard for you to imagine something more trying than what just happened now, no?”

“It certainly would.”

“Good. Then come back over here, cleric, and let me show you the *pleasures* of the flesh, instead of the pains of it.”

Her shock treatment had evidently worked, and he came back over, hesitating only at the very beginning of the seventy-foot-long voyage. Isacharact had him lay down on the ground on his back again.

“Now, my lover, just as you said six days ago – ‘once again, from the top?’.”

He could only moan in reply as she clambered on top of him.

Zetic awoke the next morning feeling exceedingly light-headed after having been thoroughly *squeezed* the previous night. Isacharact, who had fallen asleep on top of him, her arms coiled around his head, was no longer there, or anywhere else in the cavern, actually.

He got up and headed out to look for her – but was shocked to see the sun high up in the sky. It must’ve been almost noon; he was late for his daily prayer. He hastily made up for it, worried about his tardiness offending the God.

There was a double-anxiety there, as well. For, technically speaking, he *had* broken his vow of celibacy before marriage. But, he prayed, surely his Lord Torm, in all His wisdom and mercy, would understand that last night was no foolish escapade, and that Isacharact was no bar-room harlot.

Lord Torm appeared to agree. Zetic soon felt a little tingle inside, the tiny feeling that meant he was once again empowered by his God.

With his daily ritual complete, Zetic returned to his original goal of finding Isacharact. He didn’t have to look far, for just a few hundred feet away from the cavern entrance was a waterfall with a deep pool of water at the bottom. Isacharact was in the pool, bathing.

“You’re up at last. Come and wash yourself.”

Frigid water from the spring thaw – but fresh, and clean. Zetic waded forward.

“And how are you feeling this morning, cleric?”

“I’m not sure, exactly, though I think I can say with certainty that I feel better now than I did after the first time last night.”

She smiled at him, her head the only thing poking out of the water.

“Of course you do. That *was* the plan.”

“And how do you feel? A little... relieved?”

“I suppose so.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Isacharact raised herself up out of the water and untangled her headdress’ chains.

“Well... I *am* relieved that the ‘solution’ finally came, and I *am* relieved that we’ve finally... consummated... our relationship, but frankly... I’m not entirely satisfied.”

“Not satisfied with what?”

She eyed him warily.

“What do you think?”

“Oh. Well... hum... I suppose I didn’t do much, did I? Though, er, it *was* my first time. I, uh... I suppose I’ll, ah, *improve*.”

It suddenly occurred to him that her final decision to marry him was, after all, going to be based on his *performance* in bed.

“... I mean, just... just give me a few days, you know. I’m still getting my bearings here. Don’t race to hasty conclusions about one night.”

A sly smile crossed her face.

“Oh-ho-ho! It’s good of you to remember that you still have to live up to expectations. For however amusing it is to see you cough, sputter, and squirm underneath me, clearly unable to handle my lovemaking, it’s not exactly what I have in mind when I picture ‘ideal’ sex.”

Zetic didn’t seem to know what to say, and Isacharact, who ordinarily might take pleasure in his discomfort, reassured him.

“But in spite of my criticism... I would relax, if I was you. I’m not satisfied enough yet, but don’t worry about it too much. In all honesty, nervousness is the deadliest killer of pleasurable sex if ever there was one. I’m sure something will come to you, and I’m willing to give you a *bit* more time. You might even say I think it will only be a ‘short wait’.”

She playfully splashed water at him, and he became happy again. For a good half hour, they frolicked in the refreshing water, until the play turned more into play-wrestling, and Isacharact managed to pin Zetic’s head under the water.

Smiling smugly at him with her hands around his neck, after holding the pose for almost a minute, she was amused to see him start to struggle more and more furiously.

He began to make signs that he was drowning.

Isacharact didn’t let go.

“Oh, you perfect idiot! Fifteen years of adventuring, and you didn’t learn one damned thing about being a Gold Dragon.”

Zetic could hear her, but he didn’t understand, and only struggled more desperately.

She bent over right to the water and shouted at it.

“Gold Dragons can *breathe underwater!*”

The thrashing stopped. A few seconds later, Zetic’s mouth opened, hesitatingly drawing a watery breath.

And then he drew another, and another, and another, until it was quite obvious to him that Isacharact was right. He started to speak from under the water, words slightly garbled.

“Whell, hlow wlas I supposed to know? I alweady knew how to swlim, why shloudl I try to dwlown mysself?”

“Bah! You’ve got no excuse for such ignorance, cleric. One would think that you’d have had the intelligence to have gone and picked up a *book* of some kind and read about your own newfound species!”

She let go and backed away from him. Zetic came up quickly, breaking the water with a splash as he raised his head up high and spat out a torrent of water at her.

“Augh!”

He was smirking at her.

“...Oh, I’ll teach you, man-dragon...”

“Uh-oh.”

Before he had time to do anything but shut his eyes, she drew in breath and blasted him with cold air.

When she was finished, he was coated in frost and there was a small pool of ice around his waist where the water level was.

But the biggest change was on his face, which seemed to have changed from being clenched in anticipation of pain, to one that bore a considerable relationship to the facial expressions he had worn last night...

With a shiver to shake off the frost that made a loud crackling noise as the ice was broken, Zetic exhaled loudly and then opened his eyes, staring straight at Isacharact with what looked like... desire.

She was looking back at him quizzically. What was going on, here?

Still standing there, partially frozen, his breathing grew faster, and deeper, until at last he seemed ready to burst, but instead launched himself at her, tossing her onto her back.

“What is—What do you th—”

Isacharact was cut off as he forced himself closer and managed to let out a low growl.

It took her a second to realise what, exactly, he meant by all that, and when the answer came to mind, she opened her eyes wide, hissed back, and rolled over, moving them to the other side of the river and reversing their positions – her on top of *him*, with their hands locked together.

With his body trapped underneath her, Zetic reached up and began to shower her face with kisses and nibbles.

Isacharact closed her eyes and arched her head back for a minute, enjoying the attention...

Suddenly she opened them wide again, stared at him hungrily, and barked a command.

“All right, back in the cave, you!”

Midday turned to afternoon.

Zetic look scarcely less dishevelled, exhausted, and... *overcooked*... than he had the previous two times, but Isacharact...

The look of vague disinterest on Isacharact’s face after the first time was replaced; she now wore one of satisfaction.

“How was that, Isa?”

“A significant improvement...”

Lying next to him on her side, she licked one of her fingers.

“... And, I suppose, I suppose...”

She turned up her head at him.

“... All right, cleric. You can arrange the wedding.”

Zetic rolled onto his back and breathed out what seemed like the deepest breath he’d ever let out, laughing a teary laugh.

“Oh, good Gods! Never have I been more relieved to hear a single sentence as that one just now!”

Isacharact smiled and let him pant as if exhausted. Eventually, he turned back towards her.

“... Did you have *any* idea how perplexed you made me feel these last few days?”

“Of course! ... Although, looking at you now, I don’t think I realised you were *this* apprehensive, though I was certainly trying my best – to make you nervous, that is.”

She began to laugh in a surprisingly friendly manner. Despite being upset, Zetic managed to laugh back.

“Trying your best! You hardly needed to try at all! Did you know I’ve literally been preparing to come back to you for the last *five years*? You can’t imagine how much anticipation I built up. You can’t possibly conceive how much effort it took not to fumble my own sword or to trip over my own tail when I arrived. And you even had everyone out there to watch me fail, if I did! Torm must’ve granted me an extra surge of strength that day, propping me up.”

“Come now, cleric. I think you underestimate your own powers. You were already resilient, and you’re a Dragon now; strong will is a speciality of our species.”

“And *breaking* wills is a speciality of yours, Isacharact!”

She grinned.

“Well, I suppose that’s true. Still, you seemed to pick up on at least a few of my tricks. Frankly, I was half-expecting you to be a bit more aggressive when I started to... bend the truth.”

Zetic’s smile disappeared, replaced with a slight frown.

“You lied to me? I didn’t notice any of that.”

“Oh, not so much lied as... exaggerated. When I told you that I had to turn away plenty of eligible suitors, for example. I *did* turn away suitors, but... They weren’t particularly eligible.”

Zetic actually looked away.

“I was quite unnerved by that. It wasn’t very fair of you to lie so.”

“Humph. You ought to have expected I wouldn’t fight fair. Isn’t there a human expression? ‘All’s fair in love and war.’ Take your pick as to which one of those two describes my actions.”

“Still... It was threatening enough to say that you turned away suitors for my sake. You needn’t have aggrandized it. I mean, just think... What if *I* hadn’t told you the truth? What if I’d said I simply didn’t want to make love yet, instead of saying *why*? Wouldn’t it have made you feel uncomfortable? Wouldn’t it have upset you?”

Isacharact squinted at him, and was almost about to say ‘no’, but the genuine look of worry and sorrow on his face was strangely disarming.

“I suppose... I suppose it *might* have made me feel a bit awkward, if you hadn’t revealed your reasons.”

“Wouldn’t it have made you question yourself?”

He was really pushing her, and Isacharact bit her tongue, and ground her jaw, but she still had to concede his point, if with a growl.

“Maybe a little bit. Don’t push this issue any further, cleric, unless you want me to keep addressing you as ‘cleric’, instead of as *husband*.”

“All right. Though I do want you to know that *I* plan to be fair to you in this marriage, and I think I deserve at least the same in return.”

Another low growl.

“Fine. But I don’t really feel like talking about that kind of thing right now.”

“Well, what *did* you want to talk about?”

The scowling, squinting, growling face, without changing much at all, suddenly switched from displaying anger to displaying seductiveness.

“I didn’t want to *talk* at all.”

Zetic choked, suddenly aghast.

“I... But we just finished! You want... more... so soon?”

Isacharact only laughed cruelly.

“My dear cleric, if there is *one* reason that I decided to marry you, it would be because I want *more*. More from life, more from the world. More than what I already had, and more than I knew could possibly take on my own.”

She looked down and saw his expression.

“And don’t scoff at me like that. Greed is a powerful motivator; you ought to be thankful for what it’s brought you.”

“I suppose so... though it’s not the purest of motives.”

“On the contrary. What emotion could be purer than desire? What could be simpler than sheer lust?”

“I’m not wise enough to answer that; all I can do is say, ‘What about love?’.”

“You told me that the definition of love what caring for someone – or something – in ways that one can’t put into words or concrete actions...”

Isacharact moved her head a little closer, a sly look on her face.

“...I’m afraid, then, that I can’t *possibly* be in love with you, cleric, since I know *exactly* why I feel the way I do, and *precisely* how to express those feelings.”

“I don’t know what to say about *that*, other than that I suppose it’s good to ‘know’ oneself in that way.”

“Of course it is. But now, I am greedy, and I need you to sate my greed...”

She put her face almost right in front of his.

“...Immediately.”

He kissed her. She kissed back – *very* deeply.

After a few seconds, she withdrew, and licked her lips.

“Mmm. Tastes like saffron, too...”

THE STAGE HAS BEEN SET.
THE ACTORS ARE IN PLACE.
LET THE STORY BEGIN IN EARNEST
IN
“AT THE COURT OF THE ELF-QUEEN”