

Chronicles of the Mandrake

By Tim “HeXetic” Gokcen

hexetic@gmail.com

Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Zetic

Mutated Aberration (Man-Dragon)

Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact

Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Captain Montague

Mature Adult Human Male

Fighter and Red Wizard of Thay

Cheldar Swight

Mature Adult Human Male

Transmuter and Red Wizard of Thay

The Turning of the Wyrn

The castle of Cheldar Swight flew its owner’s banner no more. Instead, atop its peaks, the crimson banner of Swight’s master, Druxus Rhym, the Lord High Zulkir of Transmutation, billowed in the evening wind.

The violet-trimmed banner meant nothing to Zetic.

Nor did the piles of corpses – Orcs, mutants, and aberrations of all kinds – that were strewn about outside the fort, dead testaments to the efficiency of Montague’s cohort.

But, glancing at the bodies as he made his way to the war-troop’s camp, Zetic remembered his own fallen friends: the small band of heroes with whom he had adventured for several months. He could still hear their voices in his head, their cries ringing as they had met their end here weeks ago, at the hands of the wicked Swight.

Oh, Swight.... That name was venom in his mouth.

Though thirsty and hungry well past starvation and dehydration – almost at the point of death – the thought of that horrible wizard being loose filled him with rage, and he forgot the physical demands his new body was making on him.

Zetic spoke to his rescuer of their mission.

“So, Captain... Was Swight not here when you came, or did he flee at your arrival?”

Montague was walking beside him, striding through the carnage that was his handiwork.

“I do not know. We think he was here, but then fled during the siege. Some of the battle-mages sensed that teleportation magic had been used recently upstairs. However, it would have made sense for him to at least *try* to use some of his magic to beat us away, rather than fleeing outright.”

“Maybe, maybe. Or perhaps he simply didn’t want to take any chances of being defeated before he could transform himself. I am horrid, but he gave me a purposefully corrupted version of the potion. Who knows what his final result will be?”

“We certainly don’t, which is why we paid Isacharact to come along. I don’t know her exact history, but as you can see, she’s a powerful addition to the force. She also has a reputation for having plenty of experience fighting other dragons. No doubt due to dragon territoriality and all that.”

“And so she will be useful if Swight is successful in his metamorphosis. Yes, I see. But I have difficulty understanding *why* she’s here. Dragons are solitary, reclusive – I could count the number of stories I’ve heard about dragons being hired as ‘mercenaries’ on one hand.”

Zetic glanced at his right paw. It only had three large, claw-like fingers and a barely-opposing thumb.

“Well... I could’ve counted them on one hand when I had human hands. I suppose I’d need two, now.”

Zetic chuckled and continued to walk. Montague looked up in surprise at the misshapen grey dragon-man beside him.

“For someone who was imprisoned in a dank pit for several weeks and has been forcibly given an abominable form, you have a surprisingly good sense of humour, cleric of Torm.”

The skin stretched tight across Zetic’s mangled face as he smiled.

“Captain Montague, that is quite possibly the most beautiful thing I’ve heard anyone say in years.”

Zetic saw Montague’s expression change to confusion.

“Oh, don’t you see, Captain? The insidious Swight has changed my form, but my mind is the same. I have a twisted and repulsive body, but I’ve got my sense of humour. I’ve got my soul, my fire, my spirit.”

As they approached the camp, where a barbecue was already underway, Zetic's belly grumbled loudly.

“And my appetite too, apparently. I suppose I could use the expression ‘hungry enough to eat a horse’, but that might be pushing your generosity.”

Montague broke out in laughter.

“Dragon-man, you were worth rescuing for the conversation alone! I didn't realise that clerics of Torm had senses of humour!”

Zetic smiled back.

“This one does. And I don't know if I'll be able to sing as I used to, but if your men need entertainment tonight, I'd be glad to try.”

“Perhaps, dragon-man, perhaps. But go eat and drink, first. Priests of Torm, like their cousins who worship Ilmater, are known for their self-sacrificing ways, but after seeing you in that dungeon, I think you've sacrificed your health more than enough!”

They reached the camp and headed straight for the campfire. Montague called to the squires tending it and had them take off a slab of meat – lamb, probably – from the roasting-spit.

Taking it eagerly, Zetic moved a small distance away and sat down to eat.

But how to eat it? His mouth was no longer human, nor his hands, and they certainly had no utensils for him. The only thing that came to mind was to gnaw on it with the side of his mouth, trying to use his teeth to scrape the meat off the bones and into his mouth.

“What do you think you're doing?”

Occupied with eating – and with the hunger still burning inside of him – Isacharact's booming voice barely fazed him. He turned to face her icy look.

“I am trying to eat this roast, obviously.”

“No, dragon-man, you are *failing* to eat that roast, getting more of it on the ground than down your gullet.”

“Your pardon, Lady Isacharact, but I *am* new at this being-a-dragon job. Perhaps you would care to educate me in proper draconic dining procedures?”

Isacharact growled back at him.

“You are pleased to jest, miserable man-creature, but... a *real* dragon would simply eat that whole.”

“What, bones and all?”

“Yes, of course!”

He struggled to open his jaw wide enough – he had never before opened it a whole foot wide, after all – and placed the meat in his mouth. But it was too large for his throat, and he could not possibly take it down in one piece.

He snorted and spoke again, voice muffled, consonants slurred.

“Hwell, hwat nowh? Itsh too hig to shwallow.”

She grumbled and sat down near him.

“Have you no wits? Chew it, cleric of Idiocy.”

Zetic removed it from his mouth so that he could speak normally again.

“But, how? I can’t just crunch it down; my jaw muscles aren’t strong enough.”

With a vaguely exasperated look, Isacharact beckoned to have a piece of the evening meal brought over to her as well.

“Are your eyes strong enough to see me, at least? Watch.”

She tossed the meat in the air, catching it in her mouth. Her head snapped back repeatedly as she chewed, sending the bits down inside her neck, though the portion was clearly small enough for her to have swallowed it entire.

Zetic followed suit, though the feeling of the large, slightly ground pieces of meat going down his throat was... odd.

Still, once they got down to his belly, the hot food was veritable ecstasy. He let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Ah, that makes me feel so much better... Thank you for the lesson, Lady Isacharact. Now, please, excuse me a moment; I must attend to my thirst.”

He got up and walked over to the nearby river, and... *tried* to drink. But every time he’d cup some water into his hands, it would all run out before he could lift it to his mouth.

“Oh, curse me twice. With such hands, how the devil do you dragons drink, then?”

Isacharact let out an amused snort and came over.

“More often from goblets than from rivers themselves, but in such cases it is done thusly.”

She dipped the tip of her face into the river, lips puckered, drinking as an animal of the forest might. Zetic watched her; it was almost comical, seeing this great lizard calmly sipping water.

But he quickly remembered his own parched throat, and plunged his head in, sucking up the water. The liquid in the cool stream was hardly crystal-clear, but his achingly dry mouth couldn't have cared less.

Isacharact drank her fill, and raised her neck, but Zetic continued to sip. She watched him with amusement as he groped greedily at the river, trying to stick his mouth ever further into it in order to guzzle ever more.

Finally, he was done. Zetic lifted his head out of the water, eyes closed, as he breathed deeply.

“By all the Gods... Were that the pure water of the lake at the foot of Mount Celestia in the heavens above, I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference, so thirsty was I!”

The sun was almost down, now. Night would soon be upon them, and already starlight poked through the blue sky. Zetic looked up at it.

“Ah, it's good to see the stars again. Thank You, Selûne, for allowing me to gaze upon Your astral beauty once more.”

“Humph! I thought you were a cleric of Torm, not of the Star-Maiden.”

“I am... but in the hellish dungeon, I prayed to *all* the Gods – good and ill – to deliver me from there... or at the least, bring me comfort in that dark pit. One of my prayers was to Selûne, that She would grant me the light of the stars as companions in the darkness.”

“But she didn't. Why then thank her now?”

Zetic turned to face Isacharact. She still towered over him, and he had to tilt his head up to see her eyes.

“What kind of a thing to say is that? Even if I felt that Selûne had failed me, should I then fail Her, too? We cannot hold a grudge against the Gods for Their actions, as they are so often beyond our comprehension. Tonight, She has proven Her wisdom; for as I am standing here, belly full, thirst quenched, and very much alive, I obviously did not, in truth, need Her help in the dungeon.”

Isacharact now looked at the stars, as if seeing them differently than she used to.

“I suppose that is so.”

Zetic, too, looked at the stars again.

“Of course it is. And in the end, it's simple etiquette, after all. Selûne shows us Her wondrous sky every night, almost unfailingly; it is only fitting that we thank Her for it now and again.”

He turned to face Isacharact once more.

“Is it not also thus with dragons, then? Do you not thank the Gods for what They have given you?”

Isacharact remained staring at the sky, enthralled by its beauty.

“No... not usually. Dragons may give thanks to Tiamat, Queen of the Chromatic Dragons, or to Bahamut, King of the Metallic Dragons, now and again, but for the most part... we receive their gifts mutely. It makes sense, though, for given the length of his life, a dragon who uttered prayers every day would end up praising the Gods far more than a human would.”

Zetic snorted at her words.

“That does not make sense to me at all; if one is blessed with long life and great power, then one has been given a greater gift from the Gods, and should therefore be proportionately more thankful.”

Isacharact cast her eyes about, taken aback by the quick and determined refutation. How curious: this miserable figure had clearly suffered much; yet instead of being broken, the experience seemed to have made him stronger.

She soon thought of a new position to defend.

“Well, perhaps, then, the problem is that most dragons do not feel as if they have been blessed by the Gods much. We look around and see the fruits of our work, or of the work of men, but not the work of the Gods.”

“If so, dragons must all be blind, to fail to see the presence of the divine in everything around them. Look at me; do you think that I could possibly have survived that dungeon without the aid of my God?”

Isacharact turned and looked down at him.

“But your God did *not* help you.”

“Not in the way I asked, maybe. But help, He did, for I felt His presence with every new ray of hope: food, first, then hope of escape, and then escape in truth. Now that I am out, I feel His presence once again; and tomorrow morning I will know once again the power He grants to me.”

Isacharact watched as Zetic bent over to look down into the river and see his reflection.

“It was thanks to His strength that I survived the first encounter with Swight, while my companions all fell around me, poor souls... And perchance He will give the strength to undo this cursed form... though I cannot fathom His will on this matter. What I *do* feel certain of is that when we meet Swight again, my Lord Torm will give me strength – and that evil man will not triumph again.”

Isacharact bent her head also and looked at the water. After a period of time, she spoke out, facing his reflection.

“Your appearance is wretched, cleric of Torm, but your words betray a precious stone within. I will think on what you have said tonight.”

And so they sat, looking into the water as children do, captivated by its ripples, by the rapidly dimming reflections on its surface, and by the slight, barely-noticeable movement of fish beneath.

Captain Montague called out to them.

“Hail, dragon and dragon-man companions! There is still some meat at the fire; does hunger remain with either of you?”

Isacharact quickly turned away from the water and faced him.

“I have eaten my fill for tonight, Captain.”

Next to her, Zetic remained focused on the water, examining his own mangled visage. His face looked as if the wrong shape of skin had been stretched over an already ugly head. It was elongated as a dragon’s, but with still a clearly distinct nose sitting on top, and strange, flat, ears dangling by its sides.

He opened his mouth and examined his teeth – far less than ought to be in the mouth of a dragon – but as he did so, hunger came to him again, and he remembered Montague’s offer.

“I will gladly eat tonight’s surplus, my Captain, if it would otherwise go to waste.”

“All have already eaten, cleric. Come, and take what is left.”

Zetic raised his head and ambled over to the fire, where the forty-some men and women of Montague’s company sat in light merriment, talking, joking, drinking, eating. A few of them made room as he approached, and he sat as close to the fire as he could, wishing to be warmed by it.

Someone handed him the remaining chunk of meat from the fire, and he ate it as he had earlier, as Isacharact had shown him. The warmth of the food was comforting.

Isacharact came over, too, but went slightly off to the side, closer to the bunch of trees against which the camp was buttressed, perhaps not willing to be so close to the humans. She sat several dragon-paces away, and calmly looked up at the stars.

Captain Montague faced Zetic and spoke loud enough to address the assembled company.

“Well, the sky glitters wonderfully tonight indeed! I imagine it is twice as lovely for you, my good cleric, to see it for the first time in several weeks.”

“Indeed it is, and I have already given my thanks to the Moon-maiden for it.”

“Your voice must be strong, then, to reach all the way up to Her. Did I not hear you offer earlier to sing songs to us after supper? Supper is finished, cleric. What say you – or rather, what sing you?”

Zetic chuckled lightly.

“I did make that promise, didn’t I? Well, let us see...”

He cleared his throat, and tested his voice, trying to hold single notes. He soon found that he could do so with no difficulty at all.

“Oho, this is most amusing – that I should be able to sing as a dragon without effort, but to eat or drink, needed tutoring!”

The soldiers around the fire laughed; many of them had seen him struggling, earlier.

Zetic was ready, and launched into his opening piece – a hearty walking-song from the Dales, with a jaunty beat. A few in the audience knew the words and sang along; despite the long distance between Thay and the Dales, Thayans have enclaves and outposts everywhere, and these veteran soldiers were well-travelled.

But regardless of the accompaniment, Zetic's louder voice was clearly heard above all.

The singing gave him pleasure, and warmed his heart far more than the fire or the food had. Captain Montague and his soldiers may have been servants of the evil Druxus Rhym, but they were joyful, and enjoyed his music, even going so far as to request specific tunes from him. Some, he knew, but not all.

It mattered not, for the men and women, soldiers of Thay, enjoyed the melodies regardless.

And so he sang on, all through the evening, to the occasional applause and cheers of the company, ‘till night had arrived in earnest, and the light from the fire became dim. As the final embers died down, guards took up their posts while the rest went to their tents and their bed-rolls, and Zetic found himself being abandoned at the fire pit.

In the shadows cast by the camp fire, Isacharact had been sitting attentively, watching and listening to the revelry. She rarely paid interest to such a simple, primitive thing as soldiers huddled around a camp-fire, but the cleric's good humour was quite engaging.

Zetic was approached by Montague after almost everyone had retired.

“You sing well, cleric of Torm. Now, rest yourself; for you shall need your strength for the long march tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Captain. But... however beautiful the sky is tonight, it is still cold out. Can you spare me a blanket?”

“I’m afraid we have none to fit you, man-dragon; such a cover would be sufficiently large to carpet a bedroom entire. But surely dragons are capable of sleeping without such things?”

“Perhaps real dragons, Captain... but with my soft skin instead of tough scales, I am no such real dragon. And, in truth, I would just as much value a blanket for its soft presence in the night as I would the warmth it provides.”

Zetic became suddenly sad.

“It was lonely in that dungeon, Montague... Once the transformation had taken me, I had not even my tattered garments for company. I would so much rather not sleep alone now as I did then.”

“Company, you shall have tonight, cleric.”

They both of them turned to the source of the voice. It was Isacharact who had spoken.

She was looking straight at him with her cold eyes, though they looked... different.

Perhaps it was simply a trick from the fire’s light.

“Come, and sleep by my side.”

Zetic wore a slight expression of surprise, but walked over to her nonetheless, with a goodnight call to Captain Montague, who stood watching the strange scene for a moment, before going off to bed himself.

“No warmth will you find against my side, Zetic man-drake, for I am a white dragon, and it is ice and cold that fuel my heart. But, if you can stand the chill... my presence may comfort you in your sleep.”

“Thank you for your grace, Lady Isacharact. I greatly appreciate this gesture of goodwill.”

He nestled himself near her and said good-night; their bodies not quite touching. He felt confused, disoriented... but... comforted.

Was such a thing appropriate? Certainly, he had huddled next to adventuring companions before, bedrolls packed tightly in a tent, braced against torrential thunderstorms or chilling winds, but that was the company of equals. He would never have slept so close to someone *he'd* just rescued; it would certainly be inappropriate given his vow of chastity before marriage, and it could be seen as taking advantage of someone vulnerable.

But now, he was the rescued, not the rescuer. Was he being taken advantage of, then? And if so, to what end?

He turned the questions over in his mind, but was interrupted.

“You may... move closer, cleric. As far away from me as you are, you might as well be laying by yourself.”

“Oh, of course, my Lady. Thank you.”

Though he was not completely thankful for her offer, for it merely made the uncomfortable thoughts in his mind only more so.

Nonetheless, he slowly pushed himself closer, his back now butting into her flank. He self-consciously tried to minimize the amount of body contact between them... but as he settled again, Isacharact herself rolled over slightly, and he was now pressed against her, as a child might sleep with a parent.

Her body was very cold ... but its presence was indeed comforting. His mind thought briefly once more on the implications of this arrangement, but the regular pulse of her deep breaths was hypnotic, and he soon fell asleep, untroubled by dreams.

Morning came. Zetic awoke by himself, Isacharact having left his side while he still slept.

The Sun shone brightly... it was glorious. If the stars of last night were beautiful, then that brightest of all stars – Lathlander’s Glory, the Sun – was more beautiful still. The sight of the great heavenly orb that he had not seen in weeks brought a tear to Zetic’s eye.

But, to work! It was time for the morning prayer. Zetic felt refreshed, and delivered his homily loudly, joyously, and felt the power of Torm return to him. It was a wonderful feeling, a feeling he had been without for those weeks of torturous darkness.

With his God’s power returned to him completely, he closed his eyes in bliss.

“Oh, my Lord Torm. How I have missed You! I have done Your will as best I could in Your absence, but with You by my side once again, far and wide will Your voice be heard! In the name of Your justice, love, and mercy, Amen!”

He walked over to the camp. The soldiers were packing up, saddling their horses and hitching their wagons. Captain Montague saw him approach and came towards him.

“You awake late, my fair cleric. We are pressed for time, and I am afraid you have missed the morning meal.”

Zetic spoke loudly and boastfully, as if pronouncing a truth to a congregation.

“No meal do I need this morning, my Captain. Last night’s feast still sits in my belly and Lord Torm warms my heart! And my sleep was quite restful, too. I am ready to be off at your command.”

“Good, good. We go East, to Renekar, a town near the site of Cheldar Swight’s auxiliary base of power. The journey will take several days. If your energy has indeed returned, you should have no trouble keeping pace with us on the ground.”

“I have always been an excellent hiker. But, tell me, where is Isacharact this morning?”

Catapin Montague chuckled and point up towards the sky.

“Flying, man-dragon. She scouts the area to make sure that we will be safe. She will fly above and around us all day as we travel; a most effective sentry.”

Zetic looked down at the ground, disappointed.

“Oh, that is too bad. I had hoped to thank her for her company last night, but it is unfortunate that we shall not meet again until the evening.”

Captain Montague looked at Zetic, confused, and stretched out his hand towards him.

“My good cleric, are those wings on your back or not? If you wish to speak with her, fly up to meet her.”

Zetic was startled. *Of course* he had wings. Only, he had forgotten. Without him knowing quite how, they stretched out... was he learning to command them?

“They are... they are indeed wings... but I have never used them! If dragon eating and dragon drinking did not come to me on my own, I cannot imagine dragon flying doing so!”

Montague reflected honestly.

“I have seen Isacharact take wing, and it does not seem to be a complicated affair. She simply runs for a moment, then jumps into the air, flapping away. You have a few moments before we are ready to move out, why not give it a try?”

Zetic was staring at his wings, unsure of whether they would hold him. His body was light from malnutrition... but then again, so the wings were weak from the same.

“That is not at all a bad idea, though I think it would definitely be wise if I practised a safe distance away from the company.”

Montague chuckled.

“No doubt. If you cannot take flight, I will call you when we are ready to go.”

So Zetic walked a ways away, standing in front of a large meadow, beautiful tall grass shining in the morning sun and softly waving in the warm wind. He breathed deeply, and tried to move his wings around.

They managed a flap. Once, twice, a third time, it was easy now. Still pumping them up and down, he stretched them in all ways, trying to discover their limits.

Finally, thinking himself as ready as he could get himself on the ground, he prepared to launch off – but then he stopped to reflect.

Why am I doing this, exactly? To say “thank you” to Isacharact, the Great White Dragon, for her company last night? To discover my new abilities? Both, yes, but... there was something more.

It was more than just thanking Isacharact... he wanted more of her company.

It made sense, he supposed. At least she was someone he could talk to. For however joyous the singing around the fire had been last night, he recognized in the Thayan soldiers a high degree of professionalism, and a high degree of tension surrounding this task. Charming though he might be, they would not care for "small talk" while marching during the day.

And so, even with Isacharact flying overhead, they would proceed with military precision, keeping quiet and staying alert, wary of ambushes and guarded against attack. But after weeks in the darkness, Zetic lusted for conversation, for pleasant company. The soldiers would not give it to him while they marched. In the evening again, perhaps, but not during the day.

Well, then!

With one blessing-spell of good luck and another to strengthen his body, off he went. Bounding along on four legs, wings outstretched, pumping and flapping as hard as he could, he headed straight for the woods in front of him.

Closer, and closer, and closer still until he became afraid that he would go crashing into them – but instead, they seemed to collapse away in front of him.

No, they did not collapse for him. He was above them! He was *flying*!

“Ha-ha!”

A cry of joy mixed with surprise came from his lips. It was quite an incredible sensation, flying!

For a brief moment, enraptured with the initial ascent, he forgot to hold out his wings horizontally; they blew upwards, and suddenly he began to dive back down again. His outstretched legs skimmed the tree-tops, sending twigs, leaves and pine-needles flying everywhere, quickly reminding him that if he wanted to stay aloft, he needed to *keep flapping*. And tucking in his legs was probably a good idea, as well.

A few moments later, and he was safely well above the trees. Zetic had experienced spells of levitation before... but they paled to this as riding in a slow ox-cart pales to speeding in a horse-drawn chariot. Or was this more like being under the effects of a *Haste* spell, able to move at blinding speed with one’s own legs, instead of riding something else? Maybe.

Confident now in his ability to stay aloft with sufficient flapping, he tried coasting to rest his wing-muscles. He soon realized that he could soar, wings fully extended, without losing too much altitude, if he remembered to stretch his neck out straight ahead and his tail and legs out behind, and made sure to tuck in his arms.

Turning his head back, he looked down behind him at Swight’s keep; it was now a considerable distance away. The only question left, Zetic thought to himself, was how to change direction. And yet unintentionally, as he looked back at the castle and the camp beside it, his body had

slowly twisted along with his head, and he suddenly realised that he was turning in the air. Soon enough, he found he was heading the right direction to fly back over the camp.

It was surprising how easy it all was. Was his Lord Torm looking down on him at this moment, keeping him airborne? Perhaps so, for Zetic hardly felt as if he was exerting himself at all. His blessing-spells would expire soon, but even without them he felt as though he could keep this up all day.

That was a good thing, too, for now, looking to the east, he could see that the way east went through a thick forest, one of Thay's hunting preserves, and that would make landing difficult.

He flew over the camp, catching Captain Montague's cursory wave and returning it with one of his own. All is well, then! Off to find Isacharact! Far to the south-east, he saw a form in the air that seemed to be coming closer, and he headed straight for it.

A few minutes later, he recognized the shape of Isacharact quite clearly. She was sailing through the skies towards him, gliding high above on her immense wings. Aiming himself slightly to the right of her, he flew upwards and shouted in a laughing tone.

“Good day to you, my Lady Isacharact!”

She looked downwards at him, apparently with surprise.

“Good day to you as well, Zetic man-drake. You seem most... energetic... today.”

Sailing by, he craned his neck around to reply.

“Indeed!”

As before, turning his neck unconsciously caused the rest of him to follow, and he continued to reply as he made a large, sweeping banked left turn that slowed him down, dropping him considerably below Isacharact.

“So many things have happened this morning, that I am filled with spirit! I have seen the beautiful sun again, rising so gloriously in the East. I felt the strength of my Lord returned to me, filling me with His strength.”

Having completed the clumsy turn, he pumped his wings furiously to regain Isacharact's altitude and speed, almost breathless as he continued to talk.

“... And – so help me, Torm – now I fly,”

He shouted the last few words as he finally managed to come up to Isacharact, settling into a soar beside her on the right.

“... up in the sky!”

Looking him over, her expression became muted again.

“It is no great feat for a dragon to fly.”

“Ah, perhaps not. And perhaps I have been made more of a dragon than I realized, that I should find flying so easy. But it is a joy, nonetheless. Do you not find it so?”

“No, not particularly. It is simply flying; that is all.”

Zetic found that even though Isacharact hadn't batted her wings once since he had bid her good-morning, effortlessly maintaining her speed and height, he had to keep flapping now and again to keep up.

“For you, maybe. But for one who has been anchored to the Earth since birth, this sort of soaring could never be ‘simply flying’.”

Isacharact paused and breathed deeply.

“Well, I suppose when one first takes flight, as a wyrmling, it is... special, amusing... but it quickly becomes mundane.”

Suddenly becoming bold, Zetic allowed his wings to flip up slightly, dropping himself below Isacharact. He looked over beyond her to the left, and with his wings fluttering unsteadily as he tried to hold them in just the right position, he managed to sweep himself under her to the other side. A few strokes of the wing later, he came up again, now on her left. Although his wings still jittered to and fro, stabilizing himself in the air was becoming easier.

“No, I cannot see that happening. This is quite simply incredible, and I cannot imagine it becoming ‘mundane’ at all.”

Isacharact snorted.

“My dear man-dragon, you have been flying for all of a few minutes. You may wish to reconsider after you have been flying for three hundred and fifty years, as I have.”

Stunned, Zetic forgot to keep flapping and slowly fell back behind her.

Great Gods above! *Almost four hundred years old!* Though, in truth, that was merely adulthood, for a dragon. He had known elves and dwarves close to that age, and some even well past it. For creatures that live to a thousand, her three hundred and fifty in dragon years was roughly equivalent to his thirty-eight in man-years.

But still... there were differences. Did he have more energy? Was she more reserved? Well, that at least was no great surprise, she being a solitary dragon and all. But was he more youthful? Yes, it was that. So much for the grumpy old bishops who called his behaviour childish, even at thirty-eight! That childishness was an excellent fuel.

Suddenly, Zetic realised he had fallen quite far behind, and he struggled to catch back up to Isacharact, who was still gliding, as though held aloft by sheer force of will.

In truth, not much conversation happened in the skies that day, though somehow both seemed to silently appreciate the company. The occasional word passed between them, about the technique of flight, or about some interesting feature of geography, or perhaps a comment on the shapes of the clouds above.

Zetic focused on flying, desirous to master this new art as quickly as possible. By watching Isacharact carefully, he devised how to make turns without losing quite so much momentum, though he struggled to keep up every time Isacharact turned to patrol in a different direction.

Evening fell, and they joined up with Captain Montague's troop.

Isacharact once again sat off to the side while Zetic ate with the others, and sang more songs, and told some of his tales, entertaining them well. But, at night... no-one in the troop seemed to take notice when she once again invited him to return to her side to sleep. He went to her willingly, less hesitant than the night before. In his mind, they were no longer rescuer and rescued, but companions in flight.

This time, Zetic did not sleep late, awaking with the rest of the war-band. Isacharact had already been in the air for several hours, having taken flight while it was still dark out, but she returned at dawn to partake of the morning meal.

The company had made excellent time the day before, and Captain Montague said he hoped to arrive at Swight's other castle on the morrow. The camp was swiftly packed up, and the war-band departed.

As for the two dragons, while Isacharact could simply leap into the sky regardless of the trees around them, Zetic needed to hurry over to a nearby clearing. It was the same place he had landed the evening before, and the open field still showed an earthy scar where he had ploughed through the ground. Zetic winced as he remembered the painful experience. Still, Isacharact had later said she'd seen *worse* first landings.

Once in the air, Zetic begun the day by practicing what he had learned of flight so far: ascending, descending, banking into a turn, and sweeping from side to side. Isacharact soared up high, scanning the skies and the forest below, keeping to the straight lines of an enormous zig-zag pattern that crossed back and forth above and slightly ahead of Montague and his team. Zetic, meanwhile, tumbled about not far below her, constantly powering up, diving down, and blowing off altitude and speed as he practiced ever sharper and more ambitious turns.

At midday, his practice complete, Zetic regained Isacharact's altitude and found he was able to keep up with her turns whenever she doubled back to scan in the other direction.

Thinking this a fair milestone, and now feeling very comfortable aloft, Zetic decided it was time to learn a bit more.

“My Lady Isacharact, you fly most plainly. Could that not be the reason you feel flying is so mundane? Perhaps, were you to try some aerial acrobatics, you might find more joy in it.”

She glanced back at him with a tired look on her face; patrolling in the sky was dull and tedious, and it was clearly wearing on her.

“White dragons are not superb fliers, cleric of Torm. I am more comfortable on the ground. I fly because it is what Captain Montague has asked of me.”

Zetic spoke back, grinning.

“And what of hideous grey man-dragons, hmm? How well do they fly? For it is a young species, I am told. Inexperienced and weak.”

Isacharact chortled.

“For being so new, they fly reasonably well... But I have certainly seen far better.”

“Oh, really? Would that I could see this ‘better’ flight, too, and learn from it.”

She fixed him in her gaze for some time, eyeing him suspiciously... then she quickly looked around, scanning the horizon, before speaking again.

“Well...”

And off she went! Snapping her body back momentarily to slow herself, she lunged head-first into a steep, almost vertical dive, spinning as she went, a magnificent spiral descent. Zetic could do naught but fly straight, stupefied. Never mind the steepness of her dive, he couldn't fathom such a spin!

As she levelled off to fly low across the trees, he came to his senses, and followed down after her, trying to spin slowly as he went. He didn't dare try to match her angle, too afraid of being unable to recover out of the dive.

The spiralling earth below him was disorienting, and he was forced to level out far above the tree-tops, unable to properly gauge his height above them. Coasting slowly down to her level, he found that he had to work hard to dodge branches and leaves, scraping his limbs against them as he reflexively shot out his arms and legs to try to push away. He yelped in pain when the tip of a tall pine slammed into his body, and was nearly snatched from the skies when the leading edge of his left wing swept into an enormous oak's bushy top, but both times he managed to recover.

Up ahead, Isacharact was comfortably gliding across the treetops, her body, wings, and tail rippling along as she followed every tiny peak and valley, never actually touching so much as a single leaf. Her passing left a clear mark in the forest, though, as the trees swayed beneath her, swept up in the mass of air she brought with her. Now and again she flapped her wings, and the force of them briefly blew branches of the trees apart and often sent a few startled birds fleeing.

Forcing himself to stay as low down to the trees as she was, rather than cheat by flying higher up, Zetic struggled to keep up for near on an hour, becoming quite put in his place; flying was clearly not quite so simple as he had thought.

Nonetheless, Isacharact kept her speed slow enough that in spite of him constantly crashing into just about everything, his brief moments of high speed allowed him to nearly catch up.

Isacharact looked back at him, grinning with satisfaction to see that Zetic's lower body was completely covered in pine needles, twigs, and leaves: the debris of the forest top.

But the very moment Zetic finally noticed her looking back at him, with one mighty pump of her wings, she suddenly took off to the right with a almost instantaneous snap turn!

As she darted away from him, Zetic tried in vain to match, but it was quite hopeless; Isacharact was clearly a master of flight, and she was showing him to be a rank amateur. Even attempting such a tight turn with so little airspace below was disastrous, for as his right wing dipped low it smashed into the trees, and he nearly crashed head-first into the forest. At the last minute, his frantic kicking feet found a great pine to push off, and that got him moving and airborne again. Behind him, the poor tree was swaying back and forth, knocking into its neighbours.

Another half-hour after that manoeuvre, the two still skimming the treetops, Zetic had almost caught up once more, but again Isacharact sprung a sudden manoeuvre on him and abruptly powered straight up, leaving him down amongst the trees by himself. Even though he was prepared for another such surprise, again Zetic's reaction was too slow, and he could only look up at her rapidly ascending form while he struggled to climb himself. But there was no way for Zetic to match the strokes of her powerful wings, and as hard as he flapped his own, she only got further and further away.

High up in the air ahead of him, she eventually levelled off, and some minutes later, huffing and puffing the whole way up, he managed to catch up, positioning himself beside her.

Isacharact glanced at him and grinned with satisfaction.

“Had enough of the treetops, did you?”

After nearly two hours of torturous flying, Zetic was out of breath.

“N... Not at all.”

She resumed her patrol stance.

“You are a bad liar, cleric.”

Zetic could only chuckle in reply, exhausted. His wing-muscles throbbed with pain, tired of all that clumsy flapping about, and even his arms and legs were tense and strained from the constant struggling against the trees. Affording himself the relief of taking a moment to stretch everything, it was still a challenge just to level back out and hold steady, in order to settle into a gliding position.

Minutes passed slowly as he recovered his breath. Eventually, Isacharact swung over into another turn to cross back over her patrol path. Disregarding his aching body, Zetic resolved not only to match her as before, but deliberately pushed himself to make a tighter turn, crossing over her arc as he took the inside curve, levelling off in a position ahead of her.

From behind, he heard Isacharact chuckle.

“Alright, then, cleric... Let’s see how you do down below again...”

This time, he was ready, and even as she swooped down beneath him, diving back towards the forest, he managed to start his own dive quickly enough and sharply enough so that the gap started out much smaller... though that gap still grew considerably the whole way down.

And so the afternoon continued, Isacharact leading Zetic along the tree-tops for a while, and then returning up high to scan the horizon and come about for another pass. Again and again, they dived down together, and even though Zetic was slowly improving, it was clear that Isacharact had plenty left in reserve. Every time he managed to dive steeper, or climb more quickly, or coast more correctly over the tree-tops, she simply sped up a bit more, so he was always trailing far behind her.

Evening fell again, and they returned to the company, with Zetic’s body tired and sore, but his mind racing from the exhilarating experience. Despite his mangled appearance, an aberration of two species combined, and the considerable scrapes and scratches all along his underside, he positively beamed at dinner that night, and enthralled the entire war-band with the wondrous tale of Samerious, a noble knight from ages long ago.

Everyone was both invigorated and exhausted from the rousing story; not even Captain Montague could concentrate on tomorrow’s plans that night.

The soldiers went off to their beds; the watchmen took up their posts; the fire died down.

No words did Isacharact speak; a single nod of her head sufficed to tell Zetic to come to sleep at her side once again. He lay down next to her, felt her cool body once again, and his aching muscles were greatly relaxed by its touch, but... was it pressed ever so slightly more close to him this time?

And, if so, who was it who had reduced the gap? Him, or her?

Or both?

Unable to answer these questions, Zetic fell asleep.

Morning came. Captain Montague was agitated; they would reach the fort at mid-day. He laid out his battle-plan to the soldiers. Zetic listened with disinterest – his role would be simple, after all. Heal the wounded and cast spells of protection. No fighting would he need do; there were plenty of Montague’s men for that. In any case, he didn’t know how he *could* fight. His ugly grey skin was no dragon-scale; it couldn’t even ward off pine needles and sharp branches, let alone sword-blows. Not to mention, there wasn’t a sword big enough for him to wield.

The Captain mentioned Swight’s name more than once during the briefing, and Zetic felt something return to him.

It was his fury.

He had completely and utterly lost it in the last two days, replaced with the thrill of flight. Oh, Zetic, no steadfast cleric of Torm were you, then! Wake up! Justice’s work needs be done!

The desire for revenge resurged. He recalled his own fateful words on the first floor of Swight’s castle.

“I’m afraid it’s all over for Swight, even if it’s not us who finish him off. Druxus has probably planned something of his own if we don’t defeat Swight here.”

What irony! He was a part of all three sides – of the group that would eventually destroy Swight, of Druxus’ pre-planned battle-party, and of the group that had been unable to defeat the wizard that day!

Montague made some concluding statements, and wished all good luck. This new fort was more a manor than a castle, with only two stories – though with high, vaulted, ceilings that would allow Isacharact to squeeze in. A tactical advantage for the group... or so the Captain hoped.

Swords were sharpened, spells made ready, potion-bottles affixed to belts, arrows checked for defects, armours examined for chinks, and more...

Zetic admired the skilful preparation of the crack war-team. They were much more ready than he and his group had been on that sorry day almost a month ago. He felt confident of their success – almost tasting the victory over Swight.

With the plan set, the dragons took to the air again. Instead of soaring high in the air, they cruised a comfortable distance above the treetops. Just high enough for them to spot Swight’s manor, but low enough that they should not be spotted in turn. Once the target sighted, they would land and to join up with the company. The whole war-band would then proceed the rest of the way on foot, in hopes of surprising Swight’s forces.

In the air, no longer playing with his wings, Zetic thought of Swight, and of the terrible fate that he wished to inflict on that monstrous man.

But he thought of Isacharact beside him, too. It felt good to be near her. He would be sad when this was all over, and she went away.

And, even as they flew towards the final battle with the evil Swight... Even as he could see the insane wizard's lecherous eyes, and hear his cackling laugh, and feel his horrid grin upon him... Zetic could not help but think of Isacharact, reliving the past two days in his mind's eye. The way she had started off each day stern and composed, but then, with a little prodding and prompting, became aggressively playful. It had delighted him to poke holes in her haughty façade.

But it was more than just her attitude. He recalled now the graceful lines of her body as she had skimmed the tree-tops, and the way her powerful wings had beat the air when she climbed; he recalled the way her tail had twisted when she spiralled down, and the way her chest had puffed in and out when she landed. The way she held her arms and legs while she flew, the way the scales on her back rippled and shined in flight, reflecting the sunlight.

In spite of the row of frighteningly sharp teeth it held, there was something *attractive* about the shape of her face. The way she hung her mouth open slightly in flight gave it a certain *inviting* quality. A part of him just wanted to run his hands along those heavy spiral horns at the back of her head, twisting his fingers around them, feeling the shape. And her eyes... A beautiful deep dark blue colour; and the way she looked at him with disdain tinged with a hint of mischievousness, wasn't it enticing?

Wait a minute, Zetic, what was that? You've never thought of anyone that way. Graceful body? Attractive, inviting face? Beautiful, enticing eyes? Feels good to be near her? Sad to see her go? Wanting to *caress* her *horns*?

To the best of his memory, Zetic had never really fallen in love before, but he was not... ignorant... of the symptoms.

Jeck's final words, shouted in the corridor of Swight's castle as the rest of their group lay dead around them, still rang in Zetic's ears.

"We're screwed, Zetic!"

How right you were, Jeck! If you only knew where I found myself, you'd probably laugh your pretty little gnomish head off! You, dead – rest in peace, good friend – and me, Zetic, about to face Swight again, and day-dreaming of a white dragon.

Zetic, you moronic, idiotic man. Of all the women in the world, virtuous, beautiful, and eligible – you have to fall in love with one who's not even a woman!

She's almost *ten times* your age. Probably devoured ten times as many men as years you've been alive. And even though she's been pleasant company so far, she's vicious – or, at least, so Captain Montague had said: Territorial, with a reputation for having plenty of experience fighting other dragons. You saw how she can fly, and you were there when she demolished an enormous stone door. You think your divine powers could save you? She could probably kill you before you blinked.

And you're not much of a dragon anyways, Zetic, you stupid bastard. Sure, given a couple of days you can almost fly like one, but you've got a skeletal build, and no scales, and a misshapen head, and a dull, ugly grey tint to top it all off. You look like someone tried to cook a hairless rat... and failed miserably at it.

And her... she's probably had a few mates already. Doubtless they were great wyrms all, powerful, majestic, and rich – and isn't it riches that dragons are supposed to desire most of all? What riches could you possibly have compared to one of those mighty males?

What exactly are you supposed to *be* compared to those real dragons?

I'll tell you what, my good man, my humble Hierophant of Torm: you're nothing. You're just some nobody cleric. Couldn't even save your team, your friends, from dying at the hands of an evil wizard.

Zetic tried to shake off his thoughts of the creature beside him. He allowed himself to fall back a bit, wanting to put some distance between them, but this was no better, for now she was in front of him, and it was impossible to ignore her. Only pushing past her brought some relief, since she was now at least out of sight, if not quite out of mind.

Concentrate on flying, you pig-headed miscreant. Oh, your Lord Torm is going to flog you good for this one, you can bet on that, and you'll deserve it, too. Oh, yes indeed. He's a God, you know, He doesn't have to take stupid crap like this from someone like you. You'd better concentrate on the task at hand if you want to have any hope of getting out of this without His holy boot buried deep up your arse.

Get Swight. Torm's will be done, and all that.

Zetic turned his head slightly to the right and found himself staring at the beautiful creature behind him.

Isacharact... I even like her name.

Get her out of your damn mind, damned fool! Look, there's the damnable fort, up ahead!

Isacharact saw it as well, and the two dragons dropped out of the sky, returning to the war-band.

The battle was joined. Inside the great hall, a veritable flood of creatures were engaging Captain Montague's forces. Swight was pulling absolutely no stops now.

In the back of the group, Zetic was busying himself supporting the soldiers – healing ones who were injured seriously, casting helpful enchantments on those who were beset by foes – and on

using some of his divine energies against the foes – calling up Torm’s light to blast them to pieces, or befuddle their minds.

These tasks kept him busy, but even so... he kept stealing glances at Isacharact, who was quite merrily engaging as many enemies by herself as Montague’s twenty veterans.

The fight was incredible, far fiercer than his failed battle on that upper story such a long time ago. But this time, there was no question of winning or losing. The two dragons and twenty men were simply grinding up the forces sent against them. The mages in the group didn’t even bother to toss more than a handful of spells around, believing it wiser to save them for a final showdown with Swight than to waste their power on these hapless mutant grunts.

Back, back, back they pushed the enemies... Orcs and aberrations, undead and oozes, sending them up the stairs to the second floor, where even the advantage of height did not avail the horrid minions.

Suddenly, Swight appeared, scurrying across the hallway at the top of the stairs.

“Come get me if you dare, fools! While you’re having fun with my creatures out here, I’ll be preparing a little surprise for you out on the patio!”

Off he ran, laughing in his nasal voice, hurried on his way as spells and arrowheads and even Isacharat’s jet of cold air which all crashed into the wall, just barely missing him. Montague was clearly annoyed at his taunting.

“Come on, men! He’s not a dragon yet! Let’s hurry up and get to him before he can manage the transformation!”

His soldiers fought harder, but it was still not fast enough, and by the time they battled their way up the grand staircase to the second floor, the evil wizard had had several minutes to prepare himself.

With a few casual blows, Isacharact handily knocked the few remaining creatures over the railing and down onto the first floor. They didn’t get up from the fall.

“Quickly! Down the hallway, at the end! There’s an outdoor patio just up ahead!”

There was a tremendous clattering of metal as Montague’s soldiers hurried to the terrace doorway, swords drawn and shields out. It almost drowned out the thudding of Isacharact’s footsteps.

Through the open doorway! At the end of a wide, long stone patio, open on all sides, stood Swight. Everyone rushed forwards – too late!

The master red wizard tapped his hand on a pillar of stone next to him, and an eerie glow consumed the entire complex, save for the tiny square on which he stood. Captain Montague, though not much of a mage himself, was seasoned enough to recognize the effect.

“Damn it, an anti-magic field! Careful, there may be more traps! Nock arrows and let him have it!”

But as arrows flew towards him, Swight had already put up an impenetrable shield to protect himself from physical blows. The arrows bounced harmlessly off.

The group now had no way whatsoever to attack him – arcane spells would fizzle into nothingness in the anti-magic field, and swords and arrows alone could not penetrate his powerful ward.

And one last trick did the wicked transmuter have up his sleeve, for he tapped a different stone pillar, and the humans in the party let out a gasp as they were frozen in place, held fast by the potent magic trap inherent in the very stones on which they stood.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

Montague, completely immobile, was *not* happy.

But the two dragons, with their natural ability to resist such magical effects, were still free.

“It’s up to you two! I don’t know what you can do, but do something! I can only barely move my bloody lips, never mind my arms or legs!”

A laugh came from the other side of the open area.

“No, no, my fine lackey of Druxus. Nothing can your dragon, nor your dragon-man, do to hurt me, now! And soon, you will all feel my wrath!”

At his, he pulled out a potion bottle from under his cloak.

“Bottoms up, eh cleric of Torm?”

He drunk it down quickly, then hurled the glass bottle on the ground before him, its shards scattering everywhere.

The wizard suddenly collapsed to the ground, grunting and groaning.

“Hrrngh, yes! My transformation will happen much faster than yours did, cleric! And no ugly mutant will I become, but a ferocious Red Dragon! With your new companions frozen in place, I’ll have no trouble blasting them all!”

His ranting devolved into laughter punctuated by periodic painful moans.

“No mere polymorph spell is this – GAAHHH! – for I shall become a dragon as if born one, – AAAUUGH! – the culmination of my chosen arcane art!”

Isacharact surged forward, but there was nothing she could do. She rained blows down, but they bounced harmlessly off the magical shield. With a growl, she spoke furiously.

“He’s changing before my very eyes, and I can’t get to him!”

Zetic paused. He had felt Torm’s will three days ago, and it had told him that victory would come today. So, then, where was that victory? The outlook looked bleak, until he remembered...

The strength of Torm would win the battle. That is what Torm’s will had spoken.

Zetic closed his eyes, sat down, clasped his hands before him, and prayed to his God.

Inside the protective shell, still writhing as the transformation was beginning, tearing at his own clothes as sweat poured from his brow, Swight saw Zetic and cackled loudly.

“Your God will fail you to-day, cleric!”

Zetic continued to pray.

“... Or have you already forgotten how he abandoned you in my castle weeks ago?”

Zetic continued to pray. The sky had been bright, as it always was in the magically-controlled land of Thay... but now some black clouds suddenly seemed to gather.

“... You can cry to the heavens all you want! It didn’t help you in my dungeon pit—”

Zetic continued to pray, now stretching his arms out and up. Isacharact became aware that the sky was becoming dark – very dark. Agitated, she continued to try to strike at the wizard, but to no avail.

“—and it won’t help you here! And you, White Dragon!”

Zetic continued to pray. The whole sky above the manor had grown black, and the sound of thunder could be heard, with flashes of light appearing amongst the pitch-black clouds.

“I’ll destroy you, too! You’re large, but this potion will make me larger still!”

Zetic continued to pray. In the clouds high above, a hole opened, and white light shone through.

It was not sunshine.

It was the might of the God, Torm, channelled by his mortal servant, reaching out to strike at evil.

The gigantic ray of light poured down from the heavens, making horrible crackling and crumbling noises, and covered Swight’s protective cage, striking it with a thunderclap.

“... Or maybe I’ll change you into something else! A frog, or a tiny cave lizard! It would amuse me!”

With the sound of a thousand panes of glass breaking at once, the wall of protective force shattered. Swight didn’t even notice, continuing his ranting.

“... And I’ll be able to do what amuses me! Who will resist me? Not you!”

As he continued his cackling, Zetic opened his eyes and yelled to Isacharact.

“GET HIM!”

Hearing the confident cry, Swight at last looked up, and screamed in horror as Isacharact’s hand reached for him. She tossed him into the air above her head, and he twisted furiously to try to fling a spell at her.

But he could not turn in time. Screaming his wretched scream all the way, he came tumbling down straight into her waiting maw, and straight through her maw into her waiting throat, and straight down her throat to her waiting gullet, and straight down her gullet into her waiting stomach.

She swallowed deeply, and closed her mouth. A burst of frost suddenly burst out through her clenched teeth. Swight would not be climbing out. Ever.

Overhead, the clouds cleared. On the patio, the anti-magic field wavered briefly, then fell with a strange whimper. The spell of holding collapsed with a *pop*, its powers expended.

Montague, able to move again, was no longer unhappy.

“Ah, what a fitting end for that bastard! You’ve more than earned your pay on this misadventure, Isacharact. And you, my cleric friend! In the end, you were the key to the victory! I only wonder what’ll happen to you, now. Maybe we can find something to reverse your transformation, though I have orders from Druxus to destroy everything after—”

Neither Zetic nor Isacharact heard the last of his words.

A bright light blinded them both, and they felt themselves pulled – yanked in a direction they didn’t even know existed!

When he regained consciousness, Zetic realised that he was sprawled, face down, on a cool stone floor.

No, wait... not stone, but marble! Beautiful, intricate, polished marble. Marble of deep black and bright white, and of all the colours in-between. Who could possibly afford such incredible marble? He must be in the halls of a great King, or perhaps even –

Zetic looked up, and his mouth dropped wide open. Beside him, he heard Isacharact gasp.

Before them sat an unimaginably colossal silver-coloured dragon.

There was no doubt whatsoever in Zetic’s mind.

It was Bahamut, The Platinum Dragon.

Lord God of Good Dragons.

He radiated power, and His divine splendour blinded them; their sight was locked to His gaze. Neither one was able to look anywhere other than into His eyes, coloured an incredible blue that glittered in the light, like the purest and most magnificent of sapphires.

Bahamut spoke, and Zetic felt his very bones rattle at with every one of the God's words, his very skull almost about to crack open with the force of the God's will.

“So. You have defeated Swight. We are pleased. Even Tiamat, Our nemesis and counterpart, is pleased. None of the Dragon-Gods wanted him to succeed, but We were prevented from interfering by other Gods who supported Swight's wicked schemes. Calling on other allies, you have defeated him.”

It took every effort of Zetic's will to simply be able to *breathe* while being held in the unwavering gaze of the God.

“And now, We have brought you before Us, to undo Swight's wrongs.”

A piercing, blinding blue-white light seemed to shine at him from Bahamut's eyes, and Zetic felt the God stare at him even more solidly – as if that was even possible. He nearly choked; he couldn't feel any of his limbs, and all his senses were dulled before the God's presence.

All he heard was Bahamut's voice, and all he saw was Bahamut's eyes, and this was all he was truly aware of.

“You are an abomination unto Our kind. You cannot stay as you are, half-way between man and dragon, but not even half-dragon.”

There was a slight lull in the God's grip on him – or was perhaps his own willpower returning? No, it could not be. Nothing could stand up to this God's sheer brilliance; if he felt free, it was because Bahamut willed him to be free.

Zetic could speak, but only because Bahamut willed him to speak.

“If you please, most gracious and honoured Lord of dragons... By Your will, I would... I would prefer to remain a dragon. For I have tasted of the beauty of your kind, and the nectar is sweet on my tongue.”

Zetic's throat clenched shut; Bahamut had willed him to speak no more. The God's voice echoed through his ears as if to shatter him, like paper before a hurricane.

“A reward you do indeed deserve, Zetic of Torm. For you suffered much to bring Swight to justice. Such a reward as being made a dragon, We might grant. Be certain, however: is this what you truly want? You have tasted only nectar, but there is bitterness there. In the end – neither form, Man or Dragon, is objectively better than the other.”

Zetic could breathe again; it was Bahamut's will that he reply. He found also that he could look around again, and he did the only thing he wanted to do: he looked over at Isacharact, who lay, captive as he was, just near him.

Looking back at the God, Zetic made his choice.

“I will remain as a dragon, if it is in concordance with Your will, Bahamut.”

Zetic's voice vanished; Bahamut had silenced him. His eyes were locked once more.

“So. Your choice is made. Now, a choice must We make. For there are many kinds of dragons. It is obvious enough to Us that you would be a good one, a metallic dragon: bronze, brass, silver, copper, or gold. But then, which shall We choose amongst them? What say you?”

Zetic felt air rush into his lungs once more as Bahamut bid him speak.

“I cannot... I cannot say, my Lord! I do not know! I will trust only in Your wisdom, for You know the true things that I desire – and they are not power, nor glory, nor wealth, nor fame. You see my soul, my Lord! You, who know both my heart and the dragon-forms in which to place it, must make the decision, for I cannot!”

He stopped talking, though it was not Bahamut that willed it so.

“You speak well. And We do see your heart. Golden it is, full of goodness and love. So, gold you shall be. We shall make it so.”

The hand of the God Bahamut moved just the tiniest of motions, the most minute of inches, the very faintest of wavers and, with His spell thus woven, Zetic completely passed out.

Two great silver wyrms, attendants to Bahamut, carried Zetic's unconscious form down the magnificent glittering hallway in the God's glorious palace as Isacharact followed. They arrived at a door made of solid platinum and embossed with beautiful spiral designs. Opening it revealed an immense room, full of exquisite soft tapestries and luxurious satin cushions. The dragons silently placed Zetic's still-misshapen body in the centre, leaving him to rest.

Back outside, one of the dragons spoke to Isacharact.

“We will take you to your chambers.”

Isacharact looked in at Zetic.

“Are we to be separated, then?”

The demigod dragon's face was impassive, betraying no emotion. His scales shimmered in the perpetual evening light of Mount Celestia, and a faint halo of silvery light spun slowly above his head.

“You would prefer to remain with him?”

Isacharact reflected for a moment, remembering the past three days. She had heard Zetic’s request, and wondered of what would become of him. Perhaps... perhaps it would be interesting to see for herself.

“Yes, I would.”

“Then, stay.”

She entered the room and lay down next to him; the attendants closed the door behind her.

Hours later, Zetic awoke – still as yet unchanged by Bahamut’s spell. A cold presence enveloped him. Groggy, he raised his head and struggled to open his eyes, but found that they stubbornly refused his command.

“Isacharact?”

“Yes, cleric?”

“I lie next to you?”

“Yes, you do.”

Zetic suddenly felt sleepy again. Bahamut’s spell would take effect, soon, changing him.

“Sleep comes to me once more. Good night, my Lady Isacharact.”

“Good night, Zetic.”

ZETIC’S TRANSFORMATION WILL COMPLETE
IN
“THE COURTSHIP OF LADY ISA”