

Chronicles of the Mandrake

By Tim “HeXetic” Gokcen

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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

Hapax Legomenon

Two-Handed Sword

Unidentified Entity

Elminster

Ancient Male Human

Wizard, Arch-mage, and Chosen of Mystra

The Simbul

Ancient Female Human

Sorceress, Wizard, Arch-mage, and Chosen of Mystra

Brother Pasquale

Old Male Human

Cleric of Torm

Guard-Captain Khaleb

Young Adult Male Human

Fighter

Knight-Commander Markus

Old Male Human

Fighter

Derak

Male Half-Orc

Fighter

Llerith

Male Half-Elf

Fighter

The Witch-Queen of Aqlarond

With the bitter winter wind blowing against them, it was a long and gruelling flight from the frozen mountains of Icewind Dale; nearly a week of constant travel in the cold sun of the North. The direct – and the quickest – path to their destination crossed the vast cracked-earth desert of Anauroch, with its unknowable Empire of Shadow. Sleeping at night on the desert floor or in rare empty caverns was dangerous, to say the least.

Despite the perils, Isacharact and Zetic managed to arrive unmolested in Shadowdale, on the western tip of the great Cormanthor forest. Spring was beginning: the snow was gone from the ground, the weather was growing warmer, the great rains were coming, and the trees were just starting to sprout their greenery. Zetic recognized Elminster's home on the horizon. Though commonly referred to as 'Elminster's Tower', it was in truth little more than a large windmill. The two dragons landed a few hundred feet from it.

Isacharact looked at the stone building and thought it looked positively deserted. She turned to Zetic and spoke in a hushed voice.

“How do you even know he'll be home?”

“He'll be home. A better question to ask would be, 'How long ago did he realise we were going to come here?'. For he *has* been keeping an eye on me, I'm certain of it.”

“You know him – or rather, he knows you – then? Did you meet him during your more recent wanderings, or from before when you were human?”

“Neither, actually. Remember when I left you in Evermeet for several hours that one day just after we were married? Said I had to go run an errand? It was to here.”

Isacharact turned back to look at the unassuming structure that was the great wizard's home. They walked closer.

“I hope he's a good friend of yours; people don't come and knock on the door of the most powerful mortal in the known world to ask about a silly sword.”

“It's not silly. There's something... unusual... about this thing, and I have a very good feeling that it could be quite dangerous. And if I'm not a good friend of Elminster, at the very least he owes me a big favour.”

Zetic chuckled.

“I joke. We're new to each other, especially considering his actual age and my potential age, but I think we're friends nonetheless. He'd probably even ask me to join his Harpers if he thought I'd accept.”

“You wouldn't? Those wandering do-gooders seem just like your kind of people.

“Not really. They’re too ‘behind-the-scenes’ for my taste. I’ve always been a bold and outspoken cleric, not a manipulator.”

The door whipped open and out strode an old but vibrant man with thinning grey hair, a short black beard, beautiful red robes, and a smoking pipe in his hand.

“‘Outspoken’, indeed! It seems like I can never get some peace and quiet around here without someone making a racket nearby. In the future, perhaps you’ll have the common courtesy to speak of me behind my back, instead of right at my front door!”

Zetic looked straight at the wizard.

“So, you heard us talking? I would’ve thought you’d be stone deaf by now, you cantankerous old bastard.”

Elminster grunted out an indignant laugh.

“And I would’ve thought that someone would have cut out your insolent tongue by now. Whatever happened to respecting one’s elders?”

“If I were to so much as *try* to pay you as much respect as befitted your age, I’d probably die from exhaustion, old man. And you’d probably die of boredom, too.”

The wizard put his pipe back in his mouth, and stuck his hands on his hips.

“I probably would, at that. Well, then... what have you come to pester me about today? Not that little cantrip I sent you home with last time, I hope?”

Zetic glanced briefly at Isa.

“Ah... that’s working quite well, thank you. Though we haven’t had the opportunity to, er, *test* it in the last few weeks. Uh, in any case, *that* is not the reason we came to see you.”

“Well, then. What is?”

Zetic pulled the sword off his back. It glistened in the afternoon sun.

“This sword.”

He flicked it with a finger and the blade ringed in response. Still holding it in one hand, he thought about activating it – and the sword activated. With a great blasting noise, it burst into its white flame, spreading embers, sparks, and chunks of ice all over the ground. The old wizard still looked on, pipe in mouth.

And then the singing started.

The same eerie chanting noise as Zetic had heard in the smith's workshop – and a few other times when he had pulled it out during the trip to test it – came out again, filling the air with the sound of voices.

“A singing sword. Interesting, but hardly special. What is so troubling about it to you that you came all the way here to trouble me with it?”

“Several things. First of all, the smith who made it swears – and I believe him, for we helped him make it – that the night before he presented it to me, it had no curvature at the tip, nor the strange eye-symbol engraved at the top. He also is adamant that it also did not sing before I picked it up.”

Zetic waved the sword around nonchalantly.

“But there's more. While making it, the smith was troubled by strange dreams containing the same chanting, the design on the sword, the blade itself, and two words: ‘Hapax Legomenon’. And though I know many languages, I do not know their meaning. Do you?”

“No. A name, perhaps?”

“That is what I thought. Very unusual, don't you think?”

“Mayhap. But it still sounds like more of a problem with the smith than with the sword itself.”

“Since I took possession of the sword... I have also had dreams about it, myself.”

Isacharact quickly turned to him.

“You never said anything to me about dreams on the way here!”

“I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't want to worry you... and until last night, I was uncertain whether the dreams were simply my own.”

Elminster spoke up again.

“But now you're not? More unusual. Still, there are plenty of strange weapons capable of influencing the mind in the same way as this one has. The story of its creation would seem to rule out such an object, however...”

“The sword has one more property of note.”

The strange music still playing, Zetic looked around for a suitable test target.

“Do you have any particular attachment to that dead tree on the hill?”

“Not particularly, no.”

Zetic walked over to the solid-looking dead oak. Elminster and Isacharact followed suit behind him.

“Forgive me, Mielikki. Though Your creature is dead, I should not defile its corpse thusly. I will sing Your prayer tonight in its memory.”

With homage to the Goddess of forests paid, Zetic held the sword in both hands and prepared to strike the 4-foot wide tree trunk. The singing grew louder as it had before.

Elminster watched closely from only a few paces away as Zetic struck the tree solidly on the side.

The blade did not go through the tree as it had gone through the stone in the smith’s workshop.

Zetic stared at the blade in disbelief.

“What the—? When I used this sword in a cavern last night it chopped a rock clean in two.”

“Perhaps its power only works on rocks.”

“It has sliced straight through leather as well.”

“That is—wait, look at the tree!”

A white glow was spreading across the tree from where Zetic had hit it. It rapidly consumed the entire plant and became almost blindingly bright.

A few seconds later, the tree exploded with a bang, sending bits of wood everywhere. All three averted their faces and covered their heads as debris fell around them.

Zetic lowered his arm slightly, and spoke first.

“That... that was unexpected.”

“You don’t say.”

Everyone relaxed again. The singing was still present, and the blade still burned with its white fire.

“Well then, master Elminster. Any ideas?”

“A few. Let me see the sword up-close.”

Elminster spoke a few arcane words to shrink the sword so that he could hold it. As Zetic passed it to him, however, the flames quickly died out, and the singing stopped.

“That’s odd. I didn’t turn it off. Maybe it just doesn’t like you.”

“Hm, can’t see any reason why. I’m a very nice person, once you get to know me.”

Zetic grunted back a laugh.

Elminster examined the sword carefully, paying special attention to the symbol on the tip. He even closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the blade, trying to discern the magic within. They opened again, and he let out a sigh.

“I’m very sorry, my friend, but I cannot give you any answers about the nature of this sword.”

Zetic was surprised.

“What? Come now; if not you, then who else could possibly know?”

“I do not know *everything*. And if not I, then perhaps The Simbul.”

“The ruler of Velprintalar? The ‘Witch-Queen’ of Aglarond?”

“Yes, precisely. She knows much more about this kind of magic – the very mysterious kind.”

Isacharact, tired of being left out of the conversation, jumped in with a comment.

“I have heard stories that you... and she... are...”

Elminster grumbled as he handed the sword back to Zetic, returning it to its normal size.

“Yes, yes, we’re lovers. So, when you two get to her, you can say hello from me.”

Zetic grinned.

“Oh, we can, can we? And how will she take it? How long has it been since you saw her yourself? I hope you two have a good relationship, for the sake of our health!”

Elminster eyed Zetic warily.

“No, no troubles at all. Excellent relationship. No problems. Get along perfectly. And now, be off with you two. People see me standing outside with two dragons and they’ll all come knocking on my door for this or that. It’s a long trip to go around the Sea of Fallen Stars. I don’t suppose you’ve learned teleportation spells yourself?”

“No, I haven’t. Not strong enough in the arcane arts yet. It wouldn’t help anyway, you know... I wouldn’t be able to lug my ball and chain with me.”

As he said this, Zetic grinned, ducked, and threw his arms up front of his face to protect himself from the smack he expected to receive from Isacharact.

But Isacharact simply looked at Zetic, not understanding what he was doing. After a few seconds had passed, both Zetic and Elminster slowly turned and looked at her, disbelief showing on their faces.

“What is it? What are you both staring at me for?”

“You... you weren’t offended by my joke?”

“What joke?”

“Well, you know. Teleportation spells let the caster only carry a certain amount of *weight* with them.”

“So, you’re saying I’m heavy. I still don’t see how that’s a joke, or why I ought to be offended.”

Elminster left the pipe in his mouth as he answered her question.

“Let’s just say that if I implied my Simbul was too heavy, I would find myself summarily teleported to one of the nastier levels of the Abyss.”

Zetic began to elaborate.

“Yes, among *humans*—”

“Ahhh, I see it now. Human women do not like being told they are large, is that it? Since they tend to get fat with age, it is equivalent to telling them that they are old, and since they tend to get ugly as they get old, it is equivalent to telling them that they are ugly. So to be called ‘too big’ is considered a great insult.”

“Er, yes, actually. That is precisely the origin of the joke.”

“Then, my poor husband, you have made two rather unfortunate mistakes. The first was in thinking that I was anything like a human woman. Size is power amongst dragons; to say that I am large is to pay a complement to my power. And the second...”

Zetic thought he saw a strange look in her eyes...

But he was unable to think on it for very long, for, before he could react, she reached out her left hand, wrapped her fingers completely around his neck, and gripped tightly.

“Heurrrrrk!”

Zetic barely managed to squeeze out a guttural sound of pain while caught in her powerful grip. His forked tongue stuck out – rather comically, actually – while his eyes bulged open.

“... the second mistake was in assuming that my bulk was made up of all fat and no muscle. This is incorrect; allow me to demonstrate.”

With that, Isacharact slammed Zetic's head sideways into the ground, holding it tight against the earth. She leaned over and talked in an unimaginably sweet and flowery voice.

“Well, dearest? What do you think? Undecided? I could demonstrate further.”

She clenched her hand around his neck even more tightly. Zetic spoke back in a hollow and high-pitched voice.

“Gawkkk! No! No further!”

With one last squeeze for good measure, she released him, grinning wickedly. He noisily gasped for air while his head was still on the ground.

Elminster laughed.

“And you were just worrying about the relationship *I* have with *my* lover?”

His breath recovered, Zetic blew a raspberry at Elminster as he raised his head up again.

“Oh, *thbbbbpppt* to you, old man. Wisecracking is for the young and foolish like me. The aged and wise such as you should make themselves useful, instead. Point us in the right direction, and let's be off.”

Elminster did so with good cheer, and off they flew, heading towards Aglarond.

That evening, however, as they finished a meal which Zetic had conjured up out of the divine ether, Isacharact appeared agitated, and spoke to him.

“That joke earlier... Does our difference in sizes upset you?”

Zetic stopped eating and looked at Isacharact. She sighed and spoke on, looking at the ground as she did so.

“Bahamut's spell gave you rapid growth, but even so you will not likely 'catch up' to me for a long time, if at all. I am not only large for a dragon, but I will remain larger than you for the foreseeable future.”

She was starting to get emotional.

“And it's just that... all my *previous* mates found my size attractive. To most, if not all, dragon males, great size in a female means, well, great *fertility*.”

At last, she looked up with sad eyes at Zetic, who sat only a dozen feet away from her.

“But you? Did you really mean anything by that joke? Am I... too large for you?”

Zetic bent over, smiled, and stroked the side of her head. He put his mouth close up against her ear, and spoke into it, slowly and softly.

“Not even in the slightest.”

She smiled.

“Thank you, that makes me feel better.”

Zetic pulled his head back.

“Good. Because I also take back what I said earlier...”

He licked his lips and grinned.

“...I *would* like you to ‘demonstrate further’.”

Isacharact turned her neck, opened her mouth halfway, and raised her eye at him.

“Indeed...”

With what remained of dinner hastily thrown down their gullets, she pounced on him. They rolled around, laughing playfully, nipping at each other, until Isacharact eventually managed to completely pin Zetic on his back.

A kiss...

And then another, and another, and another.

Two sets of eyes clenched shut in ecstasy, as evening rolled into night.

The flight to Velprintalar was uneventful. The two dragons first headed south to Sembia and followed the coastline east, crossing The Dragon Reach near Scardale. On the other side of the great sea-lane, they followed the coast east again until they arrived at the The Easting Reach near Dilpur. Once the other shore was reached, they flew straight south.

The whole journey took three days. At midday on the third, the great city of Velprintalar appeared on the horizon, its tangled web of buildings packed close to each other and open to the outside world by the absence of a city wall – a curious omission, considering the wars of Thayan aggression that the metropolis had had to defend itself against in the past.

Off to the south side of the city, close to the sea and butting up against a large hill, sat The Simbul’s large palace of green stone. Zetic admired the mass of structures from the air.

“Oh, how I miss the sights, the sounds, and the smells of a city... Isa dear, would you mind if we walked up the central avenue instead of landing at the palace directly?”

“Are you mad? It’s the middle of the day, and it looks to be market-day at that. There must be thirty thousand people walking around down there. Can you imagine the commotion we’ll cause?”

Zetic laughed heartily and dived down towards the center of the city.

“I certainly can!”

Isacharact rolled her eyes and dove after him.

“Come one, come all! Spices from Calimshan! Golden sculptures from Amn! Mulhorandi stone statuettes! Dalelands wood figurines! Carved scrim from Icewind Dale! Cupio’s Curatio has them all!”

The merchant, standing on a podium, was crying out his wares to the small crowd on the wide city street. A few of the passers-by mounted the raised wooden deck to peruse his goods, but most continued up or down the city street, heading for some other booth or shop.

“Wonders from around Faerûn, all to be had for excellent prices. Exquisite...”

The hawker trailed off and stared straight ahead as a gigantic gold dragon landed on the boulevard in front of him and casually fluffed its mane with one hand.

Others in the small crowd, perhaps noticing the seller’s sudden quietness, turned and were equally stunned to see Zetic sitting there with his bright golden headdress... and then stunned a second time as Isacharact landed beside him, her horn ornaments glittering and girdle sparkling almost blindingly in the bright sunshine.

With a glance to each other, and completely heedless of the stares of the people around them, the two dragons proceeded towards the central plaza, ambling up the wide street.

Or, at least, the street had *seemed* wide before the huge Zetic and huger Isacharact had started walking along it. Still, there were no collisions... though that may have been less from there being enough room on the avenue than to the simple fact that people have a tendency to get out of the way when two dragons parade through town.

After a few blocks, Isacharact leaned over slightly, keeping her eyes still focused on the road ahead. She whispered to Zetic in Draconic, the language of dragons, so that most others would not understand her.

“This is *very* uncomfortable for me, you know.”

“I know. But you’re doing just fine so far.”

“All these people around us... and they’re just staring at us with blank faces... I’m not *afraid* of them, but it does make me nervous.”

Zetic chuckled, and softly butted his head against her neck.

“I would’ve thought you’d be used to it, given the way I’m always staring at you.”

She purred in a grin as his tongue darted out mischievously.

They soon arrived at the city’s town square, a large brick-paved plaza with a magnificent stone fountain in the middle. As they circled the fountain and approached the street leading to the great palace, a troop of city guards near it suddenly stood to attention.

Their captain hurried over to the dragons, raised her hand in salutation, and summoned up most of her courage to address them.

“Hold there, master and mistress dragons! My pardon, but what business do you conduct today in our fair city of Velprintalar?”

Isacharact had stopped abruptly, but Zetic spoke calmly in his great voice, his wispy tail flourishing in the air behind him.

“We walk through its fine streets on our way to visit your Lady, The Simbul. Is there something wrong?”

“Well, no, there actually isn’t... Only that we do not often receive dragons...”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps it is simply that any others who have visited did so while changed by their own magic into a human form.”

The captain seemed to reflect on this, distracted from her fear of the dragons before her by the thought of other dragons having been in – or even currently in! – the city before this particular encounter.

“Hmm, I suppose that is true. Most dragons do have a reputation for assuming human guises when amongst humans. But then, why haven’t you?”

“Simply because my Isacharact cannot, and I wish to accompany her without abandoning her alone to her draconic form.”

“I suppose that makes sense...”

Zetic smiled.

“It does indeed. Is there anything else you desire?”

“Only perchance your names, for the record.”

“Isacharact the White, and I am her husband Hex Zetic the Gold, cleric of Torm.”

At this, the guard bowed and Zetic tipped his head in reply.

“Enjoy your stay, my Lord and Lady Dragons.”

“Thank you, guard-captain. Good day.”

And so they walked on, though they felt the guards’ stares – in addition to everyone else’s, of course – from behind.

“Did you use a spell of enchantment on her?”

“Not at all.”

“Well. You certainly are good at charming your way around people.”

“My dear wife, I could probably talk the mighty Tarrasque out of rampaging through a village if but given the chance.”

“I am no high priest of your order, but I do believe that your Lord Torm frowns on such boastful behaviour.”

“You are probably right about His will. In that case, let me instead point to some of my past accomplishments.”

At this, Zetic prodded Isacharact sharply in her side, and both had a good laugh as they continued onwards to the palace.

One does not simply walk up and knock on the doors of the palace of The Simbul, Witch-Queen of Aglarond, Chosen of the Goddess Mystra, Wielder of the Silver Fire, member of the Seven Sisters, and one of the most powerful magic users of present-day Faerûn.

Unless, of course, one is a gold dragon, powerful cleric of the valiant Torm, and claims to have been sent by Elminster.

In such a case, the process for admittance is rather accelerated.

And so, after a few simple divination spells by the palace sergeant-major to detect lies, concealment, or a changed shape, Isacharact and Zetic found themselves entering The Simbul’s audience-room, where her chamberlain was holding court.

A slightly nervous-looking page announced their entry.

“The Lady Isacharact, White Dragon, and her husband, the Lord Hex Zetic, Gold Dragon, Cleric and Hierophant of Torm.”

There were not many courtiers in the hall – for all nobles of Aglarond and of its allies knew that The Simbul was only rarely in attendance at her own court – but each and every one of them turned to witness the dragons’ entry. The Simbul was a powerful woman, they knew, but to have two dragons present in her great hall! And very well-dressed dragons, at that.

Even the chamberlain looked a bit surprised. He quickly concluded the matter of local law before him – his decision being to postpone judgment for another week, so that both parties could gather more evidence – and turned to the new arrivals.

“Good day, Lord and Lady Dragons. How may the honoured chamberlain of our Lady the Simbul help you?”

Zetic stepped forward as Isacharact moved to sit off to one side.

“We desire an audience with Her Highness. We have been sent here by the magnificent Elminster, to ask questions regarding magic of Her Ladyship The Simbul.”

The chamberlain shook his head.

“Alas, for our Lady is not present and, as is unfortunately so often the case, we have no indication as to when she plans to return.”

“That is quite alright, master chamberlain. I have reason to believe that our presence here will induce her to return.”

Hearing this, the courtiers in the hall chuckled amongst themselves. Many of them had thought the same when they arrived, and they had all been disappointed. For The Simbul is indeed quite fleeting, and enjoys travelling around the world and the planes far more than she enjoys remaining in her palace.

The chamberlain conveyed as much.

“I am happy that my Lord Dragon is optimistic, and we will be pleased to give you residence while you await Our Lady’s return. However, as Our Lady sometimes visits only to briefly inquire with me about urgent matters, and as I am not unfamiliar with magic myself, perhaps it would be best if my Lord could give me some details on the question he wishes asked, that I might relay them to her should the occasion arise?”

“Certainly. I wish to ask her about this sword.”

Zetic unsheathed it from his back, and as he talked he circled the room, so that all who were present were able to get a good look at it.

“At first glance, merely an ordinary huge greatsword, though with an unusual design at the tip and a strange curvature of the blade. At second glance, it is doubtless magical in nature, for it glows with its own light. At third glance, however...”

Zetic held the sword out by both hands and activated it. The magical explosion startled some of the courtiers, but the chamberlain, having seen many such effects before, retained his composure.

“...it has some most unusual properties. The flame itself is unremarkable, but hold your ears ready...”

The sword began to sing its strange song once again.

“...for you now hear its extraordinary song. There are swords that match this one so far, of course, but the story of its creation is most unusual, and the sword is literally able to either destroy or slice straight through everything in one blow. Or, at least, everything I have tried it on, which includes wood, leather, and stone.”

Zetic continued to circle the room, though it seemed as if something had caught his eye in the corner.

“There is something hidden in this sword, and it may be dangerous. My Lord Torm likes not such things, and neither do I. Therefore, I quest to discover its secrets.”

Zetic now did something that seemed very strange to everyone, Isacharact included. He turned to face straight at an unoccupied corner of the room, and with one hand held the blade straight out in front of himself, pointing the tip at the corner.

“And, My Lady The Simbul, your lover Elminster could discern nothing in it, and he bid me come here to ask you instead. Shall I relate the story of its creation now, or would you rather hear it later?”

Some of the courtiers snickered. Surely this must be some trick! Several of them knew the magic of detecting invisibility, and The Simbul was clearly not in the corner. Even if she were, they thought, how could it be that this gold dragon could have seen her where they could not?

Zetic paused, and then began to speak slowly, staring straight at a specific spot next to one of the large marble support columns.

“I can see you, Your Highness... You are leaning against that column, with your arms folded, and your legs crossed... You are wearing a somewhat ragged violet robe which goes to your ankles. There are three rings on your left hand, and two on your right. A golden tiara inscribed with the symbol of Mystra sits on your head, and your hair—”

“Enough! You have made your point.”

And at that, The Simbul appeared, exactly where and how Zetic had said her to be. She casually walked to the front of the room, great tuff of grey hair billowing and contrasting sharply against her youthful features. Arriving at the seat of her throne, she stood with her hands on her hips.

“Come to my private chambers, then. Let us examine this sword of yours.”

Leaving the courtiers – and even the chamberlain – still stunned at both The Simbul’s appearance and Zetic’s uncanny prediction of it, she walked off through the great door behind the throne, with Zetic and Isacharact following behind her.

“Interesting story. A sword made from dragon-flame ought to be powerful, but this is most unusual. And the changing of the form, also strange.”

The Simbul had been sitting in a large chair as Zetic had recounted the complete story of the sword’s creation and of the visit with Elminster.

“Before we go further, though, I have a different question. How did you know where I was? The invisibility spell I wove was far too powerful for any divination magic you should possess, either as a dragon or as a high cleric of Torm. How then were you able to see me?”

Zetic looked at her, plain-faced.

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean that I could simply see you there. I cast no spells, nor did I even know you were in the room until I looked in the corner and saw you there.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“On the contrary, it makes perfect sense, if I add the one crucial detail: I only saw you after I activated *Hapax Legomenon*.”

“So... perhaps it is the sword that saw me, and not you. Let us talk more of the sword, then. You said you have been having dreams of it?”

Zetic turned away now, and took a deep breath.

“Yes. The first few nights I had dreams of the eerie singing, of the sword, and of the name – *Hapax Legomenon* – repeated over and over again. No other dreams have I had since it was re-forged, and those dreams have started as soon as I fall asleep, lasting until I awaken. A few days ago I decided in my mind that *Hapax Legomenon* must be the sword’s name. That night, the dreams changed...”

Zetic trailed off, looking out the window. After a moment, The Simbul prompted him.

“How did they change?”

Zetic stared at the tip of the sword in his hands. The grey eye looked back at him.

“I see the eye that is inscribed at the tip. It is several feet across and staring straight at me, as if standing straight in front of my face. It looks at me unblinking, the great iris unwavering, the eyelash unflinching. I find myself staring deep into the center of the eye... and it feels like there is something there, far away in the background. And always, I hear the music, though greater than before, and more powerful than I have ever heard the sword itself sing. Since two days ago, even if I so much as blink...”

Zetic tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

“...I see the eye.”

Zetic opened his eyes and turned to the Simbul once again.

“It stares continuously, as if boring into my head. Sometimes I think I hear faint whispers in the background, but the music tends to drown them out, at least beyond recognition.”

Isacharact was horrified.

“Good grief, that’s awful! I hadn’t realised you were being tortured so! No wonder you sleep so poorly of late.”

Zetic turned to her.

“Have I slept poorly, Isa? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Indeed you have, tossing and turning in your sleep as if possessed by some fiendish fever – shivering at times, too. I have even heard you moan and mutter, but as I was almost asleep myself, I could not distinguish any words.”

The Simbul leaned back in her chair, reflecting.

“Interesting. Tell me, Zetic: when you sleep, where is the sword?”

“Usually a dozen feet away, just within arm’s reach.”

Isacharact pointed at it and interjected.

“Maybe to start, but you’ve picked it up in your sleep the last few nights – I’ve seen you do it. About an hour after you’ve started being all agitated in your sleep, you’ve stretched out a hand and groped for the sword, pulling it tight against your chest. In the morning, it is still pressed against your breast. How is it that you do not remember waking up with it?”

Zetic looked out the window again.

“To tell the truth, I have felt more and more groggy – more and more unaware of what was going on – every morning since the sword became mine. If it wasn’t for you being there to shake me out of it by asking me if I was ready to move on, I might’ve stood around in a daze for an hour or two, easily.”

The Simbul got up and walked in a circle, looking at the ground as she spoke.

“Such consumption speaks of danger. Perhaps it would be best if you gave up the sword to the care of someone else? Someone higher up in your church, some divine emissary? A trusted friend?”

Zetic was still looking aimlessly out through the window. He muttered a barely-audible reply.

“No, no danger... there’s no danger.”

The Simbul quickly turned to him, and saw that Zetic was tracing the eye design on the sword with his finger without even looking at it.

“What? What did you say?”

Zetic moved his hands away from the tip and looked at the sword’s design once again.

“The eye staring at me is... unnerving... but I do not feel *threatened* by it. The music is eerie, and even scary, but it doesn’t feel *wrong*. I feel strange, but not in danger.”

“You are under some strange power, cleric. Your senses may fail you.”

“As they failed me when I saw you next to the column? No, my Lady the Simbul, my senses do not fail me when they say that there is no danger here.”

Zetic closed his eyes, and held the sword’s tip up to his ear.

“I feel as if... as if *Hapax Legomenon* is reassuring me itself. Telling me there is no danger, no... no *risk*... no potential for *damage*... no likelihood for *loss*... I wish I knew what it meant by that, exactly.”

Isacharact put her hand on Zetic’s, and he turned slowly to face her.

“Those are soothsayers’ words, husband. Are you certain that it does not try to deceive you?”

“I am... or, at least, I think I am.”

“What of your Lord Torm?”

“He has said nothing on this matter. That, too, is very disquieting, but again does not mean danger – for surely He would warn me of danger. Yet it also means that there may be no benefit here, for He might have given a sign for that, too. Very odd, very odd.”

The Simbul was adamant.

“If you will not give up the sword, then I insist you stay here. If it is indeed dangerous, then I may be able to protect you... there is also a strong church of Torm here, perhaps you will find some help there. You will stay in the palace, and I will stay near with you, until this strange tale comes to a close.”

“Thank you, my Lady The Simbul. That does indeed seem wise. I appreciate your help in this matter.”

Days passed.

Isacharact noticed that Zetic seemed to be growing more and more reserved, distraught, and melancholy. He spent most of his time sitting in one of the great rooftop gardens of the palace, looking over the city. In the evening, he stared at the setting sun, completely captivated by the red glow, looking to the west until the very last trace of light disappeared over the horizon. The sun seemed to be the only thing in the world that he noticed.

She sat at his side, of course. It was unusual, however, to be in his presence and yet feel so detached from him. For he spoke little, and ate little, and sang not. Always with him was the sword, though safely in its scabbard and not in his hands.

And each night, when they returned to their chambers, he snuggled with her briefly, and kissed her softly, and caressed her gently, and spoke sweet words in her ear, but then went quickly to sleep, exhausted despite having done nothing all day... Was he tired from the continuous terror of the dreams of the eye? Isacharact watched him in his sleep, and saw him curl up around the sword, body clenched as if in suffering. Before he slept, he seemed to wedge himself closer to her, seeking comfort for some hidden agony.

It pained her to see him this way.

She grew worried for his health, and said as much to The Simbul, but the sorceress-queen said only that there did not seem to be anything to do other than allow the affliction to run its course. Brother Pasquale, head minister of the city's church of Torm, came to visit a few times and said that he prayed daily for Torm to give Zetic strength, but no help seemed to come from the God.

Isacharact took it upon herself, therefore, to try to rouse Zetic from his depression. In the day, she tried to talk with him, and in the night, she tried to make love to him.

But neither worked, and Zetic sat ever more morosely during the day and slept ever more sombrelly in the night...

Until one evening, that is.

From morning to noon, it was much like every other day had been. Zetic sat and looked out across the city streets with Isacharact by his side, occasionally trying to start up a conversation – but with her efforts having borne no fruit for the past few days, she was becoming exasperated.

Something unusual happened in the afternoon, however. At one point, Zetic seemed to lean further over the railing, staring at some part of the city with narrowed eyes. Isacharact tried to follow his gaze, but could see nothing of interest; he seemed to be looking merely at a bundle of buildings near the shore of the sea, just to one side of the harbour.

A porter came to announce that dinner was served. Isacharact glanced at Zetic and, seeing him still staring intently, moved to go inside for the meal. She was startled to hear Zetic talk to her – the first real words he had said all day, and the first time he had *started* a conversation in almost a week.

“Have them bring food out here, dear. It’s too nice of an evening to eat inside.”

Isacharact turned to look at him.

“Are you going to eat as well, then?”

“Yes.”

This sudden conversation and request for food left Isacharact surprised, and a little elated – was her husband getting better at last? But she thought it best not to ‘push’ him too much, and quietly gave instructions to the porter and sat down next to him, wondering if – or when – he would speak again.

It was almost immediately, though he was still staring at the same point of the city.

“Today reminds me of a day from over twenty-five years ago. I was adventuring with a party of undead-slayers at the time, and we tramped all over Sembia destroying dens of ghouls, wights, and vampires.”

The food arrived, and Isacharact settled in for a long story. Zetic took some, too, and turned towards her as he spoke, though he continued to glance towards that same spot in the city.

“On a day much like this one – clear and cool, but growing cloudy as the hours wore on – we arrived in a small city of barely over a thousand that was being plagued by a mysterious evil of the night. The immediate suspect was a pack of ghouls or barrow-wights in the nearby cemetery, and we headed there almost immediately. By the time we arrived, night was fast falling. This turned out to be perilous for us, for no mere zombies were plaguing the town, but rather, a coven of vampires who had taken up residence in one of the great ancient crypts.”

The meal continued, and so did the story.

“Unfortunately, we did not discover this fact until already *inside* the crypts. The battle was very fierce, but we put down three vampires and their undead minions. A fourth, however, managed to flee out the door and into the woods. We had no ranger among us, skilled in the arts of the wilderness, so we could not track him that night. And, in the morning, the townspeople thanked us greatly for ridding of them of such a menace.”

Zetic had finished eating and was staring back at the city.

“But we had rid them of a menace only to acquire one of our own, for a week after that encounter we were plagued ourselves. The vampire came to visit his revenge upon us, and carried off two of our group before we at last were able to destroy him one night, breaking the enchantment on our stolen team-members.”

The sun was setting, and Isacharact noticed that Zetic was *not* looking at it, but still staring at the spot of the city, leaning quite far over the railing.

“We all survived, but it was a harrowing experience. Since then, I have always had a certain distinct... *distaste*... for the undead.”

“So I have noticed. We seem to be always off on an adventure to fight them.”

“Yes... and we shall be off again on one today.”

He closed his eyes, and turned his head up.

“There are ten vampires in the catacombs of the great cemetery. Another five are elsewhere in the city, no doubt posing as nobles. Tonight, the ones from the crypts have decided to capture some humans for a great feast to honour their dark Gods Malar and Velsharoon. Three are currently in taverns around the city, picking up eligible young men or women to sacrifice and consume. A fourth waits near the entry to their crypt. The remaining six are in the crypt itself, resting calmly.”

“How did you—”

Zetic talked straight over her question.

“Tonight, they are unprepared. Tonight, they are vulnerable. Tonight, we shall erase them from this city. Come.”

He took off, and Isacharact felt she had no choice but to take off after him. She caught up to him quickly, but he said nothing further while they flew. In the air he cast a spell of invisibility over them both, and motioned for her to follow him and keep quiet. They landed just a few blocks away from where Zetic had been staring – and Isacharact realised now that he had been staring at the catacombs.

Yet how could he have seen them? For, from the palace terrace, the graveyard was completely obscured by the buildings around it. Isacharact thought about this as they waited, huddled against the side of one of the buildings so that the few people about might not bump into them.

Isacharact soon noticed that Zetic was looking intently at a man who was standing in the shade, leaning against a building wall just around the corner. She looked at him too; it was apparent from the way he concealed his face but also occasionally glanced around that he was waiting for someone.

Or, not someone, but some people, for eventually a small group of people showed up. Five men and six women, apparently being led by one woman in particular, stopped at his corner. The people all seemed sluggish – no wait, not *all* the people. Three of the new arrivals – one woman and two men – appeared anxious and jittery instead of slow.

Zetic drew his sword and stepped closer; Isacharact followed.

“Well, is this it?”

The man leaning against the wall had stood up straight and spoken. The woman who was not groggy replied to him, while the other two looked around aimlessly.

“This is as many as we could get in one go without arousing suspicion. We could hit some more of the taverns later, but this won’t be a busy night. The ‘pickings’ are slim now and liable to be slimmer later.”

“I suppose these ones will have to do, then. Were you followed?”

“No. We were all very careful. The town watch doesn’t seem to be very alive tonight; I hardly passed a single patrol all evening.”

“Strange, I feel... watched.”

“Perhaps it’s just excitement over tonight.”

“I don’t think so. Something just isn’t right.”

“You worry too much. If the town guard even had the slightest clue that we were here, they’d have come barging down into the crypts with torches burning and drums beating and with representatives from all the good churches in town with them. And there wouldn’t be much we could do save flee through the sewers.”

“What if it isn’t the town guard I’m worried about? There could be vampire-hunters around. I get the feeling we should lay low tonight.”

“You want to call off the feast? After all the planning we went through, and with all the potential rewards from the Gods? And I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. It’s time we started being able to eat like our ‘civilised’ cousins in town, with all their juicy nobles to snack on.”

“I’m hungry too, but it still doesn’t feel right... No, I’m certain of it. Something is wrong, and I want to call it off. There is danger here.”

“How right you are!”

It was Zetic; as he said this, his singing and flaming blade smashed down onto the head of the vampire who was talking, splitting him clean in two and destroying him completely in a blinding flash of light. The other vampires turned around, horrified. Unable to manoeuvre well while the sun’s rays still skirted the rooftops, they were almost defenceless.

One of them tried to flee in the shadows, but Isacharact batted him out into the sunlight, and he quickly melted, screaming loudly.

The other two exchanged glances and started to run the other way, but were themselves turned to ash, wailing noisily as Zetic called up an orb of divine light to scorch them both.

With the remaining eight people slowly coming out of their daze, Zetic turned towards the graveyard and began yammering out loud.

“I didn’t realise that the crypts had so many exits into the sewer system. If I go in alone, the vampires will surely be able to escape. We’ll need the help of the town watch to seal them in if we want to destroy them for good.”

“Husband, *how do you know*—”

But Isacharact was cut off again, this time by an approaching troop of city guards who had no doubt heard the final screams of the vampires.

“Halt! Halt! What is going on here?”

Zetic turned to the new arrivals with *Hapax Legomenon* still held in one hand.

“Ah, Guard-Captain Khaleb. Excellent timing.”

“How did you know my—”

Once again, Zetic talked straight over the question.

“There are vampires in the city. Four have we killed just now, but six more lie in the catacombs. I should be able to destroy them myself, but if they try to flee I will have great difficulty in stopping them. The help of the town guard is needed to eliminate their infestation. I want you to take two men and immediately run to the barracks and call up Knight-Commander Markus. You will tell him what I have told you, and that we need any and every man he can spare to assist in eradicating the vampires by covering the sewer exits and the other crypts while I, accompanied by several watchmen, proceed into the crypt of Meier Sidarus to eliminate the coven.”

Guard-Captain Khaleb was completely flabbergasted.

“What? Vampires? You speak too quickly for me, dragon. All I heard were screams; where are the vampires?”

Zetic waved at the piles of ash and at the confused people standing nearby.

“Right here. The four piles of dust were the four vampires on the surface, and these disoriented people were to be their prey. In a few minutes you could even ask them yourselves, and they will tell you they only remember sitting in a tavern and being approached by someone, then nothing more. They were under the vampires’ influence until just now.”

At this, one of the unfortunate victims began to speak up.

“Pardon, but what’s going on here? Last I remember was downing a nice mug of ale in Terrik’s Tank on the west side of town.”

Khaleb stared at the man, in shock at Zetic’s sudden revelations.

“You... you are apparently correct, gold dragon. I will do as you ask. You two! Stay here with the dragons. You, and you, come with me back to barracks at the double.”

As Khaleb and his two men started off, Zetic called after them.

“Tell Markus to prefer to rouse Half-Orcs, Elves, Half-Elves, Gnomes, and Dwarves if he can. They all can see better in the dark than Humans, and night is fast approaching. And tell him also to contact the churches of Torm, Helm, Illmater, and Tyr! They will all gladly provide soldiers, clerics, and vampire-slaying supplies.”

Halfway down the street, Khaleb nodded back, and continued jogging to base with two of his soldiers. Zetic, meanwhile, quickly cast a spell of healing on the dazed victims, clearing their minds.

“You have all been the victims of vampires. Tonight, the town guardsmen and I will eliminate the undead who tried to consume you. Return to your homes and lock the doors until morning.”

Almost disbelieving their situation – vampires, dragons, and hunts, oh my! – the eight citizens of Velprintalar nonetheless hurried off on their way, heading home.

“Good. Now, we must secure the area. You two guardsmen, head for the undertaker’s office and have him evacuate the graveyard, close all the gates, and lock all the entrances. Isacharact, I want you to go to the wharf and identify all the sewer exits that we will have to block or guard. I will scout the graveyard itself. Is everything clear? Yes? Good, then move out.”

The two town watchmen took off for the groundskeeper’s office, but Isacharact reached out and held Zetic by the shoulder before he could leave.

“Wait, husband, wait! What is going on here? How did you come to know all these things about the vampires of the city? Why are you in such a rush to defeat them?”

“I can’t explain it, Isa dear. I feel positively energized tonight, empowered by this goal. I don’t know how I know of the vampires, either, only that every second I think of them I learn something new – like that the crypts have connections to the sewer system and that the sewer system has several exits at the wharf. But aren’t I better off this way than in the horrible depression I’ve been in recently?”

“I *suppose* you are... I’ll continue with this adventure, but you will need to calm down afterwards. This hyperactive state you’re in may be a welcome change, but in the long run it could not possibly be good for whatever it is that ails you.”

“Perhaps, but for now, there’s work to be done! Let’s be off!”

And with that, Zetic bounded off towards the burial ground, and Isacharact took to the air to complete her allotted task.

Two hours later the graveyard was positively bustling with guardsmen and members of many of the city’s religious orders – for Knight-Commander Markus had taken it upon himself to contact all the churches who might help in destroying vampires. Almost three hundred men had been summoned up, though Zetic had already cast a spell of silence on the crypt entrances so as to prevent the vampires from being awakened prematurely by the noise of the men and women at arms.

As the soldiers had started to arrive, Zetic had laid out assignments for all of them. Groups of five would be stationed at large sewer exits at the wharf, and groups of three would patrol around the graveyard perimeter. A small team – including Captain Khaleb, Brother Pasquale, and Zetic – were to proceed into the crypt. The remainder of the forces, of which Isacharact was a part, would be spread around the cemetery and the surrounding sewer exits to cover all the escape routes.

With a few final instructions about emergency messages – two blasts into the air from either of the dragons meaning ‘assistance needed’ and four meaning ‘all clear’ – and some other miscellanea, Zetic used the shape-shifting power innate to all gold dragons to make himself and his equipment approximately human-size so as to fit into the crypt, and the hunt was on.

“Right. Draw steel. I’ll take the lead. Khaleb, you follow behind me – stay back several paces. Pasquale and you other four, hang back even further. Stay alert for ambushes; these crypts have lots of side-passages.”

Zetic, standing on his two hind legs with his cloak wrapped well around him, gave one last hand wave to Markus before the small band breached the magical wall of silence, entering the tomb of Meier Sidarus slowly and quietly. Down several sets of staircases, and around several corridors they went, until they came at last to a corner and Zetic motioned for everyone to stop and spoke to them in a whisper.

“Everyone up against the wall, here.”

The group of seven quickly arranged themselves in a line against the wall. Zetic leaned his head back and closed his eyes, deep in thought...

“There are three around the corner. Two are in their coffins. One appears to be resting next to a pool of water.”

Khaleb was confused.

“How did you see them with your eyes closed?”

“I felt their minds.”

Zetic’s reply did not alleviate Khaleb’s confusion at all. But as Zetic spoke on, he realised that there were more important things to think about, anyways.

“I will make myself invisible and approach the resting one. Count twenty – silently, mind you! – and then split yourselves up; one half taking the closer coffin, one half taking the further one. Make a signal with your hand when you are in position to stake them. As soon as you hear me attack the one in the middle, pound the stakes through the vampires’ hearts.”

And, that said, Zetic promptly became invisible and could be barely heard turning the corner. Khaleb counted the twenty in his head then crept around the corner, leading two of the soldiers with Brother Pasquale leading the other two.

Khaleb saw that Zetic had been correct. Up against the near and far walls were two coffins – open to the air, and apparently with something in them – and in the centre of the room was a fountain or pool of water, with a very attractive and rather scantily clad woman lying on the edge.

Khaleb stared at the scene in disbelief as he crept forward with the others. It took a few seconds for the guard-captain to come to his senses and realise that he was in the presence of vampires, and that he would be in grave danger if they awoke.

Finally, his group reached the far coffin. Inside was a well-dressed man with grey hair. He looked to be dead, for he was not breathing, but Khaleb nonetheless carefully placed his sword on the table on which the coffin was resting, and positioned the stake and mallet over the creature's chest.

One of the two men with Khaleb waved to the centre of the room, and saw that Brother Pasquale was also ready. Get ready to strike any moment now...

“We are attacked! Flee! Flee!”

Khaleb heard the cry from behind him, and struck with his hammer, driving the stake into the creature's heart. The vampire immediately sat up in its coffin and opened its eyes wide, gasping for breath and making horrible gurgling noises. With the help of the soldier next to him, Khaleb pushed him down and hammered the stake again, and again, and once more – killing the vampire as the corpse turned grey and ashen. Khaleb's job done, he turned around.

Brother Pasquale and his two guardsmen were struggling to hold down their vampire and drive the stake fully into it, but the main attraction was in the centre, where Zetic's first blow had obviously missed as he was engaged in a furious battle with the vampire-woman.

“You two, help Pasquale!”

With orders given for his two soldiers, Khaleb picked up his sword and joined Zetic in slashing at the vampire. He temporarily forgot that he was fighting alongside a gold dragon... temporarily, that is, until Zetic blew flame and set the vampire alight. Disoriented from the fire that was consuming her, she was an easy mark, and Zetic turned sideways and struck her with a solid kick to her chest, piercing her flesh with his claws and sending her flying into the wall behind her. As she crashed to the ground, Khaleb ran forward and staked her as she lay helpless and burning on the crypt floor.

Brother Pasquale was still having trouble; the male vampire was fully awake and, with a stake half-driven into him, had nonetheless managed to get out of his coffin and was engaging the four town guardsmen. Pasquale let out a yelp as a roundhouse blow from the vampire's fist slammed him to the floor, wispy black tendrils licking him as the creature sapped his energy. Khaleb was about to rush over to help when he saw Zetic close his eyes, open his mouth, make a breathy hiss, and, while holding the flaming, singing *Hapax Legomenon* sword in one hand by his side, pointed his open palm at the vampire...

The undead horror screamed in agony and arched its neck back, clutching its head. It stood almost motionless, concentration apparently completely consumed by whatever Zetic was doing to it. One of the soldiers grabbed the creature by the shoulder and drove the stake in further with his mace, and the vampire collapsed dead to the ground, its limbs quickly scattering to dust.

“The four of you, go outside! Let them know that three are dead, but that the other three are fleeing! RUN!”

At Khaleb’s orders, the four guardsmen ran off shouting. They soon remembered that none outside would be able to hear them until they breached the magical wall of silence at the entrance to the tomb, and so saved their voices until then.

“Brother Pasquale, are you all right?”

“I will be in a moment. Let me just cast a spell.”

The robed and armoured cleric raised himself up and waved his hands in the air, casting a spell of restoration and health.

“All better. You?”

“I’m fine. Master Zetic? Master Zetic?”

Zetic was still standing with his eyes closed and palm outstretched at the vampire’s corpse. Khaleb walked up and touched him on the arm.

“WHAT? WHAT? WHAT IS IT?”

Zetic replied in a roar and turned his head so that his eyes bored into Khaleb, making that one take several steps backwards in fear.

“The fight here is over here, Zetic. We must move on.”

The dragon’s head whipped around as it scanned the room’s several exits.

“Yes, yes! This way, quick!”

And so, sheathing his sword on his back and returning to all fours, Zetic bounded off through one of the exits at a gallop before even Khaleb could reply.

“Where in the hells is *he* going in such a hurry? Brother Pasquale, are you ready?”

“Yes. We’d best be after him. There’s something that has been ailing that poor soul of late, and I don’t know if it’s such a good idea to leave him alone.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

Khaleb took the lead and the two charged through the doorway that Zetic had taken. Spotting his blue cloak billowing off at the end of the long crypt corridor, Pasquale soon began to trail a few dozen feet behind Khaleb as they ran after the gold dragon at a fast pace.

A recklessly fast pace, unfortunately. For, only moments after Zetic whipped around corner up ahead and went out of sight, a monstrous undead ghoul reached out from one of the alcoves along the corridor and clotheslined Khaleb.

The guard-captain grunted as he fell on his back and had the wind knocked out of him, then let out a yelp as the ghoul reached down and lifted him up and brought him close to its horrible, decaying face. It opened its mouth – jaw hanging loosely, with barely any teeth left – and prepared to take a bite out of Khaleb’s face...

“Put him down, beast!”

Pasquale had arrived, and swung his mace straight into the ghoul’s face, smashing the horrid mouth to pieces and causing the ghoul to drop Khaleb on the floor once more. The priest pulled a wooden disc engraved with the symbol of Torm out from his robes, held it high in front of him, and began to chant loudly at the ghoul, who recoiled before this display of divine might.

Back and back it went, until it was huddled against the corner. Pasquale came closer, and spoke his enchanted words as loudly as he could so that a few seconds later the ghoul could bear no more, and the malevolent spirit inside was forever banished from the corpse it inhabited. The ancient body crumpled to dust.

The cleric gave the weakened Khaleb a hand up.

“And now, my friend, are *you* all right?”

“Yes, I am... though that ghoul sapped my strength. And now it seems like there’s hardly any point in following Zetic. He took off like the wind, and there may be more undead lurking in these catacombs. It’s not safe to explore with just the two of us.”

“Let us head back to the surface, then.”

With one of Khaleb’s arms draped over his shoulders, Pasquale helped the drained soldier hobble back to the crypt entrance.

“At least we got three of the vampires ourselves. I only pray that those other three don’t get anyone...”

“Are we getting extra pay for this?”

“Oh *shut up*, Derak. Think of something other than your change-purse. We’re killing vampires, here.”

The Half-Orc named Derak turned to face the half-elf crouched next to him.

“If I wanted to kill vampires for free, I’d have joined the church of Lathlander. I’m in the city guard because it’s got *good pay*.”

The half-elf shot him a glance.

“Don’t look at me, you idiot! Watch the goddamned sewer grate in front of us! And hold your bloody crossbow straight!”

Derak gave a dismissive snarl and loosened up his neck – making several loud **crack** noises as he did so – before he resumed peering down the long, dark tunnel before them. In the darkness of the night, the sewer outflow was pitch-black, but his Orcish eyes could see almost to the end, albeit in a somewhat muddy and essentially uncoloured view of the world.

“Alright, alright. Keep your elfish pantaloons on. I think I see something...”

“The vampires are loose! The vampires are loose! Watch the sewers, watch the crypts! Three vampires flee!”

The guardsman, as instructed only moments ago by Knight-Commander Markus, was running towards the wharf and crying the warning so that those watching the sewer grates would stay alert.

“Three flee, three flee! Watch the–”

Coming to the edge of the water, he stopped mid-sentence as, looking down onto the small ledge where watchmen *ought* to have been waiting near the sewer entrance, he saw not two guards at-the-ready, but two guards at-the-unconscious, knocked out on the ground, with a strange woman huddled over one.

She turned towards him, and her face was dripping with blood.

“AHHHH! Help! Help! Vampire! Help!”

The man-at-arms turned and fled back towards the cemetery but the vampire jumped fifteen feet straight up, landed on the dock, and ran after him. One last snack for the night, she thought: forced to flee the town with the alert raised, it could be a while before her next meal.

As is often the case with evildoers, however, that greed was her undoing. For in her haste, she failed to notice that Isacharact had been circling overhead, and now the great white dragon came crashing into the vampire from behind, spraying the ground with a blast of cold air as she landed.

Isacharact quickly pinned the undead beast under one of her paws.

“I have one! I need someone with a stake, hurry!”

The fleeing guard regained his courage and turned around, dropping his sword on the ground as he ran so as to more quickly equip the stake and mallet hanging on his belt.

But he couldn't get to Isacharact quickly enough. The vampire wriggled its head free and bit into the paw that pinned it. The white dragon let out a roar of pain; when the fiend began to draw her blood, she flicked her paw, tossing it a dozen yards down the block.

This was, however, exactly what the vampire had wanted; now liberated from the grapple, she fled back into the sewers in order to try another exit.

“So, I hear you two got taken out by one of the vampires? Pretty pathetic; I thought you were supposed to have good eyes, Derak.”

“I *have* good eyes... My aim, though, ehh... But the shooting part was supposed to be Llerith's job, anyways.”

Llerith, having failed to distinguish himself earlier as a great shooter of crossbow bolts, made himself known now as a great shooter of words.

“I *did* shoot the damned thing! Three times, even! But she simply batted away the quarrels in air with her bare hands. Never seen anything like it.”

Derak growled where he stood, crossbow held ready.

“I know, I saw it all! In any case, it's not going to happen again. I'm going to fill that bitch so full of holes that the blood she sucked out of me starts dripping out of her!”

A fourth voice piped in.

“Not that you're going to get the chance, though. How likely is it that she'll try to come out here, near the middle of the docks, instead of closer to the city edges?”

“Doesn't matter. Derak and me will settle for even the slightest chance to settle the scores. Revenge brooks no excuses.”

“You said it, Llerith. Now, let's everybody shut up. Four men, four crossbows, one sewer entrance, and one soon-to-be-fully-dead undead bitch. Let's not screw this up.”

With that, all four put their fingers on the triggers and stared down the sewer pipe – Derak most of all, for he had the best sight.

Two tiny white orbs flashed at the end of the corridor.

“SHOOT HER!”

Four men squeezed four triggers and four bolts laced with holy water whipped through the air at the vampire. It happened too fast for her to react, and all four slammed into her chest. She twisted in place, screaming, and another four were soon headed her way, hitting her in the back.

Llerith, the fastest on the load, managed to let loose a third bolt which struck the vampire clean in the centre of the head, and the undead horror collapsed to the ground, shattering to dust.

“I hereby declare that score *settled*.”

“News from the wharf! Another vampire dead, commander!”

The messenger-guard ran up to Markus and saluted.

“Speak!”

Markus, dressed in the shining steel full battle-plate armour of Knight-Commander of the Guards of Velprintalar, was leaning over a table covered with plans for the surrounding area. There, in the centre of the cemetery, a dozen soldiers surrounded him, holding torches for light and equipped lightly so as to be able to ferry messages quickly.

“Sir, Llerith and Derak report that they downed a vampire in the sewers. They believe it with certainty to be the one who previously attacked them and Isacharact at the eastern end of the docks.”

Markus turned back to his plans.

“Excellent, excellent. Only two more to go. Still been no sighting of Zetic?”

“Not that I have heard, sir.”

“And no reports of sightings from anywhere else?”

“No, sir.”

“So then the other vampires must still be in the cemetery, deep in the crypts.”

Indeed they were; moments later, the wooden door of a mausoleum barely fifty paces away burst into pieces as four figures came crashing out. In the center of the tangled ball of people was Zetic, and he landed heavily on top of the two male vampires he had been pursuing all this time.

They scurried out from under him and got to their feet faster than he could, however, and the massive barrow-wight which had landed on top of him didn't help much, either. The two vampires hissed briefly at the small crowd nearby, then ran to one of the exits.

“Stop them! Stop them! The vampires are on the ground, they're out on the ground! Watch the fences and the gates!”

Markus yelled out as he drew his sword, but in his heavy armour, he had no hope of catching them.

Zetic, meanwhile, twisted free of the giant undead wight's grasp and let out a tremendous feral roar as he turned to attack it. The beast was quick, however, and leapt out of the way as Zetic swung with *Hapax Legomenon*.

Slash left, miss; slash right, miss; slash left again, miss; slash right again, miss. Chop down and to the right, miss; chop down and to the left, miss.

A twirl and an uppercut ...

Hit.

The voices emanating from the sword grew louder as the blade sliced straight through the large creature from bottom to top, splitting it in half and causing it to explode in a blinding flash of white light.

Without a single word to the dozen or so guards beginning to cluster around him, Zetic sheathed *Hapax Legomenon* again and galloped off on all fours after the vampires, completely consumed by his current task.

“...they're out on the ground! Watch the fences and the gates!”

The guard patrolling outside the cemetery gate turned to his companion.

“Did you hear that? The vampires are on the surface!”

“Yes... Look!”

Someone in tattered robes was running straight at them from the other side of the great iron fence.

“It's one of them! Get ready!”

The running vampire was still hurtling ever forward. The guard readied his sword and shield against the charge, while his partner did the same a few feet away.

“Come on, come on!”

They had expected the creature to try to leap or climb over the twenty-foot high fence. Instead, however, just a few steps away from the iron poles, it turned itself to mist and passed straight through the bars, flying between the two guards who slashed uselessly at the fog and turned to watch it go by, changing back into humanoid form a few dozen feet away.

“Damn, it’s getting away! Hey! One’s in the streets! One vampire in the streets!”

Two vampires, actually – for as the two city watchmen were turned around, the second leapt over the wall, landed behind them, and bowled over one of the guards as it ran by. That one fell forward with a grunt, while the other yelled out to everyone else.

“Both vampires are over here! Both vampires are in the streets! Halloah! Help over here, both vampires are in the streets, heading towards the square!”

As he turned to voice the news to those still in the cemetery, he was horrified to see another creature go sailing over the cemetery gate – this time, however, it was Zetic, still magically shrunk to a human size. As he landed, tumbling on the street, he changed back to his normal form and continued after the vampires.

The guard wasted no time in calling for backup as he attended to his fallen companion.

“They’re all out here! They’re all out here! Come quickly, come everyone! Up the boulevard at the foot of the hill!!”

In the darkness of the night, someone was knocking furiously at the front door of a house. The owner of said house was just about to climb into bed and he thought to himself: who the devil could be at my house at *this* ungodly hour?

Still, Velprintalar is well known to be a safe city, even at night, and he trotted down the steps to answer the knocks.

He opened the top half of the horizontal split door. In front of him were two miserly looking men, hunched over.

“Oh, thank you sir, thank you for answering our hails. Please, give us shelter for the night, we are ever so cold out here, ever so helpless.”

The vampires wove their spell, and the master of the house was dazed, but they had not yet fully gripped his mind.

“You want... shelter? A place to stay... for... the... night...”

They continued to press on ... It almost occurred to him that they were still standing completely outside his doorway, as if unable to enter until he gave them permission...

“Yes, sir, yes! You have a kind heart! Please, won’t you let us in?”

“Well... I... I suppose that you—”

“Vampires in the streets! Vampires in the streets! Bolt your doors! Let no-one in! Vampires in the streets! Vampires in the streets!”

With the cry of the guards echoing up the avenue, the owner came to his senses, stared at the vampires in front of him, and with a small gasp, slammed the door in their faces.

One grabbed the other by the cuff and turned away from the house.

“That didn’t work, let’s go! Move, move!”

They ran off up the street again.

“Where are we going, brother? Where are we going?? There’s nothing this way except the town square!”

The other hissed back at him.

“I don’t give a damn what’s up this way! All I care about is what’s back *that* way, and of staying ahead of him!”

Less than a minute later, they reached the town square and looked around, trying to decide which way to go.

“By all the illegitimate sons of Bane! I can never figure out this blasted street system without a Cyric-be-damned map!”

The other pointed down one of the avenues.

“This way, I think.”

But it was too late, they had wasted too much time. Zetic had caught up with them. Only seconds behind him were a pile of guards and clerics, running up from the graveyard as Zetic blew the alarm signal into the air – two blasts of his fire.

The vampires turned and hissed, one of them drawing a small sword. Zetic unsheathed *Hapax Legomenon* and let out a blood-curdling roar, and the fight was on.

Zetic slashed furiously at the vampire before him, who could only just barely stave off the thunderous blows with his own sword while moving ever backwards.

“Brother!!”

The other vampire ran towards Zetic and leaped into the air, intending to jump onto Zetic’s back. But, though Zetic was completely facing the other way, he seemed to sense the approach, and whipped around, sword in his hands. With a snarl on his face, and the singing growing even louder, he hit the undead horror in mid-air.

The sword sliced straight through its torso, and with a flash of light, the vampire exploded before even hitting the ground.

The other vampire recoiled in terror at this sudden death of his undead brother. His thoughts turned to flight once more, and he headed off to go down one of the streets.

Zetic turned back with a tremendous growl, and *Hapax Legomenon* smashed into the ground right behind the vampire’s heels, breaking the ground’s supports and sending the plaza’s bricks tumbling into the sewers below.

The creature ran on, heading straight at a pack of soldiers who had just ran up the alley. They were accompanied by a cleric of Helm who was chanting a ward against the undead – but the vampire’s fear of the enraged dragon behind him completely overrode the cleric’s power to drive him off, and he ignored the holy energies.

Another sword-blow crashed into the ground behind him, sending brick shrapnel everywhere, and the vampire decided that his only hope of salvation was to jump and try to escape over the crowd. If he ran straight through, there was no doubt in his mind that the crazed dragon would not miss a third time.

One more zig, one more zag, and then he jumped into the air.

From the adjacent roadway, Isacharact, arriving with another group of guards, saw the vampire reach the apex of his jump, and realised that Zetic was too far behind him to catch him in another blow. She saw Zetic bend over and open his mouth as if to blow flame – but it was not fire that emanated from his maw!

A gigantic ball of white light flashed out, travelling towards the vampire.

And.

Time.

Stood.

Still.

Or at least, it seemed to. But then Isacharact shook herself and realised that time had not stopped – for her, anyways. She looked at Zetic, and the ball of white fire, and the vampire, and they were nearly frozen in air, moving at a snail’s pace – the ball fastest of all, but even *it* flew slowly. And there was more: it suddenly felt as if she was looking through a glass of water or a piece of poorly made crystal, for her sight of the three almost-frozen objects was distorted and fragmented, as if pieces of a stained glass window were had been broken up and put together improperly.

Yet the sword’s bizarre song could still be heard loudly and clearly, and the blade still flamed normally in Zetic’s hands, apparently unaffected by the distortion in time.

“Get away from where he’s going to land, you fools!”

It was The Simbul, having only just now teleported to the plaza-turned-battlefield. She was yelling at the dozen or so soldiers and the cleric. They quickly retreated back down the lane, safely away from where the vampire was likely to land.

The vampire was confused – the men on the ground in front of him seemed to zip away from him, moving faster than seemed possible. He thought himself either mad, or under the effects of a spell of slowness. In either case, he reasoned, he was doomed.

“You there, give me your gauntlet!”

The Simbul quickly grabbed a gauntlet from a nearby guardsman and flung it into the air at Zetic. Before it reached even halfway there, the singing from the sword grew louder, and the gauntlet seemed to hit something. The air rippled, and the forms of Zetic, and the white ball, and the vampire, seemed to move disjointedly, as if reflections in waves on a lake. The glove joined them in the time distortion, its movement and rotation slowed to a crawl as it hung in the air.

Everyone present looked on in awe at the strange scene – the dragon, frozen in time, mouth open, the white ball, now almost touching the vampire, the glove, hanging in space, and the vampire, still in the middle of his great leap.

A few moments later, the ball had caught up with the vampire. There was a tremendous light that shone over the entire courtyard, casting deep shadows. The ball was absorbed into the vampire, and he turned white himself, until...

With an incredible *BOOM*, the glowing figure shattered, and time returned to normal.

But it was only *time* that returned to normal. In the centre of the square, Zetic was huddled over, clutching the sword tightly as his eyes slowly inched further and further shut. Electricity – or at least, it looked like electricity – arched over his back, and between his wings, and under his neck. He looked to be in agony, but did not cry out – instead, only held the sword tighter, and curled his head further in, and closed his eyes a little more.

“Hex!”

Isacharact moved to run to Zetic. The Simbul yelled at her, still looking at Zetic.

“Stay back, she-dragon! You don’t know what’s happening to him!”

The sword’s song grew louder, and its flame shone brighter. A thin filament of light appeared at the tip of the sword, and spiralled slowly down the length of the blade. Zetic spoke, though his voice was strained.

“I’ll... be all right... It’s just...”

The spiral reached the hilt of the sword and began to travel up Zetic’s arms. As what appeared to be lightning still coursed over his body, there was a rumbling noise felt through the ground, and suddenly one of the soldiers turned around let out a yelp.

“LOOK OUT!”

Isacharact raised her head and turned. Her eyes opened wide as she saw a three-hundred foot tall white wall all around them and less than three miles away, completely encircling them and rushing ever closer.

“tthee... fffffffiiiiiffffffffttttthhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

Zetic’s eyes were only open the tiniest of slivers when the spiral of white light circled his head, encasing his eyes in a white glow and joining them to the tip of the sword through his arm. Bolts still flew across his form. As for his speech... was time was slowing down for Zetic again, or was he just having trouble talking? Isacharact had no time to consider the difference.

The Simbul had seen the shockwave, too.

“EVERYONE GET DOWN!”

Any who were able fell to the ground to protect themselves. Even so, as the gigantic pressure shockwave came rushing in, dragging debris from across the city with it, men and things were briefly hurled into the air and blown closer into the centre of the square.

The implosion was centred on Zetic. When it at last it hit him, however, he was neither bowled over by the force nor crushed under the weight. The spiral filament disappeared. He arched his head back, and suddenly opened his eyes wide.

Not gold, but *white* they glowed, and with an incredible brilliance. He breathed out a word, jaw hanging in a gasp.

“el-e-ment!”

With that final statement said, the flame of the sword went out with a *pop* and the singing abruptly stopped. The sword fell from Zetic’s hands, clattering noisily as it struck the brick surface.

In a punch-drunk stupor, he gurgled and flinched as though struck by a heavy blow. His eyes wavered shut and he passed out, falling over.

Zetic's head struck hard against the side of the plaza's fountain, completely breaking the sidewall and causing water to spill over him and onto the forum's brickwork ground.

Isacharact rushed forward to him, heedless of The Simbul's warnings...

On the tip of the sword still lying on the ground, the eye blinked.

No longer a part of the blade, the design faded and disappeared.

TO BE CONCLUDED
IN
“AŌ, AND BEYOND THE FIFTH”