

Chronicles of the Mandrake

By Tim "HeXetic" Gokcen

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Set in the fictional "Forgotten Realms" world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Nicholas Jade

Adult Human Male

Fighter

Ravel Ironhand

Adult Human Female

Paladin and Knight of the Purple Dragons of Cormyr

Methalar Starfire

Adult Elf Male

Ranger, Sorcerer, and Arcane Archer

Shi'lk

Elder Adult Human Male

Monk

Khara Delvar

Mature Adult Human Female

Wizard

Jeck Imfar

Young Adult Gnome Female

Sorceress and Rogue

Zetic of Waterdeep

Mature Adult Human Male

Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Cheldar Swight

Mature Adult Human Male

Transmuter and Red Wizard of Thay

Captain Montague

Mature Adult Human Male

Fighter and Red Wizard of Thay

Isacharact

Mature Adult Female White Dragon

In the Halls of the Zulkir-King

“You know, I really don’t know what, exactly, I’m hacking away at over here.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Well, yes. Ordinarily, I like to have some idea of exactly what horrible evil abomination I’m chopping up.”

“What’s the difference? You carve them up either way. Does it change anything?”

“It doesn’t *change* anything; it’s just the atmosphere, the sense of awareness. Give me a room with a bunch of evil Ogres and I can go, ‘OK, this is a room with a bunch of evil Ogres, I can handle this’. But I’m all confused here. Who knows what we’re fighting? Take this thing for example.”

Nicholas’s axe cleaved straight through a shambling, wobbling, pile of flesh, cutting it in half.

“That could have been an Orc, or maybe a devil from the Abyss, or maybe the Dark Elf Goddess Lolth herself for all I know.”

“Well, you can’t very well expect to walk into the castle of Cheldar Swight, the heir-apparent to Druxus Rhym, Zulkir of Transmutation, without expecting to see some weird things. Figure that he’s basically practising transmuting stuff all day, so obviously there are going to be a bunch of half-finished experiments running around.”

An arrow slammed into a creature in front of them. To their rear, a new voice spoke up.

“Excuse me, *ladies*, but would you care for some tea with your gossip?”

Nicholas didn’t even flinch from his axe-work.

“That’d be lovely, Methalar. Four sugars, if you please.”

A fourth voice on the side piped in.

“You’re disgusting, Nicholas. You know I think tea should always be plain, but *four* sugars? You might as well just eat the sugar plain for all tea you’ll taste.”

“Speaking of taste, Shi’lk...”

Ravel plunged her sword into the mouth of a nearby quivering blob.

“...Taste cold steel, creature of evil! Hah!”

His foe vanquished, Nicholas put down his axe and turned towards her, scale hauberk glistening with the blood of the aberrations they had faced.

“By all that is good and holy... I thought they taught leadership in the Purple Dragons, not how to spout the worst battle-cries in the world.”

Methalar spoke again from the rear.

“Instead of critiquing Ravel’s training, perhaps you’d care to give us a hand back here.”

Nicholas and Ravel both turned, and saw their two companions beset by a pack of flying imps.

“Ah, now *those* things, I can understand. Let me through.”

A few slices of the sword, blows of the axe, slashes of the dagger, and smacks of the fist later, they stood amongst the pile of corpses, looking into the room before them. Methalar nonchalantly brushed some goo off his green cape, while Nicholas used a nearby drape to wipe down his armour.

“Damned if I’m going in there first. Where the devil are Jeck and the rest? This place isn’t heavily trapped, but who knows what ridiculous thing I could be turned into if one of those tiles is inscribed with a rune.”

“You know that they’re checking out that strange experiment room. Settle down, no need to hurry. There hasn’t been the faintest hint of a counter-attack. I think we’ve caught this castle without its king.”

“Maybe, but I just don’t like being split up. It’s isn’t safe.”

On cue, the three other members of the party hurried in. They were all breathing heavily.

The cleric, wearing heavy chain armour and a solid steel cap, his two-handed sword held in one hand, slammed and barred the door shut behind them.

“It’s about to get a whole lot less safe. Jeck decided that it would be fun to play with some of the levers in that laboratory room...”

“What can I say, Zetic? I like to push the shiny buttons.”

She turned her head, revealing her grinning face under the large purple cloak.

“...And now there are a whole bunch of very weird-looking things running around. But, luckily, they seem just as interested in munching on each other and on the other critters in this place as they do on us.”

Ravel appeared exasperated, her bright plate clinking as she hunched over.

“So, what do we do now?”

The wizard, Khara, finally caught her breath. Raven hair flowed over her ornate, but trim, mage robes.

“Now, we get off this floor and head to Swight’s upper chambers as quickly as possible. If he’s here, that’s where he’ll be. If he’s on his way here, that’s where he’ll arrive. And on the off chance that he’s neither here, nor coming here, that’s where we’ll find all the important stuff that we should grab before we leave.”

Nicholas hefted his axe up on his shoulder and gestured into the room as he spoke.

“No problem. The main staircase is right over there. Jeck, my dear, if you wouldn’t mind checking it out...?”

She mockingly pursed her lips at him.

“Oh, anything for you, Nicholas. Wouldn’t want you to walk into the room and slip on the rind of a fruit.”

“Oh, for Lathlander’s sake... I was *drunk* that day, all right?”

Ravel butted in.

“Give it a rest, Jeck. We’ve got work to do here.”

“I know, I know. Aw, I’m only teasing. Have a little fun while we walk in the halls of this Zulkir wanna-be.”

She pulled out a metal probe and a magnifying glass, and set about slowly walking across to the staircase, checking for traps. It didn’t seem to require much of her attention.

“But why are we here, anyways? I wasn’t there when we got signed up for this little expedition”

Shi’lk, who had been standing silent in his simple tunic, his dark skin leaning up against the wall, answered her plainly.

“We are here to destroy Cheldar Swight and his evil creations.”

Jeck snorted.

“I’m not blind, Shi’lk. Err, no offence, of course. I know very well that Swight is evil and worthy of being defeated, yadda yadda. But why are we *here* instead of anywhere else? There’s plenty of evil in Thay; why have we chosen this particular target to strike at?”

Khara answered her.

“Because Cheldar Swight covets the post of the Zulkir of Transmutation from his master, Druxus Rhym. And though Druxus is just as evil, *he* wishes to dominate by trade whereas Swight wishes to dominate by war.”

Ravel stared into the ceiling.

“The same evilness, and yet worlds apart. Whatever the affects of Thay’s forceful trade, they are nothing compared to how a war would hurt the people of the land.”

Methalar spoke up as he glanced around the room, bow still held ready.

“And the land itself. But here we are to stop the potential outbreak, fighting Swight, with Druxus’ blessing... Very intriguing.”

Zetic grunted in affirmation.

“Yes, but hardly surprising. The Red Wizards believe that it is precisely such internal fighting that helps them be strong – the culling of the weak, and so on. It works to our advantage. No-one who supports Szass Tam or Druxus Rhym’s schemes of trade will send aid to Swight, and those Zulkirs who support war are even less likely to waste their own power by coming to his rescue, even to put him in their debt. 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.”

Khara replaced the book she had been examining on a nearby bookshelf, and turned around to interject.

“There’s more to it than simple politics, though...”

Zetic interrupted before she could continue, speaking quickly.

“I didn’t mean to say that there was. But, I assumed you’d all had well enough of me proselytizing about doing this quest in Torm’s name, a noble and just cause, blah blah blah, ordained by the heavens, et cetera, et cetera.”

He arched his eyes and grinned.

“If you haven’t heard enough, though...”

The group chuckled at their cleric’s self-referential joke. Shi’lk wore a grin on his mouth beneath the bandanna that covered his unseeing eyes, and even the usually stern Khara let out a chuckle.

“Yes, Zetic, but there are also... rumours... that Swight is researching something very powerful, and very horrible. Some kind of twisted arcane magic; a new kind of transmutation, perhaps...”

As the group paused, considering what that magic might be, Jeck noisily stood up at the foot of the stairs, put away her tools, and turned back.

“It’s clean; there’s nothing here. And those stairs are constructed in such a way that they couldn’t possibly be trapped without being set off by everyone who walked by. I don’t think this Swight character cares much for traps. I haven’t found a single one since we got here.”

Nicholas took his axe in hand again.

“Let’s move on, then. No traps, eh? Well, not those of mechanical and magical means, anyways. Okay, Ravel and I will take the point. Meth, back us up, and try not to poke me in the neck with your arrowheads while we walk. You and Khara in the middle, and Zetic and Shi’lk form up the rear. Up we go!”

The small group assembled and proceeded up the stairs. Behind them, the sounds and screams of battle echoed in the distance. No doubt the castle’s guards were being occupied by the unleashed abominations, instead of the adventurers who let them loose.

Up one flight, then two, then three, until they arrived at fifth and top floor, which was most likely to hold the transmuter’s personal chambers. Nicholas looked around the corridor.

“That big door has *got* to be it. Stay sharp, everyone. Khara, care to knock it down for us?”

The fighters moved to form a line in front of the door as Khara, standing in the middle of them, held out her arms and began to wave at the door.

“Not a problem. Fire in the hole!”

A few spoken words, a gesture in the air, a flick of the wrist and – BANG! The door crashed in, splinters flying everywhere. Inside, Orcs, golems, and mutant creatures turned to face them.

A nasal voice cackled loudly from the back of the room.

“GET THEM!”

Methalar let loose an arrow at the source of the cry, but a **chink** sound let him know he had missed his mark, and the arrow ricocheted uselessly against the stone wall. Nicholas and Ravel surged forward, axe and sword drawn. Shi’lk jumped clear over their heads and into the thick of the battle.

The three spell-casters in the rear had already begun weaving their spells – Zetic with protection spells for the fighters at the front, Khara with another blast of energy, and Jeck with a spell to contain some of the crowd.

Battle raged for several minutes, spells flying at the horde of monsters who were pushing hard against the fighters, but nonetheless being beaten back. The fight slowly began to sway in favour of the party of heroes, especially once a sweeping blow from Nicholas’ axe caught two of the gibbering mutants, destroying them both. He turned his attentions to the Orcs, which Ravel had already engaged.

The two golems, meanwhile, were being handily occupied by Shi’lk, who seemed to have no trouble dodging their clumsy blows as he struck his powerful fists solidly against their stone and iron sides, creating deep dents in the metal and breaking off huge chunks of the stone.

The wizard at the back of the room showed his face to try to cast a spell, but another of Methalar’s arrows sent his way made him jump out of sight again. The ranger grinned as he knocked another one, burying it in the neck of an Orc who had broken through the line.

The battle was going well for the party.

'Was' being the key word, for suddenly a number of cries erupted from behind, and a horde of Orcish soldiers poured up the stairs, heading straight for the spell-casters still standing outside the doorway. Zetic unsheathed his sword and forgot about casting his spell as he rushed to the stairwell to hold them back. Jeck about-faced and began flinging spells at the Orcish foes.

Methalar turned around, too, to face the new threat.

Unwise... For now the enemy wizard showed himself and was unchallenged as he weaved a potent spell of destruction. He spoke strange and powerful words, red cloak billowing with power, until, surging with energy, he pointed a finger at Nicholas.

Nicholas dropped his axe, clutching his throat, barely able to gurgle out a scream as his skin bubbled and boiled, unable to resist the wizard's transmutation attack. As he stood, helplessly changing into some new, hideous, form, the Orcs continued to hack away at him, until he fell dead, still only half-changed by the magic.

Ravel cried out, her face gleaming, her hair billowing under the solid helmet, and pressed more heavily against the Orcs.

"For Nicholas!"

Khara's eyes glowed with energy and she turned towards the wizard, flinging a gigantic blast of fire his way. The fireball hit him head-on, and for a moment he seemed to be consumed by the flames.

But he had simply shrugged off the attack, and was still standing there, grinning. With a malicious laugh, he pointed his palm at Khara, and lightning surged forth, electrocuting her. The bolts jumped from her to Ravel, and from Ravel to Jeck, and from Jeck to Methalas, and from Methalas to Zetic, until all save Shi'lk cried out in pain.

And so Shi'lk, realising the danger that the wizard presented, leaped out of his battle with the golems, landing straight in front of the enemy spell-caster, and landed a solid blow to that one's head, sending him sprawling.

But Shi'lk had no time to celebrate, nor time to strike again, for he was hit himself from behind by one of the golems that he had been fighting. He turned again to face the golem, but every blow he landed gave the wizard more time to recover, until at last the wizard stood up again, spoke words of magic, and grasped Shi'lk by the arm.

Shi'lk gasped for air as the wizard's spell turned his body to stone. He stood there briefly, as a statue frozen in pain, until a heavy blow from the golem shattered him to pieces.

The wizard chuckled evilly, and turned to face the rest of the party.

"Kill them! Kill them all!"

Methalas turned around and quickly shot another arrow into the room, striking the wizard solidly in the arm. With a cry the robed figure toppled over, grasping his wound.

It was then Ravel's turn to cry out, however, for she was completely surrounded by the Orcs and the golems. Blow after blow from them landed on her shining armour, her purple garb becoming ripped, torn, and covered in her own blood. One of the Orcs landed a heavy mace-blow to her head, and she fell sideways to the ground, unconscious. Another one walked up, sword in hand, and delivered the *coup de grâce* as he jammed it into her back.

The golems advanced on Khara, who stood petrified before their charge. Methalas, seeing her plight, dropped his bow, pulled out his short sword, and lunged at the enemies in front of her. But one of the golems casually lifted him up in its great arms, and squeezed him in an unyielding bear hug.

As the Orcs struck Khara, the golem crushed the breath out of Methalas, and they were both dead.

Zetic and Jeck, still occupying the Orcs at the stairwell, were all that was left alive of the once-proud and victorious party.

Jeck glanced behind her, and saw the Orcs and golems advancing on them.

“We're *screwed*, Zetic! Hold on, I'll get us out of here!”

She began to weave a spell of teleportation, but in the corner of her eye she saw the evil wizard standing in the doorway, arm bleeding, hand clutching a wand. As she formed the translucent bubble, he pointed the wand straight at her.

Just as her spell finished and she reached for Zetic to take him with her, the wand's power flew at her, corrupting her spell, and cursing the bubble, and she screamed a last scream as the spell failed spectacularly, scattering pieces of her body across the planes.

In the thick of the Orcish horde, Zetic was still standing, chopping away with his greatsword, calling on the might of Torm. His God's strength flowed through his veins, making him larger-than-life, and stronger-than-life. He dropped one orc, and then another, but the golems were upon him, and his sword rang hollow against their hard bodies.

The wizard looked on with a scowl.

“Kill him!”

But as Zetic managed to stay alive ever and ever longer, the wizard's face turned to amusement. The great cleric at last landed a solid chop, and one golem, the one made of stone, crumbled to dust.

The wizard muttered to himself.

“He is very sturdy... he might be... useful... Yes, for one of my experiments, perhaps.”

Chuckling briefly, he barked a command to his forces.

“I want him taken alive!”

And they did just that, for while the iron golem pummelled Zetic’s chest, two of the Orcs behind him knocked him on the head with the butts of their weapons.

Time seemed to slow down for Zetic, the world became fuzzy, and he crumpled to the floor, half-conscious. The Orcs and the remaining golem stood over him.

“Bandage his wounds, and take him to the alchemy laboratory. I want him chained up on the...”

Zetic lost all consciousness, and heard the wizard’s words no more.

He awoke to a bright light shining in his face. Eyes steady, he watched it float around in front of his face – or was it simply his own eyes that were unstable, while the light was anchored? The confusion of senses made him dizzy, and he groaned.

“My, my. Awake already. You recover quickly. Very impressive.”

The nasal voice came from beside him. Zetic tried to turn towards it but found his head was braced securely. He struggled to move the rest of his body, but his arms, hands, legs, feet, and torso were all snugly locked down by bands of some kind.

His sight returned, and he saw that he was strapped to a table, upright, but tilted slightly back. He was in a laboratory, with bubbling vessels of liquid all around, and two of the large Thayan-bred Orcs standing guard at the far wall.

He moaned in pain as his senses returned, for the bonds were tight around him, and they dug into his flesh. Grunting, he struggled against them, hoping at the very least to loosen them and bring himself some relief.

“Oh, tut-tut, my fair cleric. You must learn to relax, to calm down. No force of your will can free you from those bonds. Nor the force of your lord Torm, for I have already sapped his strength from you.”

Zetic heard his words and knew he spoke the truth, for there was a certain emptiness inside of him... a hole in his soul which the divine splendour of Torm normally filled. But it would be filled again tomorrow, after the morning prayer.

The wizard Cheldar Swight at last stepped into view, standing in front of Zetic. Dark red robes covered his body, and a wicked grin was on his face. Pale of skin, his head was bald, and tattooed in the Thayan style. His small eyes were bright yellow, and his lips were violet – likely from the potions he constantly brewed and experimented with.

“What... what do you want with me, Swight?”

“Oh, I *want* many things with you.”

He ran his eyes up and down Zetic as he said this.

“But you are chained to that table because I have decided to do *one* thing with you.”

“You won’t get anything out of me by torture, fiend!”

The wizard’s eyes arched lecherously.

“Oh my, aren’t we the feisty one! And who said anything about torture?”

He laughed menacingly, turned around, and busied himself at the table.

“No, no torture today. In truth, you know little of value to me. Instead, I have decided to test something of mine on you, *valiant* cleric. For you are very hardy, very... resilient. And this particular thing that I wish to test requires a subject with much fortitude, as you seem to have.”

He turned back to Zetic, a glass potion-bottle in his hand. Green liquid bubbled inside it, and smoke poured out. He pursed his lips as he spoke, an expression of false concern on his face.

“Sadly, you are most unlikely to survive the test. But, take heart! The few others on which I have experimented died within days. I have much higher hopes for you.”

Zetic’s eyes flashed white as he stared at the bubbling, foul-looking, concoction.

“What is that potion, wizard?”

Swight’s eyes brightened, and he smiled eerily.

“Oh, I cannot *tell* you, my poor little man! Why, that would spoil half the fun!”

He approached, and looked deeply at Zetic’s face, then spoke excitedly, grinning.

“But, I suppose... I suppose I could give you a hint. It’s a transformation potion, cleric. And I am most interested in perfecting it. I believe I have it completed, but I need to be sure of its effects, first.”

He moved his face closer, so that Zetic could feel his breath.

“Today, my fine... specimen... of a man, you will drink some of it – but not the real potion, mind you! A modified version that will take the transformation only so far.”

“So, you intend to drink the final brew yourself?”

Swight arched his eyebrows and pulled his head back.

“My, my! Hardy, strong *and* smart! It is almost a shame that I decided to use you in this way, considering the other... possibilities. But my mind is made up.”

He pulled out a metal funnel from underneath the table.

“And now, my good cleric, it is time for you to take your medicine.”

Swight moved to put the funnel down Zetic’s throat.

“Now, don’t struggle. And don’t think of spitting it out either, for the funnel will reach deep, well beyond your throat muscles. Take comfort, though... at least this way, you won’t have to taste it!”

The wizard went into a giggling fit, and Zetic gagged, eyes clenched, as Swight forced the funnel down his neck.

“Now, now, if you keep up that gagging, how do you ever expect me to give you the medicine so that you can feel better?”

Zetic tried to stay steady; there was no way out of drinking the potion, and he would rather get it over with quickly. Swight still babbled away in his nasal voice.

“Ready? No? Too bad!! Bottoms up, my friend!”

At this, the wizard cackled and upended the whole bottle into the funnel, pouring it straight into Zetic’s stomach. Zetic’s eyes bulged open as the sickly liquid went down.

With the bottle emptied, Swight quickly pulled out the funnel and cast a spell on Zetic’s mouth, shutting it magically.

He patted Zetic’s cheek.

“Oh, I’m so proud of you! You drank the whole thing! What a good boy!”

Zetic began to struggle against his bonds again, and cried out, though with his lips sealed, it was only a muted hum.

Swight kept his hand on Zetic’s cheek.

“Ooh, such spirit... and such soft, soft, skin. Oh, wicked cleric of Torm, you make me regret this experiment! I see now that I might’ve derived so much more... pleasure... from keeping you around my chambers, instead.”

Zetic screamed with anger behind his closed mouth, eyes staring coldly at Swight’s grinning face.

Swight turned to the Orcs at the far wall.

“You two, over there! Take this one and throw him into the experiment pit!”

He faced Zetic again.

“But, gently, mind you... I couldn’t bear to see him bruised... he’s too cute.”

The evil wizard waved his hands, casting a spell of drowsiness on Zetic, so that he would give the Orcs no trouble on his way to the dungeon.

“One more thing before you go off to sleep, pretty little one... don’t bother trying to recharge your clerical abilities during your pleasant stay in my dungeon. On the off chance that you somehow... *divine*... when it is time for your morning prayer to Torm, I’ll be watching, ready to put you to sleep before you can finish and claim the powers he normally grants you.”

Zetic felt the Orcs removing his bonds, but he was too weak to do anything besides moan, groggy as if drunk. Inside, he struggled to keep his eyes open, and to stay awake.

The bonds were released, and the Orcs took him by the arms, dragging him off behind them, his head facing back into the laboratory room.

Swight looked at Zetic, smiled, and licked his lips.

At the sight of the wicked, lecherous, and completely insane wizard, and with his horrific brew bubbling inside him, Zetic felt like he was going to throw up, though with his mouth still magically sealed the vomit would, of course, have had nowhere to go.

Through the hallways, the Orcs dragged him, until they went through a door, and stopped in front of what looked like a water well. One of them stepped up and removed the wooden well-cover.

“All right, in you go, my good fellow. Try not to hit your head on the way down!”

Laughing heartily, they heaved Zetic up onto the well railing, and pushed him over.

Down he tumbled, briefly scraping the wall.

Down, and down, twisting in the air, feeling it rush by.

Down, and down, and down – screaming underneath his mute face.

Down, and down, and down, and down, until...

Crack.

With a sickly crunching sound, he crumpled to the floor of the dungeon far below, and passed out.

“Bottoms up, my friend!”

Zetic lay on the cold floor, and dreamed...

Dreamed of the churches at which he had lived, and studied, and trained. Marvellous cathedrals of light built to honour Torm, where he learned to sing His glory. Rugged camps where he learned swordplay. Humble temples, where he practised His compassion for the weak.

Memories of his parents, of his childhood. Of watching the realm's good soldiers march resolutely by, but seeing poor children starving in their shadow. Of seeing wicked men in high places of power, and good men in places of weakness. Of feeling powerless at the hands of unjust laws, yet empowered all the same by just ones.

Strength, resolve, virtue, compassion... the mantra of Torm went by in his head.

More memories. Of seeing the evil of the world, and taking comfort not in the laws, nor in the wilds, but only in the matching goodness of the world. For there *was* goodness in the world around him; he had always seen it, and he had always strived to match it.

He dreamed on, of simple goodness to simple folk. Of valorous combat with mighty evils.

Of foes made friends when confronted with his light. And of friends turned foes, corrupted by the darkness of others, or the darkness of the world itself.

Of his current companions who were his friends, though he had met them only a few short months ago...

Ahh, what strange tale would Shi'lk tell by the camp-fire tonight, seeing the world through his blind eyes? And what ferocious battle would Nicholas recount, telling of the time he beat ten – no, twenty! – trolls with his bare hands? Or Zetic's own stories, strange-but-true urban tales from his days serving in the city guard? Or Ravel, speaking of the court intrigues of her past, as the daughter of a noble family of Cormyr? Or Methalas, singing elvish songs of the beautiful trees of Evermeet? Or Jeck, telling of the time when she stole such-and-such shiny bauble from some haughty merchant?

But they would tell no stories tonight.

Tonight, it would be lonely around the camp-fire. Lonely, and cold.

And dark. He never remembered it being so dark outside before. Where is the moon, where are the stars? Why is it so dark?

Zetic awoke in the dungeon, and stared into the darkness, thinking himself still asleep.

Say something. You can't really speak in your dreams, can you?

“Hello?”

His words echoed back. There are no echoes in dreams, are there? Then this is no dream.

And, suddenly, it all came back to him. The castle of Cheldar Swight, the battle, the failure, and the potion.

The potion... Oh, the potion! He groped at his neck, and tried to vomit whatever undigested potion was left, in order to stave off its effects. But nothing came out; the evil wizard had planned well, and the potion had been fully swallowed.

Zetic sat up, relieved to find none of his bones had been broken after the long fall. On the cold dungeon floor, he huddled himself for warmth, and tried to look around. But there was nothing – truly, as dark a cavern as he could imagine.

“Well, my friend, Jeck was quite right. You are well and truly *screwed*. Too bad, Zetic. It was nice knowing you.”

He laughed to himself.

“Enough of that pessimism, though! Let’s see what we can do to get out of here!”

He managed to stand up, despite his aches.

“I believe I’ll keep talking to you, my friend, if you don’t mind the chatter. It’ll keep us both sane.”

He probed the damp ground – it was made up of cobblestone rocks. He picked a direction and walked off with hands outstretched, looking for the walls of his prison. He found one, fifty or sixty paces away. It was made up of larger stone blocks.

Zetic removed his shirt and placed it at the foot of the wall – a marker, of sorts, and moved along, following the wall in the darkness. But even after circling the angular room several times, always returning to his shirt, he could find nothing of interest.

“Nothing much to do then but pray, I guess. Luckily, it’s a specialty of mine.”

So, pray he did. Backing off from the wall a little bit, he kneeled and began to recite the epic ballad of Torm, the sacred and holy story of one man’s noble service as a knight that, in the end, led him to divinity.

Hours passed. The ballad, in full, takes three days to recite, but Zetic did not know all the verses exactly, so he could not use the ballad to judge time the time.

In any case, he never got through the telling the story even once. For as he reached the part in the tale when Torm confronted his king’s traitorous brother duke, he was interrupted.

By pain.

He choked out one last verse, and then the burning pain in his chest became overpowering, and he fell over, curling up into a ball.

Screaming in agony, he passed out.

Minutes – or perhaps hours? – later, he awoke again, breathing heavily, head lying against the cold floor.

“Oh, my Lord Torm. What penance you give me to suffer in Thy name. But I bear it willingly. Humbly accept my soul into Your light, and illumine-”

The pain returned again, sharp and stabbing, before he could finish even that simple prayer. His arms flailed outwards spastically; the pain rose quicker than before, knocking him unconscious before a scream could escape his lips.

He awoke again. It was hours later – he was certain of it.

“What crushing, consuming pain... is the worst over, I hope?”

A piercing feeling in his stomach told him it was not. A gurgle escaped his mouth, his legs flailed briefly, and he passed out once more.

Over and over, the cycle repeated itself. He would awake, only to experience the intense pain again, knocking him unconscious again.

Days must surely have passed, and he became more miserable. What was the point of waking up, if the only reward was a few moments of time alone in the cold before the excruciating pain returned?

He learned to fear those moments of consciousness.

But one day, Zetic awoke again and prepared himself for the pain that was soon to come. He balled himself up – he still seemed to have all his human parts; was the wretched wizard’s potion a failure? – and gritted his teeth in anticipation as he mumbled out whatever prayer to Torm that he could manage.

He recited the prayer over and over again, but the the pain did not come. He remained prepared, ready, huddled, anxious.

Still the pain did not come. He opened his eyes, though he could not see anything in the darkness.

Still the pain did not come. At last, he relaxed his arms, no longer pressing his knees up against his chest.

Still the pain did not come, and he felt safe again. Perhaps the pain was gone.

He got on his knees again, and resumed his prayer to Torm. The ballad, he began again, for in the confusion of the days before, he had quite understandably forgotten his place.

The pain was not gone, however... not completely. Instead of the sharp pangs that had knocked him out before, now it was creeping, like a poison in his blood. It slowly weakened him, jarring him so that he could not recite the poem, and instead recited prayers to Torm.

The pain continued to grow, and his prayers became more desperate. Impassioned, he cried out to his God.

“My lord Torm! Help Your faithful servant! The pain, the pain... I cannot bear this suffering! Deliver me into the caring bosom of Your heart! I beg of You!”

But his God did not answer. He continued to call, over and over again, in the darkness, until his voice became hoarse.

No answer came. And the pain grew within him.

“To Illmater I call, then! God of suffering, help me bear this torment! As You are an ally of Torm, lend this faithful servant of Your friend Your strength, and relieve my anguish!”

But Illmater answered not, and the pain increased. He fell over on his side, huddled. The pain became overpowering so that he could not move, but it was still not enough to send him into shock as before.

“Tyr! Courageous defender of the weak! Though I have been strong in life, I need Your assistance now! I am weak and powerless before this infernal potion’s sting. Come, riding in Your chariot of gold and silver! Come, rescue me from this pit of hell!”

Tyr did not come.

None of the three Gods of the Triad – Torm, Tyr, Illmater – answered his call. He appealed to the other good Gods.

“To Lathlander, Light-Bringer, I call! Shed Your light in this wretched hole, that I might rejoice in its warming rays! To Helm, Lawmaker, I call! Visit upon the wicked Swight Your holy vengeance, and release me from this unfair imprisonment!”

Neither God answered his call. The pain increased, but he remained awake in spite of it. His eyes dripping with tears, voice more a wail than speech, he appealed to the gods of nature.

“To Chauntea, then! Great Mother of the Earth, send forth a flower, and let me smell its perfume, that it may comfort me in sorrow! To Mielikki, Lady of the Forest! Send to me one of Your beautiful creatures, to be my companion in this dark hole! To Selûne, lady of the stars! Let me gaze upon Your beautiful heavens once more, that their wondrous light may give me hope!”

He called and called and called into the darkness, but no answer came. So he wept loudly on the floor, curled up, with knees pressed against his chest.

And the pain remained.

He named all the Gods of knowledge and beauty and goodness that he could think of. Gods of Dwarves, of Elves, of Gnomes and Halflings, of Orcs and Dragons, and even the strange Gods of the people of Mulhorand.

None answered his call. The pain continued.

“Is it my fate, then, to be abandoned by the Gods of love, of goodness, of justice?”

He waited a long time in the pit, but no answer came to him from the darkness; he had only the pain inside of him to keep him company.

“So. Alone am I; separated from the Gods of compassion. Then I call upon their counterparts – Gods of hatred, of tyranny, of death.”

The pain continued still, sending shudders and convulsions through his body.

“Kelemvor, God of the Dead! Take me into Your grey lands! I do not wish to suffer this miserable existence! Judge my soul now, and take it to its resting place!”

But Kelemvor did not come for him. And the pain remained.

“Bane, Master Tyrant! As Torm’s servant, I defied Your rule! Send to me the death that I richly deserve! Pour out Your wrath on my body, and make it a corpse, to honour Your glory!”

Bane’s wrath came not. Zetic swallowed deeply, cheeks drying in the cool dungeon air, his tear-ducts emptied. The pain held him still.

“Cyric, Black Sun! I brought Your murderers to justice in Torm’s name! Visit upon me the butchers that you command! Let them flay me here; I will find joy in their deadly blows!”

But no assassin of Cyric came at him from the shadows. The pain persisted, and Zetic became faint.

“Shar, Mistress of the Night! I illuminated the world in Torm’s name, but now I lie here in the shadows of this dungeon, in a cloak of blackness. I am in Your power in this domain; snuff out my existence so that I will know this pain no more!”

The shadows remained oppressive, but Shar did not make them strike out at him. He rocked back and forth on the ground, trying to forget the pain that bit at his chest like a hungry serpent. But the pain was still there, so he cried out again.

“Aō! Aō! Aō! God of Gods! Your power is beyond all imagination! Make this end, in any way that You can!”

But all people know that Aō cares not for mortals, and does not hear their prayers. Aō made no exception today, and the air and the ground remained silent, both.

“Then I am truly abandoned by the Gods. *All* the Gods.”

In the cold pit, he called out the names of angels, demons, fiends, and devils, begging them to save him if they could or slay them if they could not.

But none of the denizens of the planes came to him, and he wept again, managing only barely to cry himself to sleep in spite of the pain.

Yet in this darkest hour, in this darkest pit, in the dark earth, with the dark pain gnawing at his insides, he remained faithful to Torm. Though he called upon other Gods, evil Gods, and loathsome fiends, it was only that they might grant him death; never did he offer to serve them as he served his Lord Torm.

And so, when he awoke, an uncountable amount of time later, with the pain still in his chest, and his shoulders, and his legs, he did the only thing that he could do. He prayed to his Lord Torm once again.

More time passed; impossible to tell how long. In time, the pain of transformation subsided, and he knew only the miseries of hunger, of thirst, and of fear. He was now slowly dying in the pit of darkness.

And yet... in that same darkness, Zetic's soft mumbling prayers were at last broken by other voices. Harsh, guttural; they echoed down from high above. Zetic turned to face their source, though he could see nothing.

“Waste of good dog meat.”

“I didn't know you had a taste for canines. And anyways, it's all old and stringy. Only thing it's good for would be dog stew, and Durkal couldn't make a stew fit to wash Gruumsh One-Eye's feet in.”

Zetic choked out a pained chuckle to himself. Even after all he'd been through... he still found harsh Orc humour funny. It was comforting to know that in his mind he was still Zetic of Waterdeep, jovial hierophant of Torm, and not filled with the twisted thoughts of some horrible abomination.

“It's still a waste. The master's going to let him die anyways, why bother keeping him alive now that the transformation's almost done?”

“Look at you, talking as if you're Druxus Rhym, the Zulkir of transmutation himself. *Obviously*, the master wants to see the transformation complete entirely, and he can't do that if the poor idiot down there dies of starvation.”

“Still a waste. We should be feeding him the rats which the kitchen seems to have in abundance, not this prime dog meat.”

“Didn’t I already explain to you that it’s not the least bit ‘prime’? Look, just shut up and give me a hand lifting it. This was no lap terrier.”

As they opened the trap door into Zetic’s prison-dungeon, a tiny sliver of light appeared at the top of the room. Barely 5 feet around, it still nearly blinded Zetic’s eyes that had seen naught but shadows for days on end.

“Halloa, down there! Got some dinner for you! Don’t worry, it’s nobody you knew!”

The throaty voices turned to laughs, and in the ray of light Zetic saw a lumpy carcass drop sickeningly down to the filthy floor. He woke his aching bones and tried to rush towards it, hungry to eat, yes, but also hungry to look at himself in the light.

It was not to be. The trap-door closed. The light disappeared. Zetic groped around, and eventually found the body of the ‘dog’ the Orcs had fed him... but, it couldn’t be a dog, could it? It was so small, and they had joked about it being large. He easily held it in one hand.

Or maybe... or maybe it was not the *dog* that was small, but *him* who was large. He spoke again to himself, to comfort his thoughts, and to ward off the terrifying silence of the room.

“Ohhh... What gigantic horror am I being changed into? Gods above and demons below; help me out of this – whether kept alive or mercifully made dead! I couldn’t bear to live on as some monstrous abomination!”

But still no-one, Gods or demons alike, heard his prayers. Or, if they did, they acted not upon them.

The ‘dog’ carcass was so small, that he simply swallowed it whole. Zetic found he had to arch his head back as he did so.

“Odd... I don’t remember having to do *that* as a human. Dogs arch their heads back when they eat... and the Orcs joked about it not being someone I knew. Am I being made into some gigantic dog, then? Some hound of hell?”

The meat was vile, but he barely noticed the taste. All his senses had become dull in the void of the prison. But still... for the first time since he felt those pains of the transformation... he examined himself, running his hands over his face, his neck, his torso, his feet.

He learned little.

“No beard... face, stretched out forward like the beak of a bird... no hair... skin’s tough, like a troll, not soft like a man.”

At the thought of his skin, the horrible Zulkir-in-waiting’s comment about him having ‘*such soft, soft skin*’ brought bile to his throat. He choked it back down.

“No sense in wasting the only food I’m likely to get, even if I *would* rather die.”

He resumed his examination, forcing the awful memory out of his head.

“Long talons for fingernails, and toenails too... toes spread out more, like that of a demon’s. And, yes... I hoped it wasn’t, but that *is* a tail tacked on at the end of me, and though it follows me around naturally, I have not the wits to move it about myself. Perhaps that will come to me in time... or perhaps that was what Swight decided to deny me – new limbs, but no ability to control them.”

At the thought of Swight again, his thoughts turned away from himself, and he lay down on his back.

“So... with this food, I shall live another day. Or perhaps another week. Or perhaps another month, though whether it has already been a month or not, I cannot say. I’ve prayed so hard since my imprisonment, prayed to be saved or destroyed, and not left to rot... Is this the first twinkle of deliverance? A gesture to keep my faith?”

Something clicked in his mind, and he turned around with a start and kneeled in prayer once again.

“My Lord Torm, thank you for this blessing of sustenance. I am Your faithful servant always, though I do not know your designs on me. Deliver me from this prison and into the dens of Your foes so that I may smite them in Thy name. Bless the souls of my fallen companions, and all those who suffer and need Your help in this hour. Amen.”

As he finished his prayer, somehow... somehow the cavern managed to appear less dark. Was it simply the energy from having eaten? Or perhaps his own eyes were changing, so that he would see things as a demon does and not as he did as a man.

Regardless of the cause, Zetic felt confident enough now to probe his prison once again. He moved up against the wall, which somehow felt closer than it had been before.

“Is it a trick on my mind? Do the walls move to confuse me? ... No, it must feel closer for the same reason that the dog carcass felt smaller. I have grown large.”

He crawled and tapped his way along the wall, following the roughly square shape of the room that was broken by angular outcroppings and nooks. Until, as he tapped his way along, he felt a *seam*.

“What’s this? A vertical line? And the wall here feels different... not made out of cobblestones, but a single large stone, a flat stone, a polished stone. Stone made to look and to feel *as if* it were merely a wall. But it is not. Aha! This must be a door.”

He groped around for the edges, gauging the door’s size. It was massive; five steps wide and higher than he could reach, even when he lifted himself – painfully – up on his legs instead of on all fours, as now felt natural. And nowhere did he feel a handle.

“I should not have expected this door to be openable from the inside of the prison. But... it is comforting to know that there is a door nonetheless. Will perhaps some rescuer, a fellow servant of Torm – though, in truth, I would settle for anyone – come to breach this massive gateway and grant me freedom?”

Zetic hoped so. But, as there was nothing left for him to do, and nothing left to eat, and in truth, nothing left at all but the darkness, he sat down in front of the door, and resumed his soft prayers to his God.

However solemn they were, there was something more optimistic in them, now. Such a small blessing as food and the possibility of escape, even in such a dire situation, was like manna from the Heavens, reassuring Zetic that someone, high up above, still watched for him.

Days passed... or were they mere hours? Or perhaps long weeks? Who knows, for time had little meaning in the absolute darkness. The only thing Zetic did know is that he was hungry again, but that meant little.

He passed the time with his faint prayers, hoping perhaps that his captors were no longer paying attention, that they would fail to put him to sleep when it was morning, that his prayers would be heard by Torm up above, and that he would be granted his Lord's divine strength again.

But none of those things for which he hoped happened.

Zetic slept, and in his dreams he saw the fires of the Nine Hells of Baator, filled with the souls of the wicked, twisting in pain, anchored to the ground, burning in the heat. Around them, hideous devils of all kinds were tormenting them, extracting sweet screams. And over on the horizon... a battlefield of the Blood War, with Devils of Hell and Demons of the Abyss slaughtering each other in incredible numbers.

His mind flew closer to the battlefield, and he heard the screams of the monsters and the cries from the human mercenaries. He heard the ringing of steel on plate, and tooth and claw on scale and flesh, and then heard so clearly a cry from one of the enlisted Blood War human captains.

“The castle is ours, but that Red Bastard isn't here!”

Another human spoke – another mercenary in the endless feud on the infernal planes?

“I think I know where he is. But let's search this place, first. We might find some traces of the experiments.”

Zetic thought that these were such strange things to say on the gigantic, bloody battlefield. A castle? A Red Bastard? Experiments?

He awoke with a start, sweating. The sounds of battle had quieted to a din, but he heard voices nearby.

“HELP! HELP! I’m here in the dungeon, locked away! Help me!”

He cried out with all his might, rushed to the door, and wailed on it with his fists until they became bruised and bloody.

“Help! Help! Can you hear me? I am captive here! Help! Save me!”

In the gaps between his cries and his pounding, he heard a hurried marching of feet. One voice spoke low, but Zetic could still hear it.

“There’s someone beyond this door, better get *her* over here to break it down.”

Footsteps ran off, and the voice changed to a yell.

“Halloa, in the dungeon! Who are you?”

“I am Zetic of Waterdeep! Please, help me! I have been imprisoned here by Swight!”

“What manner of creature are you, Zetic, to need be contained behind such a large door?”

“I know not! I was human when I came here, a valiant cleric of my Lord Torm, but the wicked Swight has changed me – into what, I cannot say, for I have been in the darkness for so long that I could not recognize even my own shadow, were there any light in here to see it by! Please, open the doors and set me free!”

“All right, cleric! We shall help you, but we are wary of tricks! Stand back from the portal, and lay on the ground, with your hands on your head! If we find you in any other position when we open the doors, we shall kill you outright!”

“I will do as you ask, master rescuer! And when I am free, I will gladly pledge allegiance to your cause!”

“We shall see about that, cleric. For now, hold fast!”

Zetic did as the voice commanded; his heart pounding so quickly that he felt his cheeks throb from the pulses. He muttered a short prayer to Torm, thanking Him for his deliverance. And, though he was still tired, and cold, and in pain, he cried for joy, for his rescue was at hand.

Outside, he heard the muttering voices of several men, with one rising over the others.

“All right, there’s someone claiming to be a cleric of Torm in there. Now, I’m inclined to believe him, which means we can trust him to not get rowdy with us, but let’s not be caught unawares. You and you, set yourselves up with bows, along the corridor. You, set up that heavy crossbow to point straight into the room. If anyone sees anything – and keep in mind that it may indeed be *anything* – that isn’t lying on the ground with its hands on its head, you shoot the bastard. I’m not taking any chances. The rest of you, swords drawn, and magic at the ready!”

Zetic heard heavy footsteps outside now, walking with a crashing gait. There was a booming voice to go with them.

“So, captain? You call on Isacharact’s strength again? Bah, I should perhaps have done this all myself and saved you the trouble of putting on your armour.”

“Perhaps, my lady, but if you devoured our target beyond our sight, then you could not have been paid.”

“Feh, it is hardly worth paying me for the work I have done so far, so trivial it has been. But there are none to crush here, so why do you need me?”

“To break down this door. There is someone on the other side who claims to be a prisoner, a cleric of Torm who has been changed by Swight into... whatever.”

The other let out a loud snarl, and Zetic’s heart turned cold.

“I am here to slay treacherous Thayans, not to be your battering ram!”

“You are here, and being paid, to come along and help. So, help you shall! Break down this door, Isacharact!”

Another roar. Zetic’s heart chilled further, though he still braced himself on the ground.

“*Very well*, Captain Montague!”

The voice crashed in the air.

“You there, behind the doors! Stay back from them, and stay low, for I come to break them down!”

Boom, boom, boom. Whatever Isacharact was, she was large, and heavy, and strong. Zetic felt the ground shake as she crashed herself into the door.

But even over the loud drumming of her blows, he heard other sounds. Crackling... creaking... groaning... And the sound of silt, and dust, and broken stone falling to the ground. Tiny slivers of light appeared in the cracks; barely enough to mark the outline of a heavy stone door.

A heavy stone door that was buckling.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

He had trouble believing it, but the thunder grew louder, and louder, and louder still, until at last he heard the creature Isacharact give out a blood-curdling roar that could only be that of a mighty dragon, and the door came crashing into the room in pieces, heavy blocks thundering to the ground, her body following it.

There was a brief pause as the dust settled, but Zetic felt a cool, fresh wind pour into the room. He opened his eyes, but the light hurt so much so that he fainted briefly, and was back in his dream-world of Baator.

It was the mercenary captain of the blood wars, on the battlefield of the Nine Hells who spoke.

“By all my heavenly stars! Traces of his experiments we have found indeed! Druxus was right to send us on this quest!”

No, no, not the Nine Hells, not the Blood War. That was his dream. It was his rescuer, the one named Captain Montague, who spoke. Zetic shook himself awake.

“Please, captain! I cannot see, for the light is too strong for my eyes! I beg of you, lend me yours, and tell me what I am!”

Zetic felt a frosty breath wash over him as the creature called Isacharact spoke.

“A dragon, you have been made, cleric of Torm. Though an ugly one, with the colour of man-flesh, and ill-formed scales. Bony and humped you are.”

The captain joined in, grim.

“Though perhaps that is from malnutrition rather than by design. Nonetheless, I have seen ancient undead draco-liches with more rotting flesh on their rotting bones than you have on yours.”

Zetic sobbed softly on the floor.

“Oh! A dragon, I have been made, and a horrid one at that? Well! Better than what other things I dreaded here in the darkness, I suppose. And... and, yes, a foolish mistake on the part of the Zulkir-to-be!”

He raised himself up, though still unable to see. The Captain’s voice became agitated.

“Careful, dragon-man! Make no sudden moves!”

“I will make only sudden moves against Swight, who will feel my wrath! He has turned me into a wretched creature, but he has left me alive, and left in me the light of my Lord Torm! Foolish of him, for I still have my power, and will see him tossed into the abyss for what he has done!”

Zetic raised himself high, now, on his hind feet. He suddenly he felt wings on his back unfold, though he did not know how he controlled them, nor even had he sensed their presence until now.

“Yes! I live still, my Lord Torm! Live on, to do Your will! In the name of Your righteous fury and holy vengeance I will defeat the wicked Red Wizard Cheldar Swight!”

Zetic suddenly felt weak from the exertion, and fell back on all fours, neck abased, wings unfolded and laying on the ground. He breathed heavily before speaking again – softly, this time.

“I heard you say you were here on the will of Druxus Rhym, Zulkir of Transmutation. Has the master decided to slay his apprentice, then?”

“Indeed he has, cleric of Torm; for Swight has grown too powerful, and as you yourself are proof of it, he seeks the secrets of dragon-kind, that he might make himself more powerful, and so overthrow his master. But he concealed his plans poorly, and his master has struck first.”

“We are of different faiths, you and I, Captain Montague of Druxus Rhym, but as you have rescued me, so shall I fight by your side, at the bidding of your master, at the very least until his apprentice Swight is no more!”

“You are welcome to come with us, cleric of Torm, though you will excuse us if we keep a wary eye on you.”

Zetic managed to cough out a laugh.

“I would have it no other way, my Captain. But, lo! My sight returns!”

Indeed, Zetic’s eyes began to function again. No longer blinded by the light, the blurry figures before him became clearer, and sharper, and more defined, until he discerned twenty men and women, armed with swords, and bows, and magic staves; clothed in red robes, and leather, and steel plate.

He turned to his right, curving his neck all the way around, and looked at his form. They had spoken the truth, for he was grey-skinned, ugly and wretched, bony as if from disease, though he was not sick. His body was thinly covered with skin rather than scales – a horrid appearance for a dragon. Thin wing-skin was stretched over weak wing-bone and wing-muscle, and a wispy, tattered, tail trailed behind him.

Turning back towards the company again, he summed up his size. His head was at the height of three men, and he was twice that in length. Huge and horrible, but... perhaps not *so* monstrous, in the end.

He closed his eyes as he thought of all the other things he might have been made to be, and was gracious for *this* form, for it was in one sense, beautiful, at least compared to the horrors his imagination had produced, in the darkness of the dungeon.

Feeling a sudden cold wind from the left, he turned, and gasped.

Before him sat Isacharact, a gargantuan white dragon, towering over him as he towered over the knights of Thay. She stared at him with cold eyes. He looked into them briefly, and then, startled, gasped again and recoiled in fear of them.

The face laughed menacingly.

“Hah! Bore my gaze longer than most, you did, in spite of your weakness. But none can bear it long before backing down in fear.”

“You are immense and powerful, dragon. Many men must you have terrorized with that stare.”

“Indeed, and many dragons, too! Shall I count you as one of both for my tally?”

The white face erupted into violent laughter, as the dragon turned and walked away.

“There is no more work for me here, Captain. I go to wait outside.”

“Yes, we are all done here, for we have the proof that we needed, and there is no doubt whatsoever in my mind of Lord Druxus’ orders. We shall make camp nearby for the evening, and then proceed in the morrow to Swight’s other fort.”

The entire group left the dungeon room and proceeded down the large stone-walled hallway. Isacharact bounded ahead – Zetic was surprised at how quickly she moved, given her size. He and the captain took the middle with a few of the knights, and the rest of the soldiers took the rear, partially watching with anxiety the tattered grey dragon that was Zetic, partially watching the dark corridors of the dungeon, watching out for more creatures of the kind that they had already turned into the corpses that were strewn about the place.

Suddenly, Zetic gripped his stomach and fell forward with a grunt.

“Oh! Hunger burns my body... I would not expect a feast upon rescue, but I hope you can spare me some of your food, Captain.”

As Zetic got up again and walked forward, more slowly, Captain Montague spoke without turning.

“We can, indeed. For my master has provisioned us well, knowing that we should enlist a dragon to help us. And a dragon with a great belly for food, at that. Another twenty men wait outside with a baggage train.”

“Had I the possessions I came here with, I would pay you handsomely for even the tiniest apple from that train.”

“No payment we can take from you, Cleric of Torm. You may eat your fill freely.”

Zetic turned towards him, his eyes narrowed.

“Such generosity is most unusual among Thayans, Captain. I bid you tell me what you ask in return. Once the morrow comes and the power of my lord Torm courses through me, I can bestow many blessings on your men.”

The armoured man strode onwards, confidently.

“Indeed you can; and in that expectation of future blessings, I allow you to take of our food. You will be of much help to us in the battles ahead, and on the march to Swight’s other stronghold. And, in truth, we have brought too much, and it slows us down. Eat what you will,

that it may speed us on our errand. I do my master's bidding willingly, but this is ugly work, and I prefer to crack the heads of the enemies of Thay rather than to deal with rebellion within."

"Thank you, Captain. As Torm is ever faithful to his companions, so too shall you find me a helpful ally."

"I have no doubt of it."

ZETIC WILL FACE SWIGHT AGAIN
IN
"THE TURNING OF THE WYRM"