

# **Chronicles of the Mandrake**

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

## *Dramatis Personae*

Zetic

Young Adult Male Gold Dragon  
Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact

Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Jonas Calabra

Mature Adult Male Tethyrian Human  
Wizard

Eanai

Mature Adult Female Human  
Wizard

Kurikear

Female Human

Vessnya

Ancient Female Red Dragon

Norjkimaxzol

Male Red Dragon

## *Lies and Retribution*

“Must we?”

The look of ennui on Isacharact’s face and the tired tone of her voice told Zetic far more than the mere words. Surprised by her unwillingness, Zetic looked down at the valley before them and tried to think of reasons.

“Well... Since we’re back on the mainland, and since it’s fair to say that we’re out looking for adventure—”

“The *rewards* of adventure.”

She smirked at him, and he grinned back.

“Of course... the rewards of adventure. Anyways, if we’re going to go adventuring, then I’d like to be prepared. As many spells I know, I still prefer to pick up a few potions, scrolls, and other useful knick-knacks before setting out. And there really isn’t anyplace better to get that sort of thing than at a good mage fair...”

They looked down the hillside; the valley below was covered with a translucent violet dome of magic that shimmered in the hot sun as it kept the area underneath at a much more comfortable temperature than the muggy summer day would otherwise have it be. The dome also served the twin purposes of announcing the existence of the mage’s fair and limiting the entryway to a single point on the south side, where guards admitted only those who could prove themselves capable in the arcane arts.

Zetic gestured down at the immense setup.

“... And this isn’t some backwater fair. I’ve never been to one of the Magister’s events, but I hear they’re supposed to be extraordinary.”

Isacharact seemed to be scanning the fair-grounds, searching the throngs of sorcerers and wizards.

“They are. I was at one a little under a century ago. That was with the previous Magister, of course.”

Zetic looked over at her, surprised.

“Really? You’ve already been to one of these? What for? And why so apprehensive about going to one now?”

“Last time, I wasn’t there to *browse*. I had a very particular something I wanted to acquire, and I was ready to go to any lengths to get it – even walk right into a crowded area full of dangerous people...”

She looked over at him.

“... Because it *is* dangerous in there. It doesn’t matter how well-policed they are, crowds are always dangerous, and crowds of wizards are even more so. You want to go and just casually browse around, and although I understand the intention, I’m not a fan of the idea. Especially not without a polymorph spell.”

Zetic grinned.

“I haven’t got any on me, sorry. You could pick one up inside.”

Isacharact seemed uninterested.

“I can do without, I suppose. If there’s anyone in there who wants me dead, they won’t have much trouble seeing through any disguise I could put on.”

“At least this fair’s been set up with size in mind – plenty of room between the stalls, big avenues to walk through... I can see a few dragons, giants, and other large creatures walking around in there already.”

“True. But was there anything in particular you wanted to get or do?”

Zetic pulled out a parchment advertising the fair from a bag under his cloak.

“Well... I was hoping to find a pair of bracers or gauntlets in my size with something useful on them... Bracers of Armour, maybe, I don’t know. These leather open-fingered gloves I have make it easier to hold my sword, but that’s about it. The schedule for today also lists a summoning exhibition at the amphitheatre; I gather a prominent conjuror is going to gate in a Balor and give a talk about how to defeat one of those beasts. Having never seen such a powerful demon before, I’d be interested in catching that.”

Isacharact sighed, still looking down at the fair.

“I’d prefer not to go, but I’ll indulge you on one condition.”

Zetic looked up at her, inquisitive.

“What is it?”

Isacharact looked at him from the corner of her eye.

“I’ve never seen what you looked like as a human.”

Zetic cocked his head.

“You want me to polymorph myself into a human shape again?”

She looked him square in the eyes.

“Not just any shape – exactly how you looked before Swight got his hands on you.”

Zetic paused to consider the idea for a moment.

“If you insist... I don’t know why, but it makes me feel uncomfortable to do so.”

Isacharact shot him a grin and began to walk down the hill towards the fair.

“That’s precisely the point – I don’t want to be the only one feeling uncomfortable walking around in there.”

“Are these one-size-fits-all?”

Zetic, as a human, was turning over the left hand of a huge pair of metal-plated leather gauntlets in his hands. Although *most* magic items were constructed and enchanted so that they could fit all wearers, Zetic found during his adventuring that gloves and bracers seemed to be the major exception. It had been extremely difficult to find any gloves that fit his huge, three-fingered, clawed hands – and completely impossible to find any of value. Clearly designed for giant hands, this particular pair looked as if they'd fit him now, but as for the future...

The shopkeeper, a short, bald old man, stepped out of the sunny boulevard and into the shade of his store's awning to get a better look at the product in question.

“Ah, those. Not quite – they'll grow to fit, but they can't get any smaller. They come from Calimshan; probably made for a Efreeti lord. I daresay they haven't been used in quite some time. In unusually good condition for a pair of their age – but really a collector's item, given their size.”

Zetic mused aloud, half to himself, half to the shopkeeper.

“An antique, in other words... I'd rather not pay antique prices for something I was planning to *use*.”

The bargaining session thus initiated, the old man took the other gauntlet and looked it over.

“Well... I bought these from a collector who was trying to make some more room in his mansion. I *do* like to see magic items being used and not simply put on display...”

The shopkeeper trailed off; the game continued, and it was Zetic's turn to praise the product while pointing out price-cutting flaws...

“I'm surprised no-one else has expressed interest in them. Quite a few larger creatures walking around here... You'd think someone else would be interested in a pair of *Gauntlets of Creeping Cold*. Probably to do with the fact that they're gloves that go so far up the arm – I've noticed a lot of wizards seem to prefer simply wearing bracelets.”

Indeed, as he said this a tall, dark-skinned sorcerer walked by wearing a gigantic pair of thick, heavy, golden bracelets. The shopkeeper didn't miss a beat.

“True, but a strong enchantment to dexterity and a healthy dose of cold resistance to boot is nothing to scoff at. How about we say twenty-five?”

“Still collector's prices, and I'm afraid I really don't see anyone clamouring to collect these. I'd say... fifteen.”

The shopkeeper feigned being insulted.

“Fifteen thousand! The price of something with half their power. I'll bring it down to twenty-two, reasonable for an item of this potency.”

Zetic held up the gauntlet whose metal forearm-plate was long as his arm and whose leather glove was almost big enough to serve as a helmet for a human.

“But not in this size, with these eccentricities. Seventeen.”

The shopkeeper betrayed an air of defeat, and Zetic knew that even seventeen thousand would represent a decent profit.

“Sir, allow me at least *some* profit... Nineteen.”

“Seventeen and a half. Final offer.”

The shopkeeper gave a hasty, reluctant nod and Zetic proceeded to count out the money. It was most of what he had left, but he gauged the gauntlets worth it. A dexterity boost would come in handy for keeping out of trouble, but more importantly the resistance to cold would offset his own newfound racial vulnerabilities. They looked quite impressive, too, with beautiful gold-painted engraving on the shiny steel forearm plates.

Zetic wrestled to fit the huge gauntlets through the opening of the magic bag tied round his waist, then bade the shopkeeper farewell as he headed out into the mage’s bazaar. Close to a hundred booths filled with magic of all sorts butted up against each other and crowded the fairgrounds. A few traders were standing in front of their booths advertising their wares personally, but the more cunning employed magic devices or unusual creatures to do so for them. Zetic almost had to duck as a disembodied skull went zipping by, loudly proclaiming the fantastic and wonderful items to be had at low, low prices over at Zophar’s Domain. Special discounts for clerics of Kelemvor and Mystra – but on selected items only, of course.

A booth specialising in magic rings caught his attention, and he walked over to examine a glass display featuring a few hundred of them, when he heard a man’s voice call out behind him.

“Zetic?? Hey, Zetic! Is that you?”

Zetic turned around and saw a middle-aged man with broad shoulders and short, raven, hair pushing his way through the crowd. The man’s smiling mouth was surrounded by a well-trimmed goatee, and his great bushy eyebrows turned up at the sides of his face.

“Zetic! It *is* you! Ha-ha!”

The giant of a man – just slightly taller than Zetic himself, but noticeably broader – grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him amiably. Zetic grabbed back and began to laugh.

“Jonas! Fancy meeting you here after all these years.”

Jonas pulled back, revealing his splendid outfit – a beautiful puffed forest-green shirt and loose-fitting crushed red velvet pants, underneath a semi-stiff satin blue cape. A rapier hung

off a heavy cloth belt at his waist, as did several wallets and bags – the component-pouches of any wizard.

“Fancy meeting *me*?? Fancy meeting *you*, Zetic!! I thought this was a respectable event – I didn’t think they let boisterous clerics of Torm into these things.”

Zetic scoffed.

“Oh, only boisterous wizards, eh?”

Jonas leaned back and roared out a laugh.

“That’s right! Or the *friends* of boisterous wizards. But *I* didn’t get you in, so I have to ask: did you get by the guards with your own magic, or with a companion’s?”

Zetic smiled, a little embarrassed.

“Well, if you must know, I’m *not* here alone...”

Jonas arched his eyebrows but Zetic continued before he could interrupt.

“... *But*... I got in thanks to my own sorcerous power.”

“Sorcerous power indeed! Bit of a late bloomer, aren’t we? You know what they say about sorcerers... got a bit of dragon-blood in them. Surprised it manifest itself so late...”

Zetic’s eyes bulged and he choked a bit at that last comment before forcing out a laugh. Luckily for him, Jonas was looking around them and didn’t seem to notice.

“... But it’s good that you’re here, Zetic. I’ve got the perfect plan—”

“You must mean *scheme*.”

Jonas waved off his friend and heckler with a laugh.

“Scheme, plan, whatever. The point is, I need your help...”

He drew Zetic in closer, hunched over a bit, and began to speak in conspirational tones.

“You see, there’s this absolutely ravishing pair of Calimshani sorcerers here at the fair – sisters, as a matter of fact. Twins, to be precise. You following me, Zetic? *Twins*. Renaisha and Lora.”

Zetic snorted loudly, but Jonas continued, still almost dead-serious.

“... Rumour has it that this pair really likes to stick together, you know what I mean? If you want to get... ‘access’... to one, you’ve got to make sure there’s someone for

the other. You're here, so it's perfect. We can team up and tackle the duo together. It'll be the most enchanting mage fair you've ever been at, I guarantee you."

In-between chuckles, Zetic managed to ask a question.

"Oho! And which one did *you* want?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. They're both magnificent specimens of Calimshani flesh and blood. Stunning. Gorgeous. Divine. Beautiful black hair down to here—"

He bent over and touched his left knee.

"— and legs up to here—"

Jonas touched his shoulder and he and Zetic both burst into giggles.

"— you hear what I'm saying, Zetic?"

Zetic held up a hand and shook his head, still laughing.

"I hear you, Jonas, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline."

Jonas stood back up straight and became more animated.

"Oh, come on now! You can't abandon a friend like this! After — how long has it been? Twenty years? Twenty years, my good man! We haven't seen each other in twenty years, I come to you in my hour of need, and you hang me out to dry like old, wet, laundry! *Twins*, Zetic. *Twins*! Surely you can drop the mantle of 'Zetic the Chaste' for *that*."

"I never claimed that title, Jonas. And anyways, I'm fairly certain my *wife* would object to this little scheme."

Jonas' mouth dropped and he started up, dark green eyes wide open. He stood still, stunned, for several moments.

"You're married??"

Zetic seemed confused at Jonas' surprise.

"Yes."

His friend flinched and seemed to have been stunned again by this confirmation. When he spoke again, it was in a voice that grew progressively louder.

"By all the Gods... Zetic the Chaste. Zetic the Pure. Zetic the Un-Charitable. Zetic the Indifferent-to-Ladies'-Attention. Zetic the Doesn't-Seem-To-Like-Women-Very-Much... Married. It's... It's..."

He put his hands on Zetic's shoulders and began to cry out to the crowd around him as he shook his friend.

"Hear me, good people! Zetic... Zetic, cleric of Torm, is *married*! Flee, if you value your lives! Flee, for this is surely the Seventh Sign of the return of Bane!"

Zetic burst out laughing and put his hands up to calm Jonas down.

"Oh, hush up, Jonas. And Bane has *already* returned, you dolt."

Jonas was, however, un-hush-able, and gestured wildly as he yelled even louder.

"... And Bhaal and Myrkul too, probably! I think I hear Gilgeam stirring beneath the desert of Unther as well! Someone must straightaway run and tell Piergernon that Zetic of Waterdeep has wed! The very future of the city – nay, the world – could be at stake!"

By the end of his tirade, although dozens of people had stopped to hear the madman speak, the fact that Jonas and Zetic were laughing so hard convinced them that it was all just a joke.

"For heaven's sake, Jonas. Can't you go anywhere without making a fool of yourself? You were saying something earlier about only letting *respectable* people into mage's fairs."

Jonas turned to his friend, breathing deeply with a big grin on his face.

"Exactly! And who's going to respect a liar like you, claiming to be married. Poppycock and fiddlesticks. *You*, getting married before *me*. It's as ridiculous as Halaster dancing the bandy high-kick."

The wizard put one hand on his hip, the other on top his head, and began to mime the jig in question with a ridiculously serious look on his face. Zetic had to choke back laughter in order to speak.

"I wasn't aware that the Mage of Undermountain liked to dance, but as for me finding a companion *before* you, perhaps the reason lies with your, shall we say, *cavalier* approach to women."

Zetic pointed an accusing finger at Jonas, who pulled his cape around him in defence.

"Nonsense. I'm just aggressive, that's all. You've got to be, in this wizard-polymorphed-into-demon-eat-wizard-polymorphed-into-mouse world."

"I'm sure that's why it seemed like every week our adventuring group would be assailed by yet another of your jilted ex-lovers..."

"Ah, romance is just like fishing, you see. You've got to throw back the minnows."

“Mmm. I don’t think fishermen break the hearts of the fish they throw back to the water, somehow.”

Jonas grabbed his friend’s shoulder and pointed a finger at him.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, Zetic, but whatever it is, it could only be a distraction from the bigger picture: you, married. It boggles the mind. You *must* introduce me to this mystical woman who’s managed to pull you out of your cocoon of chastity.”

Zetic turned in Jonas’ grip but couldn’t see Isacharact over the market stalls.

“Well... she’s around here somewhere...”

“Never mind, I can’t wait for you to find her. Describe her to me right now, or I swear I’ll go mad from anticipation.”

Jonas let go of Zetic, closed his eyes, and put his right hand on his forehead, as if preparing to concentrate on an image. Zetic, however, was confused.

“Describe her?”

Jonas waved his other hand at Zetic in frustration.

“Yes, describe her! If you *really* have a wife – or even if you’re simply exaggerating the status of a ‘good friend’ – you ought to be able to describe her to me. Start with her height.”

Zetic tried to estimate how tall Isacharact was... But on all fours, or standing on two feet?

“Well, um... she’s, uh... uhm...”

Jonas couldn’t wait for Zetic to work out the specifics.

“Forget the details. Taller or shorter than you?”

“Taller.”

“Right. Much taller? And her skin colour?”

“White. And she’s quite a bit taller than me. Taller than you, too”

Jonas smiled, his eyes still closed.

“Hmmm... Amazon, eh? All right, how about her weight?”

Zetic recalled when he had carried her through the doors in the Queen’s palace...

“She’s about... er... one-sixty.”

Jonas opened his eyes and grinned at Zetic.

“One-sixty? And taller than you? My, my, Zetic. She sounds like a real man-eater.”

Zetic forced out an uncomfortable laugh as Jonas elbowed him in the chest.

“You have no idea...”

Jonas closed his eyes again, picturing Zetic’s wife – so far, a tall white-skinned woman, perhaps an Illuskan from the northlands.

“I’m sure I don’t. But a picture is forming in my head, and only a few more attributes are needed to complete it. So how about her measurements? You know, top, middle, bottom?”

Zetic tried to think of how he could possibly determine those, but a stroke of luck found him as, over Jonas’ shoulder, he saw Isacharact crossing the boulevard a ways behind them. With nothing else to work with, he quickly estimated her lengths...

“Er... about... twenty-eight... twenty-five... thirty-five, I think?”

Jonas put his hands out in front of him, tracing the outline of curves in the air, interpreting the numbers as measures of circumference.

“Twenty-eight... twenty-five... thirty-five...”

He opened his eyes, traced the pattern again, and, noticing the rather ample result, shot Zetic a lecherous glance.

“My, my, my! Taller than you, weighs one-sixty, measures 28-25-35... You definitely have a country boy’s idea of an ideal woman. But I’m still missing one thing... her hair?”

“She, er... she doesn’t have any.”

At this, Jonas broke out into riotous laughter and clapped his friend on the shoulder.

“She’s shaved her head?? Oh, Zetic, you dog! You mongrel! You went and married one of those wicked Red Wizards, didn’t you? Oh, yes, you did, you poor little sick puppy – I can see the guilt in your eyes. I’ve dealt with their type before, you know, and let me tell you, you haven’t the faintest idea what you’ve gotten yourself into. Those women know how to twist a man’s balls off with two fingers, and they’ve no compunction against doing it whenever they please. And I’m afraid you haven’t sated my interest – magnified it, in fact! I absolutely *must* see this extraordinary-sounding enchantress first-hand.”

Zetic smiled and pointed at the end of the shop row, where Isacharact was pawing through a bin of unsorted pieces of unusual, non-magical, jewellery.

“Well, if you must meet her, she’s right over there, as a matter of fact.”

Jonas whirled around, shading his eyes from the sun with one hand as he scanned the area.

“Where, behind the dragon?”

Isacharact, apparently no longer interested in the booth, started walking towards them, still glancing at the shops.

“She *is* the dragon.”

Pausing for a moment to stare at Isacharact, Jonas furrowed his brow and turned around to face Zetic in confusion. As he did so, Isacharact spotted them in the crowd, and headed over just as comprehension seemed to dawn on Jonas’ face. The wizard playfully punched his friend in the shoulder.

“Ha ha! You old kidder, you! Ha ha! You had me going there for a moment, there. I was *almost* about to believe you when you said it was the white dragon. Ha ha! Really, though, Zetic, you don’t need to *lie* like that just to say ‘no’ to me. I know you like to be polite when you refuse things, but that’s taking it too far. Could’ve just said you weren’t interested in ‘The Twins’ from the start, though it’s your loss.”

At the very moment he finished talking, Isacharact came up right behind him, looking at Zetic.

“There you are; I’ve been looking for you. You’re impossible to spot in a crowd, all small like that. Did you find what you were shopping for?”

Jonas spun around and stared up at the gargantuan creature before him, mouth agape. Zetic gave him one glance before replying.

“Yes, I found a rather nice pair of gloves to resist cold effects. Should be quite handy. You?”

Isacharact looked around the fairgrounds. Jonas was still staring up, stupefied.

“A few things of interest, but nothing noteworthy. I watched a mage-duel between two elves that was reasonably interesting. After that, a couple of wizards tried to interest me in a deal for dragon’s blood – *my* blood, that is – in exchange for a payment of my choice. A rare commodity, very useful for spells, but not something I’m about to sell. I got rid of them, but we should be careful; they might decide to be foolish later. Anyways, if you’re done shopping, that summoning demonstration you wanted to see is starting soon.”

Zetic turned to Jonas, who was now looking back at him, with a finger pointing at Isacharact.

“You put her up to it, didn’t you? What are you paying her to mess with my head like this? I know you like to make fantastic entrances and completely bewilder everyone you talk with, but couldn’t you just cast an *insanity* spell on me like a respectable wizard ought to, instead of resorting to such charades?”

Zetic chuckled and indicated Isacharact with one arm.

“It’s not a charade. Jonas, meet Isacharact, my wife. Isacharact, this is Jonas Calabra, an old adventuring friend of mine, and a fellow Waterdhavian.”

Isacharact barely acknowledged his existence, but when Jonas snapped out of his stupefaction and gave her a flourishing bow, she nodded in return.

“Madam, it is a great honour to meet you. I should tell you that no-one who knows Zetic would have *ever* expected him to settle down and marry. You’ve accomplished a tremendous feat.”

Isacharact snorted, half-amused.

“So I’ve heard. Pleased to meet you as well.”

Jonas turned back to Zetic.

“So what about *you*, then? You one of those crazy types that enjoys *polymorphing* themselves a bit too much? Can be quite addictive, that spell... Or perhaps you’ve been lying to your old friend Jonas since you met him, and you’re really some fearsome beast with teeth like daggers and claws like spears?”

Zetic touched Jonas’ shoulder in a gesture of reassurance and began to walk towards the outdoor theatre.

“Neither, Jonas. The truth is... somewhere in-between, I think. It’s a long story. It only *started* about fifteen years ago, though, so I didn’t lie to you back when we were terrorizing evil-doers all up and down the Sword Coast. But perhaps we could speak more after the show? I’m afraid I’m awfully keen to catch this one.”

Jonas waved him off amiably.

“By all means, go, go! I shall need some time to digest all this, I think.”

They exchanged smiles as Zetic walked off, Isacharact beside him. Watching the rather unmatched pair go – larger-than-average-sized man who still barely came up to the knees of the gargantuan dragon – Jonas put his hands on his hips and shook his head in astonishment. Then, remembering something, he cried after them, arms held out to his sides in confusion.

“Hey, Zetic! What was that about twenty-eight, twenty-five, thirty-five, then?”

Zetic turned around and cried back.

“Neck, torso, tail!”

Jonas laughed uproariously.

“All right, but one hundred and sixty??”

Zetic leaned over a bit and tried to yell as quietly as he could.

“... thousand!”

Jonas erupted into laughter and waved to Zetic, who waved back.

“Go on, then, you rascal!”

He was still laughing as they rounded the corner, Zetic out of his sight, but Isacharact still clearly visible over the roofs of the rows of merchant stalls. Jonas was oblivious to the figure approaching him from behind.

“Pardon me, but did I hear you call that man *Zetic*?”

Jonas composed himself and turned around. The source of the question turned out to be a short woman garbed in a hooded cloak of the deepest purple. Closed at the front, the cloak cast deep shadows over her face, such that Jonas could barely make out the features of a young woman with long, shoulder-length black hair, and cold, black eyes.

“Yes, I did. A good friend of me.”

The woman’s dark eyes followed Isacharact as she moved further away. Her voice was smooth, but there was a distinct hiss to it that Jonas didn’t like.

“I see. And the name of his... companion? The white dragon?”

A pale, almost grey, hand emerged from beneath the cloak and pointed at Isacharact’s retreating form. The gap in the cloak gave Jonas a glimpse at the body underneath; she was clad in a darker-than-dark black bodice and skirt; the unusually low-cut on the bodice revealed a deep bosom, much to Jonas’ secret delight...

His delay caused her to turn her head to face him, her cold eyes boring into him with a necromancer’s glare; with a sigh and a smile, he spoke.

“I’m afraid, madam, much as I’d like to help you, I consider it bad policy to reveal to complete strangers names that have been entrusted to me by my friends.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“... But perhaps you’d like to change that situation?”

Black fire of disgust and hatred seemed to emanate from her eyes as she brought her arm back underneath her cloak, shutting out Jonas’ pleasant view.

“Thank you , but I’ll find out by my own means.”

Jonas, determined to salvage the situation, bowed.

“As you wish, madam.”

By the time he straightened back up, she had completely disappeared. A tiny voice in his head began to whisper that maybe Zetic was on to something after all...

“So... Aside from complaining that it’s difficult to spot me in a crowd like this, you haven’t made any comments on how I look – or *looked*, rather.”

Zetic and Isacharact were just coming out of the busy market and onto an empty part of the fair’s field. To the left, another magical dome covered the mirrored surface of the mage-duel arena where another challenge was taking place. To the right, up against one slope of the valley, younger wizards were showing off their skill at hurling fireballs and other projectiles harmlessly against the rocky crag. Ahead, a crowd was already gathering around the stage for the upcoming demonstration.

Isacharact turned her neck around to see Zetic hustling to keep up with her.

“You look ... like you’d make a good lunch.”

Zetic’s stomach churned, as did his face.

“Er... That isn’t *exactly* the kind of evaluation I was looking for.”

She faced forward again.

“No? Too bad.”

Zetic was indignant.

“*You’re* the one who wanted to see me like this.”

Isacharact sped up her pace slightly, forcing Zetic to run beside her, and making it impossible for him to see the look on her face.

“Yes, I did, didn’t I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What are you playing at, Isacharact?”

She stopped abruptly and shot him an impish grin.

“You.”

He stood confused as she chuckled and walked off to one side.

“... Go on and stand close to the stage to see your Balor up-close, cleric.”

As she went off to take a seat up against the hill, far away from the crowd, she gave him a slap on the back with the her tail – playful, but it was strong enough to throw him to the ground.

Zetic muttered to himself as he adjusted his metal skullcap.

“Maybe Jonas was right about not knowing what I’ve gotten myself into...”

“... And the critical thing to remember, my fellow mages, is that the act of summoning a creature in this fashion is *always* dangerous.”

The summoner, Eanai, a middle-aged woman who looked as if she’d seen more than her share of battles, paced back and forth on the stage, her long green cloak sweeping along as she lectured the sizeable crowd of several hundred wizards and sorcerers.

“The problem, you see, is one of being lulled into a false sense of security. You will hear stories of powerful mages for whom a Balor is a trivial opponent being killed by one they summoned themselves – and these stories are quite true, I assure you. Always remember that, even though the summoned creature is held inside the summoning circle, it is entirely conceivable that it will manage to get out somehow – so proceed carefully, and take your time. The worst that could happen then is that the spell expires, the creature is returned to its home plane, and you will be forced to try again another day. Now, before I go any further, let me introduce my assistant, Kurikear, who will be drawing the summoning circle.”

Eanai motioned to a short woman at the back of the stage who was dressed in a deep purple cloak that covered her from her head to her toe. Kurikear came forward, bowed to the crowd, then pulled a small pouch out from under her cloak as she bent over and began to spread silver-dust in a circle on the stage, softly speaking the words of a spell of warding against evil as she did so.

“While Kurikear prepares the summoning circle, let me make a few observations about Balors in general. Balors are, of course, Tanar’ri, and as such attacks based on electricity or poison have no effect while attacks based on acid, cold, or fire, are of limited effectiveness. They can also summon aid in the form of other Tanar’ri demons – impossible while within the summoning circle, but should a Balor break free, it is certainly something to watch out for. More than this, however, one must watch out for the tremendous array of spells at a Balor’s disposal, especially the ability to dominate minds, dispel magic, and teleport themselves. Of course, it goes without saying that they are incredibly dangerous fighters, strong enough to slice the heads of their foes clean off. And as if killing a Balor wasn’t hard enough, the reward is often nothing more than a massive explosion that can kill those standing too close.”

During this speech, Kurikear had already stood up and cast a little spell of dimensional anchoring on the circle, backing away to signal the task was complete.

“I see that Kurikear is done with the circle. Silver-dust is a good, all-purpose, material to use for drawing summoning cages. Of course, chalk certainly works if the surface is stone or metal, and in a pinch even dirt will do – druids commonly make use of black earth. All that truly matters is that the shape be without gaps. Always double-check the diagram’s boundaries to make sure they are solid.”

She gave the circle a cursory glance before proceeding.

“And once the circle is ready, we can commence the summoning. I should point out first, however, that there are additional techniques and safeguards one can use to keep the summoned creature imprisoned. The ancient conjurers of Narfell excelled at these techniques, and while we all know their love of summoning proved their ultimate downfall, some of these skills are useful for those who, like myself, wish to combat fiends. I would be happy to elaborate on this after the show, if anyone is interested. For now, though, let’s move on. May I have silence, please?”

A hush fell over the crowd and Eanai began to whisper words of arcane might as she waved her hands in rhythmic patterns. A faint wisp of smoke arose from the centre of the summoning circle, and everyone in the audience felt a chill breeze descend upon them... and then, a flash and a thunderclap, and there was now a third creature on the stage.

Great black wings pulled back to reveal what looked like an immense red-skinned minotaur. But one glance at the face full of teeth and protruding tusks, and one whiff of the smell of smoke and cinder coming from the creature’s flaming sword and whip was more than enough to tell the difference.

The demon remained silent, staring at Eanai.

“Behold: the Balrog. Get a good look. Most of you will probably never get the chance to see another, and even less will have to face one in combat – and that’s something to be grateful for. I myself have only ever battled two.”

A deep, echoing voice full of hatred boomed out a reply. The Balor spoke surprisingly well, considering how full of teeth its mouth was.

“Have you now, little wizard? And after such little experience, you think yourself ready to summon fiends for show? Tsk, tsk. Such recklessness.”

Still keeping the Balor in her sight, with her hands held out, ready to cast a spell at a moment’s notice, Eanai turned slightly to address the crowd.

“The words of demons are, of course, seldom the truth and never spoken unless doing so benefits the creature in question. While some scholars have been known to gain information from summoning and questioning demons, rarely do tales of such people end in anything other than misery and death. Listen to a demon’s words only at your own peril.

Keep the purpose of the summoning in mind at all times and do not allow yourself to be distracted by other things of which the demon speaks.”

The demon’s tone became sarcastic as it, too, turned to address the audience.

“Oh, certainly, by all means, don’t listen to me or my kind. No, indeed, far better for you to listen to absent-minded professors...”

At this, it stared at Eanai, who eyed the demon warily. The Balor took one step towards the edge of the circle and began to laugh.

“...Absent-minded professors who ought to take their own advice and check that their summoning diagrams are secure!”

The look on Eanai’s face turned to horror as the Balor simply stepped right through the summoning diagram and advanced on her, sword drawn and whip held ready.

“Kurikear! The rod, quickly!”

Kurikear, however, stood still, as if deaf to her mistress’ commands as well as the cries and shrieks of the crowd.

“Kurikear!! Use the rod of banishment! NOW!”

Before anyone had a chance to intercede, Eanai let out a shrill yell as the Balor sliced his sword horizontally through the air – and clean through her neck.

The conjuror’s body crumpled onto the stage, wound instantly cauterized by the flaming sword’s blow. Her severed head flew into the audience, and the Balor turned towards the crowd that was even now fleeing in terror. As the beast moved towards the edge of the stage, a new voice yelled out from behind it.

“Cower before the might of Shar, and flee in terror from Her Wrath! Let all who oppose the Dark Lady and who call on the blasphemous Weave repent and bow to the Nightmaiden, or wither and die in the coldness of Her Night.”

With this final word, Kurikear pointed a finger at the sky and black clouds seemed to come out of nowhere, blotting out the sun and casting a deep shadow over the entire valley – a shadow that seemed to empower the Balor and make him appear even more menacing.

Zetic, having finally managed to push his way through the departing masses, leapt onto the stage, sword already drawn and voice already in the middle of casting a spell of protection. A high block warded off a tremendous overhead chop from the Balor’s sword, and he turned to yell at Isacharact.

“Isa, get the priestess!”

Under her dark cloak, Kurikear smiled: it was the name she'd been waiting to hear. With one hand, she hastily began to trace an oval shape in the air. By the time Isacharact had taken to the air, she had already opened the inter-planar gate.

“More friends for you and your she-dragon to deal with, fool!”

But Zetic was too occupied with the Balor to pay her any attention. They locked swords, the demon betraying no surprise at his smaller adversary's unusual strength. But while Zetic was pressing with both his hands on his blade, the Balor was using only one, and with his other hand, he lashed out with his whip, entangling Zetic's foot and with one swift yank, tripping him backwards off the stage and onto the grass below.

Isacharact took one look at the sprawled-out figure of her husband as she swooped down on the stage, knocking over the Balor but missing Kurikear, who managed to dive out of the way and roll to one side at the last moment.

“I didn't say you had to *stay* in that form if a fight broke out, fool of a cleric! Get back on your feet!”

With a parting snarl at having missed her quarry, Isacharact took off and began to circle around for another pass, staying just underneath the mage-fair's protective dome. The Balor got up and turned to watch her go, growling at her. A sudden crackling noise behind him made him turn around again, and he was somewhat surprised at having to tilt his head *up* to see the face of his new enemy, same as the old enemy – Zetic, now restored to his normal dragon form.

“Take *this*, fiend!”

Zetic brought his flaming greatsword crashing down on the Balor, but the demon simply stood his ground and, amazingly, blocked the tremendous blow with his sword-arm. Sparks flew everywhere as if Zetic had struck solid stone instead of demon-flesh, and the beast let out a deep laugh as he brought his other hand up and touched his fingers against Zetic's blade, still pressed down against his forearm. The Balor's touch sent a frozen chill up the blade, and Zetic let out a cry of pain as he let go of the handle.

“By Auril's white hair! You'll pay for that, demon!”

With a growl, Zetic slammed his fists downwards, smashing the wooden stage to smithereens, but completely missing the Balor who, with a bestial, toothy, grin on its face, simply teleported away, appearing a hundred feet behind Zetic, right in the middle of a group of five wizards who were approaching to assist in subduing the demon.

The Balor cracked his whip in the air and struck all five with a single, harsh blow, throwing them to the ground – and two of them seemed to be struggling to get back up. In his haste to remove these new threats, however, the demon had forgotten about the old.

Zetic turned to see Isacharact swoop down on top of him just as the demon was about to wreak further havoc on the unprepared mages. As she bit and clawed into him, Zetic found himself plugging his ears to blot out the demon's terrifying screams of pain, yet at the same

time staring in awe at the sheer power of a creature who was tearing into a demon like a cat tears into a mouse.

Isacharact's head reared up, flinging one of the Balor's newly-detached arms up it into the air, and Zetic snapped out of his daze and stared down at his sword, still radiating cold from the magic curse.

The bright idea dawned on Zetic to put on the new gauntlets he'd bought and he reached down to his waist to pull them out of his bag of holding... only to find that it wasn't there.

“Hey!”

Spinning around, Zetic saw that a few creatures had already made it through the gate to the abyss – a pair of bony, winged Vrocks were tossing his bag back and forth, cackling with glee.

Cursing himself for his lapse in attention, Zetic rid his sword of its curse with a hastily-cast *dispel magic*, picked it up, and brought it crashing down onto the stage, slicing off the tail of the Vrock presently holding his bag, but otherwise doing no damage save to the stage's wooden planks. Zetic quickly pulled his sword back up and struck again, this time catching the creature in the back and spilling it onto the stage.

A backhand swat at the other Vrock, now airborne, sent it crashing to the ground. But the portal was working faster than him: two more Vrocks had arrived, as had a towering, dog-faced Glabrezu. And in the meantime, Kurikear had managed to grab Zetic's bag out of the hands of the vulture-headed Vrock who was desperately hopping around, trying to put out the fire on his wings from Zetic's flaming sword-blow.

The Glabrezu advanced on him, and Zetic resolved to let it get no further: holding his sword in his left hand, he pointed his right index finger at the four-armed demon and uttered a holy word. A white beam shot out of his hand at the creature, instantly banishing it back to the lower planes.

The three Vrocks took advantage of his focusing on the greater demon to take to the air and surround him, swooping down to tear at him.

“I feel a draft! Someone shut the portal!”

A familiar voice cried out behind him.

“Right behind you, my friend.”

Zetic smiled as he recognized Jonas' voice, and while Jonas began to incant a spell to close the gate, Zetic prepared to cast a spell to banish all the outsiders back whence they came. Overcoming the distraction of the Vrocks, the two spells were unleashed at almost the exact same moment, but while Zetic's spell came just in time to blast the airborne pests back to the Abyss with rays of holy light, it came too soon to affect the multi-armed, snake-bodied Marilith that was just starting to slither through the gate.

Jonas's spell, however, was timed just right to shut the portal as her abdomen was passing through, slicing the hideous monstrosity in half.

Shrieking in pain, the creature's six arms flailed wildly as the fiendish serpentine mermaid writhed on the stage. Stepping forward, and with a single downwards thrust, Zetic impaled her on his sword, putting her out of her misery.

He turned around to thank Jonas but instead found himself looking Isacharact straight in the chest.

“Let's go.”

She practically barked the command, and it was only by virtue of the fact that she spoke it quietly that she avoided spraying Zetic with the fiendish blood that covered her mouth.

“But we have to go after Kurikear! She's responsible for this, and on top of that she stole my purse!”

“I saw. But she's gone, and I don't want to hang around here. There's more to this than meets the eye. We need to leave. *Now.*”

She turned and trotted off towards the exit just as the guards began to arrive. Jonas turned to look up at his friend.

“I came over from the duel arena just when it started; saw the whole thing. You'd better go; she's right about there being more to this – that woman on the stage, she was asking about you and your wife, earlier. I don't know what it's about, but you'd better take care of yourself, my friend.”

Zetic turned to look at Eanai's decapitated body on the stage.

“I'd prefer to take care of others *first.*”

He bent over and picked up her severed head, laying it down on the stage next to her neck. Sheathing his sword, he called out words of divine power, and the dead wizard's body began to glow with a grisly green light that reattached her severed head.

With a crackle of energy, Eanai shot up, clutching her neck.

“The rod! Kurikear!!”

Breathing deeply, she turned and looked at Jonas and Zetic.

“I... I take it you killed the demon? Thank... Thank you.”

Jonas hopped up on the stage and bent over to help her get back up again; when she was on her feet, leaning on Jonas and clutching her forehead as if dizzy, he turned to Zetic.

“You'd better head out. I'll take everything from here.”

“Thanks, Jonas. It was nice seeing you again. We’ll meet again soon, I’m sure.”

Zetic bent over and pressed Jonas’ shoulder with one hand.

“Indeed. If I dig up anything on that dark lady, I’ll send word to you as fast as I can. By the way, my compliments to your wife. I didn’t catch what happened to the Balor...”

Jonas turned around and saw the blood-stained field that bore few solid remains of the demon that had been there.

“... But I can certainly guess. Man-eater *and* demon-eater, I see. Get going after her. I’ll square everything with the guards.”

With final smiles exchanged, Zetic scurried off after Isacharact as Jonas helped Eanai off the stage.

“Did anything strike you as odd about that woman?”

They were in a forest clearing, a few hours’ flight away from the fair, and Zetic was still brooding over the loss of his new gauntlets – stolen before he’d even had a chance to use them.

“You mean, besides the fact that she let loose a Balor in the middle of a crowded Mages’ Fair, and then proceeded to open a gate to the Abyss to bring forth creatures who, for whatever reason, were under orders to snatch my purse?”

If looks could kill... but Zetic was too caught up in his own frustrations for Isacharact’s stare to affect him.

“Don’t you recognize her name?”

Zetic looked up at her, confused.

“Her name? Kurikear? It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Isacharact shot him a dismissive look.

“But it should. ‘kuri’ is Draconic for ‘slay’, and ‘kear’...”

Zetic’s eyes opened wide in awe and completed her sentence.

“... means ‘daylight’. May Mask curse me twice for not noticing it earlier! *Of course* she’d be a priestess of Shar.”

Isacharact cut short his bout of head-slapping.

“What makes you think she’s a priestess?”

“Well... That little speech of her, for one.”

Turning away from him, Isacharact’s eyes narrowed as she seemed to stare at some imaginary threat.

“All that proves is that she’s a *follower* of Shar. I don’t think she’s a member of Shar’s clergy. In fact, I don’t think she’s really a devout follower of Shar at all... Though she must be paying at least lip service to Her, to use the Shadow Weave.”

“She used the Shadow Weave? How can you tell?”

“She said so, for one. But I could almost feel it from the moment she began to draw that summoning circle.”

Zetic sighed deeply.

“Good grief. I’m really on a roll of slip-ups today. I can’t remember the last time I was this distracted. Beshaba must really have cast Her evil eye upon me.”

Isacharact turned to him with a snarl on her face.

“Can’t you for one moment stop attributing everything that happens to the Gods? How can you possibly have learned *anything* if you blame every misfortune or success on the will of the Divine?”

Zetic appeared sombre in the face of her outburst.

“I... I’m sorry. When you know as much as I do about the history of Faerûn’s deities and their continual involvement in the world below, I guess it’s all too easy to get caught up in thinking about them interfering in everyone’s lives like that...”

He started to smile at her.

“... But I don’t think that’s affected my ability to learn. Here: even as I’ve been complaining, I’ve already been taught a few good lessons in paying attention, keeping my guard up, and watching for Draconic words where I wouldn’t have expected them.”

Isacharact seemed to soften a bit.

“Good. It’s a beginning.”

A new voice broke out to their left.

“Beginning of the *end*, you mean, Isacharact, Whore of the High Ice...”

Even Zetic found he had a sudden urge to back away from Isacharact with the ferocious growl she let out upon seeing the newcomer: a towering Red Dragon, at least as large as Isa, and with a look of raging hatred etched into her eyes.

Zetic reached up for his sword, but the newcomer waved him off.

“Don’t bother. I’m not really here, I’m just an apparition, as you’d soon find out if you wasted time trying to strike me.”

Isacharact finally managed to compose herself enough to hiss out a few words.

“Be thankful for that, Vessnya! If you were here in person, I’d presently be attending to the removal of your *head*.”

Vessnya turned and hissed right back.

“You’ll get the opportunity soon enough, Tramp of the North! And I’m even giving you fair warning that I intend to do the same the first chance I get...”

She glanced over at Zetic, shooting him a grin.

“... That little bit of fun back at the Mages’ Fair? It’s nothing, next to what I have planned.”

Isacharact stepped over to interpose herself between Vessnya and Zetic, with a look on her face that could’ve frozen the Plane of Fire.

“This one’s mine. Get your own.”

That last statement sent Vessnya into a rage, and she shrieked back, arms held up, and wings outstretched.

“I *did* have my own, until you came along, you miserable harlot!”

With a growl, the apparition of Vessnya walked straight through Isacharact in order to plead her case with Zetic.

“But your husband doesn’t know the details, so why don’t I explain them to him... Almost two hundred years ago, I was happily mated to my wonderful Norjkimaxzol... my sweet Norjkimaxzol... We had a clutch that was near hatching, a spacious cavern in the heights of the Graypeak Mountains, a good territory with plenty of food...”

Isacharact had turned around, fury close to boiling over, while Vessnya, who was leaning over right in Zetic’s face, pointed an accusing claw back at her.

“... Everything was perfect until *this* bastard offspring of the frozen north came along one day to murder us, devour our children, and plunder our hoard. My brave Norjkimaxzol bade me stay inside with the eggs and went out to face her, alone.”

Zetic was surprised to see Vessnya's gold-coloured eyes water up as she told her miserable tale.

"... I heard the din of battle for several hours, and then, after nightfall... nothing but quiet. Searching the area outside, there were ample traces of a fight, but no survivors. I couldn't even find Norjimaxzol's corpse, and feared the worst, until at last, two weeks later, he returned to me – but he came back changed, as if under an enchantress' spell..."

Vessnya stood back up again and turned her head to scowl at Isacharact, who seemed to have calmed down considerably. She actually looked almost *amused* at hearing the story so far.

"... As indeed he was! He spoke not a word to me, or to our children who had hatched in the meantime, but simply went into the treasure-room and began to gather up his hoard. At first I was overjoyed to see him again, but as he ignored me I began to plead with him to speak. When he moved to leave just as mutely as he arrived I tried desperately to stop him, but it was to no avail... he simply walked right out the cavern entrance with his treasure in a bag of holding... and then I saw why..."

She turned towards Zetic and nodded her head at Isacharact, who was grinning widely.

"... That frigid bitch you call your wife was waiting outside for him."

Isacharact seemed somewhat less amused by this latest comment, but Vessnya continued her story regardless.

"... And as I stood there, stunned, watching my mate walk towards her like a man under a vampire's spell, do you know what she did then?"

Vessnya turned back to hurl the next line at Isacharact.

"... With all the charm of a underage night-walker, she grinned at me and said: 'He's decided to stay with a *real* female...'"

Smoke and ash poured out of the mouth of the fuming fire-breathing dragon, who paused to allow her rage to simmer. After a few moments of silence, Isacharact simply snorted at her with contempt.

"Are you finished, old hag?"

Vessnya's eyes narrowed and she shook her head.

"Oh, no, Isacharact Home-Wrecker, I've only just begun..."

With a wicked smile on her face, Vessnya turned her neck to look sideways back at Zetic.

"... After a century of preparation and years of searching, I've finally managed to track you down, and, joy of joys, I find you with a mate of your own. Turnabout would be fair play, but you don't deserve fairness, Isacharact..."

She turned back to face Isacharact with a scowl.

“... *Death* is what you deserve, and I’ll make sure you get it, just as soon as I do unto you what you did unto me...”

Zetic shivered with the cold feeling of the apparition as Vessnya stepped backwards through him and wrapped her arms around him in what would’ve been a sensual hug – had she been anything more than an ethereal projection.

Vessnya smiled at Isacharact, who was clearly not enamoured with the idea of another female touching Zetic, even a spectral one.

“... Who knows? Perhaps I’ll even have your mate do the dirty deed himself... just as soon as I make him *my* mate.”

She brought one hand up and, manifesting a small bit of force, sadistically gripped his hair. Zetic let out a small yelp, twisted free of her grasp, and quickly moved off to one side. Vessnya remained where she was, and Isacharact stepped up to address her, face to face.

“The only thing you’ll *make* is a nice trophy on my wall, Vessnya, if you come within a hundred miles of either of us.”

Vessnya casually stared back at her with a distant look on her face.

“Maybe I won’t have to...”

A smile grew on her face, becoming larger and more intense until Vessnya burst into wicked, cackling laughter – the laughter of a demon who knows they have the upper hand.

Just as Isacharact could take no more, and lashed out at the source of her anger, the apparition began to fade until, moments later, Vessnya was gone.

Zetic and Isacharact stood silent for several moments, Isacharact still caught up in her rage, and Zetic thinking about the sad tale that Vessnya had told. He practically jumped when they were interrupted by yet another fresh voice.

“Boy, you can be hard to find, old friend.”

The form of Jonas let out a yelp as Isacharact slashed downwards at him – but it had no effect otherwise, for he was just another apparition, the result of a magical sending spell. As Isacharact growled at her mistake, Zetic closed his eyes, brought his head down, and rubbed his head to calm his nerves.

“For heaven’s sake, Jonas. Don’t sneak up on a pair of dragons like that unless you’d like me to have to resurrect you, too.”

Jonas stood catching his breath and staring at Isacharact as she backed away from him with an annoyed and half-embarrassed look on her face.

“Sorry, Zetic... You know how these spells work. I either appear right next to you, or I wind up in the Piergernon’s Privy. Better here than there.”

Looking at the ground, Isacharact shook her head suddenly in frustration.

“What do you *want*, master Calabra?”

Jonas found himself taking another step backwards from her and wondering if this was all a good idea...

“I, uh... I just thought you both should know, I spoke with Eanai, and she told me a bit about that ‘Kurikear’ girl. Eanai thought she might be hiding something.”

Zetic snorted and turned to face his friend.

“Surprise, surprise. She’s actually a red dragon named Vessnya.”

Jonas wore a look of surprise on his face.

“How do you know that?”

“She just stopped by to have a chat not a moment before you arrived. I gather she and Isacharact have a rather sordid history together.”

Isacharact spoke up.

“She’s insane. If she really believes that fantasy story she told, she’s even more mad than I thought. Don’t trust one word of that lie of hers.”

Zetic looked at Isacharact.

“So you didn’t steal Norjkimaxzol away from her?”

Isacharact snorted in disgust.

“Oh, I took him away from her all right, but she’s deceiving herself if she thinks it was *unwillingly* that he left ...”

Zetic seemed doubtful, so Isacharact laid it all out for him.

“... He was *fed up* with her. And why shouldn’t he have been? She’s ugly, old, pathetically weak for her age, and worst of all is possessed of an incredibly cloying and overbearing attitude. You heard her talk about her ‘wonderful’ Norjkimaxzol, her ‘sweet’ Norjkimaxzol. Disgusting. Imagine having to hear that sort of sickening talk all day long... It would drive anyone mad. I came along looking for a fight, some fun, and a little fortune, and found that after I beat him, her mate showered me with praise and told me of his frustrations at home. He was handsome, powerful, and a surprisingly good fighter, so I did what anyone else would’ve done...”

She smiled wickedly, chuckling to herself.

“... I took him.”

Zetic remained unconvinced of her innocence.

“And damn the woman whose heart he broke? I take it she at least told the truth about that little parting shot of yours?”

Isacharact wore a look of complete disdain and snorted loudly, practically spitting out the next word.

“*Please*. I would’ve put her out of her misery right then and there, but even if he couldn’t stand her, Norjkimaxzol insisted that I didn’t touch her. I can’t imagine why; some misguided sense of loyalty, no doubt. Not that I really *cared*, of course. I was young, and hungry to take my first mate who wasn’t stronger than I was. Before Norjkimaxzol, I was always the weaker one in the relationship. He was the first one I managed to dominate, and I think I did an admirable job. By the time I was finished with him, I don’t think he could even remember her name...”

She showed a toothy grin and began to chuckle. Jonas scratched the back of his neck.

“Well. I guess there’s not much I can fill in, then. I suppose the only item of interest is that Eanai said she picked up Kurikear two years ago in a small town on the western border of the High Forest. Although an attentive apprentice, she was constantly pushing Eanai to try her hand at dragon-slaying, or failing that, to bring her conjuring act further North. Eanai also recalled that Kurikear seemed to pounce on absolutely any piece of gossip about white dragons everywhere they went. Anyways, if you’re going to go looking for her lair, it sounds like the High Forest would be a good place to start.”

Zetic nodded his head in agreement.

“Thank you, Jonas. I don’t suppose you’d be up for another adventure together?”

Jonas smiled.

“Take on an insane, lovelorn, she-dragon? No thank you, I’m up to my arms in *human* women of that sort already. Anyways, I can feel that little tingle that says this spell is about to expire, so I wish you both good luck in dealing with this fiend-summoner.”

“So long, Jonas. Give Eanai my blessings.”

Jonas bowed as his figure faded into nothingness.

Pausing for a moment to let the news sink in, Zetic sighed.

“Well. If all the people you’ve met have as *warm* feelings for you as Vessnya and Krasswéh, then we’ll have no shortage of adventures.”

Isacharact eyed him angrily.

“The people *I’ve* met? You’re one to talk, cleric. I may have injured a few creatures over the past four hundred some years, but unlike you, I don’t have any powerful organizations seeking my demise.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She gestured at him.

“Are you blind? You’re Torm’s most powerful servant on the face of Faerûn. How many evil groups would love to see you dead for that alone? The Church of Bane, whose God was slain by Torm during the Time of Troubles? What about the Zhentarim, a criminal organization gripped in Bane’s black hand? Not to mention the other Gods of evil and chaos: Cyric, Shar, Mask, Talos... And besides the clergy, there are plenty of cabals either opposed to Torm personally or bringers of justice in general. To them, you represent a grave threat from the moment you appear in their territory.”

Zetic looked down at the ground and considered what she said.

“I suppose that’s true.”

Isacharact looked around them aimlessly.

“Of course it is... Bah. What a miserable day this has been. I knew that Mage’s Fair would be trouble. As the sun’s going down and this is a decent enough spot, we might as well get some rest.”

Zetic looked up to see the clouds in the sky turning a scarlet hue.

“Care for some food before we go to sleep?”

Isacharact sounded tired and upset as she lay down.

“No thank you, I’m not hungry.”

Zetic seemed disappointed, but then began to reach for the lute on his back.

“Well, how about a little music, then?”

Isacharact looked up at him with contempt, pausing noticeably before replying.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, cleric... I’m in a foul mood right now.”

Zetic smiled at her.

“Obviously. I’m trying to get you out of it.”

Isacharact grinned weakly.

“You want to make me happy? Bring me Vessnya’s head on a pike.”

Zetic pulled his lute off his back and began to tune it.

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out of those. But I’ve got food, music, stories...”

She looked up at him in disbelief.

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you? How can you be so high-spirited after the complete mess that was today?”

Zetic laughed and beamed at her.

“How *can*’t I be happy? Ordinary events leading to extraordinary challenges... The wind in my hair and the sound of battle on the horizon... Meeting old friends and making new ones... Fighting demons and helping those in need... And at the end of the day, gathering with your companions ’round a campfire in the wilderness to share some food, a few stories, and a couple of songs before going to sleep under the stars and moon... Isa, *this* is what adventuring is all about! You have no idea how I’ve longed to live these freewheeling days again. Aside from you, adventuring is the only thing I truly missed while I was away – solo escapades just aren’t the same.”

Isacharact remained silent, listening to Zetic attentively as he gestured at the clearing around them.

“... And as for me, *this* is where I truly shine in the company of fellow-adventurers. Oh, certainly, I’m a great help in battle with my sword and magic, but it’s before and after the fight that adventuring clerics like myself earn their keep. Before, persuade locals to help out, subvert the evil-doers’ minions, and maybe even talk down their masters as well... Afterwards, bring the fallen back to life, tend to the wounded, and keep everyone well-fed and happy. You take care of the threats, and I take care of all the nuisances.”

Her look softened, and Zetic could feel her misery washing away...

“...It’s my job, and I’m right proud of it. Now, what can I play for you?”

Isacharact managed to let laugh and smiled as she aimlessly traced a claw in the earth.

“All right. Anything. But I don’t see a campfire here.”

She grinned and Zetic quickly gathered up some sticks and deadwood into a small pile surrounded by bare earth and rock.

“Easily remedied...”

One puff of his breath was more than sufficient to start a brightly burning fire between them, and as Isacharact gazed dreamily at the flames, Zetic began to play and sing the old Chondathan ballad, “Milona, Brown-Haired and Tressed”.

An hour or so later, all that remained of the fire was a few red-tinted coals and a thin wisp of smoke. Zetic and Isacharact were asleep next to each other, with Isa curled around him and purring contently.

A beautiful white dragon unadorned with jewellery appeared before Zetic, and she walked over to him on her hind legs, arms outstretched.

“Zetic... Zetic... come to me, my love ...”

She put one hand around his head and another around his neck, and although Zetic couldn't see the ground, he clearly felt her pull him down on top of her, holding him close.

“Take me... and make me yours...”

Zetic was awakened by harsh sunlight, and looked up to see the morning rays filtering through the trees around him. The air was fresh, the ground was damp, and all around the sound of water dripping off of trees. It had been a wet night, apparently.

“Isa?”

“Over here.”

She was stretching up against a tree behind him and trying to dry off her wings by beating them noisily. Turning to look at him, she noticed an odd look on his face.

“... Are you all right?”

“I, er... I had an *unusual* dream last night. Suffice to say my head feels a little topsy-turvy right now.”

“I see... Well, you'd better make sure it's screwed on straight. Yesterday's fumbling had best not repeat itself when we face Vessnya. Her plan then was to simply grab something she wanted and then escape. That won't be her plan the next time we meet.”

A few minutes later, both were ready, and they took to the skies, heading north-east, to the High Forest and the Silver Marches.

Hours after they'd left the clearing, when the sun was already well past its peak and on its way to the other side of the world, the trees above rustled with a passing breeze, and the debris on the forest floor shuffled slightly on the ground from a gust of wind.

The forest floor was subjected to a careful probing by black-clawed fingers, a scrutinizing search by golden eyes, and a sensitive sweep by a red-scaled pair of nostrils.

An hour later, the same clawed fingers held up a prize, the reward for hard work searching the area – a single, long, straight, golden hair.

A hair... from Zetic's head.

“We should be arriving there tomorrow. Of course, the High Forest is hardly a small area to search, but assuming that's where Vessnya lairs, I wouldn't at all be surprised if she came out to challenge us instead of hiding in her lair.”

With a bit of arcane magic, Isacharact traced a map of the route ahead on the stony ground and pointed out the route they were going to take. Zetic glanced down and nodded in agreement, but his mind seemed to be on something else.

“I suppose you're right. Do you think it'll really be necessary to kill her?”

She looked up at him.

“You can't cure this kind of insanity with a bit of divine magic, cleric. If we don't hunt her down and kill her, who knows what sort of trouble she could cause – for us, and since it means something to you, probably for others as well. Besides, I don't take kindly to insults... or others touching my property.”

Isacharact prodded him in the chest, making it clear what she was talking referring to.

“... If you'd rather stay out of the fight, then go right ahead. I can kill her myself.”

Zetic wore a look of resignation.

“No, no, I'll help you. I might complain about it, but I always fight when it comes down to that... It's just that I always feel bad when I'm forced to kill. I suppose you're right that there's no chance to salvage this. I just always wish there was another way...”

She dismissed his concerns as the ethereal map faded to nothingness.

“There isn't any, and when you've lived as long as I have, you'll find that this is often the case.”

Zetic protested.

“But you *like* killing.”

Isacharact grinned at him.

“Of course. But just because I prefer to fight doesn’t mean I’m ignorant of the other ways to resolve a situation. I know very well that I could bluff and intimidate my way out of more than a few fights – and that you could probably simply talk your way out of even more. It’s just that when you live as long as dragons do, you don’t want to let your enemies live and come back to attack you later – *especially* if those enemies are other dragons. Maybe *you* can turn your enemies into allies, but I can’t do that and then trust them afterwards. I told Norjkimaxzol that Vessnya was better off dead, but he was old and set in his ways, and I was young and foolish. It was a mistake we made together, and now it’s time to correct that mistake.”

Zetic resigned himself to the situation.

“If you say so. We’d best get some sleep, then.”

He lay down, and Isacharact lay down next to him, both tired from the long flight – Isacharact had insisted on speed, and Zetic felt a little uneasy about the whole thing.

Nonetheless, in spite of their reservations and anticipations, they both soon were sound asleep.

*After* they were asleep, however...

It was the same dream as the night before, but this time everything seemed so much clearer, so much more defined, and so much more forceful and moving. The white dragon was there again – for some reason, Zetic didn’t feel right calling her Isacharact. Even though it must be her, there was something... odd... about her... But he still felt them press together forcefully, and he heard their snorts and cries and moans, and smelled her frosty breath...

And suddenly, he recoiled, because *this* time her chilly breath smelled not of ice and mint, but of ash and sulphur.

“Take off your cloak, Zetic...”

Suddenly ignorant of the sensation he’d had before, Zetic felt his hands reach up to the clasp at his neck. He couldn’t even remember if he had been wearing the thing when the dream started. The fingers wanted to untie the chain, but his hands trembled and resisted.

The white dragon came closer and began to caress him gently.

“Take off your cloak, my love... It’s all that separates us... All that keeps us apart... All that keeps me from you...”

Indeed, the blue cloak – the cloak Isacharact had given him, the cloak that was enchanted to ward off magical influence on his mind – grew into a great whirlwind of cloth that surrounded him, and entangled him, and seemed to bind his movement.

Yet still his hands resisted the command to remove this interfering piece of clothing.

The white dragon put her hands around his head, bent over, and kissed him deeply...

And the cloak fell off of Zetic’s shoulders as the clasp at last came undone.

When she pulled back, she was no longer a white dragon, but a great red, terrible and magnificent.

“Now, come to me, Zetic. Come to me, my love, and be free...”

With a smile on her face, she turned and flew off...

... and Zetic followed her.

Like clockwork, Isacharact woke just as the first rays of sunlight were peeking over the horizon. It was the only truly mechanical thing about her, but she was proud of it. She well remembered the morning that news of Isasarach’s death had come back to the ice-palace – and one of the few reasons she managed to escape the chaos that ensued with more than her share of treasure was the fact that she had been awake before almost everyone else.

Today, like that fateful day over three hundred years ago, there was something that didn’t feel right.

“Zetic?”

Bringing her head up, she looked over and saw the place where he had laid was now empty, save for a single item of significance: his cloak, twisted and unkempt, and looking like it had been ground into the dirt, as if he had struggled to remove it.

Isacharact got up and sniffed the air, and even before the magic of the necklace she wore told her that Zetic was far away, she knew what must’ve happened.

Picking up the cloak, she twisted it in her clawed hands and hissed under her breath as she looked off in the direction that the wedding-girdle told her Zetic must be.

“Vessnya...”

Zetic awoke to find, to his surprise, that he was completely unable to move.

Normally, such a situation wouldn't be very surprising. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd been chained up, nor would this have been his first experience with paralysis-inducing poisons or spells.

No, what really surprised him is that he was standing up, apparently in a large cavern, most definitely *not* chained or restrained in any manner, and that magic effects of paralysis simply don't work on dragons at all – as he'd made certain to never forget since the fateful day on Swight's balcony,.

“Awake already? I admit, you've got the willpower of a centuries-old Great Wyrn.”

Zetic found that he was able to turn and look behind him at the source of the voice – but all he could see was deep blackness stretching off into the infinite. Turning around again, he found that the cavern had disappeared, and the same blackness stretched off before him as well. The shadows seemed to draw closer, suffocating him.

“What trickery is this? Where am I? Who are you?”

“Oh, I think you know.”

Looking to his left, he saw a great red dragon prowling towards him out of the darkness.

“Vessnya.”

She smiled, arching her head back.

“Quite. It has been a challenge to bring you here, husband of Isacharact. I am fortunate that I spared no effort in preparing for this day. She was wise to give you that cloak; in the end, it caused me great difficulty.”

Zetic followed her with his eyes as she circled around him, a cinder-red figure against the pitch-black surroundings.

“But not enough to stop you. That was you in my dreams, obviously. How did you get there? And how did you get me to take the cloak off?”

Completing her circle, she stopped and looked at him.

“Its magic is powerful, but there are always chinks in armour... even magical armour, wards of the mind. It was simply a matter of ensuring that there was some tiny part of you that *wanted* to take it off, and its ability to defend you crumbled and failed. And as for the dreams themselves... Well, I needed a few things of yours for that... your bag, a piece of your hair... The rest is between myself... and Shar.”

Zetic stood up and made himself look as imposing as he could – which wasn't very much, considering how much larger Vessnya was than him.

“The Lady of Darkness offers no solace nor comfort, nor does she brook it amongst her followers. If you so much as hint at rejoicing in capturing me, or in defeating your foe, she will turn on you.”

Vessnya came up close to him, her golden eyes glowing in the shadowy realm.

“Very well put, cleric. But I could care less. The magic that binds you here, while partially rooted in the shadow weave, can survive without it. I have moved beyond needing Mystra or Shar's creations to create magic. It is the sheer force of my will that keeps you here.”

Zetic was unnerved by her claim – she spoke of the kind of spells heard about only in legend – but he tried not to show his fear.

“If you say so... but where *is* here?”

She grinned at him, showing her toothy maw.

“Look outside and see for yourself. Go on, look.”

Out of nowhere, two great oval portals of light appeared, and when Zetic looked at them he found himself back in the cave, unable to move. To his left, he saw Vessnya again – but she looked *real* this time, and not like some mental projection. She appeared to be huddling over a spell-book, but as Zetic watched her, she became aware of his presence, and looked up at him, shooting him a terrifying smile.

Zetic recoiled, and found himself in the darkness again.

“Devil! I know this technique. You've imprisoned me inside my own mind.”

“As smart as he is handsome, wonderful.”

Vessnya – the false Vessnya, the dream-Vessnya – grabbed hold of his chest from behind, and brought her mouth just behind his right ear, whispering into it.

“... And here you'll stay, cleric, until I'm done with you. You can choose to be here, in the darkness of your mind, able to move and speak with me, or you can choose to look out the window of your soul, and see the world as it is – but be utterly unable to affect it. Though it's not to say that it couldn't be enjoyable... Look!”

She directed his head towards the ovals of light, and Zetic found himself looking out of his own eyes once more – and looking straight at the face of the real Vessnya, who smiled at him, then tilted her head, grabbed hold of his neck, and kissed him deeply.

He could feel her gently bite his lower lip as she pulled back.

“Mmmm... You taste as good as you look. I can see why she settled down with you. But don't worry... I'll take better care of you than that witch *ever* could.”

Vessnya turned and walked back over to the other side of the cave, where a great number of spell-books lay open, and Zetic found himself back in the darkness again.

“I'll find a way to break out of this prison, Vessnya!”

The false-Vessnya was still right behind him.

“Prison? Oh, my, cleric. You must remain here, yes, but let me assure you there needn't be anything torturous about your stay...”

Her arms wrapped around him once again, but this time as they came into contact with his hide, they seemed to melt into a hot wax, spreading across his scales.

“... You grew up in Waterdeep, didn't you? Of course you did, I know all about you from being here in your mind with you. And I know you've heard that old Chondathan saying: 'An older woman knows how to *please* a man'...”

He shivered as the wax-like substance poured over him, enveloping him in heat.

“... And you've been so *poorly* treated, my sweet little golden darling. She's so cold to sleep with, so frigid and chilling. So *alien* to your fiery nature...”

Zetic began to cringe as the heat from Vessnya almost felt like it was burning him.

“... Yet you like it, I can tell. But you haven't been with a fellow creature of flame, so who can blame you for thinking that way? ...”

The heat from her body was scalding, and Zetic began to tremble, feeling that his very flesh was about to burst into flames. Suddenly, the wax cleared off, and the dream-Vessnya grabbed his shoulders and spun him around to face her, eyes glowing brightly.

“... Let me show you why they say that Red Dragons are the greatest of all...”

Zetic pushed her off.

“Get away from me, demon!”

He got down on all fours and began to run away as fast as he could, but as swiftly as he ran, he didn't seem to be getting any further from Vessnya, who was standing quite still, watching him with amusement.

“You can't run from me, Zetic – not in this place. Come now, at least take the time to enjoy yourself while you're in here. Remember the dreams? The fantastic things we did? I can make them seem as real as reality. But we must do it soon... Isacharact is coming, and the time for my revenge is almost near...”

Zetic spun around to face her, eyes narrowing like a viper.

“Isacharact said Norjkimaxzol left of his own free will. She said he was fed up with you, that he couldn’t stand you any more.”

Vessnya’s smile disappeared into a snarl.

“She *lies*, she lies! Her wicked mouth spews forth poisonous lies at you just as it did to Norjkimaxzol! The lies of a wretched harlot!”

Zetic put on an exaggerated expression of disbelief, and when Vessnya saw it, she approached him, speaking in a low growl.

“... She’s lied to you before, Zetic... She lied to hurt you, and to make you do as she wanted. This isn’t any different. You wouldn’t have so readily agreed to help her fight me if she’d *actually* done what I said she did... But if you don’t believe me, no matter... Soon, her lies will end. My retribution for her insult will be my triumph...”

Her face suddenly changed to a grin, and she drew uncomfortably close to him.

“... But come now, let us speak of other things... After you kill her, my spell of domination will be complete; you will be mine, and I won’t need to be in here anymore.”

Zetic pulled away sharply just as she was about to wrap her arms around him, shouting back at her.

“I would *never* harm Isacharact! Never!”

“Oh, you will, cleric, you will...”

Her eyelids lazily drifted down and the corner of her lip turned up in delight.

“... and you won’t even know you’re doing it.”

The image of Vessnya, the ancient red dragon, arched her head back and began to laugh, and the darkness seemed to close in on Zetic...

“You’re late. Come in.”

Isacharact instantly spotted the figure of Vessnya, reading a book, huddled in a corner of the volcanic cavern that she had traced Zetic to.

“I wasn’t aware that I had an appointment.”

Vessnya turned to face her, eyes like molten lava, and words hardly less scathing.

“Oh, but you do... with *death*.”

Isacharact glanced at Zetic, who was standing still with his sword drawn and planted in the ground before him, hands resting on its pommel, wings folded neatly behind him, eyes open but completely immobile. He was frozen like a statue.

“If you’ve so much as *touched* him, I will make sure you die a death that even the cruellest fiend would balk at administering.”

Vessnya showed nothing but contempt for the stranger in her lair.

“You used to frighten me, Isacharact, but the tables have turned, now... You couldn’t stop me from stealing your own mate, and now you won’t be able to stop me from giving you the death you deserve.”

Isacharact’s voice, little more than guttural noises that barely formed words, betrayed the brewing rage within her.

“We’ll see about that. Die, you miserable old hag!”

And with that, the cavern was lit up by twin blasts of fire and ice that slammed into the two combatants – but as Isacharact took the painful flames straight on, Vessnya’s magic kept her foe’s ice at bay.

Seeing that she wasn’t going to win with breath weapon alone, Isacharact lunged and tore into her foe with tooth and nail.

Zetic, looking out of his own eyes that were locked in place, was just able to see the fight in the corner of his vision. Vessnya seemed to have the upper hand, having doubtlessly placed an incredible number of wards and spells of protection on herself before the fight. That isn’t to say that Isacharact wasn’t doing any damage – far from it. As the fight wore on, bloody marks littered Vessnya’s body, lending a glossy shine to her otherwise matte-red scales.

But Isacharact looked far worse for wear. She was getting in more hits, it was true, and her rage seemed to have doubled her strength, for she was thrashing and beating Vessnya as if the other was a rag doll – but while her hits were more numerous, they weren’t doing as much damage as Vessnya’s colossal blows.

Fearing that Isacharact wasn’t going to be able to win on her own, Zetic struggled desperately against the mental force that kept him immobile. He didn’t seem to be getting anywhere, when suddenly he noticed Isacharact spin around, her tail whipping across Vessnya’s face, and sending the other flying at the cavern wall, the force of the impact breaking off great chunks of rock.

And in that moment when Vessnya’s face was clenched in pain and anguish from the hit, he felt suddenly the bonds that kept him chained weaken ever-so-slightly ...

But when she recovered and directed a blast of fire at Isacharact, he felt them tighten again. Furiously, he struggled against the intangible chains, trying with all his might to wiggle even just one toe...

And when, looking down, he saw that toe move a bit, it gave him renewed strength. With all his might, he willed his body to respond to his commands.

He felt his hands move down the pommel of his sword and grasp the hilt. Isacharact and Vessnya were locked in a grapple, both of them snapping at the other's heads, and digging all four sets of their claws into the other's underside, tearing and rending the flesh as best they could. With every frenzied blow Isacharact, on top, dealt to Vessnya, below her, he felt himself more and more able to move, until finally he took the sword up and managed to step forward.

Zetic's head whipped around as he heard Isacharact call out to him.

"Help me, Zetic! Finish her off!"

Vessnya, pinned below Isacharact, cried out to him as well.

"No! Kill her, and complete the spell! You can't break free of me just yet..."

He cringed and nearly dropped his sword as he felt his legs and arms lock up, until Isacharact bit down on Vessnya's neck, and he could move again.

"Cut her head off!"

With fury in his eyes, Zetic strode over and lifted his sword upwards. Isacharact grabbed hold of the bottom of Vessnya's neck with her mouth, and pressed down on the red dragon's head with one arm, giving Zetic the perfect opportunity to deal a death-blow to the creature below.

*Too* perfect an opportunity, he realised all of a sudden, and he stopped, his sword held high above his head, staring at the two creatures before him.

Isacharact screeched at him.

"What are you waiting for? Cut it off! Strike! Kill her, and end her madness!"

Vessnya, however, was strangely silent, and looking into her eyes, he saw... fear. Her visage was one of absolute, uncomprehending terror – the terror of someone who couldn't believe what they were seeing.

And in a moment, the faces of the two dragons flashed, and Zetic saw that it was Isacharact pinned on the bottom, looking up at him in horror, and it was Vessnya who was on top, staring at him with fury.

The moment was gone, and Isacharact yelled at him again.

“Don’t fall for her trickery! Kill her, lest her spells consume you!”

Faced with this critical uncertainty, Zetic trembled, his lips twisting, his eyes wide open, his mouth half-open, making the very face of Agony as he fought against the shackles that chained his mind with all his might.

**GET...**  
**OUT OF...**  
**MY...**  
**MIND!!**

The words were screamed so loudly that both dragons before him winced with pain – and in that moment of pain, he saw things as they truly must be: it was Isacharact who was below, with Vessnya holding her down.

Zetic brought his sword down, as his mind blurred the distinction between the two dragons. Time stood still, and with every inch the blade went through the air, the position of the foe and the friend switched, until finally he forced his eyes closed as he forced the blade down.

When it hit – whatever it hit – he felt a tremendous pain and toppled over backwards, shocked into unconsciousness...

Isacharact was able to move again as Vessnya released her death-grip, shut her eyes, and screamed in pain. Zetic’s blade was lodged in her neck, having cut almost the whole way through – but not far enough to sever it entirely, nor to deny Vessnya control over her body, as she futilely scrambled to pull it out with frantic motions of her arms.

Her eyes narrowing down to slits, Isacharact reached up and grabbed the sword handle with one hand and the protruding tip of the blade with the other, and grinned.

“My, how the tables have turned...”

In an instant, Vessnya stopped howling and Isacharact saw her look back with a look of terror. With a snarl, Isacharact pulled as hard as she could.

What seemed like days later, Zetic opened his eyes, blinking several times as they quickly adjusted to the darkness. The cavern felt like it was spinning, and he staggered to his feet.

“I... Isa?”

“Over here.”

He turned to see Isacharact – and it took a second for him to recognize that it was *truly* Isacharact – lying on her side, covered in wounds and blood, going through Vessnya’s possessions: spell-books, gold, gems, jewellery...

“Is... Is she dead?”

Isacharact turned her head and looked behind her at the far corner of the cave, where Zetic saw a great red mass of scales and wings that could only be Vessnya’s corpse. His sword was sticking out of it like a carving knife stuck in a roast turkey, and the body, lying in a deep pool of sickly red blood, had been thoroughly shredded and mutilated – apparently posthumously – by claws, teeth, fists, horns, and even what looked like sword-thrusts.

Zetic felt his stomach turning.

“Oh, Gods, Isa. That was awful. I swear I never want to see that hideous visage again; the very thought of her torments me.”

Isacharact let out a snort and began to smile.

“Oh, then I suppose you *will* mind.”

Zetic slowly turned to her, his head still heavy and his mind still drowsy.

“Mind what?”

She grinned impishly.

“If I keep it.”

Zetic’s heart started to race, and he began to pant heavily. He felt faint.

“Keep *what*?”

Giving him a look-over, she reached one arm around behind her and, to Zetic’s horror, pulled out Vessnya’s severed head, its jaw hanging open, tongue dangling out hideously, golden eyes held open as if drugged. In addition to the scars of battle, the skull was crushed in, both horns had been snapped off, and all of the teeth had been pulled out – acts obviously inflicted after it had been severed.

It was just all too much for him, and he bent over double, throwing up on the cavern floor.

When he was done sputtering, he spoke, still hunched over.

“For heaven’s sake, why on *earth* do you want to keep it?”

Isacharact turned it around and looked at the face head-on, smiling warmly at the grim visage it as if it were a good friend.

“As a trophy, of course. But if you prefer I don’t hold onto it, I’d be satisfied with freezing it and sticking it on a pike outside, as a warning to anyone else who might dare to cross me. The body must be destroyed, however. The Church of Shar has strong ties to the Cult of the Dragon, and I don’t want her coming back as a draco-lich.”

Zetic pulled himself back up, muttering under his breath.

“As if what you did to it wasn’t enough...”

Isacharact growled at him as he ambled over to the corpse. He resolved to watch his tongue while she was in this mood.

“... I can take care of disposing of it.”

Summoning up all of his divine power, he simultaneously blasted the corpse with energy that dematerialized it as he laid a holy blessing over Vessnya’s cave. There was now no way short of divine intervention to bring the creature back to life – or to unlife.

He walked back out in front of Isacharact, who spoke as he went by.

“Did she touch you?”

Zetic glanced back at her nervously. She was still holding Vessnya’s smashed-up head.

“She... um... She kissed me.”

Staring at him, Isacharact’s upper lip curled up into a snarl as her claws dug into the severed head, slowly and forcefully gouging out its eyes with a sickly, gurgling sound that Zetic barely managed to ignore. She hissed at him through clenched teeth.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

He decided it wiser *not* to tell her about the dreams. Isacharact’s mood seemed to lighten, and she stood up, casually tossing the head to one side as if discarding a rotten apple.

“Good. We can clean up in here later. Your cloak is in the corridor outside, and I found your purse in the back. As for your gauntlets... I found a pair in a cauldron full of vile liquid... They’re quite ruined. Anyways, I saw a nice, deep, river to the south of here. Let’s go clean up. I don’t like making love when I’m covered in dirt.”

Zetic started up with a jolt as she walked past him, heading outside.

“Making love?? *Now??*?”

She turned to him with glimmering eyes and a bright smile on her face.

“Of course! After an invigorating battle is the best time, I find. What do you think I did with Norjimaxzol after agreeing to take him? Do you think we sat out there chatting about the weather for two weeks? Of course not; I took him to one of my lairs and promptly gave him an examination...”

Isacharact grinned.

“... A very... *thorough*... examination... We went all night; I still had the blood-lust coursing through my veins, my muscles ached from exhaustion, my body was sore with cuts and bruises, my eyes burned with fatigue, my mind was too tired to even think ...”

She tilted her head and closed her eyes, remembering the occasion.

“...Oh, it was incredible...”

With one eye cocked and his mouth hanging wide open, he had the oddest look on his face when she turned back to face him, still wearing a smile.

“... Trust me, you’ll like it...”

She gently lifted his jaw closed with one hand, and the smile slowly turned into a scowl...

“... And if you *don’t*, then I’ll start thinking that perhaps you *enjoyed* her kiss... and then it won’t just be *her* head in my trophy-room.”

Isacharact walked of the cave, and Zetic, not without some trepidation, wisely hurried after her.

THE ADVENTURES CONTINUE IN  
“RESCUERS AND LOVERS”