

Chronicles of the Mandrake

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Set in the fictional “Forgotten Realms” world of Faerûn

Dramatis Personae

Hex Zetic
Mutated Aberration (Man-Dragon)
Cleric and Hierophant of Torm

Isacharact
Mature Adult Female White Dragon

Meer-Khail
Young Male Avoral

Krasswéh
Ancient Male Black Dragon

Lural Saraendas
Young Adult Male Moon Elf

Queen Amlaruil
Ancient Female Sun Elf
Wizard

The Courtship of Lady Isa

Under the perpetual evening sky of The Seven Mounting Heavens, near the shore of the wine-dark Silver Sea, nestled up against mount Celestia, the enormous palace of the dragon-God Bahamut glittered in all its splendour.

Built of solid marble and ivory, with windows made out of giant gemstones and fine crystal, the immense building was a true testament to the fortunes of dragon-kind.

Bahamut may have been a Just and Good God, but He was still a dragon, and where other greedy drakes built great halls in which to stash their hoard, for Bahamut, the palace practically *was* His hoard, so positively dripping with wealth was it.

Yet, within its hallowed and magnificent halls, He kept many precious items that were not part of the palace itself.

And precious creatures, too...

It was now the third day since the defeat of Swight, and the third day since the audience with Bahamut, and the third day since the Lord of Dragons wove His spell of changing.

For those three days, Isacharact had lain at Zetic's side as he was changed in his deep slumber by the God's magic.

The first step had been to reverse the wicked Red Wizard's corrupted changing, and on the first day, Zetic had shrunk and returned almost to the point of being human again.

Isacharact had watched him, interested in seeing the cleric as he had been before they met, though she got only a muddled glimpse, for Zetic had kept his wings, and tail, and rubbery grey scale-less skin.

On the second day, he changed little on the outside. Instead, the magic worked on his insides, igniting the great flame that burns in the bellies of gold drakes, changing his heart to beat to a draconic rhythm, and reconstructing his mind in new ways.

During the many long hours of that day, he shivered in his sleep as if caught by a demonic fever. Isacharact had been buttressed up against him, but as the tremors had become fiercer, she had feared her own frigid body was causing it, and withdrew.

But then Zetic seemed only to shudder even more, so, an hour later, she returned to his side.

Just as on the night they had first met, her presence – however cold and frosty it was – brought him comfort, and he seemed to calm down, though never quite fully, and Isacharact awoke several times in the night as he lapsed in and out of harsh quaking.

At last, the fever seemed to pass, and Isacharact was able to sleep for a few hours, awakening late on the third day, intrigued as the final stage of spell began.

Zetic was growing golden scales, a dull aquatic yellow on the back and sides and a more solid-looking gilded bronze making up tougher plates along the front. His head was being reshaped, with a gold and white mane and two gazelle-like spiralled brown horns sprouting from it. The body changed form, becoming longer and sinuous, more serpentine. Four bundles of whiskers – two from the cheeks, two from the chin – grew out from his face, and a few pointed canine teeth began to poke out through his lips.

These and many other things happened, representing the last steps in the transformation. The physical changes had come very slowly at first, but had quickly sped up to the point that Isacharact could practically see him age before her very eyes, growing from a human-sized wyrmling to a juvenile gold dragon of twice and twice again that length – for it was no longer appropriate to speak of his size in terms of height – in mere hours.

And then... it had seemed to stop, and Isacharact was confused.

He was about the same size as he had been as an aberrant grey, but that was still much smaller than her, and for a gold dragon, he looked like he was barely an adult. Zetic wasn't exactly an old man, but he certainly was not a child. Why, then, would Bahamut place him into the form of a juvenile dragon?

The immense door of the great room creaked open, and a silver-skinned and blue-eyed man slowly walked in, as if to answer her question.

“He has much to learn, little one. It would not be proper for him to leap so far forward into dragon adulthood, without having passed through youth first.”

Isacharact gasped as she recognized the God, but it was a much different appearance than before. More... casual. Relaxed. No blinding divine light, no thunderous voice. Not even a mighty dragon form. Looking like this, any fears she had of Him seemed to disappear.

Bahamut walked over to Zetic and touched him on the forehead, examining His own work.

“The spell is not over, however... I have merely slowed it down. Zetic will continue to grow faster than would be normal, at least for a time.”

“How much time?”

The God took a few steps away from Zetic and looked up at Isacharact.

“Enough. Enough for him to have learned what it means to be one of us. When the spell is over, he will be an adult, and he will have reached enlightenment.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Not an easy journey, for one who grew up as so different a creature.”

The human avatar almost smirked at her.

“I am sure that help will present itself.”

She looked back at Him, and barely restrained speaking in an offensive tone – she *was* speaking to a *God*, after all.

“You expect *me* to ‘teach’ him how to be a dragon?”

Bahamut chuckled.

“Not at all, Isacharact. You are free to do what you please; I will lay no geas on you. There is not even anything binding you here, save wishing to enjoy my hospitality. But as for *him*...”

He gestured at Zetic.

“You’ve done well as his tutor so far. Why not continue? I’m sure that he would be... *appreciative*... of your efforts...”

Isacharact’s eyes followed the God as He backed out the door.

“... and, for that matter, so would I.”

Bahamut shut the door behind Him, and Isacharact was alone with Zetic once more. She looked down at his immobile form.

So... Bahamut wanted her to help raise this man, and turn him into a real dragon?

Well... maybe. She had to admit that Zetic was fairly amusing to be around. There didn’t seem to be any particular reason *not* to stay with him for a while, and the cleric’s point about the Gods helping mortals when they needed it certainly had been proven in the face of *two* divine interventions, one straight after the other.

Speaking pragmatically, it didn’t seem like a bad idea to do Bahamut –and Torm, too – a favour by teaching Zetic. The two lawful Gods were known for repaying their mortal creditors well, and this debt might be worth something down the road.

And then, of course, there *was* the fact that she had chosen to remain with him in the palace’s room...

As she was thinking on this, Zetic’s breathing changed. It was no longer slow and light, but became deep and fast, and Isacharact felt him wake up.

Two yellow-scaled eyelids opened, revealing underneath eyes the colour of molten gold.

Zetic raised his neck up a few feet, his mouth hanging open.

“Is this a dream, or am I awake again at last?”

Isacharact had restrained herself with Bahamut, but she resolved to speak with Zetic in the harsh tone that used with all others. ‘Tutor him in the ways of the dragon’, the God had so much as asked; well, then – let the first lesson be about projecting power.

“You do not dream, cleric.”

Zetic blinked, but didn’t move. He was facing away from her, staring at the wall, eyes wide, mouth hanging.

“Then... then is my transformation complete?”

“Sufficiently so.”

Zetic looked around the room; his pupils were barely distinguishable against the golden background that was the ‘white’ of his eye, but Isacharact could nonetheless tell that they were darting around in their sockets.

“A mirror. I need a mirror. Does the room have a mirror?”

He was breathing quickly, almost stuttering. Isacharact remained calm, cold.

“On the wall behind you, cleric.”

Zetic sharply turned his neck around to see it, and Isacharact caught a glimpse of the worried look on his face. Still breathing quickly, he got up and hurried past her to the mirror, scrambling over the pillows on all fours.

He put his face right in front of it, stood up on two feet, and stared at his reflection for almost a minute straight, putting a hand up into his hair and tossing it around, and then tilting his head in all directions. Hands ran over his face, examining the teeth within, the whiskers hanging off, and the two new protruding horns at the back.

Isacharact watched him with a disinterested air ... but she couldn’t have expected what happened next.

The look of worry on Zetic’s face changed to one of horror.

“Oh... Oh Gods, what have I done?”

Isacharact blinked and started up. Zetic yammered on, his breathing quickening further.

“I... Wha... It’s...”

He burst into tears and sobbed for a few moments, still looking at himself in the mirror.

“What devilry infests me? What foolishness compelled me to do this to myself?”

Isacharact was stunned at the outburst and didn’t really have a clue what to say. Not that she could interject at the moment, given the way he was ranting on, speaking as he groped at his face.

“I... I mean... good Gods, a dragon proper! With hair, and horns, and claws, and scales, and wings, and teeth! No longer a man, but a winged beast, instead! Oh, it’s worse, so much worse than any horror I could’ve imagined in Swight’s dungeon, and yet it is a horror that I inflicted upon *myself*! No, no, no, no, no, it wasn’t meant to be! I... I have made a grave mistake in asking for this.”

There was a break as he resumed sobbing, and Isacharact tried to calm Zetic down by speaking to him in her chilling voice.

“And did Bahamut make a mistake in granting it to you? Swight would envy what you have become... had he not become a meal for *me*, instead. But many are those besides him who would say you had been given a great gift.”

Zetic half-turned to her, still mortified by his own image.

“A gift?... A gift for a fool, maybe. For I have been acting the part of one ever since I was freed from my imprisonment.”

Isacharact continued to coldly debate him.

“Your Lord Torm must have approved of your actions to have answered your call for help during the battle with Swight.”

But Zetic’s horror only magnified, and an unearthly grimace compounded itself on top of his tears and whimpering.

“My Lord Torm! And what will He say to all this? I... I have failed as His faithful servant. Asking to be turned into a dragon, indeed! Selfish! Rash! Stupid!”

Breathing at a rate that surpassed panic, Zetic turned back to the mirror, clutching at the scaly skin of his face and shaking his head.

“Greedy! Unthinking! Uncaring! It’s too much! Too much to ask of Torm, that He should forgive this transgression. Where did my training go? Where was my responsibility? What have I squandered my life for? Why? Why? Why? Wh—”

Zetic’s eyes rolled back in his head and his eyelids shut as he toppled over, fainting.

Isacharact’s eyes opened wide to watch him fall, and in spite of the seriousness of the moment and seeing the deep troubles that Zetic was having, she let out a snort and began to laugh aloud.

So much for the stout cleric’s durability! He could stand weeks in a hellish prison, but couldn’t even face himself in the mirror! If he couldn’t *live* with this new form, then *learning* about it might be a bit difficult, hah!

It was all rather hilarious, and Isacharact had trouble containing her harsh laughter.

But Zetic was still solid, in a sense, for he quickly came-to. As he got up on two feet again, Isacharact stopped laughing and began to speak.

“A fool you have been indeed, cleric, but not in the way you think. You’ve met and have been given a tremendous gift from Bahamut, your own God personally intervened to help you defeat Swight, you are now here in this magnificent palace, with exquisite things all around, and you have the *audacity* to believe that you have done something foolish?”

He silently stared at her as she lectured to him, his head turned a quarter away and an anxious look on his face.

“Look at yourself, unless you truly are a cleric of Idiocy instead of Torm! Do you think Bahamut would have granted you this shape, were it a foolish request? He is known to give evil creatures their ‘just desserts’, but you are not evil. And do you think your own God disproves of this, either? Surely He would not allow His faithful servant to be molested by a divine enemy.”

Isacharact spoke on in a harsh tone as Zetic looked at the floor, silently conceding her point.

“And one final thing, even! You gave me a lesson in faith in the Gods on the first day I met you, though I was not ignorant of the Gods themselves. Yet now you seem to have now forgotten your very own religion.”

Isacharact leaned forward with a grin on her face.

“So, I ask you, who is Torm? How does your Lord appear? Remind yourself aloud of the answers to those questions.”

Zetic took a deep breath and was no longer hyperventilating. He replied with a defeated look that approached a grin.

“Torm, The True, The Loyal Fury. A mortal man who selflessly and faithfully followed the commands of his good king, sacrificing His life in the line of duty, and raised to godhood because of it. He appears as a greying raven-haired man in golden-coloured armour, wielding a greatsword, ‘Duty’s Bond’.”

Isacharact seized on the pause to lean even further over, egging Zetic on.

“And riding?”

Another deep breath from the man-turned-drake, and a sheepish grin as he spoke out the answer that both of them already knew.

“And riding Sharamétan... a Gold Dragon.”

Isacharact breathed out strongly through her nose and showed a toothy grin, very satisfied at this little verbal victory.

“There you have it, then. Not so far from your God, after all.”

Zetic turned back to the mirror.

“You are right, Isacharact... My Lord Torm must love me still, and He and Bahamut have given me a great gift, an incredible reward for my humble service... But, even so... it’s such a tremendous change, with so many things to discover! I managed to figure out flying, but I couldn’t even grasp eating or drinking on my own...”

He held his clawed hands up to his face.

“And if my Lord Torm has given, than he has also taken away, for I don’t have any of my old possessions. I don’t have my armour, or my cloak, or my ordained vestments, or even my sword! How am I supposed to do battle without a sword?”

Isacharact let out a growl.

“You’re still playing the part of a fool, apparently. Dragons do not need *swords* to defend themselves. I was quite easily destroying more foes than all the Red Wizard swordsmen combined during that battle with Swight. If you had had any thoughts of remaining a dragon then, you should’ve been paying attention to me.”

Zetic glanced at her, swallowed deeply, and looked off to one side, speaking slowly.

“As a matter of fact... I... *was*... paying attention to you... though... for... *other*... reasons...”

His eyes flashed up at her and he swallowed again before returning to staring at the ground.

“...*unworthy*... reasons.”

Isacharact’s eyes narrowed and her mouth clenched shut as she watched Zetic look at the floor in self-pity and reflection, his arms limp at his sides.

So... This man-dragon *was* enamoured with her! She had thought as much, given how he had behaved earlier. ‘Tasted of the beauty of Your kind’, indeed! An elegant but thoroughly saccharine way of describing his infatuation to the God.

And yet he did seem to have some... interesting... qualities. Hardy – with a strong will to survive. A good speaker, possessing a certain degree of... *personal charm*. Not bad at flying – for someone who only picked it up in a few days. And it *had* been a while since she had left her last mate. Perhaps it was time to take another.

Yes... and if it was not time to accept a new one, then at least it was time to let one *try*.

Very well, then! Let the courtship games, the mating rites, begin... but first, a test... to see if this cleric was *solid* enough for her... and a demonstration, too, to ensure that he knew what he was getting into.

Barely ten seconds had passed since Zetic had last spoken, and he was still staring at the floor, feeling sorry for himself and thinking about all that had happened.

It came as quite a surprise to him when Isacharact suddenly got up, turned herself around to face him, stared straight into his eyes, and began to emit from deep in her throat what sounded like a cross between a purr and a low growl.

He turned to face her... and felt her sharp gaze.

Then there was another surprise for him as she took a step forward.

And another.

Zetic's only reply was to look back, hypnotized.

Isacharact took another step, but Zetic didn't notice it, bound to her almost supernatural stare... one that had terrorised plenty of others before, including her previous mates and suitors – and including *him* only a few days ago.

She continued walking forwards. As she took each step, she remembered a list of creatures who had either broken down or simply taken to their heels at that point.

Zetic began to slowly back off, apparently oblivious to the fact that there wasn't much room behind him to back off *into*.

There had been ten, but now there were only five steps between them.

Another step. Four to go. This close, a pack of frost giants who had come to slay her many years ago had fled her lair.

There was a look of terror in Zetic's face, and he took another step back without looking.

And Isacharact chuckled under her breath, for in doing so, he managed to trip over his own tail, and fell flat on his back, still staring back.

Another majestic step. Three to go. When she had advanced this close to a suitor of hers – a large green dragon – he had let out a yelp and fled as fast as his wings could carry him.

Zetic's breathing became rapid, and he began uselessly scuttling away from her.

She took another step forward. Two to go. This is as far as she had ever needed to get with anyone, and she had scared a large female red dragon out of her territory with it.

The cleric-turned-drake was frozen on the ground, fingers twitching involuntarily, eyes open as wide as they could get, breathing becoming laboured, completely terrorized by the dragon who was over three times his mass and whose head, when she was down on four feet, still managed to be higher than his own, when he was standing on two.

Of course, when he was *lying* on his back, she towered over him even more. Isacharact looked down at him, amused.

Another step forward, then! One to go.

Isacharact opened her mouth more, and the growl changed in tone and pitch, becoming more breathy. Zetic could feel a gush of cold air wash over him, and his jaw started to shiver as he had to tilt his head back to remain locked in the gaze...

She bent over and brought her mouth within a few feet of Zetic, who whipped his head to the side, cringed, and pressed himself flat against the ground, trying to get as far away from her as possible.

There was no other step to take. No closer could she get to him. She held the pose for a few seconds before speaking.

“Pathetic, cleric. I would’ve thought you’d be hardier than this.”

Nothing but a whimper came from Zetic, and Isacharact withdrew her head, no longer bending over at him.

“Well, come on, get up.”

He turned his head back up at her and swallowed deeply before getting to his feet.

Isacharact backed off to the other side of the room.

It took more than a few moments for Zetic’s breath – and courage – to return.

“What was *that* about?”

Isacharact smirked at him.

“Oh, many things, cleric... But first and foremost, a lesson. *If* you’re going to remain as a dragon, then you’d better learn to control yourself. It isn’t appropriate for one of us to shrink away from an adversary.”

Zetic seemed to take her words to heart, and despite being considerably shaken, he soon regained the playful demeanour that she remembered from before his transformation.

“Are you to be my adversary, then, Isacharact?”

There was an icy twinkle in her eyes as she replied.

“Maybe... But your tutor, as well, to teach you in the ways of dragon-kind.”

All signs of the terror that had completely consumed him only moments ago disappeared, and he looked up with a bright look on his face.

“And to what do I owe this honour?”

She squinted at him and spoke dismissively.

“To Bahamut. The Lord of Dragons has asked this task of me.”

Zetic gave a bow.

“My thanks to you and He both, then.”

Isacharact watched the gesture with interest, and then breathed in and out deeply, looking around the room.

“Are you hungry?”

Still bent over, he tilted his head up at her.

“Pardon?”

“I haven’t had anything to eat since... Well, since *Swight* three days ago. It’s almost supper time, now.”

Zetic slowly stood up straight again.

“Er... well, uh... of course, of course... And even if I wasn’t, many tales are told of the incredible table that Bahamut sets out for his guests. We must—”

He saw Isacharact’s eyes narrow.

Oops. Wake up, Zetic. You and she aren’t a ‘we’ – at least, not yet.

“Ah, I mean you and I...”

Idiot, that’s just the *definition* of ‘we’. Pick a better term, and quick!

“I mean, *one* must not miss an opportunity such as this.”

Zetic walked over to the exit with Isacharact eyeing him suspiciously. He opened the door and stood to one side, bowing again – very deeply and graciously, this time. With one hand grasping the impeccably hinged and perfectly balanced door – which required no holding whatsoever – he held the way open for her.

“After you, my Lady Isacharact.”

Isacharact gathered herself and proudly walked out the door on all fours. It was good to see a bit of humility from this suitor, after that little presumptuous slip.

As she passed Zetic by, she inhaled deeply.

Yes... an interesting courtship it would be, indeed. For he was an amusing character, pleasant to be with... and now, with this transformation...

Not at all displeasing to the eye.

Isacharact half-shut her eyes in contemplation of delights to come as she walked through the door, grinning to herself.

Zetic was still bowed and facing the ground when he felt something whip by in front of him. Looking up, he saw Isacharact's tail wagging in the air behind her as she walked off.

Had she intentionally flailed it out near his face?

He became fascinated with the tail, watching it wave in the air. It was very... teasing. And while all he had managed to do so far was trip over his own, she seemed to have a very fine and expert control over hers.

Without realising it, Zetic's own tail began to slowly wag from side to side as his eyes intently followed Isacharact ...

Good Gods, man, what are you doing, staring at her like that? With the way you fumbled just a few seconds ago, not to mention the way you were frightened of her like a little child, you think you've still got a chance?

Well... she *did* lash her tail out in front of me.

And what's that supposed to mean, then?

I think it means... she's interested.

Zetic's newly-forked tongue darted out between his lips, tasting the air, and its sudden appearance made him jump with surprise. Opening his mouth, he pulled the strange thing out again and stared at it for a bit, examining it.

It certainly is *long*.

Staring at his tongue now. Lovely. Hex, my good man, perhaps you'd care to stop staring at your own body like a dummy and get back to the task of hand?

What task at hand?

Dinner, you silly sod.

Finished with that little internal argument, Zetic quickly shut the door and hastily hurried along after Isacharact.

But that hastiness was a mistake. The slipperiness of the marble floor and of his own scaly feet, compounded with a distinct lack of balance, produced several slips, slides, and near-falls along the way.

After one particularly hairy incident, he reluctantly got down on all fours – perhaps unwilling to abandon some part of his past bipedal form, or perhaps self-consciously believing it a ridiculous way to travel – and then had considerably less trouble following the corridor.

The great dining-hall of Bahamut's palace has all the characteristics that one might expect it to have.

Immense size to hold huge numbers of dragon-sized guests. Brilliant illumination to drive away darkness. Incredible decorations made of precious materials. Massive windows that look out off the slope of Mount Celestia down onto the Silver Sea below and up at the starry heavens above. Behind the scenes, an uncountable number of servants preparing and serving an equally uncountable number of dishes.

And, of course, a host of powerful and mighty guests – though no doubt many of the palace's residents, temporary or otherwise, took their meals separate from the great hall.

Zetic was awed by the magnificence of the affair... and he breathed in deeply, wishing to take in the odour of the sweet food which had already caught his eye.

It smelled delicious, and his mouth started to water as Isacharact walked off to one of the banquet tables.

Around the room, eyes stopped what they were doing to watch her enter. Most of the guests were well aware of the fact that it had been a considerable length of time – centuries, at least – since a *chromatic* dragon, an evil creation of Tiamat, had been in Bahamut's palace. On the other hand, they were also most of them aware of the rather special story of her, of Zetic, and of their victory over Swight.

Isacharact returned the stares while still walking towards the food, and all those pairs of eyes upon which her gaze fell were soon averted in the face of her chilling look.

She smiled to herself, smug and satisfied, and walked on as Zetic remained behind, still standing at the entrance to the doorway.

He sensed something new... There was another smell... no, wait, other *smells*.

Zetic sniffed at the air several times, and suddenly realised that he could... smell... the other dragons.

It wasn't that they were actually giving off a new odour, or that his sense of smell had been honed to an existing one; instead, it was as if someone had cast a spell called 'detect dragons' upon him, and its effect was to grant the ability to sense the presence of dragons by experiencing a new 'scent'.

Stopping the useless sniffing, he looked around the room. The smells seemed to match up to what he saw. A large silver wyrm smelled old. A pair of brass drakes smelled mated. He could practically *taste* the power that radiated from a colossal gold. The other several dozen dragons in the room all had their own unique 'scent' which revealed their nature.

And then... and then there was Isacharact.

The cleric-turned-dragon's eyes went wide and he felt a sudden urge to back away, for whatever this new sense was, it was telling him that she was *dangerous* beyond belief, and that he was a fool for not having already started to run.

The sense of terror decreased as she got further away... but not by much.

Zetic was taken aback as he realised that had he been able to feel her in *this* way when she had charged him, he would've scrambled off, probably so gripped by primal fear that he would've slammed straight into the mirror that had been behind him.

As it stood, all he'd managed to do was trip over his own tail. Better than running into a wall, he supposed. But even having experienced it once and come out safely, Zetic didn't if know he could take it a second time while being able to feel her presence in this way.

He swallowed deeply and headed over to the table. The 'scent' was even making him feel weak at the thought of having to remain in the same room as her.

"Is this all that you have?"

Isacharact was looking over the massive table of foods and speaking to a lantern archon petitioner – a glowing ball of light that was the embodiment of some long-dead good soul.

"All that we have tonight, yes. Was there something in particular that you desired?"

The archon was speaking back in a typical almost-musical voice, apparently unaffected by Isacharact's somewhat offensive tone.

"I usually prefer my food more... *frozen*."

Zetic was still looking over the incredible feast before them.

"You didn't seem to mind Captain Montague's roast lamb."

“It was a tolerable diversion. The hot meat from their grill was... interesting, but I prefer to eat things which are cold.”

The archon, meanwhile, had already thought up a suggestion.

“I cannot think of any frozen *food* on the table tonight, my Lady, but we do have frozen *drink*: ice wine, from Sembia.”

Isacharact looked up at the archon, and it talked on.

“Several vintages, even. I recommend this year’s white, it has so far won great acclaim amongst our Lord’s guests.”

“That sounds interesting. How about you, cleric?”

She turned to him with the archon standing by.

“None for me, thank you. I don’t drink.”

“No?”

“No. I swore an oath of temperance upon entering Torm’s service.”

The archon left to obtain Isacharact’s drink.

“What a shame, cleric. You’re missing out on the delights of the world. And after all, what’s the point of having life – and wealth, too – if you can’t enjoy it?”

Zetic seemed indignant.

“As a matter of fact, I *do* enjoy life, and quite well enough without alcohol.”

“Whatever you say, though you needn’t worry about becoming *drunk*, now. Dragons eat and drink what they please, and there are seldom ill consequences of any kind for what they consume.”

His only reply was to snort as they both began to take food from the table and place it on plates. In-between choosing items, Isacharact glanced over at Zetic.

“Do you have any *other* unusual vows I should be aware of?”

Zetic continued to look at food, though he spoke in an animated voice.

“Oh, not really... Well, except for one...”

She looked at him sideways.

“... Just a little vow... of chastity before marriage.”

And now it was Isacharact's to snort. 'Little', indeed. Zetic, meanwhile, was staring at a bowl full of small white spheres.

“Are those... *pearls*?”

She glanced over at the bowl.

“Yes.”

“For *eating*?”

“One would presume so, cleric, given that they are on a table of *food*.”

Zetic shook his head dismissively.

“Eating and drinking what they please is one thing, but some dragons certainly have very strange tastes.”

Isacharact smiled slyly at him.

“Actually, pearls are considered a delicacy by *gold* dragons.”

The golden cleric started up at her, incredulous, before looking at the bowl again.

“Perhaps I should try one, then.”

She opened her eyes wide and spoke with good humour.

“Perhaps you should.”

He picked one up and put it in his mouth, as if eating a sweet candy. But pearls are most definitely *not* sweet, and Zetic scrunched up his face as if he'd just eaten a lemon.

“Ohhh... it's *incredibly* salty.”

His eyes became watery, but both of his hands were presently holding his plate. It seemed only natural, therefore, that his tail should come up to wipe the tears.

Seemed only natural – except to Zetic, for when he realised with what appendage he was presently mopping his face, his head recoiled from it, and he watched it closely as it returned to its normal place behind him.

“*That* thing is going to take a little getting used to.”

Isacharact chuckled, having watched him while she had filled up her plate.

“At least you didn't trip over it, this time. But, tell me... What happens if you violate any of those oaths of which you were just speaking?”

“I would have to atone. There would be a... penance... to pay.”

A rather mischievous grin escaped Isacharact’s face.

“Enjoy your dinner, cleric.”

Flashing her eyes at him, she turned and left.

Zetic looked around the room. There were a few clusters, but generally speaking, the guests were keeping to themselves. Not entirely a surprise, given that most of them were dragons, and dragons are reclusive creatures. Even Zetic now felt somehow naturally compelled to avoid the other drakes, and though he had no trouble suppressing the urge, he decided it would nonetheless be best *not* to seek them out for ‘chit-chat’.

He still wanted company, though, and turned his attention to the non-dragons as he circled the room, trying to decide with whom to sit... Not those Mercanes who seemed to be caught up in their own internal discussion, though one of them gave a small bow as he walked by. Nor the band of lupine Hound Archons who were looking at him somewhat warily – as they were looking at everyone, really. *Definitely* not the group of rather secluded-looking storm giants who barely glanced his way.

Having passed by half the room, Zetic suddenly felt watched... and he looked across the room to the window, where a winged Avoral was staring intently at him.

The other noticed the attention in return, and nodded ever-so-slightly.

Zetic headed over.

“Greet-ings, I am Meer-Khahi.”

Speaking an almost mechanical stutter that made him pronounce all the syllables evenly, the Avoral bowed his head slightly as Zetic approached.

Zetic bowed back.

“I am Hex Zetic.”

Meer-Khahi’s head moved around with a darting motion and he replied in the same flat, even-paced tone.

“So I have-heard. It is a plea-sure to meet you.”

Zetic looked over the creature before him as he sat down on the marble floor. Standing about ten feet high, Meer-Khahi was a typical Avoral – at least, typical so far as Zetic had heard, for he had never actually *met* one before. The creature before him had the head, wings, body, and feet of a hawk, but the more erect posture and thicker legs of a man. Feathered arms ended in clawed hands, one of which was presently holding a small bowl of soup.

Though he looked imposing enough without it, Meer-Khahi was also wearing a solid-looking steel breastplate that covered his chest from the shoulders to the groin. There were two swords slung on his back in addition to a quiver of arrows.

Far more prominently displayed, however, was a bright-red and very fine-looking small bow that was hanging on his left side, still strung tightly.

Zetic may have been a swordsman himself, but he knew other weapons well, and based on the bow's construction he guessed – correctly – that it could hit a man-sized target a mile away with great accuracy, assuming its wielder was strong enough to draw the tiny bow back and knock an arrow, as well as being far-sighted enough to *see* the target.

Meer-Khahi looked the part.

“What is it that you do, Meer-Khahi?”

The enormous eyes stared straight at him emotionlessly, though the head in which they were embedded seemed to now have a little less difficulty with speaking.

“I am a hunt-er of e-vil dra-gons. To-day, and for the last twen-ty days, I am rest-ing after a ra-ther fierce batt-le with a black dra-gon.”

“I trust you were victorious.”

“I al-ways am.”

The resolute answer sparked a certain curiosity in Zetic.

“You're not native to this plane of Celestia, are you, Meer-Khahi?”

“No. From-the neigh-bour plane of Ar-ca-di-a, I am. Place of jus-tice ap-plied vi-go-rous-ly to the be-ne-fit of all.”

He paused, but Zetic decided not to ask another question, sensing that the Avoral was going to ask one of his own.

Meer-Khahi took a sip from his soup, and Zetic saw that he had been correct.

“I have heard some of your in-cre-di-ble sto-ry, Ze-tic. De-fea-ted a man who would make him-self a red dra-gon. Ve-ry diff-i-cult, I am sure. I un-der-stand that you have e-ven met Ba-ha-mut Him-self...”

Zetic was surprised.

“And you haven’t? Aren’t you His guest here?”

“Tech-ni-ca-lly, yes, but I have ne-ver met Him in per-son.”

Another silence, and another sip from the bowl of soup.

“Hence why I would be most pleased if you would tell me the sto-ry of how you came to meet Him.”

Zetic smiled at this statement, having anticipated it.

“Gladly.”

And so, he told the Avoral of everything that had happened since his party had entered Swight’s castle on that fateful day...

But he casually left out some of the more... personal... parts. The parts involving Isacharact. Meer-Khahi didn’t seem to be too interested in *those* aspects of the tale anyhow, mostly asking questions about the battles and the soldiers.

By the time he was done, Zetic’s plate was empty, Meer-Khahi’s bowl was finished, and the sky outside had grown just a little darker.

“A ve-ry in-ter-es-ting story, friend Ze-tic. I won-der... you said that you did batt-le with a two-han-ded sword be-fore. Will you con-ti-nue to use swords as a dra-gon?”

“That’s a very good question... I don’t know the answer, really. To tell the truth, I haven’t even held a sword in my hands since before Swight captured me. I wonder what happened to my own ... it’s probably long-lost by now, but, you know... one develops a certain attachment to one’s equipment.”

“Yes, quite na-tu-ra-lly. I would be ver-y up-set to lose a-ny of my batt-le gear, though much of it is re-place-a-ble. Still... I have a pro-po-si-ti-on you may per-haps find in-ter-es-ting. I pre-fer to fight with the bow, but I re-ly al-so up-on the sword. In my time rest-ing here I have been look-ing for a sparr-ing part-ner, but no dra-gons use swords, and the other Cel-es-ti-als re-fuse me.”

“Really? They refuse you? Why?”

“They say I am too young to spar with them. They cod-dle me.”

“How old are you, actually?”

“One hun-dred and sev-en-ty-se-ven...”

Meer-Khahi saw the look of astonishment in Zetic’s face.

“... but that is con-si-der-ed quite young for a Cel-es-ti-al.”

“I see. Well, I would be glad to train with you, though I’m afraid I haven’t got a sword to train *with*.”

The Avoral didn’t really have lips to make the expression, but Zetic could swear he was smirking as he put down the bowl and reached both of his arms over his head to draw his two swords at the same time.

“Not a prob-lem. I al-ways car-ry a spare. Per-haps you would like to fight now?”

Zetic looked around the hall; it had emptied somewhat since the start of dinner, and there seemed to be plenty of room for manoeuvring. He spied Isacharact sitting over in a far corner, an empty platter beside her, and a large gold goblet in her hand.

“Why not?”

Meer-Khahi handed him one of the swords – it was two-handed for the Avoral, but was just barely big enough for one of Zetic’s hands – and they moved into the centre of the room.

A few of the other guests turned their attentions towards the show they expected to see...

Meer-Khahi spoke a word of command, and his sword became wreathed in flame. He twirled it around in one hand.

... And now a few more of those present turned to look at the pair of swordsmen.

“A flaming sword? Yet I can see clearly enough that this one you’ve given me is without enchantment. That hardly seems fair.”

The huge eyes blinked.

“You must be jo-king, Ze-tic? You are a gold dra-gon. Fire can-not hurt you–”

Zetic frowned. Of *course* fire couldn’t hurt him. He had learned of dragons’ various immunities ages ago. They had never seemed particularly important, at least until now.

“–and it is sure-ly *you* who has the ad-van-tage, for you-can *breathe* fire as well.”

Meer-Khahi’s words made Zetic do a double-take. Of *course* he could breathe fire.

“You’re... you’re absolutely right, Meer-Khahi. I had completely forgotten about fire not hurting gold drakes. As for *breathing* it... I’m sure that I can, but I never *have*.”

The Avoral lowered his sword.

“One of my mas-ters al-ways says, ‘there is no time like the pres-ent’.”

Zetic grinned and turned slightly to one side.

“All right, let’s give this a try.”

He drew in breath several times to warm up, and then puffed outwards as hard as he could.

Only the sound of air came from his lips.

Zetic tried again.

And again.

And again.

No luck creating fire, though! He only managed to create the rather embarrassing sound of exhaled breath.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Zetic smiled as he heard the booming words, though he was facing away from the speaker.

“I am trying to breathe fire, obviously.”

Isacharact snorted amusedly from behind him before speaking the ‘line’ that was expected of her.

“No, dragon-man, you are *failing* to breathe fire, making a fool of yourself here in the centre of the room, instead.”

Zetic turned around to face her, a wide grin on his face. He barely noticed the fact that Meer-Khahi was now intently staring at Isacharact.

“Your pardon, my Lady Isacharact, but I am *still* new at this being-a-dragon job. Perhaps, as you are now my divinely-appointed tutor, you would care to educate me in the procedures for breathing fire?”

The two drakes smirked at each other briefly in silence until Isacharact rolled her eyes and breathed in mock exasperation.

“Very well. Try again, but breathe from the belly, not the throat.”

Zetic tried to do as she asked, but obtained only the same result as before.

“No, from the belly. Take a deeper breath.”

Another puff, but still nothing came out.

“Put more power into it.”

The same as before.

“Try swallowing deeply first.”

Again, nothing.

“Far too shallow. Breathe deeply, fill your lungs.”

All Zetic managed to do was put out a very loud and drawn out ‘pehhh’ sound. He was becoming slightly annoyed at Isacharact’s instructions which had so far proven useless.

“My Lady, with all this talk of breathing from the chest, I can’t tell whether you are teaching me to summon forth fire or to *sing*.”

Isacharact had been growing impatient at Zetic’s failures as well, and she quickly snapped back with a growl.

“Then sing instead, cleric, if that is all you can do!”

She huffed loudly and started to walk away.

Zetic quickly realised that his snarky comment had been a mistake, but there didn’t seem to be any way of directly undoing it, so instead he did as she suggested, and suddenly began to sing a chorale.

Meer-Khaii glanced at him briefly as the song started up, but as Isacharact had stopped and turned around, he resumed watching her.

The choral, “Verdant Justice”, is a popular one in the Church of Torm. It begins slowly and softly, but very quickly becomes rousing, almost like a battle-song.

It is fairly short, however, and Zetic soon reached the end, with Isacharact – not to mention many of the other people in the room, save Meer-Khaii – looking at him as he held the last note for several seconds.

He had intended to hold it for several more, but suddenly his voice disappeared, his eyes bulged out, he turned away from Isacharact, and he threw his hands around his neck, apparently choking on something.

Zetic sputtered loudly and then turned his head up, swallowed, opened his mouth, and blew out a column of fire that stretched almost a hundred feet into the air.

Thankfully, the ceiling was higher than that, and Zetic quickly snapped his mouth shut again... but he felt like some muscle in his throat was *stuck*. He could feel fire burning at his palate, and smoke hissed out the sides of his mouth.

The feeling of a muscle being ‘caught’ intensified, and Zetic, with one hand covering his mouth, started to repeatedly hit the back of his own head with his right fist in an effort to unstick it.

It wasn't working, though. He opened his mouth a tiny crack, and flames rushed out as he spoke.

"I'm... it's stuck!"

He was still pounding away when Isacharact turned to one side and, wearing an amused open-mouth grin, solidly smacked him square on the back of the head with her tail, sending him flying forty feet forward and skidding another dozen along the ground.

The sudden jolt worked, though, and Zetic could breathe normally again. He raised himself up back on two feet, caught his breath, and walked back to his previous position.

"Ah... Thank you, my Lady Isacharact. Your help, as always, is appreciated."

Suddenly confident, he turned to one side and effortlessly let out a tiny blast of fire.

"And it appears that your advice was useful, after all."

She smirked back at him.

"Very good. But don't get let it get to your head. You still have plenty to learn about control... and about power."

With that, she quickly blew out a small cone-shaped blast of cold that hit Zetic straight-on and forced him to hunch over for protection.

Meer-Khahi immediately readied his sword in response.

But Zetic was unharmed. He felt awake... more awake than he had ever felt before, as if he had just been dunked in extremely cold water.

He stood still for a few moments, shivering, his eyes wide open, his breathing accelerated to an intense pace, icicles already dangling from his nostrils, and frost coming from his mouth as he breathed.

My Gods, the frigid River Styx in the hells below has *nothing* on her!

So cold, so draining...

And yet... and yet the feeling was so *invigorating*, too.

Incredible...

But Zetic was pulled from his thoughts as Meer-Khahi began to talk in a harsh tone, sword drawn and held with its tip angled towards Isacharact.

"Step a-way from him, white she-dra-gon!"

Isacharact began to growl at him, and the Avoral tensed up further.

Zetic, meanwhile, was still somewhat in a daze.

“What are you doing, Meer-Khahi?”

He glanced over at Zetic.

“Stop-ping *her* from harm-ing you fur-ther. Ve-ry dan-ger-ous, this one is.”

“After having seen her fight, I agree. But I’m not in any danger.”

Isacharact was still growling at Meer-Khahi, and the Avoral, unwilling to let her out of his sight, was forced to switch his gaze back and forth between the two dragons.

“Oh rea-lly? Do you know with whom, ex-act-ly, you are dea-ling?”

Zetic stood up all the way and spoke definitively.

“She is Isacharact the White.”

“And is that *all* that you know a-bout her, Ze-tic?”

“It is all I’ve needed to know.”

As Isacharact stopped growling, Meer-Khahi guffawed.

“Not a-ny more!–”

He lowered his sword slightly and looked straight at Zetic, gesticulating at Isacharact as he spoke.

“–For this is no mere white drake, norm-all-y the wea-kest spe-cies of dra-gon-kind. *This* crea-ture is the daugh-ter of I-sa-sa-rach of the North.”

Meer-Khahi saw Zetic flinch at this.

“Ah, I see that you do at the least know of her mo-ther.”

Zetic swallowed and glanced up at Isacharact, who was still staring at Meer-Khahi.

“I have heard some of the stories.”

Meer-Khahi continued, intent.

“Let me to re-fresh your me-mo-ry, then. Over se-ven hun-dred years a-go, I-sa-sa-rach ruled the North. She was a cruel and visc-ious ty-rant, pil-la-ging the lo-cal set-tle-ments un-til she had built up e-nough wealth to found her own em-pire, and it was only on the ve-ry eve of that foun-ding that she was slain at last.”

He paused only to verify that Isacharact was still glaring at him

“Yet up un-til then, for well o-ver three hun-dred years, her reign was al-most un-chall-enged, and she and her brood wreaked ha-voc, en-slav-ing whole ci-ties and hol-ding huge swaths of ter-ri-to-ry. E-ven the frost gi-ants, who are the na-tu-ral en-ne-mies of white dra-gons, could do no-thing to stop her, and were they them-selves en-slaved.”

Zetic had swallowed again; Meer-Khahi pressed on, Isacharact still staring at him.

“And do not think that she waged war on the frost gi-ants to free the white dra-gons that can of-ten be found cap-tive a-mong them, for she *slaughtered* any dra-gon who was not her mate or her child.”

His story near its end, Meer-Khahi turned back to Isacharact.

“Though e-ven be-ing fam-i-ly was no guar-an-tee of safe-ty.”

There was a very long pause as Isacharact and Meer-Khahi looked at each other with ferocious intensity.

The Avoral was thoroughly unaffected by the white dragon’s stare, being well accustomed to such frightful presences.

Isacharact looked ready to pounce, and Meer-Khahi looked ready to jump right back at her with his still-flaming sword.

All over the hall, a great tension seemed to have been cast, and it suffocated the other guests. They had gone completely silent, unable to fathom what would happen next between the two as-good-as-declared foes.

But it was Zetic who spoke first, after first very carefully considering the situation.

“Is that all, Meer-Khahi?”

Meer-Khahi turned briefly towards Zetic but spoke while facing Isacharact.

“What do you mean, ‘is that all’? Is that not e-nough?”

“No, it isn’t.”

The Avoral turned again.

“I know plen-ty of o-ther sto-ries about I-sa-sa-rach’s reign, if you wish me to teach you more a-bout the e-vil of the crea-ture be-fore us.”

The phrasing of Meer-Khahi's words was an opportunity, and Zetic decided that he would try to twist them back at their owner.

"You cannot teach me about Isacharact."

"I do not un-der-stand you, Ze-tic. I *already have* taught you much a-bout her."

Zetic smiled, capitalising.

"No, Meer-Khahi. You have only taught me about Isacharact's *mother*. You've told me of her *lineage*, but nothing else."

"Is that not e-nough? She is born from e-vil; that should be suf-fi-cient!"

Even Meer-Khahi immediately realised that he was mistaken, but Zetic pressed on regardless, angry and stern.

"Is that how you think, Avoral? That the child of an evil creature must therefore necessarily be evil itself? That is a flawed way of thinking, not becoming of a Celestial, and you shame your heritage because of it."

Meer-Khahi only grumbled, his eyes now starting to dart around anxiously. Zetic's tone softened unexpectedly.

"Have you ever climbed Mount Celestia, Meer-Khahi?"

"No. I am not yet old e-nough to learn its less-ons, not rea-dy."

"But in need of the lessons you are, nonetheless. I have never ascended the Seven Mounting Peaks and learned the seven great Truths which all must learn if they wish to proceed, but I know that one of the very first lessons is that you shall judge people fairly, based on their actions and not on merely their birthright. For, if we all followed faithfully in the footsteps of our parents, then never would we have great kings who left tyrant heirs, or evil men who sired compassionate children."

Meer-Khahi had lowered his sword and was now humbly staring at the floor, his energy drained by the truthful pronouncement. Zetic, meanwhile, turned up to Isacharact.

"So *I* judge Isacharact on what she has done... And she has done a great many good things. She rescued me from Swight's dungeon. She helped see me through my abominable form. She taught me to fly. She defeated Swight. She has even, just now, taught me to breathe fire."

With Isacharact's eyes following him, Zetic walked over to a sombre-looking Meer-Khahi.

"And all that, regardless of her motives, adds up to *good*."

“But... but sure-ly she has done e-vil in the past? You your-self told me that Monta-gue said she was vi-cious. Sure-ly she has com-mi-tted crimes in the past, and sure-ly those past crimes do mat-ter!”

“They do, but not right now, and certainly not if you don’t even know what they are. And in any case, they can always be forgiven—”

Meer-Khahi looked back up at Zetic.

“—for forgiveness is the essence of *true* goodness.”

The Avoral stared for a few seconds before he grasped the hidden meaning in that last statement, and turned to look at the ground in front of Isacharact, head bowed.

“I... I a-po-lo-gize for my be-ha-vi-our. I should not have pre-judged you so.”

However sorry he was for his actions, Meer-Khahi still mistrusted Isacharact and certainly didn’t expect her to deign to answer him.

So, naturally, he was quite astonished when she did.

“Your apology is accepted, Avoral.”

Even Zetic was a bit surprised at this.

Meer-Khahi, meanwhile, was suddenly energetic again, and gave her a low bow.

“Thank you. If there is an-y-thing I can do to make a-mends...”

“As a matter of fact, there is...”

Isacharact looked at Zetic and noticed the confused look on his face.

Good, good! Let him be confused.

This one needed a short leash. Look at him, *defending* her in such a manner! Oh, he would definitely have to pay for *that* misstep. It ought to have been quite clear to him that *she* needed no defending, especially not from a little bird-man Celestial!

And ‘coming to her rescue’ in front of everyone, too! Like some chivalrous knight protecting a dainty lady of the court... Disgusting! Openly proclaiming her ‘virtues’, as if to make public his claim to her. The gall! And the *presumption*!

Oh, he needed a short leash indeed.

So let us yank that leash a bit, and remind him exactly *who* is holding it now.

Isacharact licked her lips.

“I have recently taken a... liking... to singing, and I understand that Avorals have exquisite song-voices...”

Meer-Khaii’s eyes brightened. Zetic’s still showed confusion.

“... So, perhaps you would care to grace me with some music?”

The Celestial looked positively delighted, and he was wearing a very smug expression.

“I... Av-or-als do in-deed have a re-pu-ta-tion for sing-ing. I would be ve-ry glad to sing for you. But per-haps...”

He looked over at Zetic.

“Per-haps, Ze-tic, as your voice soun-ded quite good on-ly a mo-ment a-go, you would care to ac-com-pa-ny me in a du-et?”

“Er... why, certainly.”

Isacharact grinned maliciously.

Even better! A live and direct challenge that Zetic couldn’t possibly win. *That* ought to show him up, and take him town a notch or two.

Neither of them was paying attention to her expressions at the moment, however.

“Do you know the Mul-ho-ran-di op-er-a, A-sii-da?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“‘Nou-mé-rak, Care-ta-ker and A-ven-ger’ from that, per-haps? I will sing the part of Rem-fis.”

“All right.”

Meer-Khaii took in a few deep breaths and shortly thereafter launched into the great song that praised one of the Mulhorandi’s ancient and now long-dead Gods.

And Zetic was *completely* flabbergasted, for the Avoral’s nasal, staccato, high-pitched, stuttering and wordy speaking voice had been entirely replaced with an incredibly deep and amazingly rich bass voice that easily filled the whole room.

He stared agape as Meer-Khaii sang on, and Isacharact saw that he was so bowled over by the change that he came very close to missing his own cue.

But he managed to catch it nonetheless, and joined in with gusto – though his tenor voice simply couldn't come close to matching the Avoral's powerful bass, and he sounded almost flimsy compared to it.

With the whole room watching and listening, Isacharact began to look around, showing off. Her lips were shut, but her eyes were silently saying, 'There now, you see? *I'm* holding the reins on him'.

She turned back to Zetic.

He was looking straight back at her... and there was a hint of defiance in his eye as he poured all his energy into the duet, trying his best to approximate Meer-Khahi's sheer power of voice..

Meer-Khahi sang on, heedless of their interchange. The song reached its end, and he and Zetic both held the last note out for a while...

A bit long of a while, actually, for the Avoral glanced over at the gold drake and seemed... delighted... to see that Zetic was rapidly running out of breath.

Taking some small satisfaction in this little victory, he nevertheless stopped short of holding it past Zetic's limit – though when he actually did cease singing, he calmly stood as if nothing had happened, whereas Zetic was huffing and puffing as if he'd just flown up one side of a mountain and ran down the other.

And Isacharact was grinning greedily at him.

Hah! Put that failure in your hat, cleric.

The way his chest was heaving, he must be completely exhausted, whereas the Avoral hasn't even broken a sweat.

Though... it's interesting. The look of defiance hasn't gone away, and even though he's out of breath, he looks ready to do it all over again.

If I'm the one holding the reins, then this horse is chomping at the bit, raring for more, daring me to send another challenge his way.

And even in defeat, he looks victorious! For his singing had been remarkably good, in spite of the presence of a superior.

With the two of them still staring at each other, Isacharact became angry; furious, even.

So much for deflating him; this little scheme seemed only to raise him up higher – in front of the whole room, he'd proudly shown off his not inconsiderable ability.

And by looking her in the eye while he was doing it – whereas Meer-Khahi had been looking away, or had had his eyes closed, focusing on the music – it had seemed to all as if Zetic had been the one singing to her, with the Avoral merely backing him up.

And yet, in truth, she *had* been more interested in hearing *him* than the Avoral.

With his chest flexing in and out, still catching his breath – or perhaps, readying himself in expectation of the next challenge to come – he looked... intriguing.

Such energy, such spirit... It was like seeing a peacock on display.

And the appearance was... arousing.

Isacharact kept her frowning eyes, but her mouth opened at last, and from it came the same purring growl that Zetic had heard from her earlier.

Or not the same, really – for it was now noticeably more purr than growl, and to Zetic, it was no longer frightening... it was...

Inviting.

They were still staring at each other, though the stares had changed in character. Meer-Khahi looked back and forth between them.

“Well. That was en-joy-a-ble, but per-haps I should now leave you two. I hope we will meet a-gain, Ze-tic.”

Zetic turned his head.

“I hope so too, Meer-Khahi... Perhaps in a few years, we can return here to climb the mountain together.”

“Or per-haps we may see each o-ther in bat-tle...”

He put away his sword at last.

“...though I think I would pre-fer your su-gges-tion.”

Meer-Khahi took the second sword back from Zetic – and Zetic could swear there was a smile on the Avoral’s frozen, immutable, beaked face as he bowed and walked away.

Zetic turned back to Isacharact.

She stopped purring.

If we can't pull on the reins to control it, let's tug at the leash of this strange meadow-lark instead, and see if it comes along.

“My meal is finished. I think I'll go see the grounds outside.”

She shot him a glance as she turned to leave.

The leash was indeed short, and Zetic followed after her.

If the inside of Bahamut's palace is a testament to wealth built from stone and rock, the grounds are a testament to wealth built out of nature itself. As in many places on the plane of Celestia, the trees in Bahamut's garden grow to incredible sizes, with beautiful emerald green leaves and flowers of all colours. Trim grass and meticulously made flagstone walkways let visitors walk beneath the shady canopy, while a cornucopia of heavenly birds and other animals frolic all around.

Zetic was marvelled by the gardens, but Isacharact almost didn't seem to be paying them any attention, striding along as if they weren't even there.

A large bird perched on a low branch began to chirp loudly, however, and she stopped to look at it, reflecting.

“Tell me, cleric... Where did you learn to sing?”

He was looking at the bird as well.

“The Order of the Chanters, in the Church of Torm.”

Isacharact turned to him and cocked an eye.

“So... you were a choir-boy?”

Zetic snorted, annoyed.

“I joined the Chanters at the age of 14. That's hardly a 'choir-boy'.”

Isacharact smiled to herself at having succeeded in disrupting his ordinarily calm demeanour. The disruption was only momentary, however; Zetic recovered quickly.

“And when, exactly, did you develop this sudden 'liking' for singing?”

She turned back to face his smirk with a cold stare.

“Recently.”

The words were like ice, and they froze the conversation.

Zetic continued to look at the singing bird, but Isacharact began to glance around at the rest of the garden, suddenly losing interest in the environment.

“I’m going to go back to the room. I feel tired.”

“Already? You only just woke up a few hours ago.”

“It was *you* who only woke up a few hours ago, cleric. *I* was awake far earlier... and I had slept only poorly during the night, for your sleep was very... agitated.”

“Oh... I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

“I doubt there was anything you could’ve done to stop it.”

“No, but my apologies for it, nonetheless. And as it *is* evening, perhaps I should go to sleep as well, if only to get back on a normal schedule.”

They left the gardens, the bird still chirping away.

The walk back had been in silence, but as Isacharact lay down to bed on the room’s plush cushions, Zetic spoke up as he closed the door behind them.

“Er... If you, uhm...”

He turned around to face her. She was looking at him with a tired expression.

“Might it be better if I slept off to one side? I, uh, I don’t want to... I don’t want to disturb you in the night, if my sleep should be ‘agitated’ again.”

Her eyes narrowed.

What foolery was this? After all the things he’d done today without asking her leave, now he was hesitating before doing the *one* thing she had already given him permission to do?

Or maybe...

Zetic looked genuinely apologetic... and perhaps a bit afraid.

Yes, yes, that’s it! Hah! He did all those other things because he’s comfortable doing them. It comes naturally to him, to want to defend people, to be friendly, to be playful.

But in spite of his obvious attraction to her – or *because* of it, probably – he was simply uncomfortable with doing anything that violated some sort of code of chivalry.

A *human* code. One that seemed to say, ‘You can look all you want, but don’t touch’.

Amusing.

A bit *cute*, even. He could seem so mature with his eloquent speech, and so youthful with his plentiful energy, but now he seemed so childish with his adherence to these silly taboos.

And we can’t have him following foolish rules. Better to force him out of such habits. But first... perhaps a little inspection is in order?

“The day isn’t completely over yet, cleric. Worry about sleeping arrangements later. For now, go over to the mirror, and let’s have a look at you.”

“All right.”

Celestia is not generally known for being well lit at night, but there was enough illumination in the room for both of them to see clearly. Zetic walked over on all fours to the mirror and stared at himself again, still having difficulty fathoming his new form.

Isacharact paced around him for a few moments, sizing him up.

“Well. I wouldn’t say you’re ugly, but you’re certainly the strangest-looking gold dragon I’ve ever seen.”

“How so?”

“There are many differences. First of all, there’s the hair –”

With Zetic still staring in the mirror, she took some of his hair in her hand, feeling its consistency.

“– which I have never seen on *any* dragon before, though I have heard tell that dragons in the land of Kara-Tur far to the east of Faerûn have manes such as yours. Still, though odd, it *is* rather... regal.”

Hearing her words, Zetic began to feel less uncomfortable with the reflection of himself in the mirror. Isacharact withdrew her hand.

“And then there are the horns. Gold dragon horns are usually golden-coloured, very short and thick, and sprout straight out from the sides of the head. Yours are long, thin, brown, and curve outwards from the back – and are not plain like a silver wyrm’s, nor spiralled like those of chromatic dragons.”

She grasped one and tugged on it. Zetic’s head tilted, but he resisted the pull.

“Though they *do* seem solid in spite of their hollow appearance.”

Letting go, Zetic’s head returned to its normal position, and he ran both hands along the horns, feeling their ridges.

“Your eyes are different, too. They’re the right colour and shape, certainly, but they’re large – very large, even.”

And now Zetic turned his head to one side, putting his right cheek close up against the mirror to examine the same side’s eye.

“Anything else unusual about my face?”

“A few things. Your head seems average, though with a bit larger of a mouth than is typical, and only four whiskers of hair instead of a dozen of scale.”

He looked at the mirror straight-on again and wrapped the straight hairs of one of the whiskers around his left index finger.

“How about the rest of me, then?”

Isacharact looked him over.

“Nothing particularly earth-shattering. With the mane, it’s no surprise you don’t have the usual pair of frills running down the back of your neck. The wings, slightly shorter but significantly wider,—”

He flexed them in and out.

“—larger back legs,—”

Zetic got up on two feet and took a few steps around. The floor didn’t seem so slippery any more, and he didn’t feel like he was about to fall.

“—and longer arms.”

He stretched them out in front of him, examining the clawed hands at their ends.

Isacharact backed away and lay down on the cushions again.

“All in all, unusual-looking for a gold dragon, but you’re still immediately recognizable as a member of that subspecies. It goes without saying that you look much better as an elegant gold than as a hideous grey, of course.”

Her summation shifted Zetic’s attitude. He was no longer horrified by his appearance, but was becoming... proud... of it, instead.

Not too bad, you know. Hardly ‘so much worse’ than ‘any horror you could’ve imagined in Swight’s dungeon’. Far from it, even.

Zetic tilted his head and smiled at himself in the mirror.

Really, not bad at all. Statuesque, maybe a bit imposing, definitely quite alien, but... warm, handsome, radiant... *She* had even said you looked *regal* and *elegant*.

The memory of those particular compliments made him want to stand up a bit straighter and puff out his chest, though the only person watching him at present was his reflection.

Yes, how’s that for Torm’s servant, now? Walk up to some cleric of Bane or Cyric and see them tremble before His power. Open up a crypt full of undead and have them run in fear of His divine light. Break down the door of some evil wizard of Thay, and see...

And see the faces your companions.

This has all turned out well for *you*, but what about *them*?

Their deaths have been avenged. There’s nothing further that can be done.

Zetic’s smile disappeared.

Though... though I ought to go and speak with Ravel’s family in Cormyr, and the Knights of the Purple Dragon, and tell them her story. And I must make a pilgrimage to one of the monasteries of the order of the Yellow Rose to pay my respects to Shi’lk. And Methalas... someone should to send word to Evermeet of his fall – and that someone should be *me*. Jeck hadn’t seen her family in the Great Dale in a long time; they would be anxious to hear news of her, even if it was sad news. And Nicholas... Nicholas was not a member of any orders, nor was he close with his family, but he *did* have a brother in Baldur’s Gate. A brother who deserved to be paid at least one last visit by Zetic.

‘They who are dead leave their work behind, and they who live must bear the burdens of the fallen. But if you live, bear them well, for such is the order of the world.’

The gospel of Kelemvor, God of The Dead.

“Well? Are you finished in front of that mirror, cleric?”

“Yes... Yes, I suppose I am.”

He turned around, and Isacharact saw sadness on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I... I was just remembering my companions, who fell in Swight’s castle. The memory of them makes me feel sad, to know that they will be absent forevermore. As I am a cleric and was their friend, there are... errands... I should run, to honour them. And even though I had only known them for a few short months...”

He looked down at the floor.

“... I still miss their company, and am lonely without them.”

Isacharact looked straight at him with an expression that betrayed the slightest hint of sharing in his sorrow.

“Yet you are not, in fact, alone.”

Zetic looked up, stared at her for a bit... and then went to sleep by her side again.

Her body felt colder than before... though that was probably because *he*, with fire burning inside of him, was simply warmer in comparison. It took a little longer to fully acclimatise himself to her chill...

But that chill was still comforting.

“Was what Meer-Khahi said yesterday about your mother true?”

It was the next day, and Isacharact and Zetic were outside in the garden again, walking along one of the paths.

Zetic was becoming accustomed to his new body, now able to walk on two feet without worrying about falling over, no longer quite so surprised or awed – and definitely no longer horrified – every time he saw his reflection. When he had made his morning prayers, it had been a tremendous divine reassurance to feel his God’s power energize him once more.

He was also becoming more comfortable around *her*, for when the morning had broken and he awoke to find her sound asleep, her ‘scent’ of fear was gone, as if it had been switched off sometime in the night.

It was around again now, however... though it seemed to affect Zetic a little less.

Still, when he asked this question, Isacharact still managed to chill him with the cold look on her face.

“Yes.”

Zetic pressed on in spite of the coldness.

“I had heard only a few scattered tales of her rule over the Northlands. I never realised the scope of her enterprise...”

Isacharact started to focus a little more on the pathway. She didn't seem to particularly want to answer Zetic's implied question, though she did so anyway.

“There isn't much that I can tell you, cleric. I was born very near to the end of her reign, and I was quite removed from her court.”

“How removed?”

“Very removed... How much do you know about dragon families?”

“Not much... Well, nothing, really.”

Isacharact smirked at him.

“Suffice it to say, then, that I was taken care of exclusively by my mother, and while I was occasionally present at her court, I rarely went outside her cave – more a fortress, really – and almost never saw anyone outside my clutch-mates. I don't even know who my father was.”

Zetic was aghast.

“You never met your father? That's awful!”

She snorted back at him.

“You really *don't* know anything about dragon families. When I say I was ‘taken care of’ by my mother, I mean my clutch-mates and I were fed by her. That is about the extent to which most chromatic dragon wyrmlings are ‘taken care of’ by their parents. In my case, it was perhaps a bit more... but not by much, and had I known my father, I doubt he would have had much to do with me, either.”

Zetic stared at her as they walked on.

“Still... Wouldn't you rather have known him?”

Isacharact rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh, turning to watch the path ahead.

“I suppose.... I suppose maybe. But I don't see the point.”

“Well, don't dragons – even chromatic ones – love their children?”

“That's a vague question. If they do, then the expression of that love varies from parent-to-parent. Some feed their children well, protect them well, and nurture them for a

while before they leave. Others don't. But does that mean they love them not? For at least they don't *hate* their children."

Zetic turned forwards and began gesticulating with his hands.

"You're putting this in material terms. Loving your children isn't about merely providing for them, it's about cherishing them. It's about caring for them in a way that is usually difficult to put into words or even actions."

Isacharact looked down at the path.

"I don't know the answer to your question, cleric. I can't say for certain if I ever felt that way about my own offspring."

He looked up at her.

"You've... had partners... before?"

She looked back at him and spoke in an offended and disdainful tone.

"Of course! What do you think I am, some kind of undesirable old maid? You'd have difficulty finding a male dragon who *isn't* interested in mating with a daughter of Isasarach. You may only know about my mother in particular, but dragons prize strong bloodlines, and my ancestry is rather... renowned."

Zetic swallowed.

Lovely. The old fool of a cleric has fallen not just for a dragon, but for a dragon *princess*.

It's not too late to go running to Bahamut to ask him for your old form back. You're not too old; you can still go and find a pretty woman to settle down with. Wasn't Archdeacon Spaqué trying to fix you up with his paladin daughter last summer? She seemed a bit keen on you, you know.

Oh, shut up, you infernal internal voice. Isacharact is who I'm in love with, and that means I'm going to stick through this until she flat-out tells me to get lost.

Or until...

Well, you know what until. You're me, after all.

They rounded a corner and started down a path between two very neat hedgerows that were presently bursting with fragrant purple blossoms.

"And what about *your* family, cleric?"

Zetic looked away.

“I don’t have anything in the way of... lineage... if that’s what you’re asking...”

He looked back up into her cold eyes.

“... But if I wasn’t born noble, I certainly wasn’t born a dragon, either.”

“Very true...”

She trailed off.

Several pleasant hours passed in the garden, with occasional conversations of no importance – comments on the appearance of the stars above, or the plants underneath, or the animals all around.

Eventually, Isacharact took notice of the fact that Zetic seemed to be growing more and more comfortable with his new form.

“You seem considerably more sure of yourself today, cleric.”

Zetic replied energetically.

“Well, I have picked up the basics of being a dragon rather well, haven’t I?”

“I suppose so. Ready for a more advanced lesson, perhaps?”

His eyes seemed to glow... and all the rest of him too, for that matter.

“Always, my Lady.”

She cocked an eye him.

“Then let me tell you about dragon magic. It is within *all* drakes to cast spells, and we do so in much the same way that men do. This is no surprise, however, for it is from us that the Elves learned magic, and from them it was passed on to Mankind. With your clerical abilities, you already draw upon the divine side of the Weave – the Power; now, you should learn to use the arcane side – the Art – as well, like this...”

They stopped in front of a large field ringed with trees, and Isacharact stood up on her back feet. Zetic had to crane his neck up to keep her face in his sight.

Waving her hands at the field, she spoke loudly, and Zetic was taken aback at her voice; he could swear he wasn’t listening to her speak, but rather hearing some raging torrential snowstorm in the mountains of the North.

“*Rrassa ’shé ssuumi Norkéjjomu d’yyauus!*”

Zetic was intrigued by the words themselves, but his attention was quickly drawn to the field before them, where a grey cloud had fallen and a storm was now in progress, completely obscuring visibility along the whole half-mile.

It soon stopped, and the cloud lifted to reveal grass and shrubs covered with a thin layer of snow – and trees too, with icicles dangling from their branches.

Isacharact looked at Zetic smugly, fists planted on top of her hips.

“Well?”

“It’s beautiful...”

He looked around; it really *was* beautiful, the way the white snow shone brightly. But then he thought back to Isacharact’s casting of the spell, and turned to her.

“Was that Draconic you were speaking in just now?”

“Yes, the language of dragons. Do you know it?”

“I don’t remember ever learning it, but... but it’s the strangest thing... I feel like I understand what you said... Was it ‘Summoned forth, the sleet-storms of the North are’?”

“Roughly, yes. There isn’t an exact translation into the Common tongue of men, but that version is very close. Your ability to comprehend me is Bahamut’s work, no doubt.”

“Yes, He has given to me the knowledge to hear Draconic.”

And Zetic immediately did a double-take, for the sounds that had actually come out of his lips might’ve made him choke on his own tongue, were he still human, and he still felt like they ought to have choked him now. Isacharact amusedly watched him as he coughed away in a fit of as-yet-unsuppressed automatic human reflexes.

“The knowledge to speak Draconic, too, apparently... and with no noticeable accent, either. Men usually can’t summon up the proper amount of throatiness to pronounce Draconic correctly.”

Zetic’s coughing ceased.

“I can see why. It’s an interesting language, but I think I prefer Elven.”

Isacharact, still standing up and towering over him, gave a dismissive snort.

“Bah, Elven. It can only be spoken delicately. There isn’t any way to project real power through its flowing verses.”

“Yet Elven High Magic is powerful, all the same.”

Her face brightened, and there was a playful energy in her voice.

“Ah, but High Magic is cast in Seldruin, not common Elven.”

Zetic raised a finger and opened his mouth as if to speak, but comically conceded her point by the distinguished absence of any words coming from his face. Isacharact chuckled at the mimed action before he moved on to make a point of his own.

“All right, all right, so Elven doesn’t sound powerful... But is there any way to project *delicateness* through Draconic’s harsh words?”

“Now *that*, I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, why don’t we see?”

And he began to recite the simple and well-known poem ‘On a Bough and a Shield’, which tells of the midsummer’s romance of a paladin of Cormyr and a druid from Amn at the festival of Shieldmeet, translating it into Draconic as he went along.

It didn’t *quite* translate exactly, however, and Isacharact, who knew the verses of the poem, found herself laughing out loud at some of the more hilarious results. Even Zetic had trouble focusing long enough to finish the recital.

“Well, cleric, I don’t think I could call that ‘delicate’, but you didn’t do too badly at making it sound distinctly *un-powerful*, at least...”

Zetic flashed his eyes at her and, to complement the ridiculous poem, gave a small and equally ridiculous bow.

“...And perhaps there *is* a way to speak Draconic in a delicate way, for surely at some time in the past such speech must have been needed.”

Isacharact got back down on all fours, and for the next few hours, they sat together, watching the field of snow and ice slowly melt most beautifully from the warm sea-air blowing in from the Silver Sea.

Night came again. No words were spoken when the two returned to their room, though there were a few smiles, smirks, and grins shot back and forth when went to sleep.

Except that this time, Isacharact began to purr very softly as Zetic lay down next to her. He felt his heart start to beat more than a *little* faster – and not just from the purr, but also from the coldness that washed over him; it seemed to have magnified since last night.

When he was finally settled and his eyes were closed, he heard Isacharact stop purring and felt her lift up her head.

And Zetic nearly gasped when she placed it down on the other side of him, draping her heavy and very cold neck across his. She moved it around a bit – caressing him, maybe? Or maybe she was just trying to find a comfortable position.

Either way, when she was ready, she began to purr again.

Zetic could *feel* the vibrations in her throat.

Isacharact grinned to herself, enjoying the sensation of having him partially underneath her, and at the same time playfully knowing how uncomfortable this must be for him.

It *was* uncomfortable, in more than one way...

...yet in those same ways, it was somehow comfortable as well.

But in spite of that comfort, Zetic felt agitated; something was troubling him. A few moments after she stopped purring, he spoke in a hushed voice.

“Isacharact?”

She replied where she was, in an equally hushed and soft voice.

“Yes, cleric?”

“We –”

No reaction from her at the use of that particular pronoun. Zetic swallowed, and continued.

“– We can’t stay here in the palace forever, I think.”

“No, of course we can’t.”

“Where shall we go, then? I... I don’t know if I can go straight back to the church, to my life from before Swight. I don’t think I could just show up like this, right now.”

“Come with me, then.”

“Where to?”

“My home, in The North.”

“What is it like, there?”

He couldn’t see it, but Zetic could feel the smile on Isacharact’s face.

“Cold.”

“When shall we leave?”

“Tomorrow, if you like.”

“Yes... Yes, I think I *would* like that.”

“Would you mind if we get some sleep first?”

She couldn't see it, but Isacharact could feel the smile on Zetic's face.

“Of course, my Lady Isacharact. Good-night.”

And before he fell asleep, Zetic felt a frosty paw rest on top of his shoulder.

It chilled his body... but warmed his heart.

They left late the next day, after dinner. One of Bahamut's attendants, a great gold wyrm, opened up for them a magic gateway from the divine realm back to the mortal plane.

With one last farewell look at the magnificent palace of the dragon-deity, they stepped through the portal. But as they did so, Isacharact could swear the attendant winked at her...

What an odd thing for a gold dragon to do... unless he wasn't—

Her thoughts were cut short as they were hit by the cold of the North where a veritable blizzard was in progress. Isacharact came to her senses and spoke in a roar to Zetic so that he would hear her over the wind.

“Take to the air, cleric! My cave is not far from here.”

She waited for him to get airborne first, worried that he might be unable to do so in the face of the tremendous winds. But Zetic's determination beat out the weather, and with only a small bit of trouble, he was airborne. She took off, and quickly overtook him, leading him to their destination.

Flying was difficult in the ferocious storm, but Zetic had learned flight as a weak aberration and now, as a strong, fully rested, fully healed, and almost-adult gold, he was tackling the job well. Isacharact was even a little impressed at the way he was flying, managing to stay at her side without too much effort.

And the way he flew... hair billowing in the wind, head thrust forward determinedly, arms and legs held close to the chest, wings beating deep flaps... he looked good.

Isacharact might almost have said he looked ‘mighty’ or ‘powerful’, but those would definitely have been overstatements, for he *was* small.

Still... strong for his size, at least.

They soon reached the mountainside cavern that was Isacharact's lair.

Buried deep in the side of a great ice shelf, walls of ice formed a passageway to Isacharact's cavern. What little light that passed through the frozen ceiling was too dim to illuminate the interior and only served to give the whole place a ghostly appearance.

It was dark inside the cave, though Zetic found he had no trouble seeing far enough in front of him to follow Isacharact. And *she* didn't seem to have any difficulty finding her way in the cave, for dragons do indeed have very good eyesight.

The icy cave was an alien environment to Zetic, and the realization that *he* was truly a part of this strange world of dragons was... disconcerting.

Without the wind, it was warmer in the crystalline passageway than outside in the blizzard, but the foreboding darkness made Zetic feel colder.

And yet... Isacharact was still there in front of him, leading him deeper into the icy den. Only that thought, and the knowledge that it was *her* icy den, brought him any comfort.

“Here we are.”

Isacharact moved off to one side as the somewhat narrow corridor which they had been prowling through opened up into a great cavern. It was more brightly lit than the entranceway had been, though that was all relative, and it was still quite dark.

But despite the darkness, Zetic could clearly see the room.

And what he saw *in* it made him gasp.

An enormous amount of treasure was piled before them. Coins of gold, silver, and bronze were heaped in the millions, covering the floor. Gemstones of all sorts glittered in the low light, and the crystal walls paled in comparison to their shine. Along the sides of the wall, a hundred other kinds of treasure – precious items of all sorts, from cloth, to artwork, to books, to weapons, and more.

Isacharact looked over, saw the awe on his face, and chuckled.

“Surprised? Well, what were you expecting to find?”

Zetic was still marvelling at the incredible hoard.

“I... I don't know.”

“It didn't occur to you that a powerful adult dragon would be rich?”

“Well, yes, but... I mean, there’s ‘rich’ and then there’s *rich*. This... This is the price of kingdoms whole. However could you have acquired this much?”

“Most of it is inheritance. I already told you that what Meer-Khaii said was true. Isasarach wanted to build an empire, and was accumulating wealth to that end. When she fell, that wealth was divided up amongst her family.”

He turned to her, mouth still agape.

“You mean there are *more* dragons with hoards like this?”

Isacharact suddenly dropped her playful attitude.

“No.”

Zetic’s eyes narrowed...

Oh-oh... I don’t like the sound of *that*.

Remember what she is, Zetic. Chromatic dragons are selfish and evil. And she was the child of a chromatic dragon empress, even...

“Ve-ry dan-ger-ous, this one is.”

Isacharact had said twice, now, that Meer-Khaii was speaking the truth. Did her affirmation include *that* statement of his as well?

Zetic turned to look at the treasure again... It looked different.

It was still marvellous, but now there was a deadly scent about it. For it had been Isasarach’s blood money, intended to pay the Queen’s way to domination through war.

And now it was Isacharact’s sanguinary treasure, paid for in the blood of her siblings.

How many of them had she slain for her to have acquired so much of it all? And what about Isasarach’s mates? Had the daughter hunted them down, too, her step-fathers and perhaps even her father himself, greedy to take her mother’s inheritance all for herself?

Isacharact saw what was going on in Zetic’s mind.

“You’re wondering about how I acquired it. What you’re thinking... is true.”

Zetic had no words to answer her with, and continued to stare in silence.

“I won’t apologize for what happened, because that would mean apologizing for what I *am*. If the thought of evil creatures feuding over a dead relative’s wealth appals you, then you might as well leave right now. But before you go, let me tell you one thing:”

Isacharact leaned over towards him. He turned to her, and was afraid of her again.

“Of my mother’s brood, I may have been the strongest, that I should have reached this point, alive and wealthy... but we were *all* ruthless... And if *I* hadn’t been the one to seize Isasarach’s hoard... you can bet that one of the others *would* have.”

She pulled back. Zetic’s fear did not diminish.

“White dragons are a cruel and unforgiving race, and I am no different. But what produced the treasure you see before you is in the past. The last time I had anything to do with a member of my mother’s family was over two hundred years ago, long before you were even born. I won’t say I’m ‘*better*’ than I was, but I am more... restrained.”

Zetic turned back to the cave, and Isacharact waited for him to reply.

It took a long time.

Still enamoured with her, idiot of a cleric? What were you thinking, exactly? ‘Oh, this one can’t be evil, because I’m in love with her’. Good job, Hex! If women are poisons, you managed to pick out the deadliest one on your first try! Be proud of yourself! Pat yourself on the back! And then can we please get out of here before she kills *us* too?

But what about yesterday? And the day before? She was warm, then. There’s something... there’s something here, still. She did say that her bloodthirstiness was in the past.

And you believe her? You think she’s in love with you? Get over yourself. Look at the treasure – this was a work of *lust*. Lust for wealth, lust for that which shines brilliantly, lust for that which others possessed and her heart desired. If she’s interested in you, if she’s – Gods help us – *attracted* to you, it’s lust, not love. She just wants to possess you; she doesn’t know love – not even for her own family, not even for her own *children*. You’re stupid, Hex, to have stuck around her for this long. Unless you’re even more stupid, thinking you can somehow ‘change’ her.

I already *did* change her. The first day, remember? The talk about religion?

The cynical voice in his head could think of nothing to say to that.

Aha! Got you, my pessimistic friend. That shut you up very well, didn’t it? Because she’s evil, yes, there’s no doubt about it, but *I* can overcome it. I *will* overcome it.

Mind your pride. Remember the story of Scyllua Darkhope, who heard the honeyed words a pit fiend said in surrender, believed them true, and was eventually turned to evil, herself.

This isn't pride. Have you forgotten who I am, and what I'm known throughout the Church of Torm for doing? And have you forgotten, too, that Bahamut, Himself, seems to have had a hand in this coming together?

After defeating his own internal demons of doubt, Zetic was feeling confident when he turned to face Isacharact... but she was wearing a chillingly stern expression, and his confidence waned as he saw it.

“All... all right, then. I think... I think can live with your nature, and your past.”

Isacharact almost winced. Considering he was a cleric of Torm, the Righteous and Unyielding, she had expected some kind of further debate.

Although, on the other hand... Torm is also a God of forgiveness, of kindness, and sometimes even gentleness.

So now here he is, a cleric of that God, saying he can accept her as *she* is.

Full of surprises, this man-dragon...

“Well, then.”

She was still looking at him; Zetic turned back to the room.

“Well, then... So with all this *stuff* everywhere, where do we sleep?”

Her playful smile reappeared.

“On top of it, naturally.”

“What, you mean your bed is this pile of coins and gemstones?”

“Yes, of course. It's a very common thing amongst dragons, you know.”

Zetic was wearing a very strange expression on his face, as if the thought of sleeping on top of the hoard was as appetizing to him as trying to eat another pearl... Seeing it, Isacharact strode over to the treasure, lay down, stretched herself out on her side, and spoke in a slow and commanding voice as she lifted up a handful of coins and let them slowly trickle out of her hand.

“Don't give it that look until you've tried it.”

The sight of her like that – one incredible treasure compounded on top of another – was fit to make Zetic's knees feel a bit weak. But he had to admit that her statement was a good rule to follow in general, and walked over to join her.

A certain amount of what one could call ‘frolicking’ occurred in treasure-head for the next hour or so, until both were quite satisfied with the bed of metal and stone, and they curled up to sleep.

On this night, they fell asleep on their sides, and Zetic was partially covered by Isacharact, with her neck and two of her limbs resting on top of him.

She purred softly again, and Zetic spoke up, his eyes closed...

“My Lady, you have a very... interesting... purr.”

“Indeed. I have a very interesting bedfellow, as well.”

Isacharact was soon asleep. But Zetic...

Zetic felt very odd. It wasn’t about Isacharact, or about the cold, or about lying on the coins, or even about knowing the terrible story behind the hoard...

He felt... lured... to the cavern’s exit, and stared at it in confusion.

It was as if some tiny voice was saying, ‘Get out there! See the world!’.

But it didn’t make sense, for he’d *already* seen much of the world...

Zetic shut it out and went to sleep, dreaming of Isacharact beside him.

“Is that the best you can do, cleric?”

A week had passed in the bitter cold of the North, though Zetic hadn’t paid much attention to the passing of time. Neither had Isacharact, really; the two of them had been quite engrossed with each other, whiling away the days with flights of fancy – of both the figurative and literal kind.

But today, outside, in the snowy landscape, Isacharact was trying to teach Zetic how to fight, though the lesson was not going *particularly* well.

“I used a sword for almost twenty-five years; I’m not used to fighting without one.”

Another one of his swipes – more a punch, really – went wide, and Isacharact got in a sturdy counter-slash that hit his face and caused him to gasp and recoil in pain.

“You’ve had enough for today, cleric. It’s clear to me that you’ll take a long time to learn to fight in *this* manner.”

Zetic dabbed at the light wound with his hand, making sure that it wasn’t bleeding.

“Don’t trouble yourself too much with this lesson, my Lady; I can always get another sword. And until then, I can summon up a magic one out of the divine ether.”

Isacharact only turned partially away, her face showing a muted disgust.

“Maybe so, but you ought to learn how to fight properly. It isn’t dignified for a dragon to have to use a weapon of steel.”

A grin crossed Zetic’s face.

“Oh, no? Don’t talk about it that way until you’ve tried it – or at least, seen someone else try it.”

She looked back at him with a sly air as he waved his hands and made barely audible implorations to Torm, summoning up a greatsword from the divine ether. When it appeared, long enough to reach from the ground to his head, he grasped it in both hands, stood up straight on his back legs, held it solidly in the air, and flexed his wings out at the back, staring at her the whole time.

“Well?”

Isacharact looked him up and down.

“Not bad, I suppose...”

Zetic beamed back, and Isacharact took notice of his pride.

“... But if you’re going to use magic, you might as well at least use it for something truly impressive...”

She shot him a smirk.

“... assuming you even *can*.”

His apparent pride didn’t diminish as he flicked his wrists, dispelling the ethereal sword. Turning to one side to face the small bowl-shaped valley that stretched out before them on the top of a mountain, he took a bit longer to cast this second divine spell.

But when he was done, Isacharact was briefly taken aback as, with a bright flash of light, the entire valley exploded into a flaming fire-storm, melting the snow clean off the rock and sending a very noticeable wave of heat at the pair.

The flames subsided quickly, and Zetic turned to her again, an even larger grin on his face.

“Well?”

Still facing the blackened and charred valley, she looked at him sideways.

“Not bad at all.”

Zetic noticed that the shockwave of heat didn't seem to have affected her in the least.

“You didn't seem to mind the blast. I thought creatures of cold were more vulnerable to fire, just as creatures of fire are more vulnerable to cold.”

Isacharact turned towards him, grinning widely.

“*Ordinary* creatures of cold, maybe. One of the legacies of my bloodline – and the source of my name, by the way – is the *Isaana Yevach*.”

“Draconic for ‘burning frost’?”

“Yes. Because of that trait, fire has no special effect on me.”

He looked genuinely surprised in response, and she noticed it.

“Or at least, no *harmful* effect. For in truth, rather than being hurtful, I find heat...”

She licked the side of her lips.

“...invigorating.”

Zetic gulped as she took a few steps towards him and jabbed him in the chest with a claw.

“And how about you and cold, cleric?”

“Er...”

He was wavering, so she poked him again.

“You *are* a creature of fire, now... And you've had plenty of time to feel the chill of the Northlands.”

“Uh... It's, ah, it's... Let's just say that I've, er, that I've developed something of a... of an *appreciation* for frost.”

Isacharact grinned wickedly in reply, and moved the talon that was poking his chest up along his neck, scraping it lightly along the way.

He swallowed, and his already-large eyes bulged even more as she reached the underside of his head, ran the claw along under his chin, and finally flicked it off at the front.

Seeing that he was still staring at her even after she was no longer touching him, Isacharact gave him two hard pats on the cheek to bring him out of his trance.

“Shall we get back to the lesson, fiery little golden student of mine?”

The next week passed much like the first.

And yet... Isacharact noticed a change in Zetic, and she often caught him staring at the hallway, or sitting just outside the entrance to the cave, gazing off into the distance. She had once asked him what he was looking at, and his reply had not been, 'Nothing', as one might've expected, but rather, 'I don't know'.

In the third week, a thought poked through her mind. Bahamut had said that it would take a long time for Zetic to reach 'enlightenment', and there was only one thing she knew of that would fill such a gap of time. There is a great step that all young dragons must take... one that Zetic had not yet taken. He was at the right age to experience *it*, as well, and the beginnings of *it* would surely cause him turn his eyes to the horizon.

So *that* must be what's going on, here. Well. An enjoyable few weeks, at least. Too bad. There really isn't anything that can be done about *it*, however hard one tries or however much one wants to overcome *it*.

No wyrmling she had ever heard of had ever been able to resist *it* once it showed itself.

And *it* showed itself in Zetic at the end of the fourth week, just as they were outside eating supper – tonight, a woolly Rothé, common herd animal of the North – and watching the sun set against the backdrop of white-tipped mountains.

"Isacharact... I feel strange. I feel... I feel like I should be elsewhere."

"What do you mean, elsewhere?"

"I don't know, exactly. It's just... it's just that I've been here for a month, and I... I almost feel *bored* with this place. Or not quite bored, actually, for there's really nothing wrong here, just that I feel like being somewhere else. Anywhere else, even."

"Where would you rather be?"

"I don't know... it seems like there are so many possibilities."

"There are. It's a big world out there, you know."

But her playful remarks seemed to simply bounce off of him. Isacharact turned back to her meal as Zetic looked around for a long time, scanning the horizon to the South and to the East and West.

“Evermeet.”

She looked up at him.

“Evermeet, the island of the Elves?”

“Yes.”

“That is where you would rather be?”

“I think it is. I adventured with a young Elf for ten straight years some time ago, and through a series of calamities we became fast friends. After one particularly nasty encounter, he decided to go back to live on Evermeet for a while, to grow up a bit more – for he was merely a youth by Elven standards, only sixty-two. He left me an open invitation to come visit him sometime. I don’t think he expected me to take him up on the offer, but I do think that it was sincere.”

“Well, it’s good to know that you would be welcome there, my dear cleric, but *reaching* Evermeet is a great challenge in and of itself.”

“Actually, Saraendas provisioned me for the trip, as well. When we adventured, he helped me learn the Elven tongue, and we used to sing together. Before he left, he taught me an enchanted song that, so he said, when sung by a friend of the Elves, would point the singer in the direction of Evermeet. I’ve tried it before, and it points me west...”

“No surprise, since the only one thing that *anyone* knows is that it is to the west. Beyond that... there are no certainties.”

“Perhaps. But I am confident that the song will not fail.”

“Then, if you feel like being elsewhere, you should go. There is really only so much I can teach you on my own; *real* wyrmlings learn their lessons from the world itself”

In saying this, she readily let go of what link might’ve bound him to her, for the call of the mysterious *it* could have easily broken such a chain, a fact that she knew well.

Or not knew, rather, but *believed*. For something happened next that she did *not* anticipate.

Zetic looked at her, and spoke.

“You... you wouldn’t want to come along?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’d want me to?”

“Well, uh, yes. If you’d like to, that is. I... I enjoy your company.”

Isacharact eyed him.

Intriguing...

It ought to drive him away from her. *It* ought to make him want to go anywhere that she – or any other dragon, for that matter – wasn't.

And now he wanted her to go with him?

Very strange... He was, of course, clearly under the power of *it* to have felt like simply 'being somewhere else', but perhaps there was something more...

"All right, cleric. I will join you on this trip."

Zetic smiled, and turned to look at the western sky; Isacharact did so, too. Once supper was finished, with the sun to guide them westward, they took off, flying towards the shore of the great Trackless Sea.

Ten days of flying took them from The Great Glaciers just north of Thay to the Sword Coast all the way on the western side of the continent of Faerûn. Each morning, Zetic briefly sang the song, and picked up the south-west heading to Evermeet.

They flew at top speed. Zetic seemed to be driving as fast as he could, and Isacharact was almost worried that she would have trouble keeping up, for he was fast becoming as good a flyer as her.

But there was an opportunity to slow down on the fifth day, just behind the coast. She interrupted him during their flight.

"We had best be on our guard while in this area. I know of a dragon who lairs not far from here. He could cause... trouble for us."

Zetic turned to her, still flying level.

"What do you mean, you know him? And what sort of trouble?"

"This dragon... He is a former suitor of mine. A rather... belligerent... one, at that."

"I take it you refused his advances?"

She looked straight forward and tilted her head, smiling.

"A euphemistic way of putting it, but yes."

Night fell, and they landed to sleep their last night on the mainland, guarded only by the shining moon above.

But shortly after bedding down, they were interrupted by a deep, powerful, and rich voice that came from the shadows of the forest.

“So, Isacharact. You said you thought it would be wise if I never came knocking at your home again, and now here you are, lying on the doorstep of mine. What wind, good or ill, has blown you this way?”

They both started up at the words, but while Zetic scrambled to his feet in anticipation of a battle, Isacharact responded only sluggishly, taking her time to stand up, projecting disdain for the speaker – a disdain that was embodied by the venomous way she spoke his name and the disgusted look on her face as she said it.

“*Krasswéh.*”

A gargantuan black dragon, easily the same size as Isacharact, stepped out of the shadows, his immense chitinous forward-curved horns poking out menacingly like a bull.

“It’s good to see that you remember my name, at least. But *I*, on the other hand, could never forget *anything* about you.”

Krasswéh walked over on two feet, his head at the same height as hers.

“Ah, I can see that you’re just as beautiful as you were back then...”

He reached out a hand to touch her face, but a look in her eyes and a barely-audible growl from her mouth made him stop a few feet away.

“... *And* as deadly.”

The black wyrm chuckled menacingly, and Isacharact’s expression changed from anger to sarcasm as she looked him up and down.

“I remember you too, Krasswéh... You were weak, ugly, and loathsome, and I can see you’ve aged only to become weaker, uglier, and more loathsome. You disgust me.”

Her insults washed straight off the dragon’s thick black hide.

“Oh come now, Isa dearest, is that any way to talk to an old flame? You must admit that there were at least a *few* good times shared between the two of us.”

Isacharact grinned, showing off her teeth.

“The only good time I had with *you*, Krasswéh, was when I had the great pleasure of kicking you out my door.”

She was finally getting to him, and his haughtiness diminished. He paused, and clicked his tongue before talking on.

“Well, perhaps not exactly good times *shared*, then... But who is this one you have with you, now?”

He turned to look at Zetic. What he saw didn't impress him, and he chided her.

“A little golden drake? Really, Isa, keeping a young stud around for your own pleasure is one thing, but robbing the cradle in such a manner? And one of those metallic mockeries of dragon-kind, even! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Despoiling dragon parents of their hoard is one thing, but stealing their children? How long ago did you snatch this one, then? Ten years? Twenty? It couldn't have been more; he barely looks fifty. And what did you do to his parents, I wonder?”

She only sneered at him, and that sneer gave him the incentive to speak to Zetic.

“Run along now, little one. Let a *real* dragon take care of this Lady of Ice.”

But now it was Isacharact who had an incentive to speak to Zetic, and she talked sideways, still staring at Krasswéh.

“See how he considers himself a *real* dragon, Zetic? He's proud of his ancestry. Too bad that it's nothing of significance.”

This jab at Krasswéh's family history provoked an angry flinch from the black dragon, which she quickly seized upon.

“Very proud, even! Look at his hostile reaction to my statement... even though he must know it is true.”

“I didn't come here to discuss matters of lineage, Isacharact.”

“Oh no? Then what *did* you come here to do, Krasswéh?”

“I should ask you the same thing, since it is *you* who are intruding in *my* territory, but since you asked first, I will oblige.”

He snapped his fingers, and sounds of the scuffling of foliage came from all around as a dozen armed men emerged from the forest into the small clearing. Zetic anxiously turned to examine them, and even Isacharact's eyes darted from side to side at their arrival.

“I've had my eye on you for a long time, Isa. You rejected me as a mate, and I can live with that. But I am a dragon as well as a lover, and when I came to your lair, I was looking for more than just *you*.”

He cleared his throat to speak, but Isacharact already knew what his words would be.

“You’re going to come with me, Isacharact, whether you want to or not. And then I’m going to take you to the North, where you will reveal to me the location of your hoard.”

Krasswéh’s voice changed to mockery.

“It’s such a shame, really. If only you hadn’t hidden your lair from magical scrying, I could’ve found it long ago, and taken what is rightfully mine without having to resort to such unpleasantness.”

He waved a hand at the soldiers who surrounded them, and began to grin again.

“But things will be as they will be, and who am I to make them different?”

She only stared back at him, furious.

“Oh dear me, Isa, I’m far above being scared by that deadly little glance of yours. You ought to have remembered that it didn’t work on me last time, either.”

He turned briefly to Zetic.

“And as for you, little golden one... I suggest you leave immediately. *When* I win this fight, I will have no use for you.”

Isacharact glanced back at Zetic.

Would *it* cause him to abandon her now? *It* ought to. Here was a difficult battle that he had no need to fight, and the promise of travelling far from these two dragons ought to have appealed to him significantly.

But Isacharact’s intuition was once again wrong, for Zetic puffed out his chest, made himself look as large as he could, and tried his best to speak in a commanding tone.

“I will stay by my Lady Isacharact’s side, Krasswéh, until *she* tells me to leave. You shall have to defeat both of us.”

“My, my, what a shame for you, and what a bother for me.”

Krasswéh didn’t seem the least bit bothered as he readied himself and ordered his men to attack. Predictably, Isacharact lunged straight at him with a blast of cold, and they began to fight viciously as Zetic turned to engage the fierce-looking men.

Some very surprised fierce-looking men, actually; Krasswéh had told them of Isacharact’s companion, having spotted the targets a few days ago in a crystal ball, but he couldn’t have known that Zetic was a powerful cleric of Torm.

So, naturally, the soldiers – swordsmen, wizards, and archers, all adept at hunting dragons – were quite startled when the gold dragon’s first action was *not* to breathe fire or to cast one of the pathetically weak arcane spells that a juvenile of his age ought to know, but instead to summon up a divine light that threw them back into the forest and blinded half the group.

When Zetic’s *second* action, made before they had even recovered from the first, was to cry out ‘Hear the word of Torm, and repent!’, a holy phrase that deafened those who weren’t already blind, the whole of the mercenary company began to have a sinking feeling about the outcome of this battle – regardless of how Krasswéh fared with Isacharact.

Still reeling from the first two blows of divine magic, the cohort of soldiers had barely gotten to their feet when the very earth beneath them began to tremble and crack as Zetic conjured up a small divine earthquake.

A wise man once said that mercenaries are brave amongst their friends and cowards before a real enemy, and that they avoid defeat only so long as they avoid battle with said foe.

That pronouncement was proven true once again on this evening, for Krasswéh’s hired backup, the deaf leading the blind, dodging around the fissures formed in the ground by Zetic’s spell, fled for their lives.

Smiling briefly to himself at this first taste of victory since the battle with Swight, Zetic turned back to see Isacharact and Krasswéh duking it out.

Isacharact seemed to have the upper hand; no doubt Krasswéh had expected his mercenaries to help him defeat her – after killing or driving off Zetic first, of course. But now, without his hired help, he was struggling to hold out against the furious physical and magical assault of the white dragon who was less than half his age.

And if she was barely winning before, when Zetic began to cast enchantment after enchantment on her, doing what he, as a cleric, did best – that is to say, layering on spells of protection, and wards of healing, and incantations of strength and battle-prowess ...

Well, quite simply, Krasswéh didn’t have a chance.

Shooting Zetic a mischievous grin, perhaps in thanks for the assistance, Isacharact actually began to laugh as she handily trounced the black wyrm, landing blow after blow, until finally Krasswéh had had enough, for he turned, and with only a brief parting snarl to them both, took to the air, taking one last jet of cold air in the back as he went.

“Just remember, Krasswéh! The only reason I’m letting you leave here alive is because it’ll make a far better tale to say how you fled like a dog from your own ambush! If I so much as catch a whiff of your foul odour again, it *will* be your final hour!”

She cackled loudly after him; when it was clear that he wasn’t coming back, she gave one final dismissive ‘Ha!’ and then turned to Zetic.

He felt her eyes grip him again...

She advanced quickly, drawing close before he even had *time* to become afraid.

“You’re quite handy to have around, cleric.”

There was an incredible brilliance in her eyes, and an excited grin in her face as she put one hand up to the side of his face, slowly caressing his cheek.

“How did your first battle feel?”

It was obvious from the energy she effused that *her* experience had been exhilarating. Zetic, on the other hand, stuttered in the face of her presence and at her touch.

“Uh, well, it wasn’t... it wasn’t exactly my *first*.”

She tilted her head, but still stared straight into him. Her hand clasped his chin.

“I meant your first as a *dragon*, obviously.”

It was difficult, but somehow Zetic managed to overcome her aura of fear – not to mention the uncomfortable closeness of her body – and show some strength of will by making light of the present situation.

“So did I.”

Her laugh was little more than a sharp exhalation, and her eyes seemed to brighten even more... until at last the heat of the moment died down, and they resumed their usual sly demeanour.

She withdrew her hand.

“I suppose that’s true. And if I say, ‘I meant your first as a *real* dragon’, is there any chance of you answering my question the way I intended it?”

And now it was Zetic’s turn to laugh, smiling.

“All right, all right. It was an interesting experience... though, in truth, I made no use whatsoever of my newfound abilities.”

Isacharact backed off and turned away to look at the now-empty battlefield.

“In this case, that was probably a good thing. No doubt the men would’ve come prepared for a dragon’s assault, and the unexpected use of your divine powers impressed upon them the value of retreat.”

“Yes, no doubt.”

She looked back at him, and there was a glow in her eyes.

“And *I* was quite impressed, too. Krasswéh should’ve been a tough opponent, but with all the spells you cast on me, it felt like there wasn’t any way I could lose.”

Her tail came up and brushed against the underside of his neck.

“... I rather enjoyed that feeling.”

Zetic gulped, but all she did next was lie down again, and prepare for sleep once more.

He looked on, hesitating.

It was very strange... on the one hand, he was drawn to her side, and at the same time, he felt repelled by it.

Unable to sort out the confusion of forces, he decided to simply do what he had been doing for the last several weeks, and slept next to her.

The next day, across the great sea! Island-hopping – for the magic of the song was well-crafted, and it led its singer from safe haven to safe haven on the way to Evermeet.

Six days of flying ever westward...

And during each of those six days, he had grown increasingly distracted, becoming less and less aware of his environment, and more and more agitated.

Zetic was becoming lost to *it*, and each of those six nights the force that wanted him to pull away from Isacharact grew stronger, though he still managed to shrug it off.

But on the afternoon of the seventh day, he seemed to calm down, and he was his normal self again.

For, flying high up in the heavens above, they had sighted land.

Evermeet, island of the elves. Rivers of grass in an ocean of trees, and just peeking over the treetops, the tips of crystalline cities and metal fortresses built in the last century. The long Retreat of the Elves was over, but it had been going on for many long years, and the new inhabitants of Evermeet had had plenty of time – and motivation – to build solid defences.

Defences that seemed quite oblivious to the presence of Zetic and Isacharact, actually, though Zetic guessed that the song which allowed him to home in on the island also told the Elves of his arrival, and they disregarded the two dragons in the air.

They were over land, now. Leuthilspar, the capital, was less than an hour away.

“Well, where do we go from here? Shall we simply drop down and ask a passer-by where your friend lives?”

Isacharact was glad to hear Zetic laugh – after they’d left the mainland, he’d been very sombre, almost as if sulking.

“Nothing so rash, thankfully. The song is keyed to the House of Saraendas, and I can feel exactly where it is.”

“The House of Saraendas? He is nobility, then?”

“Yes. His father is third cousin to Queen Amlaruil, I believe.”

Nothing further was said, nor needed to be said, for shortly thereafter, the silver mansions and homes of the Elves showed themselves, and even after having seen Bahamut’s palace, both of them were captivated by the unearthly beauty of the organic Elvish structures.

Eventually, they landed in front of a large manse only a few miles from the Palace of the Queen, and Zetic stood up in contemplation.

“Hmm. I wonder how to work this? It’s going to be rather hard to go into his house while I’m this large.”

“Make yourself smaller, then.”

“What?”

“You keep forgetting yourself, cleric, or else you simply don’t know much about dragons at all. Gold drakes like you can change their form at will. You could even make yourself appear human again, if you wanted.”

And who hadn’t heard ancient tales of wyrms in disguise, helping or hindering men as they pleased? Zetic could’ve nearly slapped himself for forgetting them.

But he didn’t feel right making himself human... So instead, he simply shrunk himself, and knocked on the door as a human-sized dragon.

Zetic could hear the soft pattering of feet inside the house, and the door was opened by a young, fair-haired, and very fair-skinned elf man.

“Yes? Who-”

The slanted green Elven eyes bulged a bit at seeing the creature standing before him.

“Er... What can I do for you, master dragon? Do you seek my father, perhaps? He is presently at court.”

Zetic grinned.

“I do not seek your father, Lural. I come in search of you.”

“Me? Well, uh, what do you want with me?”

“Only to see my good friend once again, and receive the hospitality he offered me.”

Lural tilted his head and closely examined the dragon at his door.

“I don’t under—... Wait... wait a minute... *Ze-tic?*”

Zetic burst into a smile.

“So, those green eyes of yours can still see well! Yes, Zetic!”

Elves are more often amused than surprised, but right now Lural was plenty of both.

“By Corellon’s Golden Hair! Here it was *I* who was said to be the reckless one of our little adventuring band, and now you come knocking on my door, like this??”

The Elf waved at Zetic’s form, flabbergasted.

“It’s a very long story, Saraendas.”

“Well! Come in and tell it to me, then!”

But then as Zetic began to walk in, Lural saw Isacharact outside.

“Oh, but I see you’ve brought a friend, as well! Perhaps you should tell the tale outside, so that we can all stay together.”

Isacharact was very aware of the fact that Zetic had managed to completely forget her, walking straight inside without even a glance backwards. She didn’t feel like being around him right now, if he was going to be like that.

And of course, because of *it*, he *was* going to be like that, and there was very little that could be done to make things different.

“Do not concern yourself with me, master Saraendas. I am tired from the flight, and if it will not disturb anyone, I would prefer to rest out here for a while.”

“Sleep where you please, of course! Come on in, Zetic.”

The two joyous friends entered the mansion, while Isacharact put down her head and tried to sleep.

It was difficult, though. She was thinking too hard.

“That’s an incredible story, Zetic. Simply amazing. I’ll bet my father – and the rest of the court, even, would love to hear it.”

They were sitting at a table, Lural enjoying a glass of wine while Zetic was sipping tea.

“Oh, well, you know, we each think our own stories are the most fantastic. I’m sure the Queen’s court has heard plenty of tales better than mine.”

“Don’t be too sure, my friend... I think... No, I must! I must go immediately and ask my father what he thinks of this. And I can tell them of...”

The spirited young elf became calm at last. He paused before continuing.

“I know of the Starfire family; they are distant relations of one of my uncle’s, I think. Their family home is not here in the city of Leuthilspar, but rather on the other side of the island, in Nimlith. Let me take your tale to the court, and the sad news of Methalar’s fall will quickly and graciously reach the ears of those who loved him.”

Lural stood up to go, and despite Zetic’s calm and friendly protestations, refused to do anything but run off to the palace as fast as his legs could carry him.

“I see you’re still Saraendas The Swift. I hope your father has learned to tolerate your hastiness.”

“And *I* see that you’re still the calm cleric, more interested in talking than doing.”

They had a little laugh before Lural went off in earnest.

“Help yourself to anything while you’re here, naturally. I won’t be long.”

He wasn’t, and returned within an hour, with the sun now fully asleep on the other side of the world, and only the twinkling lights of stars, the soft rays of the moon, and the magical Elven-lights left to illuminate the great Elf city.

“Well, that’s done. You are to be presented at court immediately.”

Zetic sat up in his chair.

“What? Immediately? But... it’s night!”

Lural grinned.

“Night is when men sleep, maybe! Here in Evermeet, night is when things start to liven up! Court is ordinarily in session for another five hours, at least.”

“Well, then...”

His own words suddenly reminded him of Isacharact, still outside...

“Oh, and what about Isacharact?”

The Elf was hastily leading Zetic out the door.

“I already had a little chat with her, my friend. She said she wanted to head over to the court to speak with the Queen before we got there. Can’t imagine why, but of course, seeing as how she’s essentially dragon nobility, I couldn’t refuse.”

“She’s a *bit* more than just nobility, you know.”

“Oh, I know, I know. Isasarach’s daughter and all that. Really, you ought to have been a stodgy old Dwarf, to get so worked up about ancient things. It’s plain enough to anyone – or maybe just any *Elf*, if *you* can’t see it – that she’s not here to cause trouble.”

“You know, Saraendas, you’re almost twice my age, but sometimes you make me feel like I ought to be your grandfather, that I should always call you impetuous.”

“What can I say, Zetic? Maybe there’s a bit of Gnomish blood in the family.”

They laughed and walked off, Zetic resuming his normal size – that is to say, his normal *dragon* size – along the way.

Bahamut’s palace, made of stone and metal, was possessed of a stunning glory that radiated outwards from the sides of Mount Celestia.

The palace of Amlaruil, Queen of the Moon and Sun Elves, on the other hand, was a delicate beauty, its architecture blending into the trees that surrounded it, and Zetic was captivated by the glow.

Inside, fair Elves walked in corridors that might be mistaken for being made out of the stars themselves, such did they glitter. Light came from beautiful chandeliers, and the twilight streaked in through windows...

And Zetic was looking *out* said windows, unconsciously longing to be somewhere else. For he had picked up Isacharact’s ‘scent’ again... Now *it*, that force which only *she* recognized, was driving him away from her.

He was just beginning to become aware of his own subtle internal workings when they reached the doors of the court proper, and he had to shake himself awake.

“Ready to go in? Not many humans get to see our Queen, you know.”

“I’m not exactly human any more.”

“Oh, you seem the same to me, really, but let me tell you that even *less* dragons have been at her court.”

He nudged Zetic in the side.

“The only thing I can think to say – though maybe I don’t need to say this to *you*, if you’ve still got that vow of chastity before marriage hanging over your head – is to remember that no matter she does, or how she looks, or you feel... she’s already *married*.”

Zetic snorted and chuckled in reply, and Lural gave a signal to a guardsman to let them in.

The double doors opened, and revealed inside a busy yet somehow ordered scene, where clusters of Elves were standing, sitting, walking around, talking amongst themselves, or enjoying the music that was coming from a raised platform at the back of the room...

And on that platform was an ornate chair upon which sat Amlaruil, Queen.

Lural had been right to warn Zetic, vow or no vow, for the Queen of the Elves was easily the fairest of them, as well...

The two of them walked straight up the nave to bow before the throne. The other Elves in the room, however, paid them on a little attention – when one lives to seven hundred years, after all, one sees many strange things, and tends to take each new experience calmly.

Over the soft mutterings of the other courtiers and the sweet melodies from the musicians beside her, the Queen’s delicate voice was easily heard.

“Welcome, Zetic, cleric of Torm, to our court. The young Saraendas spoke highly of you with his father, and as the elder is our cousin, we heard the son’s words, and are glad to have you as a guest among us.”

She smiled an incredibly warm smile as Zetic raised himself up again, and even though his head was higher up than her throne, it felt like he was looking *up* to face her.

“Thank you, my Queen. I’m... humbled... that my tale has caught your attentions.”

“It has, but we have only heard some. Yet you have already told it once tonight. Let your voice not be exhausted. You may tell it tomorrow, if you please. For now, we invite you to partake in our hospitality, and join us in joyous remembrance of Methalar, one of our own who was taken from us all too soon.”

She nodded, and Lural led Zetic off to one side of the room.

Time seemed to slow down in the marvellous court, in the presence of the fairer-than-fair Elves, and Zetic, a cup of nectar in his hand, forgot all that he had been thinking about as he chatted with Lural's family and others who came to speak with him.

And yet...

It was still in him, and when there was a pause in the conversation – as there often was, for Elves are slow and meticulous speakers – he became aware that he was looking out the window, and thinking of other places.

All very confusing, for he did not know why he should be behaving thus. Even Lural noticed that Zetic was becoming increasingly agitated, and queried him.

“You seem uncomfortable, my friend. Is everything all right?”

“I don't know... it *ought* to be, really, for I'm in a magnificent palace, amongst friends, safe and sound... and yet... and yet even though I've only *just* arrived, there's something that makes me want to pull away, as if I should be continuously gambling what I have for a chance at a better life somewhere else.”

“And you were saying something about *me* seeming young? You talk as if you were going through adolescence.”

“Well, I am, in a sense...”

He trailed off, and took a final swig from his cup, emptying it. Lural was about to say something in reply, but then the side doors just near them opened, and both of them – and, indeed, many people in the room, too – were captivated by what entered.

It was Isacharact, striding in majestically.

Zetic tilted a bit as he craned to see around a pillar that was blocking his view of her head. She was now wearing a set of gold-wrapped gem-studded chains that were draped between her horns, and they glittered in the light.

But that wasn't all. As she walked across the large room to the other side, two heavy-looking tassels on long cloth tethers were dangling from the tips of her horns, swaying with her step.

She nodded at the Queen, who smiled in return, and then looked straight forward as she took up a place on the right side of the raised dais, sitting at the Queen's left hand.

And Zetic...

Zetic was dumbstruck.

Lural glanced up... It would've been an insult to the cleanliness of the room to say that Zetic was catching flies, but that's the image that came to mind as he saw the cleric's mouth hanging open, a blank look on his face.

With an amused smile, he whispered to his friend.

“Psst... Zetic. You’re *staring* at her.”

No reply. Zetic continued to look straight at Isacharact, who was herself completely avoiding his gaze, ignoring him just as the Elves had instructed her to do.

“Zetic! Zetic!”

Two louder whispers provoked no response, and the other Elves near Zetic were beginning to grin – and even chuckle a bit – at seeing the obvious infatuation.

Isacharact tossed her head back, and as the chains and tassels bounced around briefly, the Elves’ barely-audible laughter doubled in volume as Zetic’s head wobbled a bit, and the cup he was holding escaped his hands and noisily clattered onto the ground.

Zetic remained oblivious to that noise as well as the growing murmurs of amusement.

Hey! Hey! Look over here! Why isn’t she looking at me? Lord Torm give me strength, I can’t – I can’t *think*! She’s got that... Oh, and those chains... And then with the eyes...

Zetic’s internal ranting was cut short – literally, as Lural had drawn his sword and given his comatose friend a tiny but stinging scratch on the right paw.

The dragon’s body jumped, and let out a gasp, turning to look at what had struck him.

Seeing Lural, sword in hand and smirk on face, Zetic realised that the striker was, in truth, not the Elf, but *Isacharact*, and he hastily picked up his cup, embarrassed.

Yet... as the grins died down, and life in the hall returned to normal, he slowly turned back to her, managing only just barely to stay aware of himself.

She continued to look elsewhere as the night wore on, indifferent to his attentions... and that indifference only served to excite Zetic even more.

He barely even noticed when Queen Amlaruil announced that the day was over, and the people began to stream out of the hall, returning to their homes.

Isacharact stayed seated where she was, and she, Lural, and Zetic, were, only a few minutes later, the only ones left in the room.

Lural followed Zetic’s gaze, looking at Isacharact as he spoke.

“You’ve been given a room in the palace, I gather. One of the guardsmen will show you to it, whenever you’re ready... In the meantime, I’m going home.”

Zetic was still in something of a daze, and was still staring at Isacharact.

“Yes, yes... Thank you, my friend. Good night.”

Lural left, his eyes darting between the two dragons. He motioned at the guards and they went outside the room, closing the door behind them.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then Isacharact at last slowly turned to look at Zetic.

He breathed in deeply as she got up and did her slow charge again, prowling forward, purring in as enticing a way as she could, a stare of invitation, not of terror, and a light softness in her step.

All these things were different from when she had charged him in Bahamut’s palace, but they ought to have made the motion less likely to frighten him off.

And he did stand his ground, for a while... but when she took the second-last step, Zetic backed up.

She stopped purring.

“You recoil? But I don’t see fear in your eye.”

“I’m... I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then why do you retreat from me?”

“I... I don’t know!”

Zetic’s breathing accelerated as he was torn between his desire to stay with Isacharact, and the secret *it* which was driving him away.

Isacharact stared at him as he looked down at the floor and began to cry from the confusion.

She took a deep breath.

“I do.”

Zetic looked up at her as she turned away.

“... It is the *Essa-Chakamarul*.”

“The ‘Wander-Lust’?”

Isacharact walked to the window and looked out.

“Yes... *It*, the wander-lust, grips all young dragons just before adulthood, and drives them away from their parents, and their clutch-mates, and any other dragon besides, making them want to fly far, far, away, and find their own place in the world.”

Zetic approached, and she turned to look at him. Passing underneath an arch, they stepped out onto the balcony at the back of the room, and looked out at the stars.

“And now *it* has you, and there’s nothing you can do, save follow its commands, and leave to find your destiny elsewhere. Leave *me*, that is.”

“I don’t *want* to leave you.”

There was a chilling warmth in her eyes.

“That much is plain to see; that you should have lasted this long is quite incredible. I was expecting you to depart alone the very moment you said you wanted to leave for Evermeet... for *it* overrides all, even my attempt at seduction, tonight. So go, now; there’s nothing here for you. You won’t find solace anywhere, until *it* has passed, and you are free from the wander-lust again.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Years. Decades, even.”

Zetic looked up at the stars.

“So... then *this* is the bitterness of which Bahamut told me.”

“Yes. Nothing can defeat the wander-lust; no wyrmling has ever conquered it, nor should they want to, for it is the essence of what we are.”

She leaned over at him.

“*We* are dragons, and our way is a way of independence and individual strength. The *Essa-Chakamarul* ensures that this spirit of solitary power continues. It would be foolish to try to resist its call.”

There was a long pause...

Still looking at the stars, Zetic broke the silence.

“But if I cannot resist it, I must at the least subvert its commands...”

He turned back to her and spoke slowly, laboriously.

“... For I’m in love with you, Isacharact...”

The stout cleric looked more broken-down than he could ever have been while in the dark cellar of Swight’s dungeon.

“... and I’ll... I’ll come back to you... if you’ll wait for me.”

Isacharact stared back into his teary eyes.

“Oh, I’m not in *love* with you, cleric...”

The sarcasm practically dripped from her mouth, but Zetic was so dishevelled and worn from his emotional torment that he completely missed it, and his sadness seemed to be magnified a thousand-fold.

She began to grin, and turned her head up at him.

“... but I’ll wait for you... at least until someone better comes along.”

Finally catching the meaning of her words, Zetic’s eyes lit up.

He took a few hesitant steps closer, brought his mouth up to Isacharact’s, and as she didn’t move away, he kissed her softly on the lips.

Isacharact kissed back. They closed their eyes, and she brought one clawed hand up into the hair at the back of his head.

A few seconds passed, lips locked... but then Isacharact’s hand suddenly clenched, pulling Zetic hair and yanking the head to which it was attached a few feet away from her. Zetic gasped in pain and briefly struggled, but Isacharact didn’t seem to care.

She looked him up and down, licked her lips, and opened her mouth in a greedy, toothy grin. There was a feral quality to her voice, and hunger in her eyes.

“Hurry back.”

He swallowed deeply as she began to purr menacingly. They held the pose for a few seconds, until Isacharact at last let go of his hair.

Zetic backed off, bowed deeply, and turned around and bent over, intending to take off from the balcony...

... only to first start up as he received a solid smack on his bottom from Isacharact.

His eyes bulged as the creature behind him began to purr again...

Without looking back, he swallowed again and launched into the air. Isacharact looked up as he flew East, back to world of men, and the world to which he was not drawn, but driven – driven away from her, by the wander-lust.

“Why are you out here alone, White Princess?”

Queen Amlaruil had stepped out onto the balcony.

“Because he is gone.”

“Will he come back?”

“Yes. You were correct, and I was mistaken; the chain was *not* broken.”

Isacharact turned to face the Queen.

“I appreciate your handmaidens’ help tonight.”

There was a soft, reassuring, smile in the old Elf-Queen’s face.

“You are very welcome for the ornaments, White Princess. I am very glad to see that all has turned out for the best. Whenever you are ready, come back inside the palace. There is much to be done...”

The dragon got up and walked forward, shooting the Queen an inquisitive glance.

“Much to be done for what?”

“Why, to prepare for his return, of course.”

ZETIC AND ISACHARACT WILL BE REUNITED
IN
“THE RETURN, AND THE KING”