

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

Captain Montague
Mature Adult Human Male
Fighter and Red Wizard of Thay

Cheldar Swight
Mature Adult Human Male
Transmuter and Red Wizard of Thay

The Turning of the Wyrn

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

The violet-trimmed banner meant nothing to Zetic.

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

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

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

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

Zetic spoke to his rescuer of their mission.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zetic saw Montague’s expression change to confusion.

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

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

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

Montague broke out in laughter.

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

Zetic smiled back.

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

“Perhaps, dragon-man, perhaps. But go eat and drink, first. Those of your faith are known for their self-sacrificing ways, but after seeing you in that dungeon, I think you’ve sacrificed your health more than enough!”

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

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

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

“What do you think you’re doing?”

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

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

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

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

Isacharact growled back at him.

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

“What, bones and all?”

“Yes, of course!”

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

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

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

She grumbled and sat down near him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isacharact let out an amused snort and came over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose that is so.”

Zetic, too, looked at the stars again.

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

He turned to face Isacharact once more.

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

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

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

Zetic snorted at her words.

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

Isacharact looked around, perturbed at how easily Zetic toppled her argument. It did not please her to be defeated so handily, though there was some other feeling in it... Curiosity? Interest?

She soon thought of a new position to defend.

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

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

Isacharact turned and looked down at him.

“But your God did *not* help you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Captain Montague called out to them.

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

Isacharact quickly turned away from the water and faced him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zetic chuckled lightly.

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

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

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

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

Zetic was ready, and launched into his opening piece – a hearty walking-song from the Dales, with a jaunty beat. A few of those in the audience who knew the words sang along, but his louder voice was clearly heard above all.

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

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

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

In the shadows cast by the camp-fire, Isacharact had been sitting attentively, watching and listening to the revelry. It was confusing; she felt like observing, but never before had she paid heed to such things as men’s songs and laughter. She almost felt troubled by her own behaviour. What caused her to behave thusly?

Zetic was approached by Montague after almost everyone had retired.

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

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

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

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

Zetic became suddenly sad.

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

“Company, you shall have tonight, cleric.”

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

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

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

“Come, and sleep by my side.”

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

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

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

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

Was such a thing appropriate? If he and she were humans both, then it most certainly would not have been... Noble clerics such as he should not lay and sleep next to maidens in this manner. And his solemn vow of chastity until marriage would definitely be called into question.

But... as dragons? Who could say? He turned the question over in his mind, but was interrupted.

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

“Oh, of course, my Lady. Thank you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zetic looked down at the ground, disappointed.

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

Captain Montague looked at Zetic, confused.

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

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

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

Montague reflected honestly.

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

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

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

Montague chuckled.

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

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

They managed a flap. Once, twice, a third time. He stretched them in all ways, trying to discover the secret of control.

Thinking himself as ready as he could get on his own, he prepared to launch off – but then he stopped to reflect.

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

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

It made sense, he supposed. At least with her they'd have *some* interesting things to talk about. However joyous the singing around the fire had been last night, he recognized in the Thayan soldiers a degree of professionalism, which meant that they would not be ones for small talk during the day.

And so, even with Isacharact flying overhead, they would proceed with military precision, staying alert. And after weeks in the darkness, he lusted for conversation, for pleasant company. They would not give it to him while they marched. In the evening again, perhaps, but not during the day.

Well, then!

With a blessing-spell of good luck and strength, off he went. Bounding along on four legs, wings outstretched, flapping as hard as he could make them, he headed straight for the woods in front of him.

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

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

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

Oh, certainly, he had experienced spells of levitation before... but they paled to this as riding in a slow ox-cart pales to speeding in a horse-drawn chariot.

He became more confident, and slowly circled around, gaining altitude. It was surprising how easy it was. Was his Lord Torm looking down on him at this moment, and blessing every flap of his wings, to keep him airborne? Perhaps so, for Zetic hardly felt as if he was exerting himself at all. He could keep this up all day.

That was a good thing, too, for now he could see that the path east led through a thick forest, and would make landing difficult.

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

A few minutes later, he recognized the shape of Isacharact quite clearly. She was sailing through the skies, gliding on her immense wings. He flew straight towards her. Speaking in an almost laughing tone.

“Good day to you, my Lady Isacharact!”

She seemed to look at him with surprise.

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

He banked so as to fly next to her.

“Indeed, for so many things have happened this morning, that I am filled with spirit. I have seen the beautiful sun again, rising so gloriously in the East. I felt the strength of my Lord returned to me, filling me with His strength. And – so help me, Torm – now I fly, up in the sky!”

Her expression became muted again.

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

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

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

“For you, maybe. But for I, who have been anchored to the Earth for all my life, flying could never be ‘simply flying’.”

Isacharact paused and breathed deeply.

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

Zetic managed to sweep under her and then up again. Stabilizing himself in the air was becoming quite easy.

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

Isacharact snorted.

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

Zetic fell back for a moment, and stared at her from behind. Great Gods above! *Almost four hundred years old!* Though, in truth, that was merely adulthood, for a dragon. Her three hundred and fifty years in dragon years was roughly equivalent to his thirty-eight in man-years.

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

Zetic's mind raced through thoughts as he raced through the air that day. Happy, flitting thoughts, as befitted the situation in which he was thinking them. The joyous sensation of flying seemed to recall all those other great joys he had ever experienced.

In truth, not much conversation happened in the skies that day, though somehow both seemed to silently appreciate the company. The occasional word passed between them about flying, or about some interesting feature of geography, or perhaps a comment on the shapes of the clouds above. Zetic focused on flying, desirous to master this new art as quickly as possible.

Evening fell again – as it always does – and they joined up with Captain Montague's troop.

Isacharact still sat off to the side while Zetic ate with the others, and sang more songs, and told some of his tales, entertaining them well. But, at night... no-one in the troop seemed to take notice when she once again invited him to return to her side to sleep. He went to her side willingly, somewhat less nervous than the night before.

They awoke together the next day, had their morning meal together, took off together, and flew through the air... together. The company had made excellent time the day before, and Captain Montague said he hoped to arrive at Swight's other castle on the morrow. What a great battle there should be then!

But it is hardly fair to tell of tomorrow now, for *today* is not over yet.

And today, Zetic had the same energy as before; but, feeling the basics of flight mastered, he experimented with more... fancy... manoeuvres.

Zetic positively weaved his way through the air as a tadpole through water. Isacharact flew straight and level and watched on, somewhat incredulous, as if watching a child play with some simple new toy.

He dived, he rose, he spun, he rolled. He jinked up, and down, and to both sides. It seemed as if, once airborne, no manoeuvre of his could break the flight.

Noon came, and Zetic decided to take a break, flying next to Isacharact once again.

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

She looked back at him with a tired look. Tired from watching him fly, no doubt, and not from flying herself.

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

Zetic spoke back, grinning.

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

Isacharact chortled.

“They fly well... But I have seen better.”

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

Her right eye turned to look at him, fixing him in its gaze for what seemed like an inordinately long period of time before she spoke again.

“Well...”

And off she went! Into a great dive, spinning as she went. Zetic could do naught but fly straight, stupefied.

But as she flew low across the trees, he came to his senses, and followed after her. Down further and further, skirting the tree-tops. He soon had nearly caught up to her, but she spied him, and took off again to one side.

Zetic tried to match it, but Isacharact turned too quickly for him, better in control of her flight than he was of his.

He had almost caught up again, but she rose up, leaving him down amongst the trees. Zetic had to beat his wings very strongly if he wanted to catch up.

Catch up he did, though, and this time she did not fly off.

She shot him a glance, and he returned it, and after a brief pause, they sailed off together, dodging and weaving through the air, as he tried to follow where her tail led.

So much for keeping a watch out for the soldiers below! But no harm was done, for no enemies lurked in the forest, and the dragon and the man-drake frolicked quite undisturbed in the air above.

Evening fell again. They returned to the company, Zetic full of energy as if having just awoken. Despite his mangled appearance, an aberration of two species combined, he positively beamed at dinner that night, and enthralled the entire war-band with the wondrous tale of Samerious, a noble knight from ages long ago.

Everyone was at the once both excited and tired from the rousing story; not even Captain Montague could concentrate on the plans for tomorrow that night.

The soldiers went off to their beds, the fire died down.

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

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

Or both?

Unable to answer these questions, Zetic fell asleep.

Morning came. Captain Montague was agitated; they would reach the fort at mid-day. He laid out his battle-plan to the soldiers. Zetic listened with disinterest – his role would be simple, after all. Heal the wounded and cast spells of protection. No fighting would he need do; there were plenty of Montague's men for that. In any case, he didn't know how he could fight; his ugly skin was no dragon-scale – able to easily ward off sword-blows – and in spite of being well-fed these last few days, he was still feeble.

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

It was his fury.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With the plan set, the dragons took to the air again, though with instructions to land out of sight of the target and to join up with the company. They would then proceed the rest of the way on foot, in hopes of surprising Swight's forces.

In the air, Zetic thought of Swight, and of the terrible fate that he wished to inflict on that monstrous man.

But he thought of Isacharact beside him, too. There was some strange feeling he had, as if he did not want to be far from her, as if he felt better when he was near her.

And, even as they flew towards the final battle with the evil Swight... Even as he could see the insane wizard's lecherous eyes, and hear his cackling laugh, and feel his horrid grin... He could not help but think of Isacharact, of tracing the lines of her form in his mind's eye. Of watching the way her wings flapped, the way her tail flailed, of the way her chest puffed in and out as she breathed. The way she held her arms and legs while she flew, the way the scales on her back rippled and shined in flight, reflecting the sunlight.

And of her face. There was something... attractive?... about the shape of it, the way her mouth closed when she slept, or hung open slightly in flight. And the eyes, their colour, and the way they stared. Were they... enticing?

Wait a minute, Hex. What did you just say?

A White Dragon, *attractive?*

Did you just think that?

Enticing eyes?

Uh-oh.

Not wanting to be far from her?

Oh, my.

Feeling better when you're near her?

No, no, no! Not good! Not good!!

Zetic had never been in love before, but he was not... ignorant... of its symptoms.

Maybe it's just friendship.

Hah! Friendship? Don't make yourself laugh! Didn't you hear your thoughts back there? Friendship's a feeble excuse. You deceive yourself, dragon-man. This isn't friendship, you silly cleric, it's...

Ohhhhhhhhhhh dear.

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

"We're screwed, Hex!"

How right you were, Jeck! If you only knew, you'd probably laugh your pretty little gnomish head off! You, dead – rest in peace, good friend – and me, Zetic, in love with Isacharact.

Talk about liking to push the shiny buttons – love has to be the shiniest button of them all!

Hex, my old friend, what *have* you gotten yourself into?

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

She's almost *ten times* your age. Probably devoured as many men as years you've been alive. And she's vicious – or, at least, so Captain Montague had said: Territorial, with a reputation for having plenty of experience fighting other dragons. Could probably kill you before you blinked.

Not that you're much of a dragon anyways, you stupid bastard. Sure, you fly like one, but you've got no scales, and a misshapen head, and an ugly tint.

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

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

Eh?

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

Zetic tried to shake off his thoughts of the creature beside him.

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

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

Zetic looked off to the side briefly and his eyes were held captive by the form next him once more.

Isacharact...

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

The two dragons dropped out of the sky and returned to the war-band.

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

In the back of the group, Zetic was busying himself supporting the soldiers – healing ones who were injured seriously, casting helpful enchantments on those who were beset by foes – and on using some of his divine energies against the foes – calling up Torm's light to blast them to pieces, or befuddle their minds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come on, men! He’s not a dragon yet! Let’s hurry up and get to him before he becomes one!”

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

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

“Quickly! Down the hallway, at the end! There’s an outdoor terrace on the roof of the first floor!”

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

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

Swight tapped his hand on a pillar of stone next to him, and an eerie glow consumed the entire complex, save for the tiny square on which he stood.

“Damn it, an anti-magic field! Nock arrows and let him have it!”

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

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

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

“Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

Montague, completely immobile, was *not* happy.

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

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

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

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

“Bottoms up, eh cleric of Torm?”

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

The wizard collapsed to the ground, grunting and groaning.

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

His ranting devolved into laughter punctuated by periodic moans.

“No mere polymorph spell is this – for I shall become a dragon as if born one!”

Isacharact surged forward, but there was nothing she could do. Her blows could not breach Swight’s shield. With a growl, she spoke furiously.

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

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

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

Zetic closed his eyes, kneeled, and prayed to his God.

Inside the covering shell, still writhing as the transformation was beginning, Swight saw Zetic and cackled loudly.

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

Zetic continued to pray.

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

Zetic continued to pray. The sky had been bright... but now some black clouds seemed to gather.

“You can pray all you want! It didn’t help you in my dungeon pit–”

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

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

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

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

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

It was not sunshine.

It was the might of the God, Torm, reaching out to strike at evil.

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

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

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

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

As he continued his cackling, Zetic yelled a simple statement at Isacharact.

“GET HIM!”

Hearing almost the same words that he had used so many days ago, Swight at last looked up, and screamed in horror as Isacharact’s hand reached for him. She tossed him into the air above her head, and he twisted furiously to try to fling a spell at her.

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

She swallowed deeply, and closed her mouth. Swight would not be climbing out. Ever.

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

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

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

Neither Zetic nor Isacharact heard the last of his words.

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

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

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

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

Before them stood an unimaginably colossal silver-coloured dragon.

There was no doubt whatsoever in Zetic’s mind.

It was Bahamut, The Platinum Dragon.

Lord God of Good Dragons.

He radiated power, and His divine splendour blinded them; their sight was locked to His gaze. Neither one was able to look anywhere other than into His eyes, coloured an incredible blue within deeper blue.

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

“So. You have defeated Swight. We are pleased. Even Tiamat, Our evil nemesis and counterpart, is pleased. None of the Dragon-Gods wanted him to succeed, but We were prevented from interfering by other Gods who supported Swight’s wicked schemes. You have defeated him without Our help.”

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

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

Zetic felt the God stare at him even more solidly – as if that was even possible – and nearly choked. He couldn't feel any of his limbs, and even the sensation of his chest against the smooth marble floor was dulled beyond comprehension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking back at the God, Zetic made his choice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Back outside, one of the dragons spoke to Isacharact.

“We will take you to your chambers.”

Isacharact looked in at Zetic.

“Are we... Are we to be separated, then?”

The wyrm’s face was impassive, betraying no emotion.

“You would prefer to remain with him?”

“I would.”

“Then, stay.”

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

Hours later, Zetic awoke – still as yet unchanged by Bahamut’s spell. He felt a cold presence coiled around him.

“Isacharact?”

“Yes, Zetic?”

“You lie with me?”

“I do.”

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

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

“Good night, my Lord Zetic.”

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