

The Poisoned Heart

Sam Stoddard

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In the heart of the Dragonlord Silumgar's fortress, the undead naga Sidisi bides her time...

Silumgar's court was not the busy place that Sidisi had imagined it in her youth, rising through the ranks of Naga in her attempts to gain power. She had imagined one day being a trusted advisor for the dragon, that she could use her influence to smite her enemies, making her the wealthiest of all Naga.



Custodian of the Trove | Art by Raoul Vitale

The truth as she understood it was that few ventured into Silumgar's court, as venturing out was far from guaranteed—even in seemingly benign diplomatic negotiations. The dragon viewed lesser beings as an outlet for his whims. Most of the peoples under Silumgar's dominion sent excessive tribute in the hopes of never being called for a private appearance. This meant that many days had seemingly endless lulls where there was very little use for Sidisi's skills as a translator.

It was in those lulls that her mind drifted back to her last mortal moments, as the knife plunged into her heart, and the necromancers chanted the spell that would bring her back—or at least the part of her that remained. There was pain in those final moments, yes, but there was also the cool evening breeze, the scent of orchids on her tongue—distant, fleeting, but present. Those sorts of sensations Sidisi had

ignored during her life, disregarded them in her rise of power. Now, they were the one thing that she could never get back.

That was the ultimate punishment of the dark magic of necromancy—to remove the ability to experience the pleasures all around, but not their memory. The desire remained, but it was a hunger that could not be satiated. The memories that remained after Sidisi's transition, even ones as painful as that, were more pleasant than her existence as a sibsig.



Silumgar's Command | Art by Nils Hamm

Sidisi was brought back to the present by the noise of a caravan arriving—from the Marang region, if she recognized the carts correctly. Dozens of strong men emerged carrying chests of gold. As they marched up the steps to the entrance of Silumgar's court, one of the humans approached her.

"I seek an audience," the man said. "I wish to explain why our tribute is not to the level expected of us."

Sidisi examined the gold medallion on the man's chest. A clear indication of wealth and power. "Perhaps you might send one of your underlings, if you have ill news," she said. "You do not look like a man who values honor above life."

"Jhinu sent me," he said, handing Sidisi a small purse of gems. "He told me you have a receptive ear. Though when he told me of you, he did not mention that you were..."

Sidisi interrupted him. "I remember this human," she said. "It has been several years now, during my previous life. He also offered me jewels for favors with the dragon. They were very pretty. A bag of jewels for a mountain of gold...a very good exchange." Sidisi tucked the bag into her sleeves. "Follow me."

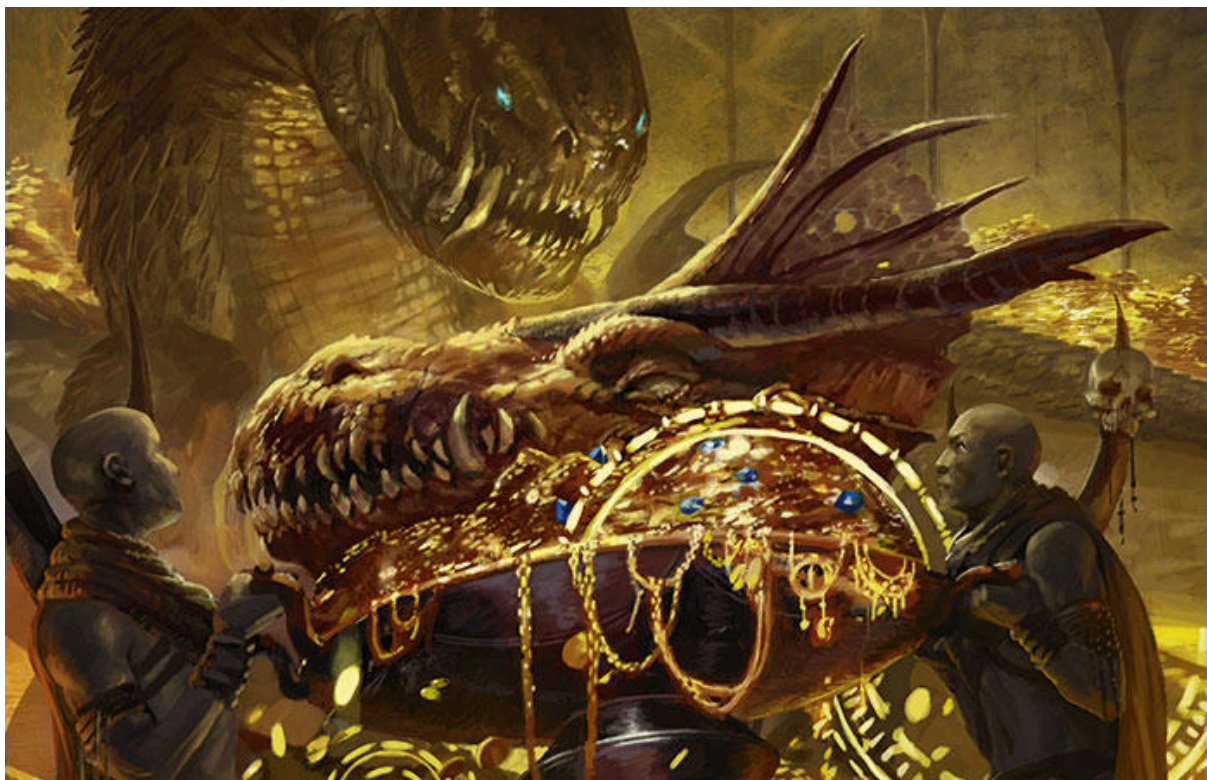
Sidisi led the man inside. She approached Silumgar's throne, loudly making a path through the gold coins and other objects of tribute that he had collected during his millennia of rule. The dragon was known to slumber in the late summer afternoons, and ensuring that he was aware of your presence was important if staying in one piece was a prerogative.

“My lord,” Sidisi said, barking in a low and gravelly language. Naga could not create the precise language of the dragons, but they could produce a weak imitation. It was the tongue the dragon enjoyed speaking in.



Dragonlord Silumgar | Art by Steven Belledin

The dragon lifted his head and turned it toward the procession of valuables carried into the room by two dozen of the man’s servants. Gold coins, gold helms, relics from the fallen warriors of Dromoka’s protectorate—Silumgar eyed this bounty, but his monstrous head provided no insight. When the last servant had emptied his treasure, the dragon turned his head away.



Hedonist's Trove | Art by Peter Mohrbacher

"Your men may leave," Sidisi said to the man. "But you may not." As the servants left the throne room, Sidisi brought her tail up to the face of the man standing before her. "We have heard stories of the conquests in the Gurmag province. Great victories against many of Dromoka's fortresses. Wealth beyond measure! But here, this wealth you have brought us is measurable. Do you not believe that your Lord deserves his cut?"

"Indeed, we have achieved many victories," the man said, turning to the dragon. "But also suffered many losses. We needed to rebuild—we needed to feed the families of those who fell in battle."

"You will not speak to the dragon," Sidisi said, her rotting tail lightly passing over his neck. "You will speak to me. I will speak to the dragon."

Sidisi growled, and the dragon turned his head. "You have lined your pockets with gold that was by all rights his," Sidisi said. "You have attempted to bribe me, but I have no use for such petty things anymore." Sidisi dropped the pouch of jewels on the ground. "The dragon has made me who I am today, and I am loyal to him. Tell me, human, who are you loyal to? Jhinu, the one who sent you to die in his place, yes? Has he protected your lands like Silumgar? Has he allowed you to live?"

"I know you serve the dragon," the man said. "But you do not revere him."

Sidisi closed the distance between her and the man. "And why not revere him? In my life I sought power, but I did not understand what that meant. I look at him now, and I understand."

"You can't truly be pleased with what he has done to you," the man said.

"What do you think you know of me, human?" Sidisi curled her tail. "Resisting the dragon is fruitless. One can only serve him and hope for a painless death when he asks for it."

The man leaned close to Sidisi. “What if it wasn’t futile? In my pocket, I hold three vials of poison made from the Jrung Orchid. A mere quarter of one was enough to fell one of Dromoka’s regents. Allow me to approach the dragon, and I can end his reign.”



Hand of Silumgar | Art by Lius Lasahido

Silumgar chuckled, and spoke words in his ancient tongue that caused the room to vibrate, piles of gold swirling in the wake.

“Just because he does not wish to speak your tongue,” Sidisi said to the man, “does not mean he does not understand it.”

Sidisi reached her tail around the man’s midsection, but he wrestled an arm free and let a vial loose. It sailed across the room and struck Silumgar’s massive body. The vial shattered and the black liquid dripped onto the ground, fizzing as it hit the gold below.

“The dragon breathes poison,” Sidisi said tightening the grip on the man. “Did you believe your oil would have any effect on his magnificence?”



Damnable Pact | Art by Zack Stella

Silumgar snorted and a toxic cloud engulfed the room. Before, when Sidisi was still alive, the dragon's breath burned her skin. She would skitter and rush to calm it with salves before large black boils formed.

The man was not sibsig. His flesh held no resistance to the vapors.

"Had you come without the gold, Silumgar would have only asked for one tenth of your population as a penance," Sidisi said to the man as he gasped for air. "Many of those you loved would have survived. Now, I'm afraid, the punishment will be more severe."

The dragon barked more orders. Sidisi grabbed the man by the neck and dragged him out of the throne room, to the edge of a sibsig pit.



Corpseweft | Art by Nils Hamm

“Please,” the man said. “Please. No. Please. I don’t want to die. I know you can help me.”

“Could,” Sidisi said, as she removed the remaining vials from the man’s cloak. “Won’t. What good are your riches now? They offer me no respite.”

“My family, I have failed you,” the man said, weeping as his breath became more shallow. “No poison will kill that beast. Surely we are all doomed.”

“Alone, no,” Sidisi said. “But tribute brings many like yourself who believe they can end the dragon. They all bring such lovely poisons.”

Sidisi unceremoniously tossed the man’s near-lifeless body into the pit. Her kin would have their feast, and nothing would be left of him to be returned. She lifted the ornate plate covering her midsection to reveal a large gash—the gaping hole where her heart once beat.



Sidisi, Undead Vizier | Art by Min Yum

There, she held a collection of poisons from all over the lands, their potent oils mixing.

Sidisi waited for the day when their potency had matured, and for when the dragon let his guard down. On that day, she would take the power the dragon had stolen from her, and the naga would become what they were always meant to be—rulers of these lands.