

Alex Sapegin

THE DRAGON INSIDE

Book two

Wings on my Back

Part 1

Orten. Near the western gates. Andy

The crowd at the gates stirred with anticipation. The tower bell rang 8 a.m. and the sound of the gate lifting mechanism came from behind the walls.

“It’s time,” Andy thought and followed the peasants towards the narrow bridge. But it was not meant to be. Nobles on horseback of various stripes were the first to enter the city, parting the crowd like nuclear icebreakers breaking pack ice. Genteel and highborn. Surrounded by a dozen body guards, dressed in a light gray riding outfit, an aristocratic taina (the word for an unmarried woman of noble class) rode by on a tall bay stallion. Sitting in the saddle, with one hand she grasped the reigns; with the other she constantly lifted a perfumed handkerchief to her nose, glancing with contempt at the serfs and twisting her plump lips into a grimace. Her eyes lingered on Andy, who stood out like a bell tower among the short peasants. Her nose wrinkled up and her lips frowned once again. Her detest for the plebeian who had dared grow taller than a nobleman engulfed him from head to toe and then the feeling of her eyes on him subsided. “Douche-baguettes!” Andy thought. “Stupid woman! It’ll be tough for me at that school if there’s even a couple of people there like *that*. I won’t be able to stand it. I’ll scarf someone for sure!”

The nobles’ children, on horses, hasses, or in carriages made their way into the city first. Andy surveyed this variegated crowd indifferently. It was as multicolored as a parrot. Camisoles, dresses and capes of various types and *façons*, feathers in caps, embroidery and lace were intended to demonstrate a nobleman’s place in society. With haughty and contemptuous looks on their faces, little kids and parents of the “golden” youth accompanied their offspring to their preparatory experiences in the school of magic. And what great disappointment these lords of life endured when the occasional filthy serf was accepted into the school, as opposed to another one of their own over-dressed, dolled-up prick-... progeny? True, the percentage of magically gifted people was significantly higher among the gentlefolk than among the rest of society. It was the result of hundreds of years of selective breeding and dynastic marriages, but real natural talents were born more often among the rest.

The city guards, exiting the towers over the gates, began to restore order with shouts, kicks and spears. They couldn’t let the people trample one another, all the more so since the crowd contained many future students of the magic School, and mage guilds didn’t appreciate disturbances and inconveniences created by their own, even future, members.

“Step aside! First let the honorable members of the noble families through!” a fat untidy guard at the gates exerted himself.

“What about us?” Andy dropped the inappropriate question.

“The riff-raff can wait!” the sloppy guard’s obese partner answered, smirking slyly. Spitting at Andy’s feet, he pushed him away from the city gates with the tip of his spear.

The wide-brimmed hat intended to cover Andy’s face, which he had really only donned for the purpose of this slight disguise, tilted from the sudden jerk and the brim flew upwards, revealing his bright blue eyes with no whites.

“If you’re going to be insolent, freak, I’ll keep you at these gates till next year!” the tubby guard guffawed, self-satisfied, itching his chain mail-clad belly. His fat sausage fingers scratched at the rings, not reaching the source of the itch. “You may have your traveling papers, but I still remember the king’s edict! Got it?”

The chubby man’s breath smelled of garlic and long-since un-brushed teeth. Plus, he stank of body odor and goat meat. Andy winced and thanked providence that it had prompted him to turn down his sense of smell, otherwise he certainly would have vomited.

“I get it, I get it. What’s there not to get,” Andy turned away from the enforcers. *Jerks*. The guards in Tandre were like the cops back in Russia – looked just like them and were just as brazen. *Hm, interesting, do they stamp them out with the same press or something?* They were from different worlds, but their manners were the same and their mugs were all vile.

Spitting on the bridge out of frustration, he made his way to the side towards the peasant carts. Not paying any mind to the peasants, who had begun to whisper to one another in fear when they saw him and make gestures with their hands meant to cast away evil spirits, Andy sat down on a log in the shade of a tethering post canopy, moved his hat a bit lower over his eyes, and began to wait until the bottleneck at the gates cleared and he could freely enter the city.

What did he expect? In the countryside, they frightened children at night, telling them scary stories of non-humans, and he happened to fit the description to a T. He was tall and broad-shouldered, taller than many of the nobles’ children, ash-haired, with a strong jaw, a forceful chin, blue eyes with no whites and sharp fangs that stuck out slightly when he smiled. He looked just like the spawn of some wayward elf and a northern orc or steppe nomad.

The fact that elves and orcs didn’t have eyes like that, that in them the blue didn’t go beyond the iris, didn’t concern the peasants. Orcs were indiscriminately gray or brown-eyed, and elf-orc mixes were gray-skinned or didn’t differ from elves in appearance. But what the heck, what did he expect from peasants who had only seen orcs in pictures? No matter which village Andy might show his face in, the peasant men and women there would begin to wonder what kind of unnatural union he was the result of. Or they could imagine a lot worse! Apparently the wild and war-loving orc raped the captive female elf during the raid, after burning down all the houses of that clan of elves and killing her unfortunate relatives! So that’s why there was no mark of an elf clan on this blue-eyed freak’s forehead! Who would want to take such an obscenity into their family? The guy gallivants around cities and all over, scaring

people and playing all sorts of dirty tricks on honest folk. He might send down a curse here, poison the harvest there... but what else can you expect from such a half-blood? Only dirty tricks.

It was strange, but elves were esteemed and respected here. The pointy-eared race really knew how to appeal to people! Girls stared wide-eyed at each elven kite,* and were ready to talk, flirt, and give them a chance. If any relationships came about, and if any of them were fruitful, they wouldn't consider the half-bloods that resulted to be freaks....

And then there were gnomes. As they say, they had hogged the whole banking sector and monopolized the trade of "high-tech" weapons. The gnome chiefs had held Tandre's guilds of production masters accountable. Even the Royal Informants tried to stay out of the business of these masters of the foothills. They might refuse to make a loan to the treasury, and then the king would reward his servants with the rod.

"But yew not scawy. Hag tol' me thet non-humans aw scawy with big teeth stickin' out!"

Lost in thought, Andy hadn't noticed that a little girl of four or five had walked up to him and was standing a couple of feet away, examining his simple outfit and the visitor himself, not forgetting to pick her nose and wipe her finger on the skirt of her worn gray dress. He had lived long enough to get used to his second appearance and the feelings and senses it gave him, so much so that while in human form, he felt disabled. He hadn't seen her coming. But actually, the girl managed to walk up to him quite silently.

"And what if I'm very scary and terrible! I'm just pretending to be all white and fluffy?" he answered the little one.

"Nope," she began, and again brought her finger to her nose, but thought the better of it half way there and patting the hem of her dress, went on. "Yew fangs aw small and yew not foaming at the mouth! Besewks aw always foaming at the mouth. Aha!"

"My fangs are small but sharp, but I don't look like a berserk, since there's no foam. Where'd you come from? Are you an expert in berserks or something?" Andy looked at her face with interest. The girl pouted and looked down, lowering her forehead, which gave her away as a native of the north. The old gray... no, at one time blue dress, re-sown in the shoulders, a hand-me-down. Her worn buckskin booties, the twisted copper coin amulet hanging from her neck, it all pointed to the far-northern isles of the Half-night Sea.

"Myra! Where are you?" a tall light-haired man came out from behind a cart. "Oh! There you are, you little fidgety one. Come over here! I've been looking all over for you. I'll take a switch to your backside, that'll teach you to run off! Geeze, what were ya thinkin'?"

"I found an owc! Hag, I found an owc!" Myra cried joyfully; Andy found her inability to pronounce the "r"s cute and amusing.

* Kite (lit. leaf) – traditional male outfit among Forest elves, something like a Scottish kilt.

The man stopped across from Andy and began to look him up and down, without a hint of fear, contempt or hatred on his face. He only showed an academic interest and curiosity. Andy lifted his eyes and in turn examined the northerner. There was no doubt it was a northerner. He wore an undershirt embroidered with dragons on the collar, leather pants and tall goat-skin boots. His belt, covered in decorative plates with designs and a straight blade hanging from it, tugged at his tucked-in shirt. The intricate pattern of a hirdman tattoo stood out on his left cheek. A plethora of small scars on his strong muscled arms testified to the fact that he could wield a sword, and often did, and not just for training purposes. That is, mainly outside of the training stadium. And he stood in such a way that he could grab the blade and strike with it at any moment, should Andy suddenly decide to lunge at him or the girl. He was a strong, experienced warrior, who had been through the furnace more than once, with a tattoo on his cheek – that gave the distinct impression that crossing him might be a lethal mistake. The presence of a single tattoo could mean a lot to someone who knew what it meant, but Karegar had given Andy detailed instructions, cramming them into his head with a pat: these people are not afraid of devils or demons, are excellent swashbucklers (far beyond elves), and skilled sailors. Provoking them is a drawn-out form of suicide.

The staring contest lasted a couple of minutes. Hag took his gaze away first, looked at the girl, silently made a decision, apparently on how to behave towards the non-human, and suddenly extended his hand towards Andy, greeting him with an open palm:

“Hag Tur, Seaman!”

“Kerrovitarr, Dragon!” Andy introduced himself, shaking the northerner’s hand mechanically, noting that it was a good firm handshake, and that the skin on Hag’s palm felt like a big callus or sand paper. Yep, this hand held an oar more often and longer than it did a lady’s rear end. *Strange, Hag didn’t mention a clan, tribe, or what city he was from. Doesn’t trust me, certainly! What’s the point in making acquaintances then?* Andy too had limited himself to the nickname that had been given to him at home in the valley.

Home.... He had long since realized that he considered the valley, the cave, and Jaga’s house his home.

“You don’t look like an orc, Kerovitar Dragon. Oh, no resemblance at all. Although, you don’t look like an elf either!” the northerner frowned.

“Kerrovitarr,” Andy corrected his pronunciation.

Hag smiled, pressing his lips against his strong white teeth. “Strange, what’s so funny?” Andy thought, looking at Hag with the question silently on his face.

“You’ve got a funny name!” he explained, glancing at the perplexed look on Andy’s face, then went on:

“Kerr, in elvish, is ash. Vitar is an orcish name, it means killer, and also warrior, but that depends on the time and season of his birth. Such names are given when warriors undergo their rite of passage and when the applicant passes the test and goes through initiation by the shamans. Put it all together and you get you – the Ash Dragon Killer, well, or the Dragon who Kills with Ash, or perhaps the Dragon Ash Warrior!

The name rubbed Andy the wrong way; it was really a “funny” interpretation, especially the first part.

Hearing this care-free interpretation, the peasants standing nearby, who had been listening to the conversation quite enthusiastically, suddenly recalled some unfinished business they had to attend to and, like a school of frightened pike minnows, shoved off in all directions. *Targ take ‘em! It’s not worth the trouble, standing next to non-humans like me.* Only Myra stared at him and even jumped up and down with excitement.

“Wow! Kewwovitaw, you have such a scawy name! Is it weawy awesome?! I want one too! Hag, I want another name, like Kewwovitaw!” Myra tugged at Hag’s pants and shook him as hard as she could. It seemed like Hag’s soul would be shaken out of him, so many amulets and weapons jingled on him, creating a beat, a soundtrack in time with the shaking.

It was an interesting sight: a non-human and a hirdman, as if having a seizure and shaking his head, and a small girl, flying around the two men like a spinning top and managing to tug on both of their pants in turn, one every second. Their pants were getting lower already from such an exercise, threatening to come down completely and expose their business to world. Before it was too late, Hag grabbed his plated belt with his left hand to keep his pants up, caught the little whirlwind, who was by some strange twist of fate called Myra, with his right, and held the little girl to himself with a death grip.

“Calm down, dragonfly!” he said to her. “What are you doing?! You almost took my pants down! What about your uncle’s dignity? What would the warriors say if they saw me drop trou? It would be the scandal of the north! The orc hevds* would have a field day, calling me Tur of the Bare Buttocks! And all because one hysterical little girl wanted to change her name! Learn to control yourself please!”

Despite the harsh tone of voice the northerner used to rebuke the girl, it was obvious he loved his niece and was wrapped around her little finger.

After this scolding, Myra quickly stopped, straightened her little dress and, with eyes lowered, whispered:

“Sowwy, uncle, I won’t anymowe. It was bad. Will you let me choose my own punishment?”

Oh la la! Andy saw his new acquaintances in a new light! Northerners weren’t simple deer, but wolves from the Seonee pack council at least! Judging by how a child reacts to an adult’s comments, there was obviously a governor or tutor involved at some point. A mentor or momma wolf.... Thoughts began to swirl about in his head like a pack of wild gray wolves.

“Aw, hell!” Andy swore under his breath. “The dragons on Hag’s shirt! The belt with the designs! I’m a dolt. I’m such a dolt! He’s probably a chief of the Dragon Clan! A traveling sea-king! That’s why he fake smiled when I called myself a dragon! A guy like that could chop me into a meaty grig* for one insulting word, and he’d have the right to. True, he’s probably a normal guy, based on his reaction, although, who knows when it comes to these northerners? It’s like Alice said: ‘curiouser and curiouser.’ A high-born northerner shook my hand. No, something seems off here. Was he testing me? Or are non-humans well-liked with that crowd?”

I don't see any reason we would be.... They're constantly fighting the hevd's of gray orcs, constant rabble, noise from both sides – they're vikings, the bastards. They even take the elves with the Long fjords for money. On the other hand, constant scrapes with orcs and the pointy-ears is a way to spread your seed among foreign races. Other tribes wage war a lot and therefore a lot of mixed-race individuals are born. The laws of war still stand. The enemy burns your city, kills the men, and rapes the women and girls. And so it goes, round and round. For several generations or a couple hundred years. He didn't declare me either an elf or an orc, although he had a really good look: there are mixes of all types there. The north is bubbling up like a kettle.”

While Andy considered the twists and turns of the developing situation and how to back out of the new chance acquaintance, Hag allowed the girl to choose a punishment for herself from a wide variety of choices he listed for her.

“I, Mywa...,” here she faltered, glanced gloomily at Andy and, not saying the last name or tribe, went on: “Fow what I did, beawing hawm to the honow and dignity of the clan of... of my clan, with the pew-mission of the chief, Hag Tuw Seaman, have chosen a punishment fow myself. No mow buying sweets ow sweet watew, until Hag decides it's enough and I can go on. I have spoken!”

Andy secretly regretted it. *Darn. Only a member of the gentry could have used her ritual “I have spoken.” That meant my preliminary conclusions were right, or at least not too far off. Please Targ let them be not too far off.* He didn't want to have to fly out of there at full speed, in a blur of wings and scales. A traveling sea-king doesn't go about Tandre without his hird, which meant that three or four dozen warriors with swords were hanging around in the near vicinity. He felt the pressure of his situation: his hass was at the stable of the inn outside of town, his sword, knives and bow were in the chest of the room he had rented. A non-human? An armed non-human? Coming into the city? Over our dead bodies! What a shame... and all while just waiting to enter the city. He looked up at the sky, deep and blue like his eyes. It called to him and beacons upward.... And he had to settle the situation somehow.

“My dear esteemed teg, Hag Tur Seaman! All the same, you haven't translated my... name correctly. ‘Kerro’ means gold, and ‘Vitarr,’ shining. The Golden shining Dragon.”

“Enough with the politesse, young man. It's not worth it to get bogged down in the complications of various translations. I'll suggest one last possibility. I think it's correct.” Hag paused for a few seconds and as he was leaving tossed back: “Vitarr, in the younger Edda of dragons means crystal, and Kerr, mountain. Nice to meet you, Crystal Dragon.”

Wow. A northern barbarian, a savage in the eyes of the enlightened south, nonchalantly tossing around names from the Dragon's Younger Edda, a language

* Grig – finely ground meat, minced meat

* Hevd – squad or military detachment of northern gray orcs, their version of a hird. The name was taken from human vikings.

* Teg – a form of formal address towards a nobleman.

long forgotten by both humans and other races alike. Only a few sad nests of dragons continue to speak it, reminiscing about the winged tribe's former glory. Now it wouldn't have surprised Andy if the northerner suddenly began speaking in Poetic Edda, composing rhymed pentameter. And how in the world, tell me please, was he supposed to maintain incognito when connoisseurs of forgotten languages appeared out of nowhere in the backwoods? Anyway, this meeting was already seeming like much more than a coincidence. He had the irrational feeling the barbarians were being led by the local gods' fortune telling game. Apparently the deities had decided to play without showing their hands, and, dealing the cards, to see which suits would fall to whom and whether there would be a wild card in this heavenly gamble. Andy mentally flipped them off. *Don't hold your breath – I won't give you the satisfaction!*

At that moment, with his sixth sense, or his rear end, call it what you like, he sensed some movement behind him at the tethering post. Looking sideways at the shiny round object hanging from the northerner's neck, he could see it reflecting the rampart and the trading quarter outside the city walls. Andy saw that his retreat path was cut off by five strong brutes, with another four standing guard to the right and left.

Oh heavens! Why me? Non-humans, if you weren't a student of the school or registered with a magicians' guild, were not allowed to practice magic, with a few exceptions of course – elves stood apart here as well. A royal edict declared beheading the punishment, without trial or evidence. A bump of the ax and your head'll go for a walk all by itself, which was why Andy hadn't placed defensive spiderwebs at the city walls (punishing mages could detect them in a heartbeat), which in turn was why he had missed the hirdmen's silent entrance.

Subtly gathering energy on the tips of his fingers, Andy prepared to zap the circle with lightning, striking at the frozen warriors in expectation of Hag's order: their defense amulets wouldn't help them against a surprise like that. There is no defense against lightning, end of story. Then he would run for it, run like hell. Only it was such a shame that he would have to forget about starting class at the Orten General School of Higher Magic (capitalize every word). The offender's appearance was painfully telling. If he could only make it to Snowflake... it would be a shame to abandon his hass... they had gotten quite attached to one another.

The northerner, meanwhile, was enjoying the situation. *Jerk. Why did I have to go and call myself a Dragon?! They've got me by the balls! Now this Sea-manatee won't let me go alive.* The dragon clan is quite picky about the use of its name. Even that little brat Myra didn't mention her clan while choosing a punishment for herself. She realized he wasn't one of their own (he didn't look like them, they probably all recognize each other's faces anyway). And he had, as it turns out, openly declared himself one of the hirdmen's relatives. They don't let that go unpunished.

Sending the girl off behind the warriors, Hag pulled a curved knife out of his boot-top, dug under his left thumb nail a bit with the tip (this looked just like city riff-raff bullying a poor schmuck), looked at the blade and asked in an icy tone:

“So, is my translation correct? You're a self-declared Dragon! A pretender,” the hirdman grinned. “Why then did you shake my hand?”

Andy seriously didn't have the slightest desire to use the magic he was forbidden to, and he so wanted to get into the school. His intuition told him not to run. He wouldn't make it back. He couldn't show doubt or fear; barbarians could sense fear in an enemy and detested cowards, but respected bravery. The second you turn your back, you're their prey. You'll be hunted down like a wolf. Although Andy wasn't a wolf, but rather something a little different, he still mustn't, not here and now – he MUSTN'T!

After a short moment of weakness and internal doubt, a solid calm came over Andy. A strange force came up from inside him and he became confident, just like when he was about to break out from that slave's cage....

It was as if his wings and tail had suddenly grown out. Just when you regret not having a tail. His mouth filled with sharp teeth all on its own.

Apparently, something had changed in his posture and on his face. The hirdmen tensed up and half extracted their swords from the sheaths. And Andy took it to the limit, Targ take them:

“Correct, teg Hag Tur Seaman of the clan of the Dragons. It's not every day you meet someone who knows Younger Edda, especially from such far-away villages. But do take your words back, for calling me a pretender I might just rip your head off.” Andy smiled in a predatory manner, baring his sharp teeth and the fangs that stood out. His red tongue ran across the white picket fence like a snake's. The northerners drew their weapons completely and stepped closer. A couple of the warriors who were standing by the wagons raised their bows with arrows setting on the strings. “A word's not a sparrow – once it flies away, you can't catch it back again! And where'd you get the idea that you're the only ones in the world? Hm? The history of my tribe (I almost said nest) goes back ten thousand years. Did Karegar take me in? Oh yes he did! Did I call him father? Oh yes I did! We share the same blood – so, I was tasked with looking after the honor of our race! It's quite simple. I'm not claiming you barbarians usurped my tribe's name. It's not worth jumping on the word 'dragon' like a hurf* on a hare. I'm a Dragon, and I like the idea that in the north there are others too – warriors, sailors, revering the honor and dignity of their name, gaining glory by their deeds and the use of their weapons. It would be unpleasant to have to kill them here because their traveling sea-king suffers from excessive suspicion.”

“Shut your yap, non-human. Aren't you taking on more than you can handle?” one of the hirdmen asked from behind Andy. He'd gotten nervous and chimed in in the place of the sea-king.

His eyes began to twitch and his vision spectrum changed again, coloring the world around him with new colors. His ears picked up the heartbeats of those around him. He could sense vibrations of fear in the air. The northerners didn't feel confident in their abilities when it came to this strange, non-human who didn't fear

*Hurf – a predatory beast that calls to mind a wolverine in its behavior and appearance, but twice as large in size.

them at all. Andy went on, his voice becoming uncharacteristically deep and his words falling like thunder from the sky. Rumbles, louder, quieter, and more rumbles. He remembered Karegar's favorite technique for scaring people:

"Two blows to the heart, two blows. To each of you. And then only ash. Teg Hag knows languages well. That's another way to translate my name."

A previously unknown, no, forgotten strength – forgotten since the Incarnation – rushed in, filling him with its power. Andy covered this strength with will-shields. The contained force bubbled inside him, and he somehow knew: if he let it go, everything would burn for ten miles around, burn to a crisp. Everyone would die, not even having time to realize that death had come to them.

"Lying dog. Bald shushug*."

He wanted to change his form and kill them all, reveling in the blood, but Andy with difficulty controlled himself. He had to talk, talk, talk, confuse the enemy, strike while the iron was hot. Hag looks not as sure as he was before. He was trying to pick out what was true and what was false. Well well. True, it was all true, didn't matter at all that he was serving it to them with sauce and trimmings and a few truths left unsaid. *You were a bit hasty, brother, to call me a pretender. Your decision to have some fun with a rare, defiant non-human already seeming like a bad idea? Your self-confidence melting away? By the way...* there were circles in his eyes; his internal fire was burning at his soul. "Go away, step back. I don't want to burn you!" Andy thought and hoped, answering the viking:

"Watch out, if you go out to shear the sheep – don't come back sheered yourself!"

He mustn't back down. His second "I," which had been cut to the quick, wanted blood. His "I," the person, was holding back his rage with all its might. For his own sake he must not kill them. The vikings felt the cold breath of the goddess of death as well. Their faces were pale and they had a doomed look in their eyes. It was inevitable. Death was all around them. It seemed to Andy that the faint smoky lines of their fates were attached to his palm. Should he tug at them, the smoke would clear and they would perish. What did it all mean? Scary, feeling like a monster. *Kill them! No! Yes!* His very soul was lost in the snares of the inner struggle to control his own power. It seemed marred by the torture he had endured at the whips of the palace sycophants of Hudd, king of Rimm, and by the excruciating pain of the Incarnation. He didn't want to become an out-right soulless murderer. No!

He liked these courageous men, who didn't even put their weapons down in the face of his pressing power. With friends like these, he could do anything, even go to the ends of the earth! Well, the planet. Guys like these wouldn't betray him! They would stick by him through and through. Guys like these....

"Don't kill my uncle! Kerr! Don't do it!" Myra stole past the frozen warriors and threw herself at his feet. Her eyes showed fear for Hag, for the clan warriors, and for him! For him? Surprisingly, the little tyke had sensed what the experienced

*Shushug – a mountain rat, a scavenger.

warriors couldn't perceive. Traces of tears ran down her cheeks and her hands were balled into fists. "I know – you're – *good!!*"

The smoky lines disappeared. The simmering kettle of strength in his chest stopped boiling and faded away along with the furious twinkle in his eyes. Kerr got down on his knees in front of the girl and took a handkerchief from his jacket pocket. He wiped her tear tracks away. Dropping their weapons nearby, the weakened warriors let their guards down as well, happy to have avoided death.

“Thank you. Thank you uncle Kerr!”

“Thank you, Myra. I noticed you’re pronouncing your ‘r’s correctly now,” Kerr squeezed the girl’s little fists in his hands and kissed the slender fingers.

“Really? Thank you for what?” Myra answered, taken aback by the news.

“For helping me remain human!”

“I said you don’t look like an orc or an elf,” Hag whispered nearby, sounding like a rusty well wench.

Orten. Near the western gates. A little earlier

A friendly slap on the shoulder snapped Hag out of his consternation. Gilwi’s satisfied mug was right there, chewing something as he walked along, as always. How much could fit in him, and more importantly, where would it go? The squad’s medicine man had even given him some sort of potion to cure worms. Was it a tapeworm? The hirdmen had suggested it. It didn’t help. He started eating even more. Like now for instance, Gilwi took a chicken leg out of his saddle bag that he had prepared earlier at a roadside yard.

“You’re going to pop, you eat so much. Maybe someone put that curse on you. Hm? To make you eat and eat? And you don’t even get constipated!” Hag jokingly teased the fat man.

“As soon as our Gilwi heads fer the bushes like he’s gotta go, all of a sudden he’s hungry again! Gilwi, maybe you could have something to eat while squatting?” Torir said, who had come up behind Hag. He was a jolly klutz with the eyes of a full-blown killer. Many of Torir’s now former enemies had been confused by his simple appearance, with his short buzz-cut stock of reddish hair and big lumpy nose in the middle of the whole composition. It was a bad mistake to let down your guard with Torir. With his sharp movements, which to many seemed impossible for a husky, seven-foot-tall fellow, and with his virtuoso command of a broadsword, he was a formidable opponent. The heavy sword, flitting like a butterfly in the hirdman’s hands, usually let down the curtain on his opponents’ lives before they even had time to realize their mistake. Hag himself had more than once seen Torir easily split an entire suit of gnomish armor and its wearer into two even or not-so-even halves, depending on where the strong blow fell... for which he was often judged by the warriors of the hird. Tell me, why the hell did Torir put a crystal enhancer on the handle of his sword? To flaunt his prowess in front of the others? Even without an amplifier he can twist a bull’s head off with one arm. And for that matter, hero, who needs *half* a suit of armor, hm? That’s for laughs, but it’ll make no spoils. Not a

single merchant reseller would buy such a piece of junk now. But, you have to admit, as a living battering ram, clad in steel armor, he was simply irreplaceable. As soon as Torir lunged into an enemy formation or jumped on board a commandeered vessel, the enemy would go flying in all directions, chopped up like straw scarecrows. Such a tactic had brought Hag's herd victory on more than one occasion, on both land and sea. Their adversaries lost the desire to resist, once they laid eyes on the instant and shameful death this steel machine brought people. And the merchant warriors sometimes threw down their weapons. So Hag didn't regret taking Torir south with him one bit. Perhaps it was Norn's will that he would be useful in some skirmish....

"Well now, there's a thought! Thanks for the idea, Torir," Gilwi chuckled, not in the least offended by the hefty man's humor. The warriors laughed out loud, verbally supporting Gilwi as they rode along side the carts, meanwhile tenaciously inspecting the roadside bushes and woods. Even though it was just two leagues to Orten, as the saying goes, the gods will help those who help themselves.

"Hag, why've you knitted yer brows, all thoughtful? Yer not payin' attention ta anything about ya! Yer like this chicken," Gilwi raised the bare bone, "you can be taken still warm!"

"Hm... it's nothing. I'm not keen on these mysterious tasks of the leaders of the Thing. What's it all for? Don't you know? I don't know either. Don't go to a fortune teller. The whole deal smells of a ferret to me."

Around the bend a pavement of hewn stone began on the road. In just a few minutes, the white towers of Orten could be seen beyond the hills. The wide ribbon of the river Ort sparkled in the sun.

"We're almost there! From the fork we'll head to the western gates! Take off your armor!" Hag commanded and, spurring his horse, rode up to the carts. He had to give orders to the driver.

There was a crowd and all sorts of pandemonium at the western gates. A few convenient highways came together here. The peasants were going to the market place. A multitude of representatives of various races awaited the opening of the city gates.

Today the General School of Magic was accepting new students. Applicants to this, one of the leading schools, were drawn here from all corners of Tandre and the adjoining states. There were many non-humans among the candidates: orcs, gnomes, mountain vampires standing out by their jet black hair, and here and there a few mixed-race individuals. There were peasants, noblemen, and members of all classes. The school didn't distinguish between humans and non-humans and didn't give anyone special preference. What mattered was only your magical gift and its strength. If it were more than the mere spark of a rural witch doctor, but the real roaring flame of a mage, the school's doors would open wide before you. If you were a non-human, like an orc, vampire or a mix, once you donned the student badge, you could already stop worrying about having to watch your back. The School and the Free Mages' Guild guaranteed protection. The citizens of Orten had no problem with members of other races on the city streets. Only the elves preferred

to study magic in their own clans and schools, periodically sending their offspring on internships in one of the best educational institutions on the continent.

Hag decided not to try to make his way into the crowd and to wait out the clog to the side of the road. He sent his detachment off to the side of the gates. A hundred yards to the left of the gates there was a public tethering post with some mangers and troughs for cattle and riding animals. There was enough room. Most of the people were pressing to enter through the opening gates, hurrying to enter the city as soon as possible. But the herd had plenty of time, no rush; they could rest from their travels, give their animals a drink, change out of their traveling clothes and head towards the city later on.

The drivers directed the carts towards the raspy serf arabas parked on the edge of the tethering post and unharnessed the horses. Let them rest from the yolk, the dears. The herdmen, once they had hastily wiped the sweat off the horses' sides and hung sacks of oats on their snouts, drifted off in different directions.

Keeping in mind that they were no longer in the fields, Hag assigned a guard of five men. Petty thieves didn't ever take a vacation. They could steal the feathers off a hawk and get away with it, and there was no such thing as too careful.

The stately figure of a female northerner stood out from the group of women. (The warriors had taken their wives, girlfriends and relatives south with them.) It was Hilda, a widow.

She was the wife of Bjorn, Hag's older brother, who died six months ago in an unlucky crusade. Hag took her under his roof. Three months had gone by since then. They had begun to live as husband and wife, not caring a lick for the judgments and gossip that went on behind their backs. The plucky young women, seeking grooms for themselves, talked more than anyone. "And you wouldn't believe how far it goes! That's the second time she trapped a traveling sea-king! The witch! Hasn't even mourned and she's busy pulling the wool over his eyes! Give the sheets a chance to cool!"

Hag only bore his teeth with contempt at the husband-hunters. He loved Hilda with all his heart. Blindly. He had fallen in love with her at first sight, when his brother had brought his wife home from the Lynx clan and led her into their parents' house. Hag then came back from a successful crusade against the elves and was at home, unpacking the spoils with his mother. This we'll keep, that we'll set aside as a gift, and this we'll sell at the market. His brother burst into the parlor and in a hung-over voice called the family and introduced his bride. Hilda, dressed in a green frock with wide sleeves and magical amulets sown on around her robust waist, and strings of river pearls in her golden locks, proudly lifted her head and looked at her new relatives with her green eyes. Her mouth was stubbornly set, not smiling, and she was flaring her nostrils and slightly trembling as she puffed up her chest with pride. "The new little Dragon will be a great addition to our nest!" the mistress of the clan approved of Hilda. Hag realized from the moment he laid eyes on her that he was doomed. He drowned in her defiant eyes, got stuck as in a swamp.

He didn't let on to anyone with a single word or action his feelings for his sister-in-law, secretly hoping that Bjorn would cease to be. Die. Drown. He would never have raised a hand against his brother himself, and would have been the first to

slaughter his enemies. Secretly dreaming of Hilda, he never even looked her way. Fornicators were exiled from the clan in shame, and thieves were executed in the Black Bog. There had been no murderers in the clan in the last three hundred years. Four years passed. Hilda gave birth to a daughter, Hag's niece, Myra. Many things came to pass, great and mundane. Hag tried to spend more time on crusades. His father stopped paying him any mind and soon, almost openly, demonstrated animosity towards him, envying his middle son's success and the glory he'd gained in battle. Hag departed from his father's house, now a stranger and unwelcome, sent away by envy.

And then one day, in a routine crusade, Bjorn's drekkar was chasing a merchant barge of gray orcs. Departing from the chase, to the chagrin of themselves and the Dragon clan, the orcs veered off to the north, and a snekkja came out from the pre-dawn fog to meet them. The ship's sail was decorated with a sun symbol, and the figure of a fire-bird on the bow. Arians. They had wandered quite far from their homeland. They were all ready for battle. The Arians sprinkled the orcs with long arrows fired from their heavy composite bows and quickly sailed in for the kill. A short pursuit and the grappling hooks flew, pulling the ships in. With a dull moan, the wooden connector bridge fell to the deck of the orcs' ship.

Exiting the fog, Bjorn's hirdmen saw that someone else was already taking charge of their prey and they tapped their oars in a friendly gesture, but good fortune then turned her face away from them. The Arians, although they had incurred some losses during the grappling with the merchant orcs, still managed to fend off Bjorn's vikings. Twenty Arian warriors jumped on board the "Flying Valkyrie" and the fun began, which ended with the hirdmen's slaughter. When they were through, only forty hirdmen were left of an original eighty. The Arians cut the cords and chains that connected the two ships, scorched the merchants with flaming arrows, and left with their spoil. Bjorn, who had killed three, had taken two strong blows with a sword. Arians' swords were light but unusually solid. Gmarin the gnome, later examining them in Sogneborg, declared the foreign smiths' creation superior compared to the gnomes' simple imitation thereof. That blade was now in Hag's sheath.

There were no more sorcerers among the hird. One had caught an arrow to the eye; another got it in the neck with a sword. The Arians killed them off first. Three days later everyone's wounds became inflamed. The hirdmen, despite all their skills, could not stop the infection that even the most useless sorcerer could have cleared up in three hours. On the fourth day, Bjorn died, along with another four wounded men.

The drekkar reached its home fjord with a lowered pennant, which meant that the sea-king and the captain had perished. A sorrowful procession met the vessel. They managed to bring the bodies of the fallen home before the icy spell of a deceased sorcerer's amulet lost its power. The warriors' bodies were wrapped in white cloth and piled on a funeral pyre, built on a large raft.

The intoxicating flame carried the souls of the fallen vikings to Valhalla. People stood on the shore watching the flame consume those who, just four weeks ago, had been alongside them, enjoying life.

Hilda stood on the shore, holding her daughter with her head lowered dismally. She was alone. She hadn't had time to bear Bjorn a son. His father refused to keep a widow without a son in his house. Everything that her family had given her could fit in a single cart. The clan mistress, old Freira, tried to talk sense into the head of the clan, but the father was inexorable. He loved Bjorn, his first-born, most of all. He was waiting for a grandson, in which case Hilda could expect much from him, but the Norns ordered otherwise.

Hag made up his mind to take a drastic step and approached her:

"Will you come with me?" he asked. "Don't say no just yet. You can perform the funeral service, and then you'll be the lady of my house. I'll take Myra in as my own daughter."

He had greatly feared that Hilda would be burned along with her husband, then he feared she would refuse him, but she agreed.

"I will," she said directly.

"Why?" he asked, like an idiot.

"I'll go. Not because I fear being alone, but because I've always loved you, from the first day I saw you in your father's house. I'll go, because your mother and father have always known it. Don't ask how they knew. They knew everything. Bjorn didn't love me, going about as he did among the grass widows, and he envied you. Which is why your father threw you out. He thought Bjorn would be less jealous of your glory and success in battle. But what will you say to your family?"

"I won't say anything. And if my family or clan is against it – I'll leave. Dragons should be together, but my home is your nest!" he spoke the ritual phrase.

The clan didn't say anything about it at the lesser Thing. His father didn't care; his middle, unloved son had already lived in his "long house" (ship) for two years and had led a hird which half-consisted of his personal squad on raids. Hag hadn't yet regretted his decision for a second.

The story with the Arians then took an unexpected continuation. It turned out that all the Arians' vessels – skeids, drekkars, and snekkjas – began to be seen in waters where gray orcs' (the vikings of the east) drekkars usually sailed. The orc clans from the far-away islands cast off from their long-time dwelling places and migrated south...

"There's turmoil in your eyes. Did something happen?" Hag asked his wife.

"Myra's missing, I haven't been able to find her for fifteen minutes already. Tell the warriors to search every inch of the tethering post."

Hilda nervously fingered the belt on her waist. Her face was covered with a blush of emotion. Her green eyes looked at her husband pleadingly.

"Calm down, we'll find her!" he kissed her on the cheek and summoned Olaf his foreman, a phlegmatic warrior, whose expression called to mind a sleepy bull's. Olaf really did, in his figure and his habits, resemble a bull. Only he had a hidden agenda, as did many in Hag's guard. He was tough, strong-willed, and didn't give concessions even to his top ten men. A strong warrior, Olaf had long ago earned some authority by his skills, tactical shrewdness and, where necessary, fist and strong word. He could conduct trade, bargaining until his voice got hoarse, somehow knowing all the prices and the demand for each commodity. Possibly, in the future,

Olaf would leave the herd, and then Hag would have a very good merchant friend. No wonder the merchants welcomed Olaf as soon as they laid eyes on him. Like one of their own....

“Olaf!”

“Yes, sea-king!” Olaf appeared immediately.

“Get a dozen men and go up and down the tethering post. Myra’s missing.”

“Again?”

“Yes, Olaf, again! I’ll find her – I’ll give her a good lick when I do!”

Olaf smiled. He heard Hag’s promise to whip the girl several times a day. She was a walking scourge, not a child! She was constantly keeping the whole squad on their toes. She was always turning up lost, missing, getting herself into places it was impossible to get into while in your right mind. Loved by all the warriors, she played with them like dolls in her play carriage, often making fools of hairy mustached men and making them the targets of friendly ridicule, managing at the same time to stay out of their way.

Hag decided to move to the side of the city gates. Who knew, perhaps Myra had decided to play with the peasants’ children?

“My fangs are small but sharp, but I don’t look like a berserk, since there’s no foam. Where’d you come from? Are you an expert in berserks or something?” he heard from behind a wagon with high sides.

Hag stepped livelier and ran onto the free square. A tall man was sitting on a thick log, leaning his back against a post. As far as he could tell, he had been speaking with the girl for a while already, since the subject of their conversation had turned to berserks, the girl’s favorite heroes. But what was that about fangs? Hag tensed up. What did he say, he has sharp fangs? He had yet to meet a vampire! He had to bring this interview to a close.

“Oh! There you are you little fidgety one. Come over here! I’ve been looking all over for you. I’ll take a switch to your backside, that’ll teach you to run off! Geeze, what were ya thinkin’?” Hag said, coming out from behind the wagon and cutting short the girl’s conversation with the stranger.

“I found an orc! Hag, I found an orc!” Myra cried, skipping and hopping towards him.

An orc? Well, that’s where the fangs came from then! The stranger stood up, patted the dust off his coat and wiped the dirt off his boots with some grass. He was a couple inches taller than Hag, wider in the shoulders, but of a thinner build. His wide-brimmed hat had been covering his face, but now Hag could see him clearly.

A non-human, how interesting! Hm. The viking, who had seen mixes of all kinds, was for the first time ever having a hard time figuring out this person’s race. He wasn’t an orc: his sharp fangs weren’t an indicator of orc blood, and there were a host of other signs that it wasn’t an orc, from the shape of the skull to the color of the skin. And although his fangs stood out a little from his lips when he opened his mouth and were obviously sharp, it really didn’t look like he had orcish ancestors. He wasn’t an elf – didn’t have the right type of face or shape of eyes. It was possible it was a vampire, but his blue eyes without whites didn’t point in that direction. Yes, his eyes... neither orcs nor elves had eyes like that: he had human-shaped eyes. Hag

would have even said he was a northerner or an Arian, as the non-human's build most closely resembled that of a Norseman-viking or an Arian. He stands and conducts himself like a nobleman, his back straight and his chin held high. He was good looking! He examined the stranger's figure more closely.

The stranger looked to be about twenty years old. He stood out because of his tall stature, wide shoulders and ash-colored hair. His right arm was a bit curved at the elbow – ready to take hold of the sword that wasn't on his belt, but the marks from the sheath on his belt and the side of his leather pants testified to the fact that a sword had been there. The non-human's hand movements and stance indicated that he wasn't a swordsman, which meant a sword wasn't his weapon of choice, but his fingers, now they told a story....

The thin aristocratic fingers of his right hand showed the characteristic calluses left by a bowstring. Also his left sleeve was crumpled and worn from wearing a bone shield on top, and the breadth of his chest and shoulders, as he had noticed earlier. He didn't present a great threat as an individual, although, first impressions might be deceptive: Torir too looked more like a ham than a fatally dangerous warrior. What a mysterious non-human this was. This was getting interesting. He had to find out. Hag decided to introduce himself and extended his open palm:

“Hag Tur, Seaman!”

“Kerrovitarr, Dragon!” the non-human answered, shaking his hand. Hag noticed it was a good strong handshake. Mixes were more often than not stronger than humans. It was the gods' way of leveling the playing field for them.

“Dragon? What, is he mocking me, the bastard? Or is he stupid enough to not have noticed the embroidery of my clan? There are no more Dragons! And he's got a name for himself too! Who but a northerner could call himself that? And you, swine, you're no northerner! Otherwise you wouldn't have uttered such words!” Hag thought, squinting at his undershirt, at the clan embroidery on the collar. His blood was rushing to his head. “We'll just see about that... was it an intentional insult or...? Let's have some fun on the road!”

“You don't look like an orc, Kerovitar Dragon. Oh, no resemblance at all. Although, you don't look like an elf either!”

“Kerrovitarr,” the blue-eyed man corrected Hag.

Hag smiled, noticing that his opponent didn't yet have a clue. “Well now, what'll he say about that name? Let's go over that title of his...” And Hag went over it:

“Kerr, in elvish, is ash. Vitar is an orcish name, it means killer, and also warrior, but that depends on the time and season of his birth. Such names are given when warriors undergo their rite of passage and when the applicant passes the test and goes through initiation by the shamans. Put it all together and you get you – the Ash Dragon Killer, well, or the Dragon who Kills with Ash, or perhaps the Dragon Ash Warrior!”

Myra was jumping nearby, expressing her euphoria at this interpretation of the non-human's name. The blue-eyed man made a face and tried to correct himself; apparently he'd realized his mistake. “Don't anger a Dragon, boy, oh you don't want to do that!” The long road south, constant stress and pressure, no fights or skirmishes – he had to take this all out on someone. He couldn't take it out on his own people,

and this degenerate, with his clan-bashing nonchalant comments about Dragons, was a perfect fit. Here Myra almost pulled his pants down, what a laugh that would have been! They wouldn't have let him live it down for a year. He had to blow off some steam and punish this imbecile, so that he would know how to call himself a Dragon. He wouldn't kill him, but he would beat some respect into him with the tips of his boots. Olaf's ten silently stepped from the camp and cut off the non-human's retreat path.

Here Hag remembered the dragons' Younger Edda, which had been hammered into his head by his tutor Miliberilem, an old elf, extremely old and gray, which was in and of itself surprising. Beriem, as he called himself, had taught Hag the art of war and leadership for ten long years. He liked this light-haired guy who had been left to his care by Earl Sigurd Ice Blade of the Dragon Clan. The boy sucked up knowledge like a sponge, and Beriem had no short supply thereof and wasn't at all stingy. He piled data from all different fields of study on the young student: writing, fencing and archery, tactics and strategy, ship-building and sailing, cartography and navigation by the stars, maths and languages. They barely touched on magic; Hag didn't have much of a gift. He wasn't a mage, but the spark of a conjurer was in him and he could see people's auras with true vision and cast a healing spell or a small curse. The Dragon's Younger Edda was a whole subject of itself. Hag puzzled over it. It had been more than a thousand years now since they spoke Edda, but his teacher kept on teaching him this ancient subject. "You'll use it! Trust me!" he said. Now it was coming in handy!

"Enough with the politesse, young man. It's not worth it to get bogged down in the complications of various translations. I'll suggest one last possibility. I think it's correct." Hag paused for a few seconds and as he was leaving tossed back: "Vitarr, in the younger Edda of dragons means crystal, and Kerr, mountain. Nice to meet you, Crystal Dragon," Hag took the bull by the horns.

The blue-eyed man made a face and Hag realized he'd hit the nail on the head with his translation! He too knew Edda? Maybe even the runic alphabet too? Great! An educated non-human! But that didn't change anything – his boldness needed to be quelled. It's a great honor to call one's self a dragon! And not just anyone has the right. It was time.

But instead of fear and uncertainty, an icy calm and a haughty expression came over the guy's face, and such a strong confidence in his abilities that Hag felt a wave of cold shivers go down his spine. Something was wrong here! The sorcerers Tim Crooked and Sveiny Wave quickly ran up from the camp. Their eyes darted all around, taking in the scene. Their faces showed concern. Hag sent Myra off behind the warriors. Let her be safe from harm. What had gone wrong? Everything! Loki was having a field day!

A part of time and existence had fallen from his understanding.

"Two blows to the heart, two blows. To each of you. And then only ash. Teg Hag knows languages well. That's another way to translate my name," the non-human announced in an icy tone. Hag snapped back into time and lifted his eyes to greet the bringer of death.

For the first time in his life, the very first time, he became frightened! This non-human's aura was tightly withheld under many shields, and the force he wielded was billowing about him. He was a mage! A strong mage! Tim and Sveiny were trying to put up an active defense, but to no avail! This strange force broke through their joint shield as if it were tin foil. It tore like paper. The sorcerers tumbled to the ground. Such a weight fell on their shoulders that Hag couldn't take a step. He glanced at the warriors. Their faces were white and fatality lingered in their eyes, but that mix... oh, gods! His blue eyes were glowing with a transparent light, his hands were lifted – another couple of seconds and he would strike. That's it! The end. You've asked for it, Hag! Got carried away, dammit! What had he said about sheep?

Something flashed off to the side. Myra! No!

"Please! Don't kill my uncle! Don't do it! Kerr!" Myra threw herself at the mix's feet. He lowered his hands and dropped to his knees in front of her. Tracks from tears streaked her cheeks. Her hands were clenched into fists at her chest. "You're good! I know it. Forgive us."

The weight was lifted from his shoulders. Hag fell backwards onto the roadway, dropping his sword from his weak hands. He was alive! Everyone was alive, thank the gods that nothing fatal had happened. What was going on there? With Myra?

"Thank you for helping me remain human!" Kerr said. Who had helped? Myra? Thank you Myra!

Human? Well, that's quite a declaration. He-he, he would have squashed us like bugs, that human!

"I said you don't look like an orc or an elf," Hag snickered hoarsely, taking away the last of the fear and tension with his laugh. Glad for the gift of life, Myra and the warriors laughed too.

Out of the corner of his eye Hag looked at Kerr, holding the girl's hands in his, and caught his blue eye..., then choked. He had never seen such a wave of loneliness, sadness, grief and pain in anyone. What a wave!

"What shall we tell the punishing mages?" he heard as if from afar. Sveiny the magician had snapped out of it. "Sorcery at that level, near the gates, if the reason for it is found, will be answered, and not by a slap on the wrist. For practicing magic without the mark of a mage or student – they can string up a non-human!"

In horror at the idea, Myra grabbed hold of the clothes of the mix who had almost killed them. Then again, they had asked for it. They had crossed a line, not minding their business. And they had paid for it. A strange ripple ran over the boy's face and hands, then disappeared. It was a boy, actually; now Hag could see he was no more than sixteen or seventeen, not twenty as he had previously thought. It seemed to Hag he saw scales and claws on his hands, just for an instant!

"Tell me what I magicked here! I'm leaving, let them look for me if they like. They won't find me. They'll go crazy searching." Kerr let go of the girl's hands. "Well, so long, pretty girl."

There had to be a way out of the situation. Hag painstakingly went over all of the possibilities in his head. He had caused the problem. "Honor clouds one's vision," apparently, as the fidgety girl had said, and now the boy was saving their

honor. Theirs! The dragons'! No, not on his watch. If that happened, they wouldn't have any honor left and they might as well never return home. Better to fall on their own swords than to let it be this way!

"Sveiny! Go get the Thunder Amulet!" Hag ordered the sorcerer. Guess he'd found a way out of the situation. "And you, Crystal, have a seat and don't budge. 'I'm leaving, let them look.' Stay there and try not to shine, for the love of sea scum!"

"What for? It's empty. I didn't charge it. It needs so much mana pumped into it, you wouldn't believe."

"Exactly! Split the accumulator and stone in a frame. Let the sniffers prove that the mana didn't splash out of the amulet."

"There's an idea," Sveiny Wave smiled, catching the sea-king's drift as soon as he had begun speaking. So much mana was pumped into the "Thunder Amulet" to maintain the cupola of fixed protection that the boy's magic could be chocked up to a glitch by the broken artifact. Everything would fit perfectly: the drawn-out discharge of mana, the warriors' loss of strength, the ghostly luminescence.

"Well, I'm still leaving. The gates to the School of magic are open til five for accepting potential students, I'd better hurry," Hag heard Kerr's words, addressed to Myra.

"Will I see you again, uncle Kerr?" the girl said, holding on tight as a burr. She wouldn't let him go so easily.

"I'd be happy to see you at my house any day," Hag said sincerely. "It's the second house on the left after the 'Blue Bookworm' inn. And please accept my apologies. I speak for all my warriors and for myself most of all."

"Hey, you should thank Myra. And you know what...."

"What?"

"Find her a governor, ok? Better a Life mage. She's got a gift. By the way, you can call me Gurd!"

Bam – that was a slap in the face. *How kind the gods are! There goes the whole thing from the Younger EDDA. Four words, a whole name. There's blue eyes with no whites for you! And he even has a title too? But from where?* Hag glanced around. Kerr-Gurd had already vanished into thin air.

"I will, I definitely will. A Life mage. I'll remember that. We'll see each other again!" Hag mumbled under his mustache, stunned.

Dear reader! Thank you for reading my book!



[The Dragon Inside Book 2](#) release is expected on January 15th!

I hope that you will be carried away by an excerpt from the future book.
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