

The Dragon Inside
Book 1
Becoming the Dragon

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Contents

Contents

Part 1: Portal Voyager

N-ville, Russia. Andy.

Part 2—Black Dragon

The northwestern border of the Kingdom of Rimm, the Wildlands.

The Marble Mountains, No Man's Land, the Valley of a Thousand Streams, Karegar, Jagirra.

Northwestern border of the Kingdom of Rimm, the Wildlands.

Part 3—Fire of the Soul

Raston, the capital of the Kingdom of Rimm. Nirel.

The Northwestern border of the kingdom of Rimm, the Northern trade route, the Happy Horse Inn.

Kingdom of Rimm, the northern trade route, Raston. Andy.

Kingdom of Rimm, Raston. Nirel.

Raston, the Royal Hunt. Andy.

Part 4—Birth of the Dragon

Raston. Nirel.

Raston, Nirel. Two weeks prior...

Raston. Alo Troi. One week, four days prior...

Raston, the Royal Menagerie. Andy. One day prior...

Raston. Andy.

Raston. Nirel.

Raston. Andy.

The Marble Mountains, No Man's Land, the Valley of a Thousand Streams.

Part 5—Wings on my back.

The Marble Mountains, No Man's Land, the Valley of a Thousand Streams.

Epilogue

GLOSSARY

Book Recommendations

Part 1: Portal Voyager

N-ville, Russia. Andy.

“I’m heading out! I won’t be back ’til late!” Andy’s mother grabbed her purse from the coffee table and threw her cell phone and keychain into the side pocket. “You’ve got this, right?”

“I got it, Mom.” Andy frowned. “There’s food in the fridge, pizza in the freezer. Feed Olga, get her dressed and ready, then make sure Irina takes a warm sweater, a coat and bug spray with her to her game. Did I forget anything?”

“Don’t go into your dad’s study. He’s downloading something; it’ll freeze the computer. You know very well, he’ll be fuming about it until next Christmas. Are you going to Sergey’s house?” Andy nodded. “Then take Olga to Grandma’s. Okay, bye.” Helen kissed her son on the cheek and slipped out the door. The company minibus had already honked a couple of times.

The clatter of claws on parquet came from the living room, and Bon scrambled into the entryway with his leash in his mouth.

“You’ve already gone out boy! You woke me up at the crack of dawn.” Andy said to the pup. Bon sighed loudly and wagged his tail, showing he wouldn’t mind going for another walk. “All right, fine. You talked me into it, you smooth-talking devil. But just to the bakery.”

Andy took the leash from the dog and hooked the carabiner to his collar. Bon leaped joyfully in circles around his owner.

“Quie-e-et!” Andy snapped at the dog. “You’ll wake the girls.”

He needed to make a trip to the bakery anyway. Olga and Irina wouldn’t eat breakfast on a Saturday without cinnamon rolls, and they were out.

Andy preferred sausages or bacon in the morning; Bon did, too, but the pup rarely got them.

Andy bought the cinnamon rolls at the bakery and a carton of milk at the store next door then headed home.

He was wide-awake with nothing to do, and he looked resentfully at Bon. “Why wake me so early on a Saturday, Boy?” The pup only wagged his tail in response.

He was struck by an old urge to jump on the computer and play some of his favorite online games, but soon an inner voice reminded him, “Don’t go in your dad’s study. He’s downloading something; it’ll freeze the computer.”

“Ok,” he said to himself. “Forget the computer.”

Andy hadn’t played computer games in more than two years, and he’d done just fine. But sometimes, something would come over him, and he’d want that escape into another reality.

He sighed loudly, making Bon turn to look at him as if to say, *Are you copying me, Master?* Andy smiled as he reached up to scratch a little scar at the base of his neck—courtesy of a lightning bolt, no less—a sad reminder of the danger of standing under trees during storms. For more than two years, Andy had been branded with the scar just above his right shoulder, but the memory of that fateful moment was as fresh as if it had happened yesterday...

His homeroom teacher, Ms. Nichols, had long promised to take their 6A class on a field trip to the woods, and that day was finally here. After an hour of belting out songs on the bus, each kid singing at the top of his lungs (out of tune, but with feeling), they arrived. Mother Nature’s wonder spread out before the young tourists in all its glory. The weather was

beautiful—not a cloud in the sky—and the birds were singing. There was fresh May grass growing and no mosquitoes.

The idyllic scene was ruined, however, by signs of human neglect. Litter was scattered everywhere, and the strong smell of a public toilet came from the thick brush at the end of the field opposite from the river. To make the best of things, the children spent the first half-hour picking up paper, plastic bags, cans, cigarette butts and other trash from the meadow. Certainly, no one thought of going into the river where broken glass glittered near the shore.

Andy sadly recalled the days when he and his mom had visited his Uncle Rob. They had walked in the forest, collecting mushrooms and pinecones. *Now, that's a place of open spaces and natural beauty!* Towering cedars three arm's lengths around, their tops disappearing into the sky; even rows of round hilltops going off into the blue distance; and not a single tin can for hundreds of miles. He had longed to share that with his classmates.

The day went by fast, but starting around lunchtime, a gloomy haze curled up on the horizon.

"I love May's first storms!" one of his classmates shouted.

A strong gust of wind lifted last year's dead leaves into the air, and a clap of thunder, like the rumble of empty barrels, made them all duck.

Ms. Nichols began herding the whole class back to the bus stop, but the wind picked up, and the storm worsened. One flash of lightning followed another. There was still a half-mile to the bus stop when the heavens opened and soaked Andy and the others. Miserably, the class huddled under trees that at least gave the vague illusion of shelter from the rain.

Andy chose a young oak with sparse spreading branches. He had just gotten situated under a thick branch when a close flash of lightning blinded him. When he came to, he was already on the bus...

Andy's friends were waiting for him when he arrived home from the hospital. They all gathered around, filled with questions. First on the list, had the lightning awoken anything supernatural in him?

No! he thought gloomily, *I can't read minds, see the future or communicate with the spirits of the dead. What a crock! I was struck by lightning and don't even get anything out of it!*

It wasn't long, however, before Andy learned the lightning had left a rather unusual effect behind. As soon as he sat down at or lingered near a computer, it would slow down and freeze up. The television flickered with static if he came within five feet of it. Andy was forced to withdraw permanently from his lifelong love of gaming. He could never have expected such a cruel blow from Mother Nature. A scar on his neck was one thing—complete with bragging rights and a sort of war story—but to be sentenced to life without computers? That was punishment fit for the wretched.

When it became clear he could no longer use a computer, Andy fell into a deep melancholy. He felt his life was over and transformed almost overnight from a happy goofball to a pensive guy with an intense, piercing gaze.

In time, he realized he had no choice but to accept his new life and rediscover the world around him. Books (so many books!), his bicycle, rollerblades, the gym in the evening, and, oddly enough, even a passion for cooking...

One afternoon, Andy was idling around the house alone. His younger sister, Olga, was at daycare, and his older one, Irina, was at a friend's house. His parents were at work and he was starting to feel restless. In order to distract his mind and save himself from an attack of melancholy, he decided to leaf through a cookbook. Then the idea occurred to him to try cooking something—all by himself.

His first attempt at a meal was an eggplant-based lasagna, constructed mainly from leftover veggies in the fridge, and the result was mouthwatering! For a long time, his mother

couldn't believe he had prepared something so delicious on his first try. She had expected him to be like Irina, who was capable of producing passable scrambled eggs at best.

For the next month, the family spent all of their spare money on various groceries and ingredients so Andy could prepare new and exciting culinary delights. Olga, a very picky eater, suddenly devoured the dishes her older brother prepared, dirtying both cheeks in the process and gaining three pounds as a result. Irina threw her diet out the window and joined her younger sister in the feasting. They teased each other about who could put on weight the fastest.

And there was no question their parents loved Andy's cooking. His father joked that his son could make a salad out of nothing. Still, Andy soon tired of his cooking phase and took to new hobbies, such as renovating the guest room to make it livable again. The added upside was his own space, since sharing a room with his little sister had become awkward and sleeping on the living room couch wasn't very appealing either.

Next, he tried sports to distract his ever-busy mind. He retrieved an old bicycle from the garage and fixed it up, and repaired some broken roller blades. Andy began to spend all of his time outside, convincing his friends, Sam and Sasha, to join him. Instead of *Counter-Strike* and *Call of Duty*, Andy persuaded the boys to experience skating in the park and the real-to-life world of paintball.

It was after one particularly grueling game of paintball that Andy first encountered Sergey, and his life took yet another unexpected sharp turn.

Sergey Usoltsev was a local celebrity and known eccentric. Old lady from next door used to mutter about him as he walked past. "What can you say about someone who collects old bows and restores them? What a ridiculous way to spend money, and on such useless things!"

Andy and the guys were coming back from the latest game of paintball, and Andy was distracted by some large welts on his backside, courtesy of Sasha, the sharpshooter. He continually stopped to rub them, slowing their pace, and as they plodded along, a sound like *donn* followed by a biting *click* caught his ears. Andy turned his head when he heard it again—*donn, click*. Sam saw Sergey first and tapped Andy on the shoulder, pointing past the fence of a two-story house. A tall, hoary-haired man with a wide chest and chiseled arms stood in the yard twisting an M-shaped bow in his hands. After looking around, he pulled an arrow out of the ground, raised the hand holding the bow and deftly set the arrow on the bowstring. He pulled it back almost to his ear and fired. The bowstring let out a ringing *donn* and *clicked* against the thick leather glove that he wore on his left hand. In a flash of feathers and with a dull thud, the arrow pierced a wooden pole dug into the ground 50 feet on the other side of the yard.

That was awesome! Andy thought to himself. Sasha and Sam stood with their mouths open. Like a whisper of olden times and epic heroes, it wasn't something you saw every day. *I would love to learn to shoot like that!*

The boys waited ten minutes for another show, but the man pulled the arrows from the pole, went into the house and didn't come out again.

The next day, Andy stood at the intricately carved wicket gate and rang the bell. The archer from the previous day appeared.

"What do you need, son?" he asked, glancing at the boy.

"My name is Andrew! Teach me to shoot like you do!" Andy blurted out, looking the man in the eyes.

"I don't take apprentices!" Sergey answered and slammed the gate.

Andy thought for a minute and settled down on a little bench near the gate. He had firmly made up his mind to learn to shoot a bow; he just had to get his future teacher on board. When it grew dark after a few hours, Andy finally got up from his spot. Sergey hadn't deigned to leave the house again.

The next day, the bench was once more occupied by the stubborn boy. This time, Andy brought a couple of books with him to help stave off boredom. All day, the homeowner showed no signs of life, although the tulle curtains did flutter from time to time.

On the third day, Andy repeated the whole process. He had decided patience was the key to success. New books helped the hours go by.

“What are you reading?” someone said from behind his ear.

“The *Land of Crimson Clouds* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky,” Andy answered and raised his eyes from the page. The archer stood at his gate.

“And the other one?”

“Yurii Kachaev, a historical book. There are a couple of stories in it: *Above the Forest Ridgepoles*, and *Beyond the Whistling Arrow of the Chanyu*.”

“Aren’t you sick of hanging out by my gate?”

“No, my father has a large library. It’ll last me a long time. I’m not bothering you, am I? Or are you worried I’ll rub the paint off the bench?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Would you like to come into the yard and drink some tea?” the man unexpectedly offered, and for the first time, he smiled.

“I wouldn’t say no to that,” Andy answered. “Although I’d like some Fanta even more...”

The man opened the gate and let Andy into the yard. “So, you want to become a bowman?” he asked.

“I want to become a bowman, and maybe try to make my own bows.”

“But can you stand the training? I won’t coddle you,” the archer said, again smiling with just the corners of his mouth.

“Yes!” Andy declared.

“Well then, come in!” The man opened the door to the porch for Andy. “My name is Sergey.”

“Andy.” He reached to shake the outstretched hand.

That was two years ago. Andy smiled thinking back.

“Tell me what you know about bows and shooting them,” Sergey said as they sipped on their tea.

Except for Robin Hood, Andy couldn’t think of anything, so he said so. Sergey winced visibly at the sound of the name and launched into a lecture on the topic of bows.

“Robin Hood, *indeed!* What stories they tell you young folk! The English bowmen were beating the French at the Battles of Crécy and Agincourt... That’s all nonsense! At Crécy, they knocked out the horses and forced the knights to the ground, and then the tired Frenchmen were massacred. King Phillip should’ve been beheaded for organizing a battle in such a way, but the knights did right, you know. One must always listen to his commanding officer.

“What’s an English bow? Even a Western European bow in general?” he continued. “A piece of wood remade and fashioned accordingly. That kind of bow was made from one piece of a certain kind of wood. Most often, they used elm and yew, but they made use of ash and hazel, too. To have such fine material as yew available and not bring it to perfection was the height of extravagance on the part of the Europeans. The English could shoot their bows just over a hundred yards, with the record-holders hitting the target at about 220. When firing at random, without a target, an arrow fired from a recurve English bow could reach almost 550. And that’s the last good thing one can say about recurve bows. They didn’t do well with moisture, always lost the battle in heat and cold, and God forbid you should drop such a bow in the water!

“No matter what the Europeans said, Eastern bows outperformed their English counterparts in all respects, and bowmen in the East were much better than the English. I’ll give you a couple of examples: a randomly fired arrow from a Russian compound bow can fly up to 875 yards. In Russia, there was a measurement used for distance called ‘arrow’s flight’ or simply ‘flight.’ It dealt not only with how far an arrow flew but how far it could fly and retain its deadly force! It wasn’t all that much, around 240 yards, but still not bad. You can up and do that right now if you like; it was nothing special.

“Tatar, Arab and Turkish bows surpassed European bows by far, both in efficacy during battle and in technical excellence. And there were no English or Italian yews there! They had to bring the materials they had readily available up to standard. The same Ugrians or Hungarians—the ‘threat of Europe’ of the tenth century—were knocked off their chain-mail-clad cavalry by Mongol bows at the Battle of Mohi.

“But...back to bows. An Eastern compound bow can withstand cold, heat, or moisture; if you had to, you could dip it in water, and it wouldn’t lose the battle! See...”

Sergey ran into another room and returned with the bow Andy had seen him use. “It’s an exact reconstruction of a compound bow from the tenth to eleventh centuries. It consists of two wooden planks glued together lengthwise, on the inside.”

He ran his finger along the inside of the bow. “A juniper plank planted on fish glue; here and here, there are sinews. If you took the string out now, the sinews would pull the bow the other way. This bow has been glued with boiled birch bark.

“Later on, people began to strengthen bows with decorative bone plates. They made plates of iron, too, but that was at the request of the epic Russian warriors of old. The strings were different, too. In the West, they generally made bowstrings out of hemp. In Russia, they used silk or animal tendons. A string made of specially dressed dorsal skin was considered especially chic. The Arabs preferred to use the dorsal skin of scrawny camels for this purpose. The bowstrings prepared by special methods could withstand heat and moisture. You could fire an arrow in the rain!”

Sergey kept going into the other room until an entire collection of different kinds of bows lay on the coffee table. The lecture had a lasting effect on Andy. In an hour, he’d learned more about bows than he’d read in books from first through sixth grade.

Sergey began Andy’s training with breathing exercises. Then came the development of his shoulder girdle, strengthening exercises and various tasks designed to improve his ability to judge by eye, and his hand-eye coordination. The lessons were interesting. Andy’s friends showed up just to listen to the lectures on bows and ancient weapons. Sergey had a large selection of books and materials on old weapons that started with ancient Egypt and ended at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, the tutor had developed a whole philosophy on the lore of archery and spent a good deal of time edifying his young pupil in it.

It was six months before Andy picked up a bow for the first time, and still, he didn’t get to shoot it. Instead, his tutor asked him to fit it with a bowstring and slowly pull on it to the point at which an arrow could be shot from it. Then he had to return it to the starting position in an equally slow motion and continue doing so for endless hours until his hands began to quiver.

One day, Andy came to Sergey’s class with a puppy on a leash. Much to his relief, the dog’s presence was met favorably. Sergey scratched and rubbed his shaggy sides and pet his wide forehead. He then told his student to fully accept his responsibility for another and learn to take care of his four-legged friend.

The puppy was a hand-me-down of sorts from Andy’s older sister, Irina. The impulsive girl was prone to bursts of compassion and love for her fellow creatures. She fed stray kittens in the alley and pigeons and sparrows in their backyard. And when she found a little, lost puppy, she brought him home, intent on caring for him the best she could. Unfortunately, although she had the best of intentions, her interest in these new projects tended to fade

quickly. Before long, she had abandoned the puppy to his own devices, which often consisted of leaving puddles and piles behind him. These, Irina flatly refused to clean up, and although no one wanted to take responsibility for Bon, they couldn't bring themselves to cast him back out on the street. Finally, their father, Iliya, delegated Bon to Andy and severely reprimanded his impulsive daughter, forbidding her even to go near other animals. "Love them from a distance," he instructed.

In a year, Bon shot up from a funny little puppy to an enormous canine, something like a cross between a crocodile and a puffed-up suitcase, weighing over a hundred pounds. Andy was Bon's mother, father, and kind master all in one, and, in Bon's eyes, the only commanding officer above Andy was Iliya. The hearty, big-boned man commanded respect by his appearance alone, but with a mastery of three languages and an advanced degree in physics, he was an intimidating figure to both man and beast alike.

Bon was a cooperative and loyal companion, always at Andy's side. During Andy's training sessions with Sergey, the canine behaved himself nicely and was never underfoot. Sergey adored the dog and even took care of him a couple of times when Andy's family took vacations to the seashore.

Andy returned from the bakery to a ruckus that included the strumming of a guitar and the sound of many voices. The entryway was full of backpacks and various kinds of gear. He then realized they'd been descended upon by the "Tolkieneers," as his father called them. Iliya was irate about his daughter's new obsession with elves, reconstructions, and cosplay, considering it all foolishness and nonsense. Irina and her equally odd girlfriends were learning Qenya and ordering custom-made elvish-style dresses online. They spent hours on the internet meticulously searching for the best fashions for role-playing games. Mom and Andy had no problem with Irina's new obsession and actually found it mildly amusing.

"Oh, Iliya," his mom tried to reason, "let them have their quirks."

"Andy?" Irina appeared in the entryway. "How about making something yummy for breakfast?"

"Yeah, right," Andy retorted immediately. Judging by the shoes left in the hall, there were at least five people over. He had no desire to feed that crowd.

"Ande-e-e, dear..." Irina pouted. "I've talked up your talent in the kitchen so much, they're simply drooling in anticipation. Now, they're going to think I'm just a bragger whose word is no good. Come on, be a dear. Do it for me? Pleecease?"

Her palms together in a supplicating gesture, Irina gazed sweetly at her little brother and batted her long eyelashes.

Andy silently contemplated his sister. *When did she have time to do her makeup?* he thought. *Fifteen minutes ago, she was sleeping like a log!*

"You *are* a stupid bragger, but I'll do it this once," Andy relented. "But you're cleaning up!"

"You're the best, Bro! No doubt about it!"

While Andy clunked dishes preparing breakfast, a serious argument broke out in the living room as to whether a modern person could be transported to a fantasy world and how amazing the possibilities would be.

What's the fuss about? Andy thought. *This portal voyager will probably end up knifed upon arrival, and that's it, the end. Or worse still, he would be captured and sent to work the streets or to a harem. What, you think they'll be waiting for you there with open arms? Get real!*

In the end, the debating parties agreed that taking a stroll in another world would be awesome.

No one paid attention to the argument Alena, Irina's friend, put forward. She suggested the inhabitants of another world may not know of Qenya and may have another way of living.

“Don’t they have enough local mages there already?” she asked. “What’s more, they handle weapons from childhood, not just during role-playing games.”

The debate quieted down for a moment, and then someone apparently said something that made the whole crew burst out laughing. Bon, intuitively realizing Andy was super irritated by the loud sounds coming from the other room, trotted over to the door between the living room and kitchen, stuck his head into the room and barked deafeningly. He stood there a few more seconds to make sure his interference in the conversation had the desired effect, shook himself, turned around and laid down on his rug near the kitchen door.

“Good job, Boy!” Andy praised the dog and tossed him a piece of ham. The treat didn’t reach the floor.

“What was that?” Andy heard the question rolling in from the other room.

“That mutt will cure your hiccups in a hurry! Hey, Troll, you look a little pale after that. You okay?”

“Peachy. I almost pooped my pants.” Andy heard this unknown “Troll” answer, and a new outbreak of laughter nearly shook the walls. “It’s a good thing I went at home this morning, or I would’ve had a hard time keeping clean!”

Andy glanced at the dog in a conspiratorial manner and pointed to the room. “Bon, sic!”

Bon got up from the rug and headed toward the room to lay down the law. Andy followed on tiptoe to watch. A mirror hanging on the wall in the entryway gave him a great view of the unfolding events. Leaving her half-finished juice on the table, Olga followed her brother, determined to join in the fun.

The room was full of guests. Andy recognized two of them. There was Alena, Irina’s friend, and next to his sister, perched on a high-backed chair, sat Mark, the tow-headed fellow currently seeking the role of his sister’s boyfriend.

Naive guy, you’re clueless, Andy thought pityingly. Irina changes gallant knights more often than she changes her clothes, and you, along with the crowd, will get kicked to the curb, as soon as the next fad comes along.

Next to Alena, on the sofa, sat a long-legged beauty he’d never seen before. She was an eye-catching brunette with short hair and a plunging neckline on her fitted blazer. In the armchair by the window sat a strapping, ham-handed young man with a shaved head. *Troll!* Andy guessed. There were no other candidates for such a moniker. In another armchair, with his back to Andy and a seven-string guitar resting on his knees, sat a long-haired young man, the one who called Bon a crocodile.

While Andy eyed the company, Mark scooted closer to Irina and tried to put his arm around her. She recoiled, just slightly moving her shoulder away from the suitor and directing her gaze toward the long-haired Legolas facing her from across the room.

Mark doesn’t even stand a chance!

As soon as Bon entered the room, the laughter quieted as if he’d waved a magic wand. The canine inspected the whole party, let out a snort of disgust and then, baring his formidable teeth, delivered another strong round of intimidating barks. He focused mostly on Troll, growling at him to boot. When he had given the bewildered crowd a second contemptuous snort and licked Irina’s hands, he retired to the entryway.

“Troll, did you get what he was saying to you?” the long-haired youth called out.

“I can’t even imagine...”

“That demon—by some divine error called a dog—just let you know not to defile other people’s homes with your presence!”

Andy left his lookout post and entered the living room, capturing the Tolkieners’ attention. Irina subtly shook her fist at him, knowing very well who had unleashed Bon on them.

“I need volunteers,” Andy announced. “Two of you move the table in here and set it,” he nodded in the direction of the round table in the corner, “and a couple of you wonderful ‘elves’ can serve the fare that some other helpers can bring in from the kitchen. Don’t be afraid of Bon. The dog’s been fed. Just don’t be loud, or he’ll get nervous!”

“Oh, wow! The food is so good!” Vera, the brunette, exclaimed, before licking her plump red lips with the end of her tongue as she stabbed the last morsel on her plate with her fork.

Before they began serving, Irina had remembered her manners and introduced the guests to her brother.

“Irina, where’d you get a brother like that?” asked George, AKA Troll, still chewing.

“You’ll make a good husband someday!” Vera said, casting a soulful look at the chef and winking at Irina. “You can do everything; your wife won’t have to go near the stove!”

Andy feigned confusion. “But why would I need a wife who won’t do anything?”

“What do you mean! To carry her in your arms and bring her breakfast in bed of course!” Vera got up, walked over to him, leaned over and wiped a drop of sauce from his chin with a napkin. The subtle odor of expensive perfume engulfed him. Her décolleté, with its milky-white, firm looking, inviting little breasts, was right in front of his face. She ran her slender fingers mischievously over his shoulder.

Andy’s jeans suddenly became several sizes too tight in the crotch. It was too late to extract his eyes from the quagmire of her bosom.

“Oh! This colt’s become a steed already!” Vera noticed the awkward fit of his pants. “Irina, you said he was just a little boy! Some little boy! Take a glance at his fly! Just look how he’s staring! And his shoulders are so wide... Troll, hon, this guy will soon rival you!”

Vera messed up Andy’s hair flirtatiously and kissed him on the top of his head, making him turn as red as a lobster. They had more than gotten back at him for his antics with Bon; they had ridiculed him. The gang around the table laughed.

Thinking quickly, Andy said, “Vera, how many days does your game go?”

“Three. Olga didn’t tell you?”

“I’ve got a proposition for you. You know, this game you’re playing...let them play for a while. You give me a couple of private lessons in domestic life, and I’ll carry you in my arms and bring you breakfast in bed. I won’t let you near the stove. What do you think?”

The room broke out in another burst of laughter.

“Troll, look, you’ve got competition! The boy is about to steal Vera right out from under you!” Egor, the long-haired youth remarked, choking on his laughter.

“Yeaaaah...” Vera drawled. “Kerimova,” she said addressing Irina, “you and your boy are cut from the same cloth; you’ve got razor-sharp tongues.”

The landline on the coffee table jangled. Irina waved her hand for silence. She answered the phone. “Hello...yeah, Dad...fine...I’ll check...Andy can bring it...I’ll tell him. Bye.”

“What’s up?” Andy asked his sister.

“Dad’s boss showed up and asked to see his work on the new apparatus, but the documents with the color bar test patterns are here at home. Can you take them? And I can take Olga to Grandma’s.”

He’d take them; what choice did he have?

“What does your dad do?” Egor asked.

“He works with high-voltage magnetic fields and resonance phenomena. Something like that. It’s all mumbo-jumbo to me,” Irina said. “Point-like variation in the metrics of space. He’s trying to create teleportation. He says they’ve made some headway. Can you imagine? A quick ‘Zoomph!’ and you’re in America! Whoever paves the way with that kind of thing will be raking in the dough!”

“Has the government really forked over the funding for that?” Egor asked in surprise.

“You expect that from the government? No, a very wealthy investor is financing the whole thing. There’s a lot of money tied up in this research. When Dad got picked up by this investor, his salary increased ten times.”

Irina ran into her father’s study and came back with a black folder of documents since Andy couldn’t enter the office when the computer was running.

As Andy tied his shoes in the hall, Bon seemed to go berserk. As he stood to leave, the dog bit into Andy’s pant leg and wouldn’t let him out the door. When he managed to trick the dog and slide out the entrance, the dog sat back on his haunches and howled at the top of his lungs.

Everyone was surprised. “Does he always behave like this?” Egor asked Irina. She shook her head, her eyebrows slightly raised in concern.

“Hmm,” Egor reflected, “it’s as if he can sense some trouble coming...”

Iliya’s office was on a former military base on the other side of the city. Andy had to change buses to get there since there were no direct routes. The first part of the route was on an old Korean-made bus. At the back sat a boisterous group of four guys dressed in imitation gangster-style clothes. They wore the typical baggy rapper pants, bandanas, baseball caps and sweaty untucked t-shirts with chunky chains around their necks. Andy turned toward the window. He never liked posers like these, imitating African American rappers and clinging to a subculture that wasn’t theirs. One of the guys took a laptop out of his bag, and Andy soon heard the sound of passionate moans and groans coming from the speakers. The group guffawed at the on-screen action, with the whole bus privy to their comments. A couple of passengers reprimanded them, to which the young hoodlums responded with a round of profanity.

Jerks! Andy thought and decided to put a stop to the anarchy. He offered his seat to an old lady and used the excuse to move closer to the group. *Let the good times begin!*

The moans began to fade at the most interesting moment, and then completely fell away. He knew the laptop’s screen showed nothing but flickering ripples.

“What!” he heard one boy squawk. “We haven’t finished the film!” Next, came a torrent of comments and ideas on how to restore the frozen video. They passed the laptop between them, trying to revive it, but it showed no signs of life. Andy stared out the window so they wouldn’t know he was grinning mischievously.

The cure-all fix came next—a power reboot. They turned the laptop off and on again; it started up normally for a second, giving them hope, and then the screen immediately turned back to ripples, followed by a fade to black. Frustrated to their wits’ end, the boys decided any attempt to revive the computer was worthless. It had flat-lined.

“Stupid piece of crap!” its owner furiously threw the computer down on the seat. “‘Made in China.’ Cheap garbage!”

“Sell that thing for scrap metal,” one of the hoodlums said sagely. “And maybe next time, don’t get one that’s made in China.”

Two stops before Andy’s, the group got off the bus and left the laptop on the seat. *It’s a nice laptop, Andy thought. The Chinese aren’t so bad. I’ll give it to Irina. She can reinstall Windows on it herself.* He deftly snatched the abandoned property.

Andy sputtered in a thick cloud of diesel exhaust as the bus rolled away. After ten minutes of leisurely walking, he came to the old concrete guardrail of the military base.

Now, where is that hole in the fence I know so well? The wall was there to keep folks out for their own good. Andy bypassed it and headed toward the former base headquarters.

“Builders have been busy here! They’ve cluttered up the whole grounds,” Andy mumbled, walking around strange, latticed construction and bizarre 10-foot-long cast blocks. Every 20 feet or so, he had to jump over thick, high-voltage cable harnesses.

A sharp pain in his head stopped him short in the middle of the grounds. He found himself enveloped in St. Elmo’s fire, surrounded by a rumble like a low-flying jet. Everything grew dim. The savage pain drilled at his temples, and Andy grabbed his head.

I have to get out of here! He didn’t know where to go. Suddenly, an instinctual internal voice cried, *Anywhere!* He took a step, and the earth pulled away from under his feet. His face met the branches of a coniferous tree...

“Mr. Kerimov, perhaps in the meantime, we can warm the equipment up? How much longer will it be?” The investor’s inspector was anxious.

“I requested the machine, but you decided there was no rush and arranged an inspection of the complex.” Andy’s father cast the inspector a hostile glance.

What in the world did they send him for? He hasn’t got the slightest clue what’s going on, yet he expects a report. He’s putting on airs as goodness knows what...

“You’re allotted sizable funds; the administration is interested in the quickest possible results. Money should be making more money, not settling into useless scraps of iron!” That comment had set Iliya off from the beginning.

What a jerk! No one ever promised a quick turnaround! The project’s preliminary duration estimate was five years. It has been three. What’s the point of running in circles? The administration can send all the Poindexters and pencil-pushers it wants; that won’t speed up the work. We have already reached milestones that other countries are still struggling with, accomplished at least enough for two Nobel prizes. Investments in science should be made with long-term returns in mind, not instantaneous gratification.

“I admit that was a mistake” The inspector’s words brought him back to the conversation. “But just think; I don’t have a heap of time, only a handful of hours. I understand, of course, that a few hours on site won’t enlighten me about your work, but I have to present results to the higher-ups. Even if the progress is minuscule, funding for your project next year depends on it. Opponents to our projects will seek to decrease investment in this area at the next board meeting, so it’s in your best interests to shut them up! And there’s no need to furrow your brows at me; I’m not responsible for our current difficulties!”

Iliya simply exhaled through his clenched teeth. *It’s just like some of the bosses to abandon research halfway through; it’s happened before.* The whole group was scattered then; people got out of science and went to work as janitors. A couple of the promising ones moved to America, obviously not to sweep the streets.

What a pain it was to find a new group of colleagues! And now, to throw it all away again? Not on your life! If they were so ravenous, let them eat ’til they choke! The equipment could be run on idle. The inspector would jump for joy.

“Denis, start the device,” he commanded his young assistant.

“Starting up, sir.”

The lights in the building flickered. The walls vibrated slightly; the diesel power plant’s axles began to spin. The operators took their places in front of their computer screens and control monitors. Testing began.

“The shielding of the external electromagnetic circuit and peripheral field are activated.”

“The external circuit; we’re at 30 percent power, sir! The accumulators are in start-up mode; 50 percent, sir. The internal circuit’s at 50 percent power. It’s going into idle mode, sir.”

“Metamaterial and dielectric polarizers deployed. Electromagnetic blocks activated.”

“We have quantization...”

“What are the guards doing?” the external video surveillance guy suddenly broke out, breaking the strict communication protocol in panicked exclamations “There’s an object on the active field! I’ll kill you, you—”

Iliya cut him off. “What’s going on?”

“Unauthorized person on the site!”

“Visual on the main screen!” Iliya cried, his blood running cold with a terrible apprehension. *Oh, God!* In the middle of the grounds, dropping his papers and grabbing his head, stood Andy! Iliya’s son bent forward. He took a step and then...

“Holy mackerel!” Denis gasped in awe at his screen. “The transfer chamber’s showing zero, and there’s some kind of trick on the external field!” The main operator hit the red emergency abort button to drop the load and deactivate the device.

It was too late; an oval-shaped “window” appeared before Andy, through which Iliya could see a coniferous forest stretching back to the mountains in the distance. Andy took another step

“Nooooo!” Iliya threw himself at the screen as if that could stop the boy. “Andy-y-y!”

When Andy disappeared from view, the window closed and a round shockwave spread from the very center of the grounds, sweeping over the accumulators in its wake.

An oppressive silence hung over the operator's room, broken only by the quiet sobs of the project's leader, on his knees in front of the main screen.

He could be anywhere...

"Momma!" was the only thing Andy managed to spit out before his chest snapped the first twig at the top of the pine tree. After that, all of the sensations a slipper experiences came toppling down on him. His body snapped the thinner branches and banged flatly against the thick ones as he fell about halfway down the trunk, where he caught a fat bough in the crotch. It diminished the blow of the teenager's weight and bent, breaking from the trunk. Several more branches later, Andy crashed to the ground. One of the several large pine cones hurled from above with him landed right on his head and knocked him out.

Not one thought—only the pounding pain in the back of his skull pulled at Andy in the darkness. A wave of a thousand shivers ran over his body, returning the feeling to his numb limbs. His nose itched, making him sneeze, although chills swept over his whole body in a chaotic wave. The feeling of bugs crawling all over his arms, legs, and face grew stronger. *Ow!* He felt he'd been stabbed with a red-hot needle in his right nipple. He howled in pain, giving his sleeping brain a kick. Red-hot needles swept over his whole body in a burning wave. *Ow! Stop!* Consciousness came flooding back as if someone had flipped a switch in his head. Andy opened his eyes and tried to sit up; he hadn't the strength to stand.

His jaw dropped at the sight before him, but he closed it right away so no ants couldn't get in. Thousands of them scurried over him and around him, similar to the red wood ants he was familiar with back home but were twice as big and, by all appearances, meaner. And with that thought, a few of the little buggers chomped down on his wrist. His arm burned as if from a stinging nettle. Instead of a bite, a couple of drops of blood appeared on his skin.

Brutal little pests! Hold on you! What? It's lunchtime, and you've already decided on the menu? I'd like to know how long I was laying here before they decided to bite me, Andy thought.

Judging by how actively the ants moved, his appetizing carcass was to be the main course, and they weren't in the least worried by his objections.

There are a lot of them, and only one of me—and all I can do is hobble like an elephant! His sudden movements angered the ruddy things, and with tripled energy, they took to stripping the fillets and other parts.

What are they doing, the little beasts? It hurts! Andy tried to flick the hungry things off him. *You don't like that, nasty creeps?* The creeps didn't like it; furious ants started dumping formic acid on him, and their cousins, slightly bigger, with big heads and powerful mandibles, joined the red pests.

I have to get out of here, pronto! The acid in his many abrasions didn't just hurt; it burned and itched.

Oh, great! Some of the pests had wriggled their way to his "sacred" parts. Andy patted himself a couple of times in the area of his crotch and stumbled to his feet, then almost tumbled right back down. His head exploded in sharp pain, everything swam before his eyes, and a nauseating lump welled up in his throat. In the next second, his stomach turned inside out, he doubled over, ridding himself of his half-digested food.

Realizing their lunch might run away at any moment, the ants sent their bigheaded fellow tribesmen to the front and went on the offensive, attacking Andy's legs and hands, which were stuck firmly to the ground. Andy suddenly forgot about his nausea and headache and began to knock the little aggressors off his arms and legs with a vengeance. The bites of the bigheaded ones were more painful by far, stabbing their jaws two or three millimeters into his skin; they didn't waste their time on anything less.

Staggering like a drunkard, going from one tree to another in a zig-zag and grabbing onto every oncoming trunk in order not to fall, Andy left the banquet hall full of disappointed ants. The stream he crossed stripped the insects of any hope of pursuing.

“Well, Dad, look what you’ve done! The teleporter!” Andy said. “It’s brought me to the ends of the earth. Interesting... Am I the first ‘teleport-onaut’ or were there other experimental subjects, and where did they end up?”

He could imagine endless scenarios for “teleport-onauts” but they all had one thing in common—flying to space was nicer than falling from a cedar tree. Neil Armstrong triumphantly declared “One small step...” but Andy only had time to screech some profanity before hitting the ground.

It’s a good thing I didn’t land over the crater of a volcano! A fried naturalist isn’t good, neither are drowned men eaten by sharks or gnawed on by crabs at the bottom of the ocean. Now if only specks weren’t flying before my eyes and my head didn’t hurt, I’d be swell!

Andy stopped near a gigantic pine tree, so big that if it were cut down, a couple of pianos could easily be set on the stump. *A sequoia!* he decided. *I’ve read about this kind of tree, but where was it they grew again? Irina blabbed on about different parts of America...*

A whole forest loomed behind the first woody titan, their tree tops tickling the clouds. Which national park? Yellowstone? That didn’t sound right, but his head hurt, and he couldn’t think. So, he was somewhere in the wild United States.

The pest! Andy slapped himself on the back of the neck, squishing the latest ant in an entire mob of hungry insects that had set out on a journey on his clothes—or what was left of them, to be more precise. *Strange, flesh-eating ants didn’t live in North America, their habitat was in hot climates, wasn’t it? Stop.* Andy glanced warily in all directions. *How could I have forgotten about other predators! Olga enjoys watching animal shows; we have a whole collection of disks on that topic at home, including one about Yellowstone grizzlies, wolves, coyotes and mountain lions, a long list of “cute” creatures I wouldn’t want to meet—and there are also rattlesnakes and various spiders. Yikes! Now, I have to watch my step, too, so I don’t step on some creepy-crawly!*

His headache slowly faded into the background, and the nausea stopped tormenting him. Andy paused near a cluster of large boulders and decided to check his pockets for potentially useful items, anything that might come in handy for survival in the wilderness.

Hmm, fairly scant. His wallet with a \$10 bill. Shoelaces: one pair. A thread wrapped around a piece of paper and a needle to go with it; he was prepared in case a button came off. A pocket knife, made in China. A mechanical wrist watch; he didn’t have a digital watch for obvious reasons. A keychain. No matches, no documents. The entire description of his “riches” took up less than a paragraph. Some Robinson Crusoe I am. Of the whole list, only this little knife could be considered a useful acquisition. The rest is junk.

“W-a-a-i-a-i-ai, w-a-i-a-i-ai!” Andy heard the strange sound coming from deep in the woods. Glancing around with a start, he hastily stuck his meager belongings back into his pockets. He had no desire to meet the author of the wood song and needed to think about where to spend the night. No matter how he tried to spin it, he would have to crash under the stars for who knew how long. Andy looked at the enormous sequoia and crossed out the idea of sleeping in the redwood grove of the forest. True, there was no underbrush, and he could see for a hundred yards in all directions, but the ground was littered with old wind-fallen trees. The main disadvantage was that the knots only began to appear on the trunks about ten yards up. It would have been useless to try to climb the trees without claws. And a night spent on the ground, more than likely, could end in the belly of some native predator. He had to search for another place, and another place might be downhill.

He knew the direction of the mountains, their snowy tops shining, the yellow-green wall of the taiga stretched in a dense carpet. He had managed to glimpse that in the instant he’d been falling through the cedar, but had no idea what might lay in the other direction. *If there’s no place safe here, perhaps it’s worth a look in the opposite direction?*

Once he had made up his mind, it was as good as done, and in a few minutes, Andy was heartily trekking downhill. It was in his best interest to move his feet along quickly since the memorable “w-a-a-i-ai” rang out a few more times from his right.

He froze—and just in time. The gaping drop-off under his feet could have been the final and fatal obstacle for a speed-walker who forgot to look down. Andy estimated the distance, judging by the looks of it, at 200 feet. Had he fallen, no one would have been able to collect all his bones in a million years. He would have become the Humpty-Dumpty of the Yellowstone Canyon.

A fantastic view opened before Andy from the height of a bald peak. It was a green sea of deciduous trees stretching over the horizon, the foliage overlapping the wide light-blue ribbon of a river. In the center, between a rocky precipice and the river, rose a perfectly round hill.

About 50 yards below Andy, a fairly small half-circle rock shelf about 5 yards across protruded from the solid wall of basalt-like a little tongue. *I found a place to spend the night!* He just had to descend to it and have a good look at everything from there.

He found a good spot for the descent 200 yards to the left of a convenient little trail to his intended sleeping spot. True, he had to huff and puff as he climbed the almost vertical wall to a height of over 20 feet, but no grizzlies or other predators could climb up there.

When he finished, his fingers were insanely sore, and his knees shook. *Clinging to the slightest cracks and supporting myself with my feet on the tiniest ledges—what a rush!* The question now, of course, was how would he get back down from his chosen patch of rock, but he would sleep on it.

It got dark fast. The last ray of daylight went out and, bypassing the evening twilight, the night came into its own. A myriad of unusually bright stars appeared in the sky. A nearby constellation stood out like the bright beam of a street lamp, and he noticed yet another oddity—there was no milky way in the sky, no Ursa Major or Ursa Minor.

Perhaps I landed in South America, not North America? What else can explain this completely unfamiliar pattern of stars?

Andy settled between two large stones still radiating daytime warmth. *Warmth is great, but how am I supposed to fall asleep?* The moon came out, casting a brilliant glow around itself in the sky, and the nocturnal world came to life no less fervently than the daytime one. The world around him immediately took on dark shadows; crickets and cicadas chirped with all their might; an owl hooted in the woods; and from below, came the sounds of animals calling out to one another in screeches, whistles, and howls. Some formidable creature let out a “sneeze” heard around the world. The Eastern horizon lit up, and ...

Impossible! Andy scampered to his feet. His sleepy stupor vanished. *How is this happening!* In violation of all astronomical principles, there arose in the dome of the sky a second celestial body. The second rising body reminded him of an image of the Earthrise on the moon. Eyes open wide, everything else vanished from his mind as Andy stared at the exotic view. *It's not a satellite; it's another planet, blue and full of life!* The white spirals of cyclones and the azure of oceans were visible to the naked eye. He could make out the vague outlines of continents in spots.

“So much for that! Not Yellowstone, not South America,” Andy whispered, swallowing bitter tears. He sat down on the nearest stone. “Where am I, Dad?”

He froze like a popsicle; the milky cloud of fog that covered the forest and the rock shelf dragged its damp and chill all along his body. Andy had slept for two hours at most when a loud “mroouuwn” made him clamber to his feet. *Who wouldn't be sleeping at this hour?* The nocturnal brutes had already disappeared into their holes, and the day-life had not yet crawled out. The murky veil of fog hid everything within 30 feet of his shelf. Andy picked up a hefty rock and threw it at the spot where the outline of something living could be seen. “Mraa-uu-w” came from below.

Look at that! Hit the target on my first try! Something large slipped under the ledge? follow by a heavy sigh came from under the ledge.

A slight breeze, like a playful puppy, began to break the fog into pieces and carry it off to the west. The first rays of light from the sun painted the world below in rose-colored hues. “Mrown. Mreoww,” the visitor made himself known.

Andy lay on his stomach, carefully crawled to the edge of the rock shelf and looked down. “Eeek!” he exclaimed when his eyes met a pair of yellow eyes with vertical pupils.

He recalled a scene from Lewis Carroll’s story about Alice in Wonderland. “The wide, wide grin means the Cheshire cat’s in!” The member of the feline family that had settled down beneath the shelf was like the famed Cheshire cat’s older brother, only quite a bit bigger—about the size of a tiger or lion. Its grin from ear to ear revealed an immense mouth, strewn with fearsome triangular teeth like a picket fence.

“Mroooowr,” the Cheshire meowed. “Mram...”

“Uh-huh, and good morning to you. Have you lost something here?”

“Mrrrrrow,” the Cheshire meowed once more and started licking its right side.

“Me? No, man, I disagree! I’m not lost, and why eat me?”

Why not? The Cheshire stared at him quizzically. *How would you like to see yourself as stew meat?* Andy’s mind raced as it imagined a conversation with the cat, but he had trouble picturing himself as stew meat. *Everything here is so mean and hungry! Did you learn that from the ants?*

“Mrru.” The cat tilted its head to the side.

The Cheshire came out into the sunlight, stretched all its limbs out by turns and gave Andy a frisky look. “Come out!” it seemed to say. “Let’s play!” Andy imagined what any such games might end with and decided to cancel all play dates.

“Sorry, cat, but I’ll be better off at home! I’ll remain intact!” Andy informed the feline.

The tailed creature didn’t seem to take offense. Home was home, and he didn’t have anywhere to hurry off to either.

“Maybe you could leave me alone?” he asked the Cheshire.

“Mr-r,” the cat quipped and, turning back to the woods, growled loudly. “Mr-rr-uun!”

“So, you’ve rejected me? Is that right, whiskers?” The cat did not react at all to this last harangue. An hour later, the bushes on the edge of the clearing began to flutter and revealed new members of the feline family—a sleek momma and two kittens. *Terrific...*

When they had surrounded the ledge according to all the rules of siege craft, the Cheshires went off to relax, romping around in the small brook that flowed along the edge of the clearing. *They are hot, you see! But aren’t I hot, too? Soon my tongue will be like a dry sponge.* The two kittens, which were no smaller than a large lynx, seemed to be chasing butterflies. But, from time to time, they glanced in the direction of the precipice to see if the prey had decided to come down yet.

Andy climbed right up to the wall in an attempt to spare himself from the heat of the day in the skimpy shade of the rocky ledge. It didn’t help much. His stomach growled loudly enough to rival the kittens below. It periodically distracted them, causing them to look up curiously. First one, then the other, as if teasing him, would go over to the brook and loudly lap at the elixir of life. Andy could only swallow greedily and dream of a drop of rain. He didn’t notice when he started to doze under the hot sun.

Someone tried to wake him, stubbornly tugging at his pant leg. At first shyly and carefully, then with all its strength. The r-r-r-rip of tearing fabric rang out. Andy pulled his leg back and opened his eyes. *What is this?*

On the edge of the rock shelf, as big as medium-sized dogs, sat several little griffons. *Did I sleep so long that scavengers appeared?* The griffons couldn’t be anything else. Interesting creatures, Mother Nature had had some fun putting the head, neck, and wings of a vulture together with the body of an orange cat. There were a few other differences—the fingers of their paws were long and fit for grabbing onto thick branches and shredding the bodies of their victims or other carrion with their imposing claws. Another difference was in the way

the tail was built. It started out just like a regular cat's tail, but about 5-7 centimeters from the base, it turned into a wide fan of long feathers. After all, they couldn't use their paws to stabilize and steer their flights.

Andy didn't have the strength to marvel at this new wonder of nature. Thinking for a moment, he grabbed the nearest stone and flung it at the beasts. He missed, but the rock flying by made them open their tail fans and shove off to the nearest tree. *What's going on below?* The Cheshires were darting around along the cliff wall, trying to find some point at which they could climb up to the ledge. The griffon's presence seriously upset them, since they had invested so much time and energy into keeping watch. They opposed giving up their prey to this brazen feathered scum.

"Mr-a-a-w!" the dad of the little family joyfully exclaimed when he saw Andy. *He's alive!* Now he could calm down and continue his pleasant bath. The griffons in the tree cawed repulsively.

Andy backed away from the edge of the rock shelf and occupied his familiar spot near the wall, leaning his upper back on the rough stone. He was between a rock and a hard place, literally. One more day of sitting under siege like this and the beasties from the tree would undoubtedly peck him to death; he simply wouldn't have the strength to resist. He heard the sound of wings. A few more griffons straddled the upper branches of their sturdy roost. The new arrivals started cawing with the previous residents.

The Cheshire on the ground growled threateningly and threw himself at the tree. The griffons looked at the enraged cat as if he were a halfwit and relocated to a slightly higher spot, emptying their bowels in the process. It didn't land on the cat—he managed to dodge in time—but the tree now stunk like a public toilet. A scuffle broke out in the tops of the branches. The griffons who had migrated from the lower tier tried to take a VIP spot, but they were stopped by their counterparts who had occupied the roost first. The scuffle turned into a savage battle, feathers, and clumps of fur flying in all directions. The kittens below egged the fighting half-birds on with their mewling. The adult Cheshires didn't even deign to glance at the ruckus. The battle ended with the expulsion of five of the fighters. The dozen that remained settled on the branches and took to pruning their feathers and licking their wounds. A silence fell over the clearing.

Andy closed his eyes. *What will become of me now? Where will I go if I survive the siege? How can I live if it turns out there are no people in this world?* Too many "ifs."

He heard the sound of flapping wings again. An impatient griffon had landed on the rock shelf, reassured by Andy's stillness. A sharp wave of the hand and a heavy stone with a hearty smack cleared the careless creature off. Its offended caw was interrupted by its death yell from under the paw of one of the kittens. The rest of the griffons squawked indignantly, but no one else dared make an attempt at the prize.

Nothing at all happened the rest of the day. The approach of evening sent the griffons off for the night; the Cheshires lay down under the shelf and quietly purred to one another. Andy stared silently at the rising of the blue planet and prayed that God might send him relief from his suffering...and at least a glass of water. His tongue swelled up in his mouth, his lips cracked, the walls of his stomach seemed to chew on one another. The Cheshires were just fine; they had scarfed up the griffon; the momma had gone into the woods and brought out a rabbit, also devoured with pleasure. Andy wouldn't have turned down some roast rabbit legs, all the more so because, by the looks of it, the local rodents weighed about 45 pounds. *Dang*, he wondered, *what do these cats need me for if the woods are full of games?* The cats didn't hurry to answer his question.

He dreamed of Germans. Deutsche Zoldaten in field-gray uniforms. It was a phantasmagoria of historical images from films about World War II. The Nazis set up a field kitchen under the ledge to make buckwheat porridge with stewed meat. The fat cook whistled a happy tune and banged a rhythm on the boiler lid with a ladle. Two platoons of soldiers joined hands and led circle dances around the kitchen, clinking mugs of beer and blowing the white foam caps. Each new round began with the distribution of sausages and pouring the

white foamy beverage into outstretched glasses. One sergeant built a whole orchestra of crickets and, picking up a long stick, was conducting before the black musicians. Mugs and sausages in the soldiers' hands were replaced with wooden spoons, and the soldiers, removing their helmets, lined up in front of the kitchen. The happy cook in a greasy apron and crumpled cap dished out to each one a kindly ladle of the nourishing porridge.

The Zoldaten waved to Andy invitingly, yelled "Kom! Kom!" and extended a helmet full of porridge to him. The cook smiled a wide, fatherly grin from ear to ear. In the next second, the cook's eyes turned yellow, and a Cheshire cat was looking at him, dressed in the German field uniform. "Kom!" the cat said sweetly and threw the de-plumed griffon into the pot. The soldiers built a fire and stretched out their chilly palms to him...

Andy awoke curled up; it was below freezing. A chilly wind chased dark clouds around the sky, and the freezing weather made his jaws chatter. *How lucky are those sitting in front of a campfire now, the one that's happily illuminating the slope of the bald hill?* Andy stopped shaking; for a moment, he felt a sensation of warmth. *Fire! If there was a fire, that meant there were people!* He almost danced for joy. On the wave of positivity, the Cheshires seemed like such a small detail, merely a pesky obstacle. Andy lay on his stomach and glanced under the ledge; all four fascists were still there. They just needed helmets on their heads to complete the picture.

"Meow," the dad meowed in a questioning tone.

"I'm freaking out," Andy answered and spat at the dad. The wind carried it away, which was a shame because the spit was so full of poison that the Cheshire would have died instantly—even though it wasn't meant to be. "Die, slime bags!"

"Mr-r-r."

"Yes, you!"

The Cheshire didn't seem to take offense at the comment, but its face showed that someone would answer in full the next day for the nighttime awakening.

A strong gust of wind rustled the crowns of the trees; lightning flashed in the sky. The first fat drops fell to the ground. The downpour went on for an hour, and Andy quenched his thirst. *God granted me water. Now I ought to find a way to save it.*

But he was frozen to the bone and couldn't wait for the sun to rise.

The first rays of sunlight hadn't yet touched the rocky shelf when the flapping of wings rang out, and the first griffon landed on the roost tree. A half an hour later, the whole top was littered with the cawing crowd—at least forty of them. The griffons, by all signs, were discussing the prospect of sharing lunch with the Cheshires. There were two possibilities: either "lunch" would die and pass entirely into the hands of the half-feathered vultures, or they would have to settle for the leftovers from the lords' table, which would be a completely undesirable turn of events for them. Andy pictured a third possibility involving two protruding middle fingers and some choice words to boot.

The Cheshires below became flustered and began sniffing the air excitedly. With a husky meow, the female herded her kittens and tore off out of the field, glancing up with a sorry look. The head of the family also ran off with his offspring and better half. Just as the tip of his tail disappeared into the bushes, a whole herd of large animals entered the clearing, cutting through the thick underbrush with their chests. The griffons left their roosts with a repulsive squawking, screeching and the loud flap of wings. Andy stared wide-eyed at this new marvel of nature.

The animals looked like the result of some mad scientists' experiment in crossing an elephant with a giraffe. They had large bodies like elephants, long necks, and elephant-like heads, only of smaller proportions. That was where the similarities ended, and the differences began. They had no tusks, but the males' heads were crowned with sharp, 3-foot-long horns. Their long trunks were covered in sheets on the outer side that resembled the scales of an armadillo. The scales covered the entire length of the trunk with overlapping edges. Especially tough, thick scales covered the lower fourth.

Interesting. Why? Perhaps nature will reveal the secret to me sometime. The new animals' feet were more like those of a camel, but a lot thicker. Their thick, short fur with tiger stripes let them blend in excellently behind the hazelnut trees.

"I hereby dub thee 'Eleraffs!'" Andy said triumphantly, and as quickly and quietly as a fly, got down from the ledge. He hadn't the slightest difficulty getting down. *Shouldn't have worried.* He had to hurry; the Cheshires could come back at any moment. The farther away he got, the better. A big, wrinkled Eleraff looked his way, carefully inspected him with its little eyes, and whistled softly, after which it turned toward the nearest tree and began munching on the highest leaves. The ritual of his being accepted into the herd had taken place... *Well, maybe not so much a ritual and not exactly accepted, but permission from the monarch to follow them had been granted. He was no danger to them, and so be it!*

The herd turned in the direction of the bald hill. Andy trudged along behind them, following their tracks, not getting too close and not too far behind. His path led to the place of the nighttime bonfire...

"What hard luck! Oooo..." Andy moaned, and darted into the bushes, breaking off a big burdock leaf along the road...

Following the Eleraffs turned out to be convenient and relatively safe. In about three hours, the mass of forest was left behind, and the animals stopped in a wide meadow to the right of the bald hill. The giants didn't trouble over which trail to choose; they just paved a path where they pleased. Predators preferred to get out of their way sooner rather than later. Andy wasn't the only "barnacle". Behind the herd of Eleraffs, small herds of goats and antelopes followed, small wild pigs grunted off to the sides, and colorful birds that resembled terrestrial blue-tits swarmed on huge piles of manure.

But one thing kept him from letting his guard down completely. Along the way, the herd stopped at a meadow circled with trees full of ripe fruit. Andy picked the spiky, fuzzy fruit, which resembled a southern peach. He had observed the Eleraffs and other herbivores stuffing their faces with the forest delicacy and decided to have lunch. He lacked the strength to resist his empty stomach, which emitted a gigantic portion of gastric juice at the sight of food. He savored the juicy flesh, gnawing on it once he had ripped off the rind. The "peach" tasted something like a cantaloupe and was just as sweet. In the center, it held a bilobular pit that resembled a cute little butt.

As he finished his fifth one, frightened bleating broke out on the edge of the meadow and, breaking through the thin undergrowth, a curly-horned antelope from the same cohort of "hangers-on" to which Andy belonged leaped into the clearing. With a snarl, a dark brown Cheshire shot through in pursuit.

The sharp-toothed cat did not have time to do anything else. At the sound of its snarl, one of the horned male Eleraffs turned around with shocking speed for such a heavy body. The folded trunk whistled like a whip and hit the cat's back with the outer, armored side. The Cheshire was thrown back 20 feet, right at the feet of a female Eleraff with a cub. In the blink of an eye, the cat was trampled into a bedside rug.

From that moment on, Andy never left the Eleraffs' side. The incident with the antelope and the cat showed very colorfully that hungry predators were carefully observing the "hangers-on," and although they were not visible, that did not mean they weren't there behind the thick underbrush. After so much grief to avoid ending up in some stomachs, he had no desire to turn up in others.

The only thing was, he shouldn't have picked those "peaches." The seed in the middle that looked like a butt turned out to be a real pain in the butt. In an hour, Andy's stomach churned mightily, and on wobbly legs, he took to occupying the bushes. He had had three such "outings" in the last couple of hours. He had not yet sat down when a humongous something entered the clearing. Miraculously cured, Andy flew up the nearest tree like a bullet; he couldn't remember when he had managed to pull up his pants and button his fly.

The small herbivores dashed out of the clearing from all sides, bleating, and squeaking. In some places, the bleating turned into death rattles as they met skulking predators in the

bush. The Eleraffs formed a circle with the females and young in the center. The males stuck out their horned heads and swung their trunks threateningly. Finally, the “something” stepped into the open field from behind the crowns of the trees, and Andy got a look at it.

A saber-toothed tiger! But what a tiger! Terrestrial relatives of the saber-toothed beauty could only run away from this fellow, curling their tails behind them in fear. More than anything, the tiger reminded him of the Smilodon, now extinct on Earth. It had a reddish-brown coat, a short tail, and powerful paws. At the shoulder, it was no less than six-and-a-half feet high and about a dozen to fifteen feet in length. The predator’s mouth was crowned with fangs a foot-and-a-half long. *How much does it weigh?* Andy wondered, examining the predator from 50 feet up the tree.

With a guttural growl, the tiger began to circle the bunch of Eleraffs; the youngsters and females whistled and trumpeted in alarm. The males whipped their trunks. They swayed their heads from side to side and threateningly lowered their horns to the ground. All of a sudden, the tiger leaped forward and immediately back again. A young Eleraff took a step forward and tried to provoke the beast with its horn. The tiger dodged with its whole body, crept forward and delivered a blow with its fangs into the base of the Eleraff’s neck. After that, it jumped back to the edge of the clearing and lay down under a tree. Its hunting was done; it had only to wait for the victim to bleed to death. Bright crimson blood splashed jerkily from two deep wounds on the victim’s neck. In a few minutes, the wounded male’s legs gave way, and it fell to the grass that was already soaked with its blood.

The herd, trumpeting and whistling fiercely, slowly quit the meadow. The tiger remained calmly where it lay; the rest of the herd didn’t interest it...for now. The sound of flapping wings came from above; a griffon landed on the branch next to Andy; several more circled in the sky. *The scavengers have come; they’re everywhere!* Next to the griffon, a regular vulture saddled the roost, a cousin of the terrestrial scavenger. Staying in the tree any longer became dangerous, and Andy, getting down, followed the herd of herbivores out of the meadow. The tiger cast him an indifferent glance. *Why would it want the tough-trimmings-two-legs when there was a mountain of fresh meat available?*

Following the retreating grass-eating giants up the hill, Andy stepped on a round flat boulder. Something clicked loudly under the stone, a bright flash blinded him and, in the next instant, he collapsed into the hole that opened up underfoot...

Part 2—Black Dragon

The northwestern border of the Kingdom of Rimm, the Wildlands.

“Chutka, eet, what was that?” the man, shaking like a leaf in the wind, asked his heavy-set young counterpart. The carnivore’s guttural roar continued to echo through the woods.

Chutka ran his palm over his bushy beard and cast a scornful glance at the young man. He was tall and thin like a beanpole. Gichok looked nervously from side to side. The end of the broadsword he held firmly in his right hand shook like a rabbit’s tail. *Meat! Spineless meat!* Chutka thought. *What in the name of the goddesses brought you to the hunters? Seeking wealth and women?*

“Sul is hunting,” Chutka answered, loading the bundle of ropes onto his back. He headed for the camp.

“S-sul?” Gichok went pale. “Don’t they live on the steppes? Which is far away?”

“May-a far, may-a not. Look alive and chop; he won’t eat you!”

“Why not?”

“He stinks from meat that’s soiled itself!” Chutka laughed aloud and gave the cowardly Gichok a firm pat on the back. “He’s like a high-born, ‘Let’s have only fresh, clean meat; you’ll just do for feeding the yella flies’. You’re yella yourself, inside and out!”

Gichok, calmed by the fact that no one would eat him anytime soon, began chopping through the thick underbrush of creepers and hazel, cursing like a sailor. “How long must we keep on feeding the horseflies and mosquitoes here, eet? Maybe a dragon’ll join the party?” he asked, turning toward Chutka.

“May-a join, may-a not,” Chutka repeated his tall-tale embellishment. “You’ll hang about here until Grok the magician says enough or until you get eaten up by midges. Sul’s the one who’s squeamish about ya, but midges are keen on manure!”

“Tfoo on you!” the young hunter swore as if spitting and immediately got a telling blow to the back.

“Shut your trap and chop. What Grok says goes! You took the money, so no gripin’, Little Hunter. Pray to the goddesses or beg the One God, that a dragon’ll join us, or instead of a dragon, Grok’ll gut YOU! Got it?”

Gichok nodded.

“Now you’ve got it. Hack more lively; no yapping!” Chutka bellowed.

Gichok shut up and took to it, frantically swinging the long knife. Chutka stayed back a bit; he had no desire to come under the wide swing of the double-sided blade. The pair continued in silence right up to the camp.

“Did you set the ‘spider’s web’?” Grok the wizard asked Chutka right away. He employed the squadron of hunters. Chutka nodded.

“Look,” Grok added, “if you damaged the weight-bearing threads, I’ll have your hides!”

Arist, the commander of the small squadron, approached the magician. He was just as heavy-set, big-boned, and broad-shouldered as Chutka. A dreadful scar intersected his crooked face from his left eye to his chin; his neat beard barely overlapped it. Arist’s ice-blue eyes, the depths of which hid a malignant cunning, gazed perceptively and carefully, noticing every detail and every movement.

“I’ll have my own peoples’ hides, thank you, and let’s get one thing straight right now, Grok: I’m in charge here! If you don’t like something, let me know. A bozl should have but one head! If someone else starts commanding them, not only will we not zapag a dragon, we’ll become side dishes for Sul, the mrowns, or long-maned wolves! You pay; we execute. If anyone doesn’t do it right...” he glanced at Gichok, who lowered his head and cast his eyes

downward. The tips of his ears became crimson. "...I'll stuff his ears down his throat! You've already scared my people. And frightened people are not hunters, more like shadows in the woods."

Grok turned to Arist and pursed his pale lips into a thin strip. His glare bore holes into the old hunter. Arist calmly returned the magician's piercing gaze. Grok, in his dark frock with his pale face, shaved head, and crooked nose, looked like a servant of the goddess of death, Hel. His unblinking eyes added credibility to his "servant of death" image.

"E-e-excellent, you've vouched for your people, most esteemed Arist. I'll ask you in case I need anything," the magician hissed and cast a glance at the long-suffering Gichok, who had instantly changed the color of his face from red to deathly white and started trembling slightly. Something flashed with a blue light inside the magician's tent; he turned sharply and set off to check on his artifacts.

Arist heaved a long hissing sigh. The struggle with the magician was hard on him. In the last seven days and nights, he'd gained many gray hairs and many times cursed the day he'd agreed to take the job. They had been enticed by the idea of easy money, but as they say, "Set foot in the swamp, you'll feed the troglomp."

The contract had been signed, and the magician had furnished a handsome advance payment. The hunters had been out of work for a good while and were glad of the order. Now, they would have been glad to return the money, but the hired man's code did not allow any backing out.

"Go on, chop wood for the fire and help the others strip the deer," Arist told Gichok and, with a wave of his hand, sent him away. Happy to be as far away as possible from the magician and the squadron leader, Gichok practically skipped toward the fire and the porridge-boiling hunters.

Arist turned to Chutka. "What do you suggest?"

Without a word, Chutka ran the edge of his finger across his throat. The commander shook his head.

"The code. Your people would slaughter you for it later."

"Then there be only hope in the dragon, may-a he'll eat the turd. I'll give it to ya straight; I'll shed no tears!"

Grok exited his tent and headed directly to the conversing pair.

"You've come from the burial ground. Did you see anything strange?" he asked Chutka.

"No. Like you said, we didn't go on the hill. So?"

"Strange. The 'tracking frame' registered the use of magic in the area. You're sure you didn't see anyone?"

"What's there to see? We hung the tubes with gluten and stretched the 'spider web' over 'em. By the goddesses, who'er enters that hill is caught!"

The magician nodded his approval and turned to Arist. "Your repose is over; gather your people, Commander. Set Watchmen at all the snaring spider webs. A dragon will fly in soon. The black lizard won't miss the spells of the guardians of the burial ground. Yes, and I almost forgot, let the 'web-men' come to me for the negotiated artifacts." The magician issued his instructions and disappeared into his tent.

Chutka and Arist glanced at one another.

"The wait is over," the commander said quietly and, already with increasing volume, went to rouse the bozles.

The Marble Mountains, No Man's Land, the Valley of a Thousand Streams, Karegar, Jagirra.

"What are you laying around for, you old fart!" the grouchy voice of Jagirra, herbalist, and magician, interrupted the dragon's afternoon nap.

Karegar opened his left eye and looked at the woman who'd awoken him. *What now?* She was standing with her hands on her hips as if she were getting ready to chase after a little

man rather than a dragon. And she didn't look anything like a highborn Snow Elf; she was a country wench in a traditional peasant's apron embroidered with red roosters, but with a stature above and beyond that of a mere mortal. Her posture, her expression, the turn of her head, her enraged glare—all of these made him put his tail between his legs.

"Open your shameless little eyes, black lizard!" Jagirra continued in just as agitated a tone. She grabbed a towel from her shoulder and swatted the dragon on the nose with it.

"You old hag!" Karegar opened his eyes and lifted his head from the hot stones. The name "lizard" had offended him.

"WHAT? Who are you calling old hag?" Jagirra's eyes blazed with a raging fire.

Karegar backed away; he'd crossed the line. He'd let it slip before he knew it. Jagirra just might send a fireball flying.

"Come here! I'll show you old hag!"

It might have been an amusing sight for an on-looker—an enormous black dragon backing away from a sleek female figure brandishing a rolled-up towel before his nose. Soon the dragon's back hit the cliff; there was nowhere to retreat. He had to pull his shoulders and neck in to hide behind his wings. Jagirra might have seemed funny only to those who didn't know her. When angry, she could smash a decent rock to bits or burn a reinforced border fort to the ground in a couple of moments. It had happened. Karegar, without too much effort, could recall five or so such times.

He had had time to study the she-elf over the course of two thousand years, and today's mistake was an unforgivable error on his part. He sat on his tail and put out his front paws.

"Ok, I'm sorry! Let's get it over with. I'm not a lizard or a fart, and you're not an old hag."

"Just try calling me that again, and I'll tie your tongue in a knot!" the elf mumbled, calming down.

"I've heard, too, that Rauu are the very picture of imperturbability. 'Icicles,' they call them." Karegar couldn't resist teasing. The storm had passed, and he once again lay down on his bed of stone, resting his head on his left front paw. Jagirra perched herself in the curve of his elbow. It made a sort of deep warm seat, and she pet the dragon on the forehead... Karegar couldn't count the number of times they'd been alone together like this, just talking, or even more often, letting themselves be silent. He enjoyed the capricious woman's company; apparently, the feeling was mutual. Sometimes, Jagirra would fall asleep in the embrace of his arm-seat, in which case Karegar would feel afraid to breathe lest he wakes the sleeping herbalist.

"Idiots say so, and you're repeating like a parrot."

Karegar twisted his neck and looked at her.

"What are you looking at?" Jagirra was braiding her hair.

"You know," Karegar began, "For a thousand years now, I've thought of you as..." here he faltered, not knowing how to continue.

"Cat got your tongue? Spit it out! After 'old hag' I can handle anything!"

"As my wife..." the dragon finished his sentence and stuck his head under his wing. If he were capable of blushing, his black scales would have turned crimson.

"Ye-e-es," Jagirra drawled. "Been thinking about that for a long time, have you? They say dragons don't suffer from dementia! But I've got a loon."

"That's just like you," Karegar lifted his wing a bit and said from underneath his webbed covering as if hoping his wing would protect him. "You chase me off like a country wench does her wandering husband. I can't even wave my wing one too many times without your permission! Don't fly there, stop scaring the herds here, ladies are bathing there; don't peek! What do they call it nowadays? Under your thumb!"

The herbalist bent over in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Karegar sighed heavily and put his head back down on his left paw. He would have stamped any other woman out ages ago—he had no particular deference for human or elf life—and would have lived peacefully, but all his rage passed and turned into a puppy's desire to wag its tail before this woman.

"Now that's a good one! I'll forgive you 'hag' for making me laugh so hard!"

"Oh, thank you. Tell me again why you woke me up?"

Jagirra abruptly ceased her laughter and glanced at the dragon with a serious look. He immediately felt guilty.

“Did you fly to the Bowing slope?” she asked.

“I was hunting.”

“What, you’re too lazy to use your ‘true’ vision?”

“Just tell me what I’ve done wrong.”

Jagirra shook her head. “Some country wenches were gathering berries in the wood, and then you show up with your hunting. Anyway, from your type of sport, Tria, Trog Sosna’s daughter-in-law gave birth right there. It’s clear, you’re the Master and owner of the valley and the mountains around it but couldn’t you have dragged this elk to your cave instead of ripping its head off alive? And then what? If you would look with your true vision, you’d see people and would have thought twice before carving up that elk!”

Karegar cast his eyes down. What rotten luck. But ultimately, he wasn’t a hand-fed pet; sometimes he craved fresh blood. The fact that humans went gallivanting about wherever they pleased was their problem, not his!

“And who was born?” the dragon asked tactfully.

“A boy, they’re naming him after you. There’ll be another Regar in the valley!”

“There’s already at least five. Brog has a daughter called Regara, and I can’t count all the boys by that name!”

“You should be happy! People love you! They call the valley ‘Karegar’s Valley!’”

The dragon winced; the herbalist’s last words cut him to the quick. They dredged up ancient memories from the back of his mind.

“It’s already been called that for a very long time,” he carefully set the she-elf down from the curve of his elbow.

A cave filled with black blood and dead children spread before the dragon’s eyes. The little dragons weren’t yet three years old. They had put his daughters to sleep with black lily dust, then cut their heads off. He found the killers. The Forest Elves hadn’t had time to get far. They hadn’t time to kill anyone else. Karegar set upon the pointy-eared camp like a hurricane of wrath. Irru attacked the camp from the other side. His wife had come back from the hunt and, seeing the demolished nest, tore off in pursuit. Not even smoldering twigs were left of the camp; the wind scattered the thick ashes... Irru, in her grief, lost sight of her senses and two days later was burned up in a violent attack of dragons on the Great Forest. The elves, it turned out, had attacked not only his valley, but other valleys too. Karegar remained alive, but after the attack he lost the ability to wield magic, descending to the level of a third-rate human wizard-wannabe. The war had wiped out the dragon population. The Great Forest ceased to be, becoming an idle wasteland, but the Light Forest remained, for the time being... Karegar tried not to think about what would happen later on.

The last true bloods had left Ilanta. They had left one “minor” working portal, fitting it with “closing” loops, and sealed the rest. What happened at Nelita remained a secret. *Why hadn’t the true bloods and the few dragons that had left with them come back?* The goddess Nel’s Night Eye didn’t hurry to reveal the secret. The “minor” portal turned out to have a surprise—it could only be opened from Nelita. The tracking beacons would register all attempts to open the portal, but there still had not been a single attempt. One such tracking beacon lay in the dragon’s cave, which had never once lit up green. Inside the portal, no one activated the spell’s security complex, which was set to true bloods. Once every couple of months, Karegar would fly to the portal, as if that would open it and dragons would start flying through the gates. But hope lingered in his soul that someday exactly that would happen.

The war had ended almost three thousand years ago; he had been alone for a long time since. Until one day, Jagirra came to the valley. She managed to rouse the solitary dragon and once more imbue him with the desire to live. Since then, a lot had changed, but his home had not been called “Karegar’s Valley” in almost three thousand years...

“I’m sorry,” the herbalist’s quiet voice called him back to the moment and made him put away his inveterate pain for a time.

“You can’t bring back the past, but tell people not to call the valley that. Tell them I asked...” Karegar stepped from one leg to another and stretched his neck like a dog.

“Okay.”

A slight peep came from inside the cave.

“What’s that?” Jagirra asked, surprised. Karegar jerked the ends of his wings, the dragon’s equivalent of shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know; I’ll go check it out.”

After a few seconds, the dragon shot out of the cave.

“The tracking beacon! Someone’s activated a portal to Ilanta! I’ll fly over and take a look. I’ll be back by morning.” He threw his wings open wide, pushed himself off the ground with all four paws and rocketed into the air.

Four hours later, Karegar was already making his third circle over the bald hill that hid the ancient portal in its depths. He hadn’t seen any sign of digging or attempts to get inside it. *Perhaps the magical guard perimeter lost the energy from the spell it contained? Or the digging sites have been masked over with sod?* The dragon switched to true vision; there was no magical activity! *Why then did the beacon blink? Maybe my tracking beacon’s broken?* Little did he know, even activating the exit point portal on Ilanta would trip the beacon. No one had tried to come through from Nelita, but a certain guest was having an unwanted adventure under the hill...

Karegar decided to inspect the hill once more, set a course with his wing, and descended, flying over the very tops of the trees. Something white flickered behind him and entangled his hind legs and wings, sharply pulling him backward. Karegar roared angrily and pressed his wings flat against his back. Breaking branches, he crashed to the ground, which quaked slightly with the blow of the dragon’s body. A bald man in dark garb leaped out of the bushes and ran to where the dragon fell.

How much more of this! The lone thought played over and over in Andy’s head. Finally, the slanted tube he had so unfortunately fallen into ended and his legs crashed into a plaster lattice in a cloud of dust, pebbles and dry leaves. He tumbled out into a room of gargantuan proportions.

Flying in a curve for another several feet, Andy landed on his back on the gigantic skeleton of some kind of animal. The bleached bones couldn’t withstand the new load and with a terrible *crack* collapsed like a house of cards. The cloud of dust that was stirred up as a result covered the former skeleton and the human figure that was trying desperately to extract itself from the heap. A rumbling echo rang through the hall, and it was impossible to sort out the crackle of bones from the sounds of stones that continued to fall from the hole in the wall.

Getting out of the heap and covering his face with what was left of his t-shirt, Andy ran off in the opposite direction of the dust cloud. The adrenaline rush was slowly passing; the hurt and injured parts of his body began to let him know they’d come to harm—in some places, a sharp pain; in others, a dull stinging ache. His whole back from his neck to his tailbone screamed in agony from the multitude of cuts, and a couple of small splinters were deeply embedded in the muscle tissue just above his right kidney.

“Aw man...,” he moaned, almost swearing, and stepping to the side to search for a relatively clean patch of floor. When he found it, he carefully removed his t-shirt and twisted it into a tight whip, laid down on the surface on his stomach, put the shirt in his mouth and, by feeling around, began to extract the foreign objects with his fingers. Tears gushed from his eyes. He was all alone; no reason to be shy.

For lack of alcohol or another disinfectant, he had no choice but to take his chances. He lay down on his stomach, put his t-shirt in his mouth, which soon got all chewed up and saturated with saliva, and put his arms behind his back to extract the splinters with his fingers. *Some surgeon I am!* After the “surgery,” which seemed relatively successful, he lacked the strength to move. For another twenty minutes, he lay crying. He felt sorry for himself.

Why did all this have to happen to me? Why couldn't the stupid Tolkieners from Irina's group have gotten thrown into this land? They would have been ecstatic!

"Why me?" he cried as loud as he could, touching his lips in despair and hitting the floor with a fist, which raised a small cloud of dust. The cry bounced off the walls and came back to him in a multitude of resounding replies. No one was ready with the answer.

What had he done to offend the powers that be, for them to make fun of him so? First, they pet him with a bit of lightning, then decide that's not enough, so they add an other-worldly excursion? But I'm lucky no one has gobbled me up, and I haven't stepped on a poisonous snake. That "peach" could well have been the last fruit I ate in my life. On the other hand, what does luck mean? Luck would have been not walking through the experimentation field, or even better, not going to my father's work in the first place.

When the cold of the stone began to take its toll and his adrenaline had waved bye-bye, he carefully sat up. Trying not to move his shoulder blades or back too much, he was finally upright and wiped his wet face with the t-shirt. He squinted at his surroundings. *Enough with the wet eyes, tears won't solve your problems.*

They will answer me. They will answer for everything. I will make this sucky world face the music, just you wait! Andy didn't yet know who "they" were and how exactly he would make them face the music, but he firmly made up his mind to survive. He would survive despite everything, no matter what it took.

"Where've I ended up this time?" he posed the philosophical question to the emptiness.

Silence reigned in the place, disturbed only by the broken crumbling of pebbles still sprinkling from the hole in the wall. The room he'd found his way into was enormous. Andy raised his head. A cupola glowed with a soft, subdued light. The floating specks of dust danced in the air like a myriad of little stars.

"About 250 feet..." he measured the height of the cupola by sight. "Probably about 350 from wall to wall."

It turned out that the bald hill hid an ancient structure. The walls were ornamented with bas-reliefs, but a thick layer of dirt and dust covered all the surfaces, keeping him from examining them more closely. In the thick dirt of the room, the unnatural cleanliness of a high arc stood out; it looked as if it were cut from one solid piece of crystal. Sparks of reflected light played along the arc; a pale purple light illuminated the crystal's thickness from within.

A mountain of bones towered before the arc, bones so big one might surmise they belonged to a dinosaur. The vertebrae of the tail Andy was sitting next to stretched in a row at least 25 feet long. *How did that paleontological exhibit get in here?* He couldn't see any doors or passageways. *Did they fly in?* This last thought had barely just formed in his brain and spread over his cerebrum when his eyes, just ahead of his brain, caught sight of the oblong bones lying to the right and left of the skeleton he'd destroyed. *Well, well!*

Andy stood up, a wave of dull pain running along his spine as he did. *Okay, I can handle that; I can walk and jump.* The position of the bones was very similar to the frame of bat wings or a pterodactyl. "How about that!" The local flying creature's wingspan was about 65 feet. *Some pretty formidable birds hang out in these skies!*

Andy walked up a little closer. It was a wing all right. He stood there snapping his fingers pensively and staring straight ahead. There were griffons in this world, so logically he had to accept the idea that this mountain of bones was, at one time, a dragon. But it was somehow difficult to believe that this dragon flew. The wingspan was too small for such a bulky, cumbersome beast, unless...

Unless there was magic here. If so, everything would fall into place. A dragon's flight, the lighting in this place he was in, the question that had already bothered him—where did the light come? As far as he could remember, there hadn't been any windows on the hill. Batteries? What enormous volume they must have to be working still after all the time it took for this layer of dust to form! It had obviously been quite a while. Automatic electrical power? Ha!

“You’re not thinking in the right direction, Andy Dip-head. You’ve got to think about how to get out of here, not about how the lights work!” the unfortunate traveler scolded himself. “I’ve got to take a look at this wonder of nature’s mind.”

Andy walked around the dragon. The monster lay before some kind of pedestal or altar, its head resting on it. Although, calling a skull with five-foot-long teeth a “head” seemed inadequate.

“Whew! Now that’s big!” Andy said, drumming on the dragon’s tooth with his fingernail. The dragon’s jaws also bore two pairs of upper and lower fangs about 16 inches each. The skull itself was of a conical form and got wider toward the eye sockets. Both sockets were tilted forward, so there was no question of whether it had binocular vision. A collar of bone about a foot and a half long protruded from the back of the skull, covering the base, which divided into two cones that became 3-foot-long horns. The horns faced backward and ran parallel to the fifteen-foot-long neck. *This “birdie” didn’t peck at seeds—it pecked at those who pecked at seeds—Eleraffs, for example.*

Andy turned to the altar and almost fell, getting his foot tangled in a chain that came out from under the dragon’s right paw.

“Well now, let’s see...” he bent and tugged on the chain. Clanking against the stone in protest, a real round “pancake” with a blood-red stone in the center appeared from under the creature’s paw. It was something like a medallion, perfectly fit for a dragon, the right size, and everything, about a foot and a half across. Andy pulled the circular object toward himself, not the least bit surprised by the weight of it, and picked it up—25 pounds, give or take. He spat on the metal and rubbed it with the edge of his t-shirt. The clean part shined with a dark yellowish color. That explained the pancake’s heaviness; it was made of gold. Was the stone a ruby? Andy lifted the object up and watched the light play within the gem. *Was the dragon “whacked” here because of this gold? Maybe someone had... but no, there are no other bones around, no signs of violence.* He crossed out the possibility of a dragon slayer.

The medallion suddenly flashed yellow and strange runes lit up on its surface. The crystal arc started humming like a swarm of angry bees. Its pale purple light changed to a bright neon color. Andy got scared and tried to toss the heavy circle away. No such luck; the medallion melted onto his palms.

The arc’s fluorescence grew brighter; Andy’s startled fear turned to full-blown panic. Not knowing what to do, Andy slammed the yellow thing on the altar with all his might. This junk, this circle, this amulet, medallion, whatever it was, detached itself from his hands. Bits of the skin off his palms remained on its surface and fell to the ground by the dragon’s head, clinking victoriously.

Andy sputtered from the pain and shook his hands back and forth at the wrist. A couple of drops of blood had gotten onto the woe-bringing golden circle. A dark red beam of light shot from the ruby to the ceiling.

In the next instant, he felt as if his chest was being slammed by a sledgehammer, his feet lifted off the ground, and he felt himself soaring in the direction of the opposite wall. He didn’t make it all the way there; he landed 30 feet from the take-off point, then skidded another 15 by inertia.

The arc had stopped glowing, and the red beam from the ruby disappeared. The question *What was that?* somehow immediately took a back seat to the exclamatory maxim *Run like heck! You didn’t believe in magic? There’s proof for you! Is it alright that it’ll leave its mark on your ribcage?*

The air over Andy lit up, his ears perked up at the sound of a very high-pitched, borderline ultrasonic, screech. The outlines of some kind of pentagram formed in the air above him out of nowhere. According to all indicators, the magic had decided to finish him off.

Andy couldn’t manage to pick his butt up off the surface it had polished and get out of there, no matter where. The pentagram suddenly glowed, the bright light slashing at his eyes and the ultrasonic screech turning to a rumbling hum that made the walls shake. His body was overwhelmed with an incredible weight, pinning him to the floor. His arms and legs felt

nailed down with invisible nails, and Andy could only stare at the pentagram descending upon him.

“Aahhh!” he writhed with his whole body. “Let me gooo! I don’t want it! What is it? I’ll tear you apart!” Instead of his cries, a muffled rattle escaped his throat. The desperate attempt to free himself from the pentagram’s hold had no effect. It finally touched his body, and the glow went out as if it had never been. The weight lifted, and Andy sprang from the ground to his feet in one movement.

Rage and a readiness to kill whatever might cross his path bubbled inside him. He grabbed a large thighbone of the dragon and began to destroy the remains of the skeleton with it. A few minutes later, all that remained intact was the skull. Wiping the ample sweat from his forehead, Andy looked around.

The room had changed. The dirt and dust buildup from many centuries had disappeared, and the room shone clean. Only the ruined skeleton, fallen stones under the hole in the wall, and dirty, bloody Andy, himself, spoiled the magical transformation. The coat he’d been holding was left somewhere in the ventilation pipe as he slid his way in here and his t-shirt was in rags, but his shoes looked good as new.

Andy shifted his weight from one leg to another and let the enormous bone fall from his hands. It was strange; he wondered how he had been able to smash the skeleton. Looking at the bone he was gripping in his hands, he questioned why it had been stronger than the others. Andy looked at his hands and kicked the bone that lay on the floor—an ordinary bone. He was suddenly ashamed of what he’d done to the dragon.

He turned from the destruction to find a way out of the room. He walked along the walls, examining the bas-reliefs and stone carvings as he did so. The stone images took his breath away. Dragons, people, judging from the long pointed ears, elves, and other creatures were depicted in full detail. The tiniest details were carved with meticulous precision.

How much time Andy spent immersed contemplating the lives of the winged race and the other stone characters, he couldn’t say. He tried to turn away from the walls, but involuntarily, his gaze continually fixated on one or another of the carved images or bas-reliefs. He soon came back around to where he had begun—pretty hard to find any doors or other rooms. Either they weren’t part of the project, or they were scrupulously masked, which was most likely—maybe even by some magical password or passage only by aura. Andy scratched his scar. *I could fail to find my way out of here until the second coming; then my skeleton would take its place beside the dragon’s mashed-up bones. How cute. The composition would be called...*

“It won’t be called anything! I’ll get out the same way I came in!” The thud of pebbles falling from the ventilation hole had pulled him out of his thoughts and given him an idea.

Easier said than done. Let’s say I can get to the hole by climbing on the arc. What then? Then the challenges begin. How can I climb up the inclined tube? I don’t have claws! Think, man, think!

“What are you smiling at?” Andy kicked the innocent skull in frustration. Its teeth clanked noisily; the reflection of the internal violet light from the arc glinted across the fangs.

“Sorry, man!” Andy sat down in front of the dragon’s skull. He had no claws, but he had a substitute... “Can you share your chompers? I need them more than you do!”

The fangs really didn’t want to come out of the skull. The second stone he used to try to pry them out was shattered to pieces with no success. He had one fang at his disposal; ideally, he would need three more. Andy struggled with them longer than he had spent smashing the skeleton. The fangs were in there good and tight.

They were sharp, and the inside edge was finely serrated; it cut no worse than a knife. *I could cut my palms to shreds on these!* Andy cut a few strips of fabric from his t-shirt with his pocket knife. Now, he just had to wrap the bases of the newly acquired climbing devices in fabric, and he could get going. He’d been there too long already...

Punch a fang in. Pull yourself up. Left, right, pull yourself up. Small crumbs and sand fell on his face. “Dang! It got in my eye again!”

Andy punched a fang in deep with his left hand and got situated a little more comfortably, then wiped his eyes with his right hand. He didn’t know whether he would make it out or not, but the dirt, clay, and sand would last him the rest of his life if he did. *Crunch.* The fang in his right hand hit something hard in the dirt wall and broke. Andy reached for a replacement in his belt. Three teeth left; he had to be more careful.

The walls of the tube glowed with a ghostly light as if glow-in-the-dark mushrooms or phosphorous microorganisms lived in the depths and on the surfaces covered in dirt. Sand and little clumps of earth periodically fell on his head from above, and the little bits scratched his stomach, drawing blood.

Punch a fang in, pull yourself up. Now the other hand, pull yourself up. Halfway there.

All kinds of stupid thoughts came to mind. Andy wondered whether he’d have a blister on his belly button or whether his belly button would be completely wiped into oblivion. Cowboys get blisters on their butt cheeks, and his situation was a lot worse than horseback riding. *Fifty yards down, fifty to go.*

He saw his coat hanging there. *Punch a fang in, pull yourself up. Right hand, pull yourself up. There’s my little coat. Did you miss me?* He took hold of it and brought it with him, clenching it in between his teeth.

Another landing on the dragon’s bones would certainly end badly, if not fatally. *I shouldn’t have smashed the bones. Not worth it! Don’t spit in the wind, especially if the wind is a dragon skeleton.*

Roots, just like live tentacles, strove to hook onto his belt and prevent him from crawling up and out. They grabbed his hands and tried to poke at his face. It was no use; the robot Andy had become had a job to do. *Punch a fang in, pull yourself up, punch the other one in, pull yourself up.*

Three-quarters of the way—the finish line... He sure couldn’t take a final sprint, but no big deal; he would go by the Olympic principle, *It’s not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game that counts.* He wished he could fix the fangs to his legs; his arms were already shaking quite violently. He caught his breath and kept going—punch, pull; the other hand, pull.

Andy got another portion of moist earth in the face. *Good thing I shut my eyes in time. How much dirtier could I be? I’m already like Winnie the Pooh when he jumped in the mud before flying up to the honey!*

It was hard not to mispronounce the poem with the coat collar in his mouth: “It’s a very funny sought that, if Bears vere Bees, zey’d build zeir nests at ze bottom of trees. And zat bein’ so (if ze Bees vere Bears), We shouldn’t have to climb up all zese stairs!”

Interesting, he thought, *what kind of “bears” or “bees” dug out this “burrow?” Maybe they hired a red-eyed rabbit to do the job? ‘If I know anything about anything, that hole means Rabbit,’* he further quoted the childhood classic in his mind. ‘...*And Rabbit means Company....*’ Anything was possible. Momma “Cheshire” brought a bunny from the woods the size of a large dog. God-forbid he should meet such a fellow in the tube or one of the “bees” he was wondering about.

If they have rabbit like that here, what kind of elephants do they have? The size of a five-story building! And the fleas on these “pet” elephants would be the size of a car. Jump-crash, jump-crash, the jumping cars on the backs of friendly giant elephants....

He bumped his head on a big boulder. *Stop. I made it, I made it!* Andy better secured his footing and began to look for the gap between the boulder covering the hatch and the edge of the tube. There were no traces of one. *How did so much dust, dirt and leaves get in here? Open up!* Andy hit the stone with all his might until his knuckles bled. He heard a *click* above his head, and the boulder rolled to the side, revealing the opening and the darkening sky overhead. *Evening already?* The wind blew into the tube and howled above it; the moving roof sprinkled bits of dirt into the hole. Not waiting any longer, Andy climbed out of the trap. With the speed of the guillotine, the huge boulder rolled back into place, almost squishing his feet.

Andy lay down on his back. His arms were stiff and seemed to buzz like a transformer. *How much distance did I cover climbing up? About a hundred yards? I should probably get to the river and wash myself off...*

The sky brightened. The light blue edge of the rising planet appeared over the horizon. Andy sat up. *What should I do now? Go down to the woods and look for the tallest tree I can find?* Staying on the hill seemed like an incredibly bad idea. Andy would have to go out to the dark forest stockade anyway; better to do it sooner rather than when the nighttime creatures came out to hunt. He could orient himself by the light of the fire between the trees. Suddenly he stopped. *You idiot! Fire! There are people there!*

His exhaustion lifted, and he bolted downhill, hurdling over boulders, bushes, and fallen trees. If he had tripped at that pace, he would have been shattered to pieces. He raced, dodging in and out between the trees, not noticing the underbrush and cleverly threading through the thin trunks of the dense hazelnut trees. The fire was close by already.

Andy ran right into some cords that hit him in the chest and blocked his way. He grabbed one of the fangs from his belt and began hacking away at the ropes. *Faster, faster! What's this? A net?* He stopped at the very last second. *What kind of people are they? Have you forgotten everything you were thinking about portal voyagers?*

Trying not to make any noise, Andy stepped back. His left leg tangled in the mesh of the sticky net. A couple of improvised dagger strokes, and his leg was free, but with a thin ringing sound, the thick thread that connected to the net's mesh snapped.

An eerie roar came from somewhere off to the side. A dark shadow Andy took for an uprooted tree in the twilight suddenly grew larger. People began to scream excitedly; he heard snippets of orders being barked here and there. Shadows broken by the fire began to move and quiver in different directions. The dark shadow to the right stretched upward and lifted off the ground; wide wings opened on the background of the starry sky.

"A dragon!" Andy froze in a stupor. The powerful beating of the enormous wings pushed Andy back with gusts of air. He stumbled on one of the cords and, stepping carefully about to avoid falling, scrambled into the clearing and right into a pale-faced guy in a black frock.

A punch in the jaw snapped Andy out of his stupor. The thug put his foot in Andy's stomach and let out a guttural cry. His face was distorted into a repulsive grimace. If Andy hadn't studied hand-to-hand combat with Sergey, as well as archery, everything would have ended here. The lessons weren't very systematic, as opposed to the shooting lessons, but it was some kind of self-defense. Instinctively, Andy jumped back slightly and tightened his stomach muscles to absorb some of the energy from the blow. All the same, he lost his breath for a few seconds, and a bloody film covered his eyes. A knife glinted in the man's hand. He again cried something out to the others; people stopped.

Andy took a long step forward to meet the hand that suddenly brandished a knife and, as Sergey had taught him, knocked the knife away. He leaned his torso away from another possible blow and, crouching, struck the guy in the liver with his right hand. The man wheezed. Andy felt something warm on his hand. His enemy seized the hand that hit him and squeezed it like a vice.

A lump of bile welled up in Andy's throat. He had stabbed the man in the liver with a long dragon's fang. *I KILLED him! What now?* The pale-faced man wheezed and collapsed to the ground. Andy stared in horror at his bloody hands.

A blow to the back of his head caused a whole host of various-colored stars to appear. The stars went out, and everything went black...

Northwestern border of the Kingdom of Rimm, the Wildlands.

"Take it easy, little fellow," Chutka muttered between clenched teeth, hiding a lead mace-and-chain in his sleeve. "No point in flailin' yer arms around here." He kicked Andy with the toe of his boot, sending him collapsing to the ground in a heap. "Arist, what'll we

do? The dragon got away! Grok, the magician, is already telling Hel off; he'll have a dark afterlife."

The seven hunters stared silently at the two bodies lying on the ground.

"Eet, were'd he come from? He sailed in from nowhere, like a morning fog!" Gichok's voice put in. "Chutka, you didn't knock him off by chance?"

"What? He'll be back on his feet by mornin'." Chutka squatted and turned the stranger's body face up. Then he started. "A lad!"

The rest of the hunters' faces showed surprise and disbelief in equal measures. They questioned how a boy had taken out an experienced mage, and so quickly, that no one had had time to blink an eye.

"What are you gawking at!" Arist took the lead. "Chutka, Draï, run to the magician's tent, look for some notrium shackles. Grok should have some."

"Why?" asked Titus, a hunter with a narrow, pockmarked face.

"Because the lad is a mage. Or d'ya think Grok was walking about without a defense amulet?" Arist called their attention to an entire bundle of chains with various amulets around the dead magician's neck. "Besides an amulet, Grok always kept a shroud on him, and it'll be a fine day afore ya break through 'er. Yer hand'll sink in, and you're the one who'll go limp then! And the lad sent him to his maker in three seconds! Explain that t'me? If he ain't a mage, I'm Madame Dora from the public haus in Pulha!"

The hunters chuckled at their commander's crude humor.

Drok was overweight and clumsy, with the sloping mustache of a southerner. He poked the boy with his finger and waved in the direction of the hill. "The little wizard chopped up the spider web and cut the anchoring ends that were holding the dragon," he explained in gestures.

Arist gave the remaining hunters work to do: Gichok chopped sticks; Titus and Drok wind an entire spider web into a roll; Taylor, a former legionary, searched Grok's pockets. The commander himself squatted down near the boy, knocked senseless by Chutka, and retrieved two more dragon fangs from Andy's belt. He held them in his hand and contemplated. The boy was somehow strange. His camisole was sewn from some sort of thin fabric; he wore tight pants made from a dense sackcloth. Arist inspected the boy's hands. Peasants' calluses were absent, although he saw characteristics typical of professional archers: thickened skin from the protective thumb ring and abrasions from the bowstring on the pointer and middle fingers of his right hand. The former foreman was well versed in deciphering such details. The boy had a well-developed frame and muscles, was built proportionally correct, and had the wide shoulders of a bowman.

Arist continued the examination. He had an even, oval face and hair cropped short. A nobleman, perhaps. *It was most likely, but what had he been doing in the woods like that, obviously for more than one day?* He was ragged, dirty as an urban pauper, swathed in cuts and bruises, with his hair covered in white cobwebs. Just then, Gichok tossed a new handful of dried sticks onto the fire, and the blaze flared up, shedding light on the field. Arist frowned in surprise. The boy's hair wasn't entangled in a cobweb—it was gray....

Behind Arist, Taylor let out a choked wheeze. Sensing danger, Arist threw himself on the ground just as he heard the resounding slaps of bowstrings against leather gloves. Gichok screamed, and in the next second, the scream became a death rattle. Drok fell to the ground on his back, and Titus lay beside him. *Forest Watchmen! But why? Why were they shooting them down?*

"Don't shoot! Arist show yourself!" The old hunter heard a familiar voice call. Arist stood up. No sense in jerking about, they had taken his men completely by surprise. A stately man in Watchmen's garb entered the field. He wore high soft boots, a green, loose-fitting camisole weaved of dense fabric, and pants of the same, with a wide belt wrapped several times around his waist. A short sword was attached to his belt. The watchman was holding a small, cocked crossbow with a short bolt.

“Hands in the air. Higher. Don’t move, or one of us will send you to the great beyond. You see how nervous they’ve become; they killed all your men!”

“Dimir!” Arist recognized the watchman’s voice. He used to be a hunter until he disappeared a few years ago. “What do you mean by this? What did we do?” he ran his gaze over the field of lifeless bodies. Titus had stopped writhing and was eternally quieted. The watchmen had the notorious habit of coating their arrow tips with poison.

“There’s only one punishment for poaching on the land of the Duke of Lere—death!” Dimir said, squinting contemptuously and brandished his weapon.

“What duke? What are you saying! These are no man’s lands!”

“You’re mistaken. A week ago, His Majesty, in exchange for services to the crown, bequeathed these lands to the Duke.”

“But we’re not subject to the edict! We’ve been in the forest for two weeks! According to the code, a watchman has to warn a free hunter first if laws are being broken or if rules have changed!”

“Consider yourself warned.” Dimir grinned. Muffled laughs were heard from behind the brush. “We have no problems with you personally, but you made such a bad choice of employer, Arist. You’re losing your grip. You didn’t know the Duke had offered a reward for Grok the magician of 200 Imperials? That’s a decent amount of money for you. Grok owed him—owed him quite a lot.”

The commander shook his head; Dimir’s message was news to him. It was useless to argue or try to prove anything to the Duke’s Watchmen; they did everything just like that. Just try to find some wiggle room, and you’d be shot full of arrows. They had almost certainly covered the base camp as well. Confirming the hunter’s worst fears, three watchmen appeared on the field, one of them bearing Drai’s head in his hands. Arist closed his eyes and said a silent prayer to Hel that she would grant his bozles a light afterlife; they didn’t deserve to die like that.

If the hunters had known these lands had been given to Duke Lere, they never would have agreed to such a job just for some stupid perks. The Duke was known for his cruelty toward trespassers. *But Dimir, how could he? He was a former hunter!* Arist watched as Dimir’s men patted down the dead hunters’ clothes, ripped away their belts with knives. They then took Arist’s belt, confiscated his steel and flint, and collected the remaining dragon fangs. Deft hands grabbed the small dagger from his boot.

“How is it that you, Arist, failed to protect your employer?” Dimir asked, grinning malignantly. The hunter shrugged. Dimir snapped his fingers and pointed to the mage. Two watchmen walked up to Grok’s body and cut off his bald head, immediately placing it in a dense sack. Dimir explained, if caught dead, the duke would pay 150 Imperials—still not bad.

“And who is this?” The crossbow turned toward the boy.

“A stranger, he came from the woods. He’s the one who killed Grok.” Dimir raised his right eyebrow skeptically. “We thought he was a mage.”

“Dorit, come here.” Dimir turned to the bushes. The branches rustled and a thin, short figure stepped onto the field. “Have a look. Is it a mage?”

Dorit removed her fur-lined hood and cape to reveal a yellow-haired gnome. Her short hair was glinting like fire, she leaned over the stranger and whispered something.

“He’s been stunned very badly; his aura is barely intact,” Dorit said in a melodious voice, concluding her examination. “He might have been knocked into permanent foolishness.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” Dimir interrupted her.

“Calm down. He’s a mage. I haven’t figured out his elements; everything’s topsy-turvy with him. Targ himself couldn’t make sense of it!”

Dimir nodded and pointed at the half-dead guy. “Put him in the master shackles, the ones we prepared for Grok.”

The same watchmen who had cut the mage’s head off deftly clamped the metal bracelets onto the unconscious boy’s wrists and ankles, and threaded them with a thick chain. They produced a rideable reptiloid from the bushes and strapped the boy’s unfeeling body to the lizard’s back.

“What do you need him for?” the gnome asked her boss.

“We’ll sell him tomorrow on the road, get a couple of gold coins in the common purse.”

Dorit nodded in agreement.

“We’re done here! Let’s go!” Dimir cried to his subordinates, once they had plundered the corpses and destroyed the special hunters’ crossbows and tackles. A couple of men collected the knives, daggers and broadswords in a sack. The gnome picked up the third dragon’s fang, which had fallen to the ground from Taylor’s hand. A gust of wind brought the smell of smoke to Arist’s nostrils; they had burned the base camp.

The squadron of Watchmen disappeared into the darkness of the forest. Arist remained alone on the bloody field. *The pigs! How could they!* It would have been better if they’d killed him...

A callused hand lay on the hunter’s shoulder. Arist turned. *Chutka! Alive!* But how he had changed! He looked...older.

“Let’s go, Commander. Mustn’t a-stay here, mrowns’ll smell the bloode. We won’t be able to defend us’selves, the two of us!”

Chutka pulled the commander along by the hand, as one would a child. Arist, lacking any will of his own, not heeding the roads at all, followed the bozl. “Not all is lost, Commander! I’ll now surprise ya!”

Chutka led him to a small clearing where, tied to trees, two reptiloids stomped the ground. It turned out the sly hunter hadn’t fulfilled the commander’s order to fetch the shackles but instead started going through the mage’s tote bags, thereby getting his hands on something that was nothing to sneeze at. He grabbed the totes and snuck out of the tent, intending to bring the thing back to his commander. Then he had seen Draï’s feet lifted off the ground and some unnatural adornments appear on his chest. Chutka plopped down to the ground and crawled away from the camp. The reptiloids, smelling strangers, broke the pegs they were tethered to and rushed to the woods, where our hero intercepted them. There were 300 weighty Tantrian pounds and a couple of purses of jewels in the leather totes. The mage had been a person of means.

“Where shell we a-go from here, Commander?” asked Chutka, climbing into the saddle.

Arist thought for a moment. “North, to the vampires. One former hunter owes us big time, don’t you think?” A desire for vengeance burned in his eyes.

The bozl’s lips stretched into a gap-toothed smile. He too could almost taste revenge.

“We’ll exchange this purse of jewels for Dimir’s head.”

The two reptiloids, despite the dark of night, carried their riders to the mountains.

End of Manuscript Book One

Book Recommendations

I want to thank you for reading my book. The full version can be found at the link:

<http://amzn.to/2AVVkgY>

If you enjoyed it then please leave me a review and look at the rest of the series. But I would also like to bring some other great authors to your attention.

Tabloid journalist ‘Kif’ must balance his real-world struggles with his role in an epic fantasy game. A must-read for those who love fantasy, games, and humor! Try the best-selling series Fayroll by Andrey Vasilyev now from [Amazon](#).

I also want to recommend Realm of Arkon, a great series written by a friend of mine: G. Akella (Georgy Smorodinsky). He is one of the most popular and best-selling LitRPG authors in Russia. Book one is currently available for free on [Amazon](#).

GLOSSARY

Geography

Alatar – the largest continent on the planet of *Ilanta*.

Aria – a continent located north of Alatar.

Empire of Alatar – a state existing two thousand years ago that pursued an aggressive policy of conquest. Approximately sixty percent of the total area of the continent of Alatar was subject to the Empire. The continent itself was named in honor of the Empire. Northern kingdoms such as Tantre, Mesaniya, Meriya, and Rimm were at one time secluded barbarian provinces of the Empire. As a result of civil war, the Empire of Alatar was broken into separate states and ceased to exist.

Ilanta – a planet.

Kingdom of Mestair – a legendary human kingdom located on the territory of modern-day Tair and the Great Principality of Mesaniya, which existed three thousand years ago during the age of the dragons. As an independent state, it was destroyed by the dragons and their allies during the war with the Forest Elves and few human states that had joined them.

The Light Forest – the state of the Forest Elves, limited to the growth area of the Mellornys.

The Marble Mountains – a large mountain range crossing the northern part of Alatar from north to south. From the north, the range is bordered by the North Sea. From the south, by the Southern Rocky Ridge and the Long sea.

Mesaniya – A Great Principality located north of the kingdom of Tantre.

Nelita – The second planet in a triple solar system: Ilanta, Nelita, and Helita. Nelita is considered the dragons' native land; it was named in honor of the goddess of life, Nel. The literal translation is "eye of the goddess of life."

Ort – the largest river in the north of Alatar, flows across the territory of the kingdom of Tantre.

Patskoi Empire – a human state with the capital at the city of Pat. The Emperors of Pat consider themselves the heirs of the Empire of Alatar.

Rimm – a human kingdom located east of the Marble Mountains.

Steppe – the self-designation of the kingdom of the white orcs. Located in the east of Alatar.

Tair – a dukedom

Tantre – a large kingdom, second largest after the Patskoi Empire, located in the central part of north-western Alatar. Geographically limited by the Marble Mountains and the Northern and Southern Rocky Ridges. Has access to the Eastern Ocean and the Long Sea. Its capital is the city of Kion.

Miscellaneous

Alert-dert – a military rank corresponding to that of captain.

Asgard – in Scandinavian mythology, the heavenly city is the abode of the Aesir gods.

Book of the Guardians – a book in which the dragons recorded the password spells to the inter-planetary portals. The guardians are the dragons (true blood mages), who stayed on Ilanta to guard the portals. At the time the events described herein took place, all guardians are thought to be deceased.

Chucker – a magical artifact that allows its user to throw balls of capsulized spells.

Drag – a flying lizard that can be saddled and ridden.

Feather – a junior military group of twelve to fifteen rideable animals.

The Goddesses' Eyes are what people call the planets Nelita and Helita. Helita, Nelita and Ilanta make up the system of planets that revolve around their sun.

The Gray Horde – the collective name for all the “gray” orcs residing in the northern coastal steppes; the strongest khanate of the “gray” orcs was also called the Gray Horde.

Gross-dert (gross- leading, dert- wing) – a military rank in the air units of Tantre’s army, corresponding to that of colonel.

Hel – mistress of the world of the dead.

Khirus – the main god in the pantheon of the “white” orcs. Khirus the lightning-armed is the god of warriors and daredevils.

“Knee” Prince-Khan – that is, one who is bent at the knee, living in total vassal dependence on the king, unlike a “belt” prince or khan, that is, one who bows at the waist. Belt khans have a high level of autonomy, can mint silver and copper coins, and maintain personal militias, some of which are comparable to an army. They collect their own taxes independently on their lands, sending one twelfth to the king’s treasury. In the event of war, “belt” princes are obligated to present one third of their troops to the king’s army. “Knee” khans, most likely, are hereditary governors of the lands and take an oath of fidelity to the king.

Loki – the Scandinavian god of mischief

The Lynx clan, the Dragon clan – the strongest clans of the island Norsemen.

nökürs - elite warriors and bodyguards.

The Northern Alliance – an alliance of Tantre, the Rauu Principalities, and the gnome kingdoms.

Odin – a Norse deity.

Pound, jang – the currency of the kingdom of Tantre. Pounds come in silver and gold; jangs are a small copper coin.

Rauu – Snow Elves. The first artificial race created by the dragons for battles against the orcs.

Roi-dert – a junior officer’s rank, corresponds to that of lieutenant.

Rune Keys – used for opening portals.

Second-in-saddle – the second rider on a large golden griffon. Usually armed with a bow, rarely with a magical chucker.

Servants of Death – helrats, priests of a cult forbidden in all countries which perverts the very name of the goddess Hel. Hunted dragons and actively promoted human sacrifice.

Severan – a cold northern wind.

Taili-Mother – The deity of the “white” orcs, representing the feminine, analogue of the goddess Nel.

Targ – the gnome god whose name took on a negative connotation in almost all countries. Occupies the niche of mischief-maker and prankster, analogous to **Loki** in some sense.

Teg – the polite form of address of a nobleman; **grall** – to a mage. **Teg grall** – form of address of a noble mage. **Tain, taina** – titles for high-borns, male and female, respectively. Professor/master/mistress [first name] Teg grall (tain/taina) [last name].

True blood – a mage who, unlike others, can work directly with the astral and consciously take mana from it. Other mages can extract mana only from the planet’s magical field.

Snekkja – a row/sailboat of the Scandinavian peoples in the twelfth-fourteenth centuries. Predominantly used for raids. Held up to one hundred people.

Valhalla – a heavenly palace in Asgard for the fallen in battle, a paradise for the valiant warriors.

Wing – a regiment of griffons or drags consisting of one-hundred-twenty to one-hundred-fifty rideable animals.

