

**Alex Sapegin**

**THE DRAGON INSIDE**

**Book three**

**A Cruel Tale**

**Part 1.**

**Out of the frying pan and into the fire.**

Russia. N-ville...

“Elijah, are you coming?” Mrs. Kerimov touched her husband on the shoulder. “It’s 2 a.m. Give it a rest.”

Mr. Kerimov turned his attention away from the screen and rubbed his temples in exhaustion.

“Ten more minutes, hon. I’m just finishing the diagrams.”

“Come on, cut it out.”

“Cut what out?” he asked his wife, sincerely failing to comprehend.

“Cut it all out, please. I’m asking you. Enough... you won’t find him. ...I can’t go on like this anymore,” his spouse cried, fell to the floor, hugged her husband’s legs, and started to sob. “If there were only a grave, I could cry there. I’d know he was there and wouldn’t console myself with false hopes. Elijah, how can we?”

Mr. Kerimov picked up his weeping wife in his arms and brought her to the bedroom. He laid her carefully on the bed and laid down beside her.

“Don’t say that. Andy didn’t die. Do you hear me? He didn’t die! I’ll do whatever it takes to find him!” he said confidently.

“I don’t know, Elijah. It’s been six months since we lost him. I’m tired.... It’s as if we live on different planets. You, with your work, you’ve stopped paying attention to us altogether. Stop blaming yourself and look around you. You have two girls. Give them a scrap of affection—they’re not dead! Ira’s gotten completely out of hand, and Olga... Elijah, I’m getting scared she’s becoming exactly like Andy after he got struck by lightning. The same eyes.... I see her smile less and less often. Come back to us, please....”

Mr. Kerimov didn’t say anything. He too had been noticing their family problems recently, but his constant barrage of work didn’t leave him time to think. His wife was right. He’d stopped noticing everyone around him, giving 100% of himself to his work and his efforts to find his son. After the unfortunate event of Andy’s disappearance, his company had come into quite a shower of funds. All the guards were changed, and new barriers were put up all around. They built new grounds and the entire territory was covered with masking nets. It was only possible to enter the territory by passing three control points and a biometric fingerprint test. Four months later, they received the very latest new equipment. After calibrating it,

the physicists began their experiments, but so far their goal eluded them. They hadn't created a "window" to another world. He watched the surveillance video footage hundreds of times after the explosion, and one of them showed a good view of where Andy'd been thrown. It was a coniferous forest made of giant trees, something like Sequoia, and the sky above them was visible too. And the sky was a whole 'nother matter. The edge of the stellar body visible over the horizon couldn't possibly be that of the moon. The moon didn't contain oceans or have cyclones. There were a ton of theories put forward. It could have been a parallel world, a far-off planet in some remote galaxy. One thing was for sure—Andy landed in another world.

"I'll try..." Mr. Kerimov hugged his wife. He couldn't find any other words of comfort for her. What could possibly comfort her? He stroked his crying wife's hair and shoulders for a long time with just his fingers, until she calmed down and fell asleep. Then, carefully, trying not to make a sound, he got out of bed and tiptoed to the kitchen.

Through the window, in the darkness of the winter night, the lights of the few cars twinkled, and snow was falling. Mr. Kerimov switched his focus to his own reflection in the glass. He saw a man with broad shoulders and sunken, unshaven cheeks, tired and beaten down by life. He opened the fridge, took out a bottle of "Gzhelka" vodka, poured himself a half a glass, and gulped it down in one swig. The drink burned his throat and flowed down into his stomach with a warming sensation, but did not at all bring the calming effect he'd hoped for. Staring into space, detached from the world around him, sat down on a stool and put his elbows on the kitchen table. What, what was he doing wrong? They'd modeled all possible and impossible options for starting the apparatus. They entered identical parameters for starting and activating the electromagnetic fields, (thank God all the control readings of the devices of that ill-fated day were recorded by the computers). They conducted experiments with the penetration of various objects into the active field. All for nothing....

"Dad?" A child's voice made Mr. Kerimov snap out of it. How long had he been sitting there? Olga was standing in the doorway to the kitchen in a light nightgown with her hand on Bon's back. After Andy disappeared, the dog stopped eating, and only Olga's tenacity, spoon-feeding him for two weeks, prevented a second family tragedy. Once he'd survived the loss of one master, Bon chose another master for himself—Olga. The dog followed the girl everywhere. When she went off to school on September 1<sup>st</sup> to start the fourth grade, he walked her all the way to the school building and, ignoring the commands of Mrs. Kerimov and Irina, remained waiting for her in front of the building. Soon the guards, students, and teachers all got used to the great big dog accompanying and waiting for his girl every day outside the building. He became a regular sight associated with the school. When it got cold, the children brought him a blanket, and he would lay on it at the far end of the hall while classes were going on. And, as a bonus, Mr. Kerimov could feel sure of the girl's safety walking to and from school. No one was stupid enough to come near her with a giant beast bodyguard like that.

"Yes, baby."

“Dad, you completely forgot about the time.” Olga took her father by the hand and led him to the bedroom.

Time... They’d all completely forgotten about time!

“Olga, you’re a genius! Time, it has a direction too! Yes! that’s it!” He picked his daughter up and swung her in a circle around the room. “What do you want for Christmas?”

“I want you to be here to celebrate it with us, not at work,” Olga answered sincerely. “Promise me.”

“I promise.”

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At the last meeting of the outgoing year, the entire intellectual elite of the team headed by Kerimov had gathered at the table. “The old guys” sat next to the boss, guys he’d started working with back in the eighties. Five “Bandar-logs” (monkeys from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*) occupied the opposite side of the long rectangular conference room table, members of the young generation of the intellectual elite of Russian sciences. Vera, the senior commercial director’s administrative assistant thought of the nickname for the young scientists (the senior commercial director himself was present too. Some rich guy had to fork over the dough). As it happened, the name stuck right away.

Each person Kerimov had chosen and invited to the project was a bright and unusual star. They were constantly spouting ideas and proving that some of the best and most talented young people go into STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). The “Bandar-logs” instantly became thick as thieves and always agreed among themselves. They always put forth Aleksandr Belov as their spokesperson for their cutting attacks, who answered only to the informal address “Alex,” a genius from the field of mathematics and data analysis, who could describe any process in numbers. There was also Denis Remezov, a nuclear physicist, the main powerhouse and organizer of all the great endeavors initiated by the “Bandar-logs,” as a rule, mainly in the form of jokes and small harmless pranks.

The scientists had been screaming at one another for going on three hours now. The new apparatus configuration Kerimov was suggesting brought heated debate from all sides. If the big boss weren’t present, a couple of “hot heads” would have long since started a fist fight. They were that passionate. When the debate died down, Mr. Kerimov, drawing the line, said to Alex:

“Alex, your task is to create a mathematical model describing what we’ve discussed here at this meeting. I’d like to see what we get when we factor in multi-directional time with various formulas. Try making a model with a spiral or sinusoidal projection on a common axis of coordinates. It would be good to work out the scenario that includes the movement of my son in the active field, and how he affected the apparatus, accumulators and metamaterial polarizers. From there we might be able to put together the algorithm for putting various blocks into operation when opening a “window” to another world. You, Maksimov. Oleg, your job is to put together a program for controlling the apparatus in accordance with the figures

presented by our god and the model equations. The rest of you Bandar-logs will help with the transpositioning of the blocks. Alright, that's all for now. The next meeting will be on January 11th."

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"Petrovich, what is this?" Kerimov kicked an empty pizza box out of his way and shoved the dried-up sushi onto the floor. A half-empty bottle of champagne, knocked down by the box, rolled around the floor, pathetically tinkling about the wheel of the operator's chair. Another portion of the Italian delicacy plopped down onto a chair, face down as per the law of falling food, spattering sauce everywhere. Someone apparently had a good time at the operator's chair over the holidays.

Gennady Petrovich was a freckled man with wide palms and shifty eyes on a simple face. You couldn't tell by looking at him that he was a retired lieutenant colonel. He watched the fizzy beverage spilling over, eyes glinting with anger, and answered:

"Your guys wanted to order out. I allowed the delivery."

Kerimov wanted to puke just from alcoholic fumes in the room.

"Pizza and sushi: I get it, but how could they bring vodka and champagne here? Does this look like a playground to you? What, did they order themselves a stripper, too??"

Petrovich, head of the internal guards, looked down and guiltily shuffled his feet. The face of the boss of the research complex turned a shade of scarlet. Petrovich could see the smoke start coming out of his ears. Kerimov grabbed him by the lapels with both hands. He let out a muffled gasp.

"You good-for-nothing!" Kerimov roared. "What the hell did we hire you for? Had yourself a night out here in the lab, did you?! I'll show you a New Year's Eve party! I can't leave you alone for a week! Do you realize what could've happened?"

"I'll deal with the booze and your colleagues' bringing it here. I'll punish the guilty ones of my people." The lieutenant colonel adroitly freed himself from the boss' grasp and took a step back from Kerimov. The simple expression vanished from the head of the guards' face. Now a fit, strong-willed man with smart, penetrating eyes stood looking at the boss of sciences. He was accustomed to giving orders and strictly controlling their implementation. "I'm looking out for safety, not your crew's morals. Got it? Only your champs have access to the operator's room and the platform. Your Bandar-logs ... acted like it," he hissed through his teeth.

The door to the break room opened with a creak, revealing the sleepy mug of Alex the math genius and leader of the research group of the commercial scientific research institute with a long-winded abbreviation for a name. Turning swiftly at the sound, a livid Elijah Kerimov grabbed this one by the back of the collar and dragged him along after himself like a naughty kitten. Alex, heavily hung over, who'd left to go to the bathroom, hung on the boss' arm like a sausage, realizing that the less he moved, the longer he would live. Kerimov glanced into an office. The whole "Bandar-log" gang was gathered here. The young colleagues were lying side by side

on a couch converted into a sofa bed. The whole place reeked of stale vodka. The former bunker's forced air ventilation system hadn't yet taken care of the stench.

"Have you all gotten a good rest, guys?" Mr. Kerimov grumbled, almost chuckling. He looked at Oleg Maksimov, who was laying his head on a dirty winter boot and had the tread pattern of its sole on his other cheek. Kerimov's desire to kill them all passed from the comic sight of them.

Returning to the operator's room and dragging the mathematician with him by the collar, he sat him down in one of the operator's chairs and hit him with a hard, foreboding stare.

"Alex, your gang," he began, accompanying the phrase with a sweeping gesture in the direction of the break room, "is closer than ever to leaving the walls of this interesting building forever, with the print of the boss' boot on their butts and their termination of employment documents in their pockets..." He was about to go on, but was interrupted.

"No," Denis Remezov's disheveled head appeared in the doorway. He sniffed loudly and wiped his face with his hand, leaving a shiny trail on his sleeve. "Boss, you're going to give us drinks for another week." His hazy look ran across the room and stopped on an inverted champagne bottle. Seeing how Kerimov's face stretched out from such a statement, he corrected himself: "Well, maybe a week is a bit much, but we'll hang out for today at your expense."

The boss choked on his saliva and coughed.

"Boys, gotten your lines crossed, have you?"

"No, my memory serves me well; it's sober. I can't say as much for my reasoning and my body, but I'm sure I remember quite clearly that last night, we put the apparatus together according to the new scheme worked out by Alex and Oleg. Some people partied last night. But we were working hard! It all works great now. The "window" opens, not to America, of course, but even without the Yankees we can sure impress the big bosses! It looks so beautiful there—you wouldn't believe. And..." Denis pushed his glasses up on his nose and tramped his feet over to his terminal. He typed on the keyboard for a minute, then a sublime smile spread across the operator's satisfied face. "Your attention on the main screen, please! Does the view remind you anything?" It was a familiar sight, truly. The edge of the blue planet over the horizon stood out especially brightly. A soft breeze swayed the tops of gigantic trees and drove clouds across the sky. "Alex, come here."

Denis waited for the mathematician, who'd been subject to "shipping and handling" by the boss, came over to him and, hugging him around the shoulder, said in a pompous tone:

"This genius, unjustly chastised by our higher-ups, he's the one who crunched the numbers and created the algorithm that moved Andy in the active field. Eventually we dropped the monoblock idea and switched to a multicomponent scheme with several active fields by alternate commissioning of metamaterial polarizers and multistage quantization. Half a year ago the equipment only fixed the level of the load and didn't take into account the resulting energizing of the external field. My hat's off to your foresight, boss, but time turned out to be really something interesting. By initiating different blocks and changing the potential of the external

field, we opened “windows” to several worlds and were able to fixate the parameters. Based on the different starting pulses of different power and different load application vectors, time goes at different paces in different worlds, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it goes in different directions. Although, Alex’s been talking about that from the beginning. We’re both just so surprised at your shameful ingratitude. After all, he’s the one who set the time vector last time. It’s a shame, of course, that a puncture into the world your son got lost in consumes massive amounts of energy, and the accumulators can only hold the “window” open for five seconds. But Oleg is sure he can fix this problem. We’ve just got to get rid of the four-step quantization and smooth the transition process. Well, now you’re so happy you’ve let go of your tension. Come on, is there really any reason to bust our chops? And by the way, before I finish here, I want to ask about something,” Denis asked his boss, who was eagerly gobbling up the image on the main screen with his frantically gleaming eyes. “Are we going to have some more to drink today to cure this wicked hangover?”

“Yes, you are.” Elijah Kerimov looked away from the screen. He wanted to ask the guys a hundred questions, but the main one came to the forefront: how were they able to find the world Andy was in? But he could wait a day or two for the Q and A. “But first, clean the whole place up. Alex doesn’t have to participate in the clean-up.”

“Alex, ‘We are great. We are free. We are wonderful. We are the most wonderful people in all the jungle! We all say so, and so it must be true,’” Denis recalled the quote from Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* and slapped the mathematician on the shoulder as he did.

Leaving the youth alone to clean up their mess, Elijah Kerimov went to his office, looked at the phone on his desk for a long time, then entered a long series of numbers, and put the receiver to his ear. After a few hums, someone picked up.

“Hello.” A strong, unmistakable feeling of irritation resounded in the person’s voice through the thousands of miles of distance between them.

“Hello, Mr. Bratulev, this is Kerimov...”

“Considering what time it is, you better have a very good reason for bothering me,” the unknown person interrupted the scientist. “Has your center been successful?”

“Not exactly what we were hoping for...”

“If not that, what?”

“The result we got is far more serious.”

There was a pause.

“I’m waiting...” the voice said after a few seconds.

“Mr. Bratulev, I can’t tell you the rest over the phone.”

“It’s that serious?” the irritation in the voice disappeared. Now the person just sounded surprised.

“Even more so!”

“Alright, I believe you. Step up security and make sure as few people as possible are in the know. Remind all your colleagues of the need for confidentiality. I’ll send my chief of security. He’ll organize and ensure a level of control appropriate

for a situation like this. I don't have time to talk now; I hope to hear the details when we meet. Don't call me at this number any more. Good bye."

He hung up without another word.

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Petrovich waved to the driver of the company car and went down the stairs to the underground crossing. The head of the internal guard of the institute came up on the other side of the road, grabbed his cell phone and pressed a button.

"Hello?" a soothing female voice said on the line.

"There's been a break in the dam," he said in a nonchalant tone.

"Understood."

After he hung up, something clicked in the phone. He tossed the now useless device into a trash can, where it quickly became a melted hunk of plastic....

Tantre. The middle of the Ort river...

Andy flowed down the river, giving himself up to the current of the Ort. He hadn't the strength to swim. Merchant vessels sailed by a few times, and he saw people's fingers hanging from the sides and pointing at him. He didn't care. He had been seen by one and all on the shooting range; a couple dozen more witnesses wouldn't make a difference. The important thing now was to find a quiet, deserted spot to lay low for two or three weeks until he could take on human form once again. There were gardens and cultivated fields all along the banks of the river, as if just despite him. Hiding a three-ton dragon there would be problematic.

"Ow!" Andy almost gulped down a bunch of water when he opened his mouth to cry out in pain. A piece of his wing got stuck on a snag and the dragon lost what was left of his left wing.

Orten was getting farther and farther behind him with every passing minute, and the hope of finding clues about how to build interworld gates along with it. There was no way he could go back to the School of Magic now. It was forbidden. What was worse, Frida was lying on the School shooting range that had become a battlefield. Why? Why did he bring trouble and death to those he loved? What were the local gods punishing him and them for? If he could change the past, he never would have gone to the shooting range, and Frida would still be alive....

Andy floated on and felt hatred towards Wood elves growing in his chest, filling the cold emptiness left after the battle. His thirst for revenge was tearing him up inside, but he wasn't planning on getting even now. What for? It was stupid and pointless for one dragon to try to get revenge on an entire state. He had to try to find the Woodies' weak spots and find himself some reliable allies. The Rauu, for example. Now even the hypothetical possibility of a duel with the Icicles could be crossed off the list. The Snow Elves never avenged themselves on people they've fought with side by side. Oh, the look on Melima's face and the faces of his other

classmates when they saw him as a dragon was incomparable. He had to think about that. *Hmm, I wonder—did Miduel ever find that box?* Only a couple of hours ago, he was thinking of how to build bridges towards relationship with the Rauu. Now he had to think about where to build them. It would be terrific to be able to meet with Miduel now, or... or with Rector Etran. The rector was like a Russian stacking doll: one thing on the surface, another a bit deeper inside, but if you keep digging, you'd come to a third or fourth entity. She'd trapped him so skillfully with the archives and the library. What do you need with one measly bookworm, grall Etran, Orlem countess? What do you have in mind for him? It wasn't a good idea to try to use her as an ally, but asking her advice... although, getting the rector's advice would be costly.

He needed to figure out what he'd used against the elvish mages. Andy wasn't very aware of what was going on at the moment, but he clearly remembered taking energy directly from the astral, without the astral dragon. But what happened next... The lake of bubbling lava in the place where the mages had stood was a complete surprise to him. He'd only taken out a small crumb! Like it or not, he should conduct an experiment with the external barrier. The energy pumped through the little virtual dragon that served as a sort of plug and safety barrier was great, of course, but, as real-life experience showed, he had to train while connected directly to the astral. No two ways about it.

The sky stretched out above him. A hard rain began to fall. He could see hillsides lit up by flashes of lightning on the horizon. These were the spurs of the southern end of the Rocky Ridge, which separated Tantre from the Patskoi Empire. Here the Ort flowed in a little hook and turned towards the Gulf of Terium. Andy started paddling towards the bank. The territory became unpopulated and wild closer to the foothills. The next city, Ortag, was fifty leagues downstream. After that, the cities crowded one after another along the edge of the river towards the sea. The mighty Ort's mouth was covered and controlled by a port city, the impregnable fortress of Miket. Swimming up to the river bank, Andy inspected the mountain spurs, overgrown with vegetation. *Perfect! Couldn't have designed anything better for my needs! You wouldn't find a more beautiful spot and temporary hiding place for a lone dragon.* Punching his claws deep into the slippery, muddy bank, he crawled onto the shore and trotted right into the thicket without delay. The downpour erased his tracks.

**Dear reader! Thank you for reading my book!**



[The Dragon Inside Book 3](#) release date February 26<sup>th</sup>!

I hope that you will be carried away by an excerpt from the future book.  
And if you've already read *Wing on my Back* - please leave a review. I really appreciate every comment and review on [Amazon](#).

Thanks for the feedback.

Stay tuned and be informed!

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