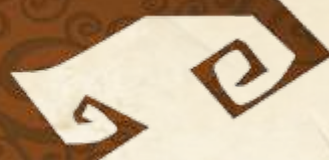




TO SLAY A DRAGON!



1

The three travelers were standing on top of a low hill opposite a grey rock covering the entrance to a cave. A fierce Amazon, a brooding warrior and a silver-haired mage. Numerous spots of grass that faded due to the long drought were looming darkly, and animal bones gleamed white among the stones. The cave entrance was not visible, but they knew He was there. They were hunters who managed to corner a rare and savage beast. But it was not yet completely clear who was the prey and who – the hunter.

The dragon was older than the three of them combined, he was smarter and definitely stronger. But what did they care? Each of them strived to achieve their goal by any means necessary and did not regard the dangers. Just like children who want to get their wish at any cost and do not think about consequences. Compared to the dragon they really were children, naive children who believed in their fearlessness and power.

Finally He felt them and woke up. Dragons sleep a lot, so they need a secluded and safe shelter. They are very cautious by nature and remarkably intelligent, and become even more so as years pass. The hunters saw the grey rock covering the cave entrance from prying eyes shake and become blurred. The rough stone began melting and swiftly changing its shape and color.

– Well, it's starting, – Baldassar said impatiently, and he nervously clenched his staff.

In less than a minute they saw a grandiose portal in a graceful elfish style with a pearly passage mirror in the centre instead of the rock. A tall figure came out of the portal toward them.

Elia's heart missed a beat. It was her Iatael, just as she remembered him – in sparkling dragon armor, with a scarlet cloak waving behind his back, and his long blond hair skillfully and elaborately styled as Draggari elves used to do. Iatael's face had exquisite elven make-up on, and his blue eyes were looking directly at her.

– Why did you come here, Elia?

Elia unconsciously backed away when she heard his voice again after such a long time.

– Why do you pursue me? Why don't you want to let me be... after all that? You know you are the only one to blame for everything that happened. I am here because of you. Is it not enough for you? You run after me as a tenacious murderer. Leave me alone, Elia. Please, go away. Do not torment us both.

His face was twisted with genuine malice. And his gaze... His eyes were emanating cold inhuman hatred.



Elia was choking with tears. His words made her feel pain that was almost physical, though she knew that none of this was true, it was a deception, an illusion, and she shouldn't react like this.

'Don't listen to him, just don't! Everything is not like he says', – Elia repeated to herself, but tears were flooding her face.

– I am here for you, Iatael, – she forced herself to speak, and her voice, weak and quivering, sounded pathetic and strange to her. A weeping Amazon! There was a time when Elia would kill anyone who'd say such a thing to her without hesitation.

– Kill yourself for me! – Iatael ordered coldly. – Why didn't you dive off a cliff at once if your vows of love were true? Why didn't you do it later? Kill yourself if you love me. Do it!

An enormous axe made of dragon teeth and bones twanged in the air in a wide arc and hit the elf just between his eyes, but it didn't meet any obstacles; it flew further through the dim glass of the portal and dully clanked when it reached the rock.

– Forgive me, my fierce mistress, but I cannot watch this slobbery whimpering any more. How could you love a freak such as this elf? – Tulum said. He looked like a brutal warrior, a cross between an orc and a human, with his wide shoulders, robust jaw bone and narrow forehead. He wanted to add something else, but he stopped halfway and opened his mouth in astonishment.

And there was something to be astonished about. The picture reeled before their eyes, changing with an incredible speed. Iatael in his sparkling armor and the grandiose portal disappeared, and a totally different landscape emerged. It was a prairie grassed up to the horizon. And in the middle of it stood a nomads camp – animal skins sprawled on poles, tents made of the same skins, and covered wagons with huge animals with small heads and thick horns at grass next to them. Orcs walked freely among the tents. Their greenish-blue skin, greased liberally, glistened in the sun. None of the nomads paid any attention to the trio standing at a distance.

At first Elia couldn't understand why they were being shown this.

– I grew up here, – Tulum finally moaned, kneeling.
– This is my camp. I can recognize every tent, every cart, and every ox.

As if in reply to his words one of the tall warriors noticed them. He turned his head with a massive, jut out jaw bone towards them and breathed in loudly with his wide nostrils. His deep-set little eyes stopped on Tulum.

– What are you doing here, worm? – He approached Tulum and sharply prodded him with his long clawed finger. – I have known from the very beginning that you would turn out to be a traitor and a coward ill-fitted for free life, just like your father was – a pathetic and weak little man. Your mother must have cursed

the day when she brought you to the camp. She should have fed you to the pigs when you were born!

Tulum's rough and usually impassible face turned to a mask of true terror and dismay. Elia had never seen this brute like this during their travels. He seemed on the verge of tears, as if he was a naughty five-year old boy.

– Chief, I will prove it to you, chief... – Tulum's lips were trembling.

– You had already proven to me that you are scum once, when you abandoned your camp, worm. Commit at least one worthy deed in your good-for-nothing life – prove that you have at least a drop of real orc blood in your veins. Kill yourself!

Tulum grabbed the huge knife with a bone handle on his chest decidedly.

Elia wanted to scream: 'Don't do this, he is provoking you on purpose!' She rushed to him, but Baldassar beat her to it. The mage's staff with a heavy carved dragon knob hit Tulum's head hard, and she heard the mage's abrasive voice.

– Dragon's dung, are you nuts to believe this? What have I done that the Great Wizards sent me such feeble-minded companions?!

Elia doubted that those were the words of an ancient and powerful spell, but they had a wonderful effect on Tulum. He dropped his dagger and shook his head from side to side, as if trying to shake out something alien which crept there beyond his will. The staff blow that would definitely crack anybody's head open, was quite sobering for Tulum.

Meanwhile, the picture before them changed for the third time, and Elia was no longer surprised to see the speed of the changes. She saw a distant yellow desert with dunes quivering in the heat. It seemed that nothing can survive in this desert, and the skeleton laying white in the dunes was a tell-tale confirmation of this. Hot wind, like a famished dog, fluttered yellow pages of a book that lay open next to the dead man's bony hand.

'I won't be surprised if the skeleton raises his smiling skull and addresses us', – Elia thought. She seemed to be getting used to the show.

And indeed there was a voice. But it came somewhere from the sky.

– You are too old and frail for this, Baldassar. Admit it, the Phoenix Lodge will never find out all the secrets known to the ancient wizards of Signum.





let you grab everything for yourselves? Fat chance! Dragon's slime to your throats! I will stay and receive what is due for me.

The desert and the voice from the sky started to melt. The grey rock still hiding the entrance to the dragon's lair appeared before the hunters again. The mage spat out, turned away and started walking to their temporary camp nearby.

Elia and Tulum exchanged looks and silently followed the mage. It was getting dark fast, and they had to get a good sleep before the next morning.

2

The three travelers entered the tiny camp at the foot of one of the nearby hills, still silent. None of them was in a mood to discuss what they had seen. Each of them wished to stay the rest of the day alone with their thoughts.

Their two horses and a mule were still tethered. The animals had already eaten their oats and were snorting timidly, looking around them. They too felt uneasy. Their instincts told them about the danger waiting in the dragon's cave.

The bulk of their belongings and supplies were packed on a small cart which the mage usually rode. Their hunting gear was also there. Harpoons, snares, various traps, hooks of every imaginable size, bundles of robust string, chains, a portable bolt thrower, several smaller crossbows, a supply of arrows and heads for them, a dozen axes, flanged maces, swords and lances. They might need all of this the next day, when they went hunting.

A cage as high as half human height covered with tattered canvas was standing next to the cart, in the dust. When the hunters returned to the camp, the thing in the cage felt them approaching and grumbled angrily, rocking the cage and making unpleasant screeching noises that vaguely resembled a bird's cackling.

– Baldassar, it looks like your pet has been missing you a lot. See, the cage is in a flurry, – the half-orc grinned and thrust his thick finger toward the cage.

Neither you, nor your brothers are proficient enough in magic. Didn't the elves from Caendir island warn you about this? You will find only death and oblivion here. Go away now, until it's too late. Run and you might survive. Tell your brothers from the Lodge what you've seen and heard. Let them know and not dare go after the great knowledge. Leave those two, why would you waste the precious sand of your life for these fools?

The roaring voice from the sky was commanding and all-powerful, and the skeleton and the open book only enhanced the impression. It seemed that one of the Great ancient wizards, who were now worshipped as gods in Signum, was actually talking to them. Indeed, the wizards were still somewhere in the world, though unseen.

The Amazon and the warrior turned to the mage. The last performance was clearly intended for him. Sure, he was a cranky old man, sometimes completely unbearable, but they couldn't afford to lose the mage's support now. Their only chance of winning was to act together.

The voice from the sky was went on and on, convincing the mage to surrender and retreat, it promised rewards and punishments. Elia saw large sweat drops appear on the old man's forehead, he pressed his lips together, and his eyes were restless. He was clearly hesitating and confused.

Finally the mage snapped and came down on his companions:

– Dragon's gill, why are you looking at me like this, you freaks? Are you waiting for me to run and



– Tulum, your head is empty as dragon's shell. This thing is hungry, and we are just walking slabs of meat for it, like steaks.

The canvas came off half the cage, and a reptile's eye – green with golden iris – stared at the people through the thick wooden bars.

– It seems to be really glad to see you, Baldassar. It will eat you with its gaze any minute, – the muscular Amazon pointed out, adjusting her primitive diadem made of animal bones and fangs.

The mage swore angrily, mentioning every dragon and their close and distant relatives ten generations back.

– I am conducting an important scientific study of this species, draco de volucris carnivore, and it's absolutely necessary that I retain this specimen. And I don't care about your congenital stupidity which prevents you from understanding the value of this study.

– Aren't you bored of catering to it yourself? – Elia asked.

The mage deliberately ignored her question and addressed the half-orc:

– Tulum, feed it at last, until it has shattered the cage.

In a way Baldassar was not just their companion, but also their employer, so both of them were forced to carry out his wishes and listen to his endless grumbling patiently.

The warrior took a bag from the cart, and it immediately burst into worried chicken cackling. After the little dragon in the cage was sated, it was the hunters' turn to eat. The following day was going to be hard, and no one wanted to enter it on an empty stomach. Tulum made a fire, and Baldassar got around to cooking dinner – he didn't trust the half-orc's culinary abilities. And forcing the Amazon to cook would be a huge mistake.

One wouldn't call their trio a close-knit group. Though they were dragon hunters, they were rather fellows in misfortune, than trusty friends. Their paths intersected not long ago. Elia met Tulum three years before, when she wandered into a prairie while following a burned down trail left by a dragon. The trail consisted of ruined and scorched orc camps. Apparently, the green-skinned people suited the killer's taste, so he visited the prairie regularly.

The Amazon set an ambush for the dragon, and when it appeared again, she managed to wound him, but almost died herself. Tulum watched Elia fight the beast, and the half-orc came to respect the girl deeply after he was a witness to her courage and resourcefulness. After the dragon went away to lick his wounds, Tulum picked unconscious Elia up and cared for her until she was able to mount a horse herself. Tulum joined with her to get the head of the dragon that destroyed his settlement.

They did not succeed in finding and slaying the monster that, as Elia said, was called Paraxis the Ruthless, and whom the orcs nicknamed the Scarlet Death. But during their years of travel around Signum they became rather adept at hunting certain types of dragons. They were especially skilled in taking on smaller beasts: various Dirt-clutchers, Mud-floppers, Bone-suckers and Snake-tails.

Their glory, though not too great, got ahead of them, when Elia met Ulrich von Eichenwald, a vagabond knight from the Western baronies. This young and charming man came from an impoverished, but ancient baronial family, and he also 'worked' as a monster hunter. Ulrich could be devilishly gallant and courteous, especially when he could spot some personal gain for himself. Very soon the young knight became their new companion, and up to a certain time things were smooth between them. Every time when the

hunters heard about a dragon-like beast terrorizing a region they would immediately set off. Local authorities – a baron, a governor or just a village elder – willingly offered them generous payment for the monster's head. After all, if a draconid got into the habit of messing with them, it did great harm to their property, especially to the cattle, and it could easily injure or even kill a man. Besides the reward for slaying the monster, the hunters were very interested in its lair.



Draconids usually were real hoarders, and their caves, along with bones, rusty armor and lots of useless gear, sometimes contained real relics – silver, gold and even jewels.

Very soon the bags of all three hunters were filled with impressive treasure. But wealth was not the main motivation for Elia. She was looking for the real killer dragon, Paraxis the Ruthless, to slay the beast whatever the cost. Ulrich found out about the girl's obsession at the moment of her weakness (she told him about everything herself when she fell for the young knight's charm and found herself in his bed), and one fine morning he decided that they had different paths to follow. He disappeared and took the contents of their bags with him, so Elia and Tulum were left completely broke.

The Amazon was furious but she could do nothing. It was the hardest for Elia, because they finally picked up the trail of Paraxis whom they had been searching for for such a long time. But continuing a pursuit that could last for weeks or even months without money even for oats for the horses, let alone without real equipment necessary to kill such a beast, was impossible.

At this very moment they met Baldassar. Or rather the mage found them himself and proposed to combine their efforts. He undertook to solve their financial difficulties in exchange for the carcass of the slain dragon for his studies. Of course, Elia immediately refused. She didn't trust Baldassar, and after the incident with Ulrich she didn't want to deal with anybody else. But the mage was willing to wait and didn't push them. And Elia was short for time. The trail of the dragon whom she had been hunting so stubbornly for so long was fading every day.

Besides, dragons live for hundreds of years – much longer than people and even elves whom many a man consider to be almost immortal. The dragon could fly to another part of Signum at any moment or even cross the endless sea beyond which there were other lands, if you believed rumors. And finally, he could just go to sleep for a hundred years or more. Such lethargic sleep was not rare for adult beasts who had been living for a long time.

Moreover, Elia found out that Ulrich declared himself the greatest Dragonslayer and promised to kill Paraxis. No doubt, he ran out of the money he stole from them. Most likely, the pretty bastard wasted it on women or just gambled it away, and now he needed a new source of funding as soon as possible. The hunt for Paraxis could give him a lot. Several neighboring rulers set a price on his head, and innumerable treasure which the dragon had accumulated during his many raids was definitely stored in his lair. Elia decided that she would better go hunting with the crazy mage than let Ulrich kill the dragon.

Tracking the dragon and finding his lair took another half a year. And now they almost

reached their target. Elia knew that Ulrich was nearby and also trailing Paraxis. The Amazon was genuinely infuriated with this. If the scumbag dares to cross her path, she wouldn't hesitate to send an arrow between his eyes and another one downtown.

The loud gurgle of stream and hiss of a dying fire pulled Elia out of her dreams about first getting rid of the dragon and then setting the score with Ulrich von Eichenwald whom she hated. Baldassar was standing with his back turned to her and urinating on the fire, which was burning away, with obvious pleasure.

Elia pulled a disgusted face:

– Mage, I hope this is a smart magic ritual that will protect us from intruders – the dragon or at least wolves – at night.

– You can believe whatever you want, woman. But, to tell you the truth, I don't think my urine is capable of repelling a dragon and any other nocturnal creatures, – Baldassar said, adjusting his robe.

– Then, maybe, you shouldn't do it quite so ostentatiously? – She asked.

The mage said sardonically:

– Oh, I am sorry, my mistress, I didn't think about your tender feelings at all. Maybe I should have asked for the permission of our green-skinned friend before urinating to the fire? I thought you had seen all sorts of things during your adventures.

– What are you insinuating? – The Amazon asked with a clear menace in her voice.

– I am not insinuating anything specific, – the mage hurried to add. – But you and your orc friend are quite a strange couple.

– We are companions. And Tulum is not an orc.





Baldassar commented tartly:

– Dragon's udder, then who is he? He looks like an orc, walks like an orc, dresses and even talks like an orc.

Elia didn't rush to answer, giving Tulum a chance to answer himself if he chose to.

The warrior got up unhurriedly, went to the cart and returned with a wineskin full of new wine. Pulling the stopper out with his teeth, he turned the bag over and took several large gulps. Then he gave a drunken belch and said:

– My mother is from the Moon Jackal clan. She was a famed warriorress. Such women are very rare among orcs.

– See, I was right, woman. He is an orc! – Baldassar exclaimed.

Tulum made him shut up with a gesture.

– My mother was an orc, but my father was a human. People in my tribe said that my mother hid her pregnancy till the very last day, and when it was time for me to come into the world under the Jackal's Moon, she went to the prairie and had me.

The mage whistled in surprise:

– I met a lot of half-bloods, mainly from elves and humans, to the west from the Celestial mountains, especially in Vallor. But I have never heard about half-blood orcs. May I be covered in dragon scales from head to toes if your fellow tribesmen didn't want to kill you as soon as they saw you!

– They did, – Tulum nodded. – A baby like me was a great shame for my tribe. The warriors wanted to kill me, and they could easily do that. But they treated my mother like an equal, so they asked her: 'Woman, why did you bring such shame to the tribe and didn't leave this child in the prairie for the wolves and jackals to devour?' My mother replied that she wanted to do so at first. But then she saw me and realized that she couldn't abandon me, and now, if they wanted to kill me, they had to kill her first.

– Looks like your mother was one of us – Amazons, – Elia edged in. – Though a real Amazon would never put

up with men's power or consider them her equals.

Tulum drank some more wine and continued:

– After a discussion the warriors decided: he is only half orc, and his second half is human, so the rough prairie life – piercing cold wind, burning sun, constant roaming and coarse food – will kill him without their help. So I stayed to live with the tribe. My mother cared for and tended to me more than other mothers care for and tend to their children. She taught me everything she knew: how to hunt in the prairie, how to make weapons, how to read the stars, how to search for water during a drought, how to get away from a prairie fire, how to ride a bronotop, and the main skill for an orc – how to fight. I grew up in the prairie among my people, but still I didn't become a rightful member of my tribe. So I decided to leave.

– I see, so you decided to slay a dragon to earn fame for your family, – the mage said. – It's a stupid decision, though it is quite worthy of an orc. You had better choose something less dangerous. For example, kill a woolly rhinoceros or a saber-toothed tiger by yourself, or challenge a mountain troll. But becoming a dragon hunter and going after the most terrifying monster alive – Paraxis the Ruthless...

– I didn't want to become a dragon hunter, – Tulum replied. – I left so that my mother could be proud of me. But on the day when I went to the prairie a huge shadow flew above me towards our camp. I rushed back. But I was late: when I returned to the camp, I found only burned wagons and my tribesmen's corpses. The dragon killed them all and was having a feast over their remains. I hid in a ditch in horror when I saw her, – the half-orc pointed at the Amazon who was sitting opposite him. – This woman was dashing to the dragon without fear. I thought the beast would devour her in a blink of an eye as it did my tribesmen before. But the young warrior fought with such fierceness that the dragon was powerless when he encountered her wrath. She resembled my mother, and for a moment I even thought that it was my mother's spirit that returned to get her revenge.

Tulum went silent; he seemed to be completely absorbed by his memories.

When the mage was tired of waiting, he addressed Elia:

– That dragon in the prairie – it was Paraxis?

The Amazon nodded in reply.

– So you have been hunting him for a long time?

Elia nodded again:

– Yes, I have an old score to settle with him.

– Let a dragon eat my liver if it is not about that elf prince in shining armor, – Baldassar said.

– Don't poke your long nose into other people's affairs, mage, – Elia squinted threateningly.

– Our lives will depend on each other tomorrow, and I'd like to know if I can trust the ones who will cover my back, – the mage retorted.

– Well then, you first, – the Amazon said. – Tell us, why are you here? I bet you have things to tell too.

The pale blue disc of the moon appeared on the sky, casting its ghostly light on the hills near the dragon's lair.

– I think I already told you that I am conducting important scientific studies, – the mage started, but Elia interrupted him:

– Your ring.

– What about my ring? – The mage looked at his hands one at a time. Several rings sparkled on his fingers, some of them with rather noticeable large gems. It was customary for mages to turn jewelry into magical artifacts.

Elia shook her head:

– The one you are hiding on your neck under your clothes. Don't be surprised, I only glanced at it, but I recognized the symbol. A fire phoenix – the sign of the secret Phoenix Lodge. We heard about this order at the dragon's cave, and I don't think it was an accident.

– Dragon's heartburn, it's all fairytales and fiction! There is no such lodge. You seem to have listened to too much gossip at a roadside inn, – the mage dismissed her.

– Then show me the chain and ring on your neck, – the Amazon demanded.

The mage felt Tulum's unpleasant heavy gaze on himself. Both his companions were looking at him expectantly. Baldassar hesitated for some time, and then gave up:

– So be it! I mustn't talk about it under penalty of death, but who will learn about it, if we will be roasted by a dragon tomorrow?

The mage groped around in this robe and produced a thin gold chain with a small grey metal ring to the moonlight. The ring was decorated with a signet featuring a phoenix reborn in flames.

– What is it? – Tulum asked. By the looks of it, he was not impressed with the artifact at all; on the contrary, if the half-orc found it on the road, he would just step over it.

– It is a symbol of membership in the order, – Elia explained.

– Dragon's testicles, how do you know this? – The mage asked.

– You hunt for ancient secrets, – the Amazon answered. – Iatael told me that the Phoenix Lodge had tried to send its spies to the Celestial mountains and Talanis island more than once.

– Ah, the elf in shining armor, – the mage squinted. – Well, it is true. I had a chance to visit the ancestral homeland of all elves – Talanis island – myself. Of course, I went there with a merchant mission, but this didn't insure me against nagging attention of elf guards. Elves sense everything related to magic a mile away, and they see it through. – The mage went silent and pensively stroked his long beard.

– What were you doing in elf lands and why did you hide your real name? – Elia returned him to the conversation.

– I was a spy for the Lodge, – the mage told them casually, as if they were talking about prices for last-year herring or yesterday's rain. – The Phoenix Lodge does exist, though no self-respecting master of magical science or scientist will admit it. The Lodge has long ago become a popular myth, a fairytale surrounded by lots of stories and fables. But believe me, it's all part of a well-thought plan. You will ask me whose plan? – The mage raised his index finger up, as if he intended to make a hole in the sky, next to the moon and stars, with it. – We spread the rumors ourselves. Our principle is: if you wish to hide something well, put it where everyone can see it. A little gold, some connections, whisper a thing or two to the innkeeper at a roadside dump, babble something out in drunken chitchat... And all the people are buzzing, repeating to each other the same tale – about the Phoenix Lodge. Everyone tries to embroider his story, to think something up or invent details, and after a time the tale turns into a horde of rumors and gossip, which a sensible common man shouldn't believe, of course. We put in some good effort, and we had our motives for this. Wizards are not just weirdos well up in old books and manuscripts, royal diviners or doctors who are summoned when someone needs to find their beloved cat or put leeches on a boil. Many adepts of magical sciences occupy rather high positions at barons' and even kings' courts. As a rule, those positions are not very conspicuous, like a king's counselor or a secret advisor. The Lodge includes very influential people from all over Signum.



– Mages always conspire and always create some secret societies or orders. Because they are mages, – Tulum spoke thoughtfully. – What is so special about this Lodge?

Baldassar snorted angrily, and Elia explained:

– I agree with you, Tulum, that wizards have been prone to conspiracies and scheming since olden times. And the Phoenix Lodge is, probably, the most legendary secret mage society. Even lunar eclipses and obtaining the philosopher's stone have been connected to their activity.

– All this gossip isn't worth a straw, – Baldassar stated confidently. – Ignorant people usually mention the Lodge all over the place. We have something to do with less than a tenth of what is attributed to us. But nevertheless, the Phoenix Lodge exists, and it is a rather far-reaching organization. I have been a part of it for a long time, and I have hardly reached its higher levels, though I know some members of the Lodge Chapter.

Elia was not surprised with Baldassar's story. She was interested in something else:

– And what did Paraxis do to the Phoenix Lodge?

– The Lodge doesn't care at all whether I kill the dragon, – Baldassar replied. – My brothers and I have absolutely different goals.

– Then why are you here?

– If I tell you, you'll probably have to live looking over your shoulders for the rest of your lives. The Lodge doesn't forgive when its secrets get to wrong ears.

– What can be more dangerous than being a dragon hunter? – The orc said and had another pull at the bag which was already almost empty.

– Let me wet my whistle with this dragon's hogwash, – the mage grabbed the wineskin from Tulum. He made several big gulps, belched loudly and continued:

– Keledanis elves still live on Talanis island. The elves call their island Caendir. They keep lots of ancient secrets there, including those about the first people and birth of gods on Signum. I had to find out as much as I could about these mysteries.

– What exactly? – Elia exhaled, pulling herself away from the wineskin. She was the last one to get to the wine, and the Amazon proved that she could drink as well as men with dignity.

– For example, how to kill a god. Or how to deprive him of a part of his divine power, – Baldassar replied.

At this the half-orc dropped his jaw to the ground and Elia forgot about the wine:

– What? Are you out of your mind? What god are you talking about?

– Emris, Aria, any of them. We do not care. The Phoenix Lodge intends to challenge all gods.

– But why?

– Because we want to put an end to their rule and to get hold of their power, – the mage's eyes ignited determinedly, and his beard straightened up as if electrified with a mighty spell. – Do you know that great wizards of giants – the first people – became gods of Signum? They achieved incredible magical mastery, and managed to outlive their age.

– I heard these myths, but gods are gods – they cannot be killed, – Elia said.

– You are wrong! – The mage snapped. – In the past the gods were the same flesh and blood beings as us, great minds and scientists of their people. Due to their deep knowledge of magic they found a way to improve their bodies. So even a tiny bit of a god's body, be it tears, blood, saliva, bile or even urine, contains an unparalleled charge of magical energy. These bits of sacred gods' liquors are valued among the people of Signum more than gold or precious gems. I have spent long years experimenting with liquors of different gods, and I can confidently say that killing a god, or rather depriving him of his divine power, is a challenging, yet achievable goal.

Tulum was excited with the mage's intense speech:

– Is it more difficult than slaying a dragon? – The half-orc asked.

– I don't think so. It's hard to say for sure. No one has ever tried to do this, – Baldassar was contemplating aloud.

– But when I was on Talanis island, I managed to learn something about how gods appeared on Signum. Some legends of Keledanis elves, the most ancient ones, tell how the gods acquired their power. In those times the great wizards united to banish Vortirus, the horrific chaos dragon, from the center of the world. Echo of this battle goes through realities like ripples on water, and even now one can meet it in the most distant worlds on the edge, where time slows down and flows differently. The chaos dragon represented unrestrained force of the magic itself. He could not be killed. But the great wizards managed to wound him, and to banish him far away from Signum.

– Ha, so the young gods were dragon slayers like us? – Tulum asked.

– Dragon's eggs, don't interrupt me, – the mage snapped tetchily. – I have just come to the most important thing. On Talanis I was able to bribe some elves with spice. You know that this hard drug has a special effect on elves, and it is strictly prohibited on Talanis. The elves I bribed stole a few manuscripts from the Eternal Knowledge Vault. They were written by elf annalists during the first age after the battle with the dragon. From these manuscripts I learned a secret that the gods tried to expunge from people's memory. The ancient wizards who defeated Vortirus used the blood he spilled to acquire their power. They created a magical elixir from the dragon's blood. No one could predict the elixir's effect with confidence. They had only vague speculations and obscure theories, but the thirst for knowledge, and mainly the desire to obtain incredible powers got the best of them. The ancient wizards decided that all of them should go through a rite of initiation and take a few drops of the miraculous elixir.

– And what if it was a poison? – Tulum couldn't control himself.

– Well, then they would all die, – the mage shrugged.

– In this case wouldn't it be better to choose one to take the elixir? – Elia asked.

– They were afraid.

– Of what? – The half-orc wondered.

– That the one who takes the elixir will obtain unlimited power and destroy the others, – Baldassar explained. – So each of them drank the potion.

– And what then? – Tulum asked. – Did they become gods?

– Not all of them, – the mage shook his head. – Only some of them. For part of them the elixir was a deadly poison, others just lost their mind or underwent horrific changes and are now wandering in lower worlds as monsters. There was too much original power of order and chaos – which we usually call magic – in the blood of the world dragon. A selected few were able to accept this gift. We now know their names as the names of the gods. Moreover, the elixir had absolutely different effects on the gods. Some of them received the ability

to control various elements – earth, water, fire, wind, rock or iron, others got a smaller gift – for example, the power to open any locks and latches, bewitch metal or perform wonderful melodies on any instruments.

– Baldassar, everything you just told us is truly amazing, – the Amazon said reservedly, casting a telltale sidelong look at Tulum. – But even if the gods wanted to hide the secret of their power's origin, what use will this knowledge be to the Phoenix Lodge? The chaos dragon wandered around the InterWorld, and his appearance in Signum almost destroyed all things alive here. Even we, dragon slayers, cannot find and, moreover, wound this dragon.

Elia did not believe the mage's story completely. All of this very well could be ravings of a disturbed mind. Mages and alchemists often went mad during their long studies and complicated experiments. Such was the price of discovering the secrets of the universe. Who in their right mind would believe that the gods who banished the great dragon from Signum drank an elixir prepared from his blood in order to acquire superpowers?

– I am not asking you to fight Vortirus. This dragon is dreadfully strong, and even gods were able to defeat him only using deception. But Vortirus is not the only dragon with original magic in his veins. His children and offspring remain on Signum. All dragons, including snake-like ophidians, who once were a large race on Signum, are descendants of Vortirus. Surely, not every dragon has so much power. As a rule, dragons live for hundreds, and even thousands years. A dragon never stops growing with years, and his physical strength, his mind and his magical power grow with him. Paraxis is one of the oldest dragons in Signum. His magic is incredibly strong, which we saw for ourselves today. He

was easily able to penetrate our minds at a distance and find our most deep-seated fears, and then skillfully use them to create illusions.

– So you want to kill Paraxis to gain his power? – Elia concluded.

– Nobody knows exactly how it is done, – the mage admitted unwillingly. – Only imprecise descriptions of some experiments have been preserved to our time. But even these vague instructions are enough to understand that dragon's blood is the Juice of Magic. One can perform miracles, create incredibly powerful artifacts and potent spells with it. Perhaps, one could even create a weapon able to harm gods and finally liberate Signum from their tyranny. So I need all of Paraxis's blood for experiments.

– This is real madness! – Elia said. – But I swear with the mother of all Amazons, you will get what you are looking for.

All three of them stayed silent for some time, thoughtfully gazing at bright-red coals smoldering in the fire-pit. These coals reminded Elia of a dragon's eyes. Flame sleeping for only so long was smoldering in those eyes when she looked into them for the first time. This flame was destined to destroy her life and to turn her into what she was now – a fearless hunter.

4

– I used to be a liberty-loving and free Amazon, one of thousands of courageous warrioresses of my people. We don't live like other people on Signum. Amazons do not serve men, they do not cook for them, do not wash their clothes, do not clean and saw from dawn till dusk. We do not just refuse to accept men's power over us, we do not consider them equal to us. If one of us decides to have a child, she does it of her own free will and often against the will of the future father. We use men only for the conception, and then we cannot see the father of our child ever again.

There is only one man whom we are willing to recognize as our equal, and he is a god. We worship Arakat, the god of war, and Inara, the goddess of hunt. The best of us are proud to call themselves the brides of Arakat. We go raiding along the coast of the Inner Sea far to the west or east.

Hippolyta, who was known as the Unrivaled, had been our queen for a very long time. No one could beat her in archery while riding a horse or in knife throwing. Many warriors admired her and loved her. Hippolyta was my mentor, and I sincerely thought that I loved her more than others. I wanted to follow her example in everything. It was before Hippolyta met a man.

His name was Linos, and he wasn't even a warrior. A meager slave from sunny Hellas. This man was a sculptor; he carved statues of gods and goddesses of stone. They say he had no equals in his art. Hippolyta wished that he sculpted her lifelike statue, and for this she sat for him. Hands of the master creating a living sculpture from dead stone fascinated Hippolyta, and she gave herself to him of her own will. After this Hippolyta

should have forgotten about this man immediately, she should have executed him or at least banished him. But his charms, more treacherous than anything in the world, have already had their effect on her. Soon she realized she was pregnant and she didn't hide it. On the contrary, Hippolyta announced that she wanted to live with Linos as husband and wife. Many of us, including me, thought that her decision was a sign of weakness, moreover, that it was a betrayal.

– Loving someone who is not from your tribe does not mean a betrayal, – Tulum said unexpectedly.

Elia nodded in reply:

– At that time I didn't think so, Tulum. Later I received a cruel lesson. Listen to me, all in good time.

Hippolyta was expecting her first child and basking in love and happiness next to her beloved Linos. And I was burning with hatred and jealousy. Many times I imagined how I would sneak into my queen's tent under the veil of night to carry out my bloody vengeance. Sometimes I imagined that I would kill Linos before Hippolyta, and sometimes – that I would kill them both. Filled with such thoughts, I was wandering around the foreland of the Celestial mountains. I was accompanied by a small squad of Amazons, young adventure seekers just like me.

Once, after a tempest that raged throughout the night, we saw a sky ship. It was heavily beaten by the night storm, and it was swimming above the ground, almost touching hill tops with its bottom and lurching to one side. Its flying bubble, which allowed the ship to fly above ground, lost its shape and looked like a deflated balloon. I usually saw sky ships high above the ground, proudly emerging from snow-white clouds, like ethereal creatures. They were heading from the Dragon Riders' harbors to every corner of Signum, majestic and unapproachable.

– Who are these Dragon Riders, and are dragons like horses or mules, so that they would let anyone ride them?

– Tulum was astonished.

Baldassar, who possessed impressive knowledge on any question related to the history of Signum, replied to him:

– Dragon Riders. Draggaris elves, descendants of those who went with prince Icanor from Talanis island to the Celestial mountains to find a new home there in union with the oldest creatures on Signum – dragons – call themselves that. Draggaris elves are so arrogant and selfish that other peoples often call them High elves. Thanks to their ancient knowledge on aerial navigation, which they received from dragons, Draggaris learned how to build miraculous flying ships, and now they control transportation of the most profitable and expensive goods on Signum. Due to this they are one the richest peoples. But Dragon Riders are not really interested in precious metals or gems. They mainly concentrate on self-understanding and mastering the higher laws of harmony. Draggaris elves believe that knowing canons of beauty and harmony is possible only through meditation and entering a special, ‘open’ state of mind. For this they frequently use jannat, a strong drug prohibited among many peoples of Signum due to its noticeable side effects.

– Some orc warriors use special mushrooms to gain a wild boar’s frenzy or a bear’s fury during battle, – Tulum shared.

– Draggaris riders handle dragons, and they are able to defeat a whole army single-handedly. That’s why there are not many madmen who dare cross their way on Signum, – the mage noted.

– The sky ship that we saw belonged to High elves, but we didn’t see any dragons nearby, – Elia continued.
– But the ship made of beautiful white wood and shining in the sun due to its gilded paneling was about to fall right before our eyes. It could not gain the necessary altitude to fly over the nearest hill, and my estimation was that it would run into it with its gilded snout. I couldn’t miss such prey. My mind was already drawing the pictures of the ship’s holds filled with the most exotic goods. Besides, no other Amazon could boast that she was able to even approach a sky ship. I was imagining how everyone would envy me when I deliver the ship to Temiskira, our capital.

I gave a signal to my friends, and we started pursuit, whooping and hooting. We caught up with the ship when it drew level with the hill top and caught the rocks with its shredded rigging. The small elf crew was trying to detach the ropes in vain. When they saw us they grabbed their crossbows. But what could the soft elves who were used to gaze at representatives of other peoples of Signum from a bird’s eye view do against Amazons? We managed to take the ship over in a matter of minutes. Its crew was partially killed and partially taken as prisoners – someone had to navigate the ship.

I decided to check the hold first. But, to our great disappointment, jannat was the cargo transported by the sky ship. Of course, this drug could cost insanely much on one of the Sphinx Caliphate markets. But it had virtually no value for us, which was not the case for the ship. I decided to deliver it to Temiskira no matter



what. I can’t say it was easy. The sky vessel was damaged heavily, especially the flying balloon. The ship could not raise more than a few meters above the ground. Besides, it was almost uncontrollable, so we had to drag it with our horses. But notwithstanding all the difficulties, we reached Temiskira in a few days with nothing to report.

A huge crowd of Amazons gathered on the central square of the city to stare at the sky ship. The queen’s court was nearby. Hippolyta’s house, as most other houses in the city, reminded a giant tent made from skins and bones of wild animals such as saber-toothed tiger, rocky bear and woolly rhinoceros. The queen herself went out to meet us, but I saw no smile on her pale face. When I came closer to tell her about my trophy, she asked me quietly:

– What have you done, Elia? Don’t you know whose ship this is and what punishment awaits for those who dare encroach on the property of High elves?

I answered to her rudely:

– My queen, it seems that you’ve grown very soft staying here. Didn’t you teach me that Amazons are not afraid of anyone and anything under the moons of Signum?

Hippolyta’s baby started crying in the wet nurse’s hands behind her back. The queen eyed me from head to foot heavily and said:

– Remember my words, Elia: this ship will bring us great trouble.

Though Hippolyta was not happy, the other Amazons took my trophy as amazing luck. A magnificent feast was organized in Temiskira at once; wine was flowing and half-naked amazons were dancing in the torchlight late into the night.

I lost count of how many times famous warrioresses raised their cups in my honor and shouted my name. I felt as a new queen. It seemed that everyone forgot about Hippolyta. By morning I went to sleep, exhausted from all the drinking and dancing.

– Dragon's gills, how could you be so cock-sure and careless!
– Baldassar exclaimed. – A sky ship is too dangerous a trophy. Draggaris elves would never let anyone take over their ship unpunished, especially if its holds are filled to the brim with jannat.

– You are right. I and my vanity are to blame for what happened next. Indeed, it was me who decided to deliver the sky ship to Temiskira. The Dragon Riders wasted little time. The next day I woke up to loud screams and a smudge of fire in the city. That day death itself came to us, and the death was called Paraxis the Ruthless. The dragon was not alone, there were at least three of them, but none could match Paraxis's cruelty. He burned, trampled in the ground, and tore with his enormous fangs and talons everything that crossed his path, leaving scorched earth and mountains of corpses behind him. No doubt, I would have died that day, had it not been for Hippolyta. She saved me at the expense of her own life, literally pulling me out of the dragon's clutches. I saw her brave face for the last time just before the flames devoured her.

Roaring from pain and fury, I decided I would get my revenge, even if it would cost me my life. From a young age every Amazon is taught how to handle a lasso, so that she could catch wild horses in the prairie. I managed to get hooked on the dragon's back with my lasso and hopped onto him.

A rider in red armor controlled Paraxis. He also noticed me and he made the beast rise high into the sky. I got dizzy. The city under us was rapidly turning into crumbles spilled on the ground. I clenched my teeth and tried not to look down. The rider was my target. We started fighting at incredible height, with hurricane wind whistling in our ears. The dragon couldn't help his rider in any way, so we were evenly matched. I almost took on the rider when Paraxis turned sharply in the air. Having lost my balance, I hit my head on the armor on the dragon's back and fell down. I expected that I would inevitably crash down, so I closed my eyes calmly.

When I opened them again, I found myself in a strange cave next to a blonde blue-eyed warrior, who was cooking something from herbs on a little fire. The warrior's armor seemed vaguely familiar, but when I tried to remember where I saw it, I felt dizzy again and I had a splitting headache.



– Are you Arakat, the god of war? – I asked him.

Seeing that I opened my eyes, he smiled and answered:

– You could say that, since I ride a dragon. But no one has ever called me this.

The warrior turned out to be Iatael, an elf prince, a Dragon Rider, one of the sons of Icanor. He saved me when I was falling down unconscious. He didn't say why he did this, for I almost killed him. So I found myself not at Arakat's feast table, but in a narrow rock cave high in the mountains.

– Am I your prisoner now? – I asked.

Iatael was silent for some time, and then he said:

– I would prefer to call you my guest. I am sorry; I cannot take you to Celestial Citadels, where the Hall of Silence and Contemplative Serenity is located. It is not customary for my fellow elves to keep company of outlanders. But no one will disturb us here.

And while Iatael refused to call me his prisoner, in fact I was one – imprisoned in my individual cell high in the mountains, though without doors or grates. I must admit, I did not lack anything, neither food, nor water. I used to get by much less sometimes. Iatael came almost every day, and he brought me everything I needed. His dragon descended to a stone ledge next to the entrance to the cave, so that the rider could enter.

I thought that Iatael kept my life only on his elfish whim. After he is done playing with his new toy, he would feed me to the dragon or (I don't know which is worse) leave me for dead alone here, high in the mountains. A few times, when he was not there, I tried to escape, but the cave was surrounded by sheer cliffs. Getting out of my prison without growing some wings was impossible.

I felt unbearable loneliness staying alone in the tiny stone cave. I could sleep and eat as much as I wanted. The rest of the time I just sat on the edge of the abyss and looked into the endless wilderness until my eyes were sore, waiting for the dragon to appear.

Iatael came at different times. Sometimes he told me wonderful stories about things he saw flying over unknown lands in the far north or west. Sometimes he just played his silver flute – a magical, slightly sad melody would echo around the rocky mountain cliffs.

Gradually I stopped wishing to kill him. What was the sense of killing my only guard, if I couldn't come down from there without his help? Of course, the fire of vengeance was still smoldering in me, and at first, during the long hours when Iatael was not with me, I imagined how I would crack his head open with a sharp stone. He was considerate enough not to leave me any other weapons, be it a knife or a bow. But when the tall and handsome elf appeared in my cave, the thoughts about murder just went away. My life as an Amazon was left far below, and many things I used to consider important lost all their significance and attraction. But I began to value every glance of the piercing blue eyes I was given, every light step when he entered the cave, every casual touch when he examined the rapidly healing wound on my head.

Iatael often brought me gifts. A rare shell of finest, almost transparent mother-of-pearl. An amazingly beautiful carved comb from reindeer antlers. A funny outfit of a woman from Nipan islands. A wonderful fiery-red feather of the Roc, shining in the night. A necklace sparkling with diamonds.

Once Iatael brought in his shirt a small adroit animal with beautiful fur opalescent in the sunlight. He said it was a marten. I named the animal Sparkle. We became friends soon, and now, when Iatael was absent, I often played with it. Sparkle turned out to be a very loyal and smart little thing. Loyal to death, – Elia could not contain herself, and a tear glistened on the proud Amazon's cheek.

After picking at his long beard a bit Baldassar said:

– It seems to me that I heard something about your elfish prince, Amazon. He was a brother of their ruler. The High elves composed a song of praise for him; in the song he dies at the hand of a devious traitor.

Elia spit on the ground angrily:

– I did wish him death the first moment we met. But when I looked into his blue eyes there, on the mountain, I lost my balance and my very self forever. The blue flame burned my heart and melted all my fury drop by drop. At one moment I realized that I lived only for our next meeting. It was a real revelation for me. I came to know the feeling for which I hated Hippolyta. And in part it was her posthumous gift to me.

– It looks like magic. All elves are sorcerers, – Tulum stated.

– Yes, Tulum. It was magic, but unlike usual magic, it is usable by all and every people. Iatael didn't understand what was happening to him either. It is not customary among his people to express any feeling openly, especially the feeling that occurred between us.

Iatael told me a lot about the customs of High elves. Believe me, they are a strange race, and all their traditions are really old. They virtually haven't changed since their prince Icanor became the first Dragon Rider. Dragons gave their ancient knowledge to Draggaris elves, and they taught them how to build air ships. Iatael told me that dragons agreed to this union because they knew their time was running out. The dragons used to be a large and wise race once. Now we consider them monsters. This is what time does. It wipes whole races, once powerful peoples and their achievements off the map without mercy. Iatael told me all of this. And he also told me that dragons taught the elves how to use jannat.

– What is so special about this drug, besides the fact that when one uses it, his brain starts resembling liquid feces? – The mage wondered.

– To us jannat is really known as a strong drug, but High elf riders can communicate with their dragons using it. If you take jannat following a special recipe that dragons disclosed to Draggaris elves, it will allow you to easily converse with other creatures at a distance without using words.



- Telepathy! - Baldassar exclaimed.
- Yes, I think it's the word Iatael used, - Elia agreed.
- It is very interesting. Very interesting!
- That is why the High elves value this drug so much.

They use it very sparingly and cautiously. Surely, the bodies of High elves are much more resistant to the effects of jannat, and they use different mental practices to rid their minds from remaining intoxication. Nevertheless, long-term consumption does have some effects on the riders: their mind gradually changes, and their eyes acquire a blue shade so bright that they resemble crystals of frozen blue flame.

- Yes, - Baldassar confirmed. - Jannat users are usually called 'blue-eyed ones'. The blue-eyed ones usually don't live long.

- I tried jannat for the first time on the day when Iatael offered me to ride the dragon with him. 'Trust me, - he said, - You will be able to touch the most unusual and exciting thing in your life - the mind of a dragon, a creature that has lived immeasurably more lives than you and has absorbed an incredible volume of knowledge, including magic. Dragons can exchange thoughts telepathically without jannat, but we cannot do without it'.

Iatael took jannat with me. First I felt nothing, but very soon the world around me faded and become half-transparent. It looked as if I fell through the mirror of normal reality. I closed my eyes and I saw a world consisting of thousands of sparkling threads and pulsating springs resembling far-away stars. Some of these stars were dazzlingly bright, and others hardly gleamed. I was scared and lost, but Iatael found me. He told me that this was what the lining of the world looked like: the threads are the magic woven into our world, and each live thought spring is a star. He led me farther and I faced Paraxis. If before I saw just the dis-

tant sparkling stars around me, now I encountered the sun. The dragon's mind shimmered with unthinkable shades; it was enormous and unbearably bright.

- Greetings, little warrior. Finally we can talk.

- You are a dragon. You killed queen Hippolyta and other Amazons!

- I am Paraxis, who is called the Ruthless in this age. I do not care about the death of those who live mere moments by my standards.

- What do you care about?

- Answering this question is not easy. I have lived long enough to satisfy my curiosity. But I am still interested in meeting people like you, little warrior.

- What is so special about me? I live mere moments by your standards, don't I?

- Your mind shines incredibly bright, little warrior, though it will last just a moment for me. Your thoughts, your will, your obsession with victory - this light cannot be outshined. I would say that this is still interesting to me. Connecting to your mind, seeing the world with your eyes, feeling the stream of your thoughts and energy.

Ride me, little warrior. Feel yourself a Rider, and then we will truly touch each other's thoughts. Believe me, such things happen very rarely. Dragons choose their Riders only once. They open to them their minds, bottomless treasuries of knowledge and experience, and in return the Riders let us enter their minds and feel all the things we have forgotten with years again. Elves live long by human standards, but for dragons this time is also very short.

- The dragon talked to you? - Baldassar couldn't restrain himself. He even jumped to his feet in excitement. - Did all of this really happen or was it just a product of your mind befuddled with jannat?

Elia hissed at him grumpily:

– As I already said, Iatael taught me how to use jannat to open my mind to the fullest and protect myself from its side effects as much as possible. Everything I told you actually happened.

– What else did the dragon tell you?

– Nothing of essence. I swung aboard the dragon, Iatael behind me, and we soared upwards to meet the wind. It was incredible. I could close my eyes and see the world through the eyes of the dragon. His mind was incomprehensible, and I dived into it as if into the ocean. Those were the images of far-away eras, fragments of sentences in forgotten languages, reflections of ancient wars and cataclysms – everything that the dragon lived through.

Baldassar twisted his arms in desperation and moaned:

– Oh wizards almighty, I would trade my soul for a chance to look into his mind! I could learn so much if I had such an experience!

Elia pulled a disdainful face:

– The dragon is a monster. And when we go hunting it tomorrow, you'll see it with your own eyes.

To endorse her words Tulum raised his enormous axe and banged it loudly on the ground.

Elia started talking again, but now her voice was much more quiet and humorless:

– Iatael, my beloved prince, still flew to me, and we met among mountain peaks, in secret. Or so we thought. Using jannat, we often practiced in conversations without words. This was our undoing. That day Iatael was extremely excited when he came to me. His blue eyes were truly shining. He hugged me and said:

– Get ready, Elia, we are flying away.

– Flying away? But where to?

– It doesn't matter. What matters is that we will still be together – you and I.

Though we discussed our plans for the future many times, I was not ready. Sparkle climbed to my shoulder and tried to shove her sharp snout closer for a kiss, but I moved it away. I had to find out what had happened.

– Listen, Iatael, you are a prince and a Dragon Rider. You told me many times that you can't just disappear from your people. They will look for you and they will find you.

Iatael pushed me away angrily. His blue eyes almost burned me through.

– Do not remind me who I am, I know it very well. But I have made my choice, and I told them about my decision today.

– What have you done?

– I did what I should have done a long time ago.

– And what did they reply? Did they try to stop you? Did they send pursuers after you?

– Not yet, as far as I know. Paraxis will warn me. For now they are discussing it. But I am sure that they will try to get me back whatever it takes. So we have to hurry.

I was still completely confused:

– You said they would try to get you back whatever it takes? Are you in danger because of me?

– No, – Iatael replied adamantly and confidently. – You are in danger because of me. After their discussion they will conclude that you are the cause of it all and you have to be destroyed. Don't stand still, hurry up.

He already gathered part of the supplies we might need on the way and turned to exit the cave, when he suddenly stopped. I understood why at once. I already knew when Iatael was mentally talking to his dragon. In a minute he confirmed my suspicions:

– We have no time. They are flying here to kill you.

– But we can't run from them forever. If they want, they can find me anywhere on Signum, – I said.

– Then we'll fly away from Signum, – Iatael declared.

'No, you are not flying anywhere', – the dragon's voice burned my head as a furious lash. I knew: he wanted not just Iatael to hear him. We exchanged looks waiting for the dragon to continue. He was always near us, though unseen, he heard us and followed us. This creature had its own will and its own twisted intelligence, a cold logic. Failing to take him into account was our grave mistake.

'You are not flying anywhere, – Paraxis continued, – because I decided so.'

'Paraxis, I am prince Iatael, son of Icanor the Honorable, I am your Rider, and I order you to obey.'

'Not anymore.'

'Not anymore what?'

'You are not my rider anymore. I am breaking up our union by my own choice.'

And after this I saw a stream of fire, terrifying roaring flames bursting into the cave and engulfing Iatael. I still couldn't believe it had happened when I heard the voice of the dragon talking to me again.



clear, as Iatael taught me, I made a step forward, then another one and another one... I raised Iatael's sword at the spot where the heap of still smoking armor lay. The hot metal burned my hands to blisters. But I wasn't thinking about it. I approached Paraxis and looked right into his huge yellow eyes.

Though I made an effort to hide my thoughts, the dragon guessed. I also understood that he knew what I was going to do. I would definitely burn right there, but Sparkle was faster and attacked the dragon's amber eye. Paraxis was distracted for a moment, trying to shake the little animal off his head and kill it with one click of his mighty jaws. At that moment I jumped forward and stuck Iatael's sword between steel plates of his armor. Paraxis roared in fury and pushed away from the rock with a wide wing stroke at once. Still clutching the sword hilt, I hang on the monster's chest. The dragon's blood was spilling from the deep wound in hot spurts, washing over my hands and face.

– How do you like my answer, the old-born?! Do you enjoy it?!

I don't remember what else I screamed to him. Paraxis was flying with difficulty, staggering from side to side. Sharp mountain peaks and bottomless abysses were passing under us with amazing speed. He was trying to throw me off his chest with various air stunts. He didn't manage to do it at once. He was definitely descending, and on his way he clutched buttresses and sent stones raining down. After hitting another rock everything blurred before my eyes and my fingers just opened.

I woke up to coldness and pungent pain in my palms burned with the sword. The dragon was not around, just a few pulled out rocks and traces of blood on the snow remained. He flew away, and I was left lying alone on the snowy mountainside.

Elia looked at her companions inquiringly:

– What is a dragon? A fierce monster, a sentient being or, perhaps, a living god? I have been fighting dragons for many years, and still I don't know the answer to this question. The thing I do know is why I am here. To slay a dragon!

'I have saved you, little warrior. Iatael is dead, and now Draggaris elves have no reason to wish you dead. I told you that a dragon selects only one Rider in his life. I think I can make an exception from the rule for you. Become my Rider – Elia the Fierce Flame, the first among the Amazons.'

Paraxis's voice sounded in my head like thunder. I closed my eyes, trying to banish it, but suddenly I saw myself riding a dragon. Winding threads of rivers, greenish moss of forests and uneven folds of hills were floating far below us. The dragon was taking me to the escaping horizon, and I could here only his mighty wings, beating the wind with the force of a hammer. My thighs were tightened around power invoking awe and numbness in all inhabitants of Signum. I was drunk from feeling this power more than from the strongest wine. I was Elia the Fierce Flame, Dragon Mistress, Queen of Amazons, terror of every tribe both close and far away. My eyes were flaming blue.

'Do you like gold, little warrior? I will give you more gold than you can imagine.'

The next moment I was in the dragon's underground treasury. The enormous cave was filled to the brim with gold and jewelry. I was standing knee-deep in gold. It shone so much I was almost blind, as if looking at melted sun. Paraxis was lying, and almost two thirds of his massive body were immersed in the gold. I could stretch my arm and gather a handful of the metal. I could even feel the heat emanating from the metal warmed with the dragon's body.

By force of will I shunned away all my thoughts and desires and found myself back in my sky prison. Paraxis was waiting for my answer. Keeping my mind

