

ANDREW PETERSON

THE
WINGFEATHER
SAGA



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PEEK



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PROOF

ON THE EDGE OF THE
DARK SEA OF DARKNESS

BOOK 1

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For my brother

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A Brief Introduction to the World of Aerwiar

The old stories tell that when the first person woke up on the first morning in the world where this tale takes place, he yawned, stretched, and said to the first thing he saw, “Well, here we are.” The man’s name was Dwayne, and the first thing he saw was a rock. Next to the rock, though, was a woman named Gladys, whom he would learn to get along with very well. In the many ages that followed, that first sentence was taught to children and their children’s children and their children’s parents’ cousins and so on until, quite by accident, all speaking creatures referred to the world around them as Aerwiar.

On Aerwiar there were two main continents divided by one main ocean called the Dark Sea of Darkness. By the Fourth Epoch, the harsh land east of the sea had come to be known as Dang and has little to do with this tale (except for the Great Evil that came to exist there and waged a Great War on pretty much everybody).

That evil was a nameless evil, an evil whose name was Gnag the Nameless. He ruled from high atop the Killridge Mountains in the Castle Throg, and of all the things Gnag despised in Aerwiar, he most hated the High King Wingfeather of the Isle of Anniera. For some reason no one could guess, Gnag and his wretched hordes had marched westward and gobbled up the Shining Isle of Anniera, where fell the good king, his house, and his noble people.

Unsatisfied, the Nameless Evil (named Gnag) built a fleet that bore his monstrous army westward across the Dark Sea of Darkness to the continent of Skree. And he ravaged that wide land, nine long years before our adventure begins.

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A Slightly Less Brief Introduction to the Land of Skree

The whole land of Skree was green and flat. Except for the Stony Mountains in the north, which weren't flat at all. Nor were they green. They were rather white from all the snow, though if the snow melted, something green might eventually grow there.

Ah, but farther south, the Plains of Palen Jabh-J covered the rest of Skree with their rolling (and decidedly green) grasslands. Except, of course, for Glipwood Forest. Just south of the plains, the Linnard Woodlands rolled off the edges of all maps, except, one would suppose, those maps made by whatever people lived in those far lands.

But the people who made their homes on the plains, at the edges of the forest, high in the mountains, and along the great River Blapp, lived in a state of lasting, glorious peace. That is, except for the aforementioned Great War, which they lost quite pitifully and which destroyed life as they knew it.

In the nine years after Skree's king and all his lords—in fact, everyone with a claim to the throne—had been executed, the people of Skree had learned to survive under the occupation of the Fangs of Dang. The Fangs walked about like humans, and in fact they looked exactly like humans, except for the greenish scales that covered their bodies and the lizard-like snout and the two long, venomous fangs that jutted downward from their snarling mouths. Also, they had tails. Since Gnag the Nameless had conquered the free lands of Skree, the Fangs had occupied all the towns, exacting taxes and being nasty to the free Skreeans. Oh, yes, the people of Skree were quite free, as long as they were in their homes by midnight. And as long as they bore no weapons, and they didn't complain when their fellow Skreeans were occasionally taken away across the sea, never to be seen again. But other than the cruel Fangs and the constant threat of death and torture, there wasn't much to fear in Skree. Except in the Stony Mountains where hairy bomnubbles

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crept across the land with their long teeth and hungry bellies, and across the frozen wastes of the Ice Prairies where those few who made their home there battled snickbuzzards daily. Farther south, the Plains of Palen Jabh-J were as safe as they were beautiful, except for the ratbadgers that slithered through the tall grass (a farmer from South Torrboro claimed to have seen one as big as a young meep, which is about the size of a full-grown chorkney, an animal that stands about as high as a flabbit).

Before roaring over Fingap Falls, the River Blapp was wide and peaceful, clear as a spring, and the fish to be caught there were both delicious and docile, except for the many fish that were poisonous to the touch, and the daggerfish that were known to leap into boats and impale the stoutest fisherman.

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An Introduction to the Igiby Cottage (Very Brief)

Just outside the town of Glipwood, perched near the edge of the cliffs above the Dark Sea, sat a little cottage where lived the Igiby family. The cottage was rather plain, except for how comfortable it was, and how nicely it had been built, and how neatly it was kept in spite of the three children who lived there, and except for the love that glowed from it like firelight from its windows at night.

As for the Igiby family?

Well, except for the way they always sat late into the night beside the hearth telling stories, and when they sang in the garden while they gathered the harvest, and when the grandfather, Podo Helmer, sat on the porch blowing smoke rings, and except for all the good, warm things that filled their days there like cider in a mug on a winter night, they were quite miserable. Quite miserable indeed, in that land where walked the Fangs of Dang.

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The Carriage Comes, the Carriage Black

Janner Igiby lay trembling in his bed with his eyes shut tight, listening to the dreadful sound of the Black Carriage rattling along in the moonlight. His younger brother Tink was snoring in the bunk above him, and he could tell from his little sister Leeli's breathing that she was asleep too. Janner dared to open his eyes and saw the moon, as white as a skull, grinning down on him through the window. As hard as he tried not to think about it, the nursery rhyme that had terrified children in the land of Skree for years sang in his head, and he lay there in the pale moonlight, his lips barely moving.

Lo, beyond the River Blapp
The Carriage comes, the Carriage Black
By shadowed steed with shadowed tack
And shadowed driver driving

Child, pray the Maker let you sleep
When comes the Carriage down your street
Lest all your dreams be dreams of teeth
And Carriages arriving

To wrest you from your berth and bower
In deepest night and darkest hour
Across the sea to frozen tower
Where Gnag the Nameless pounds you

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At Castle Throg across the span,
A world away from kith and clan
You'll weep at how your woes began
The night the shadows bound you

Away, beyond the River Blapp,
The Carriage came, the Carriage Black
By shadowed steed with shadowed tack
The night the Carriage found you

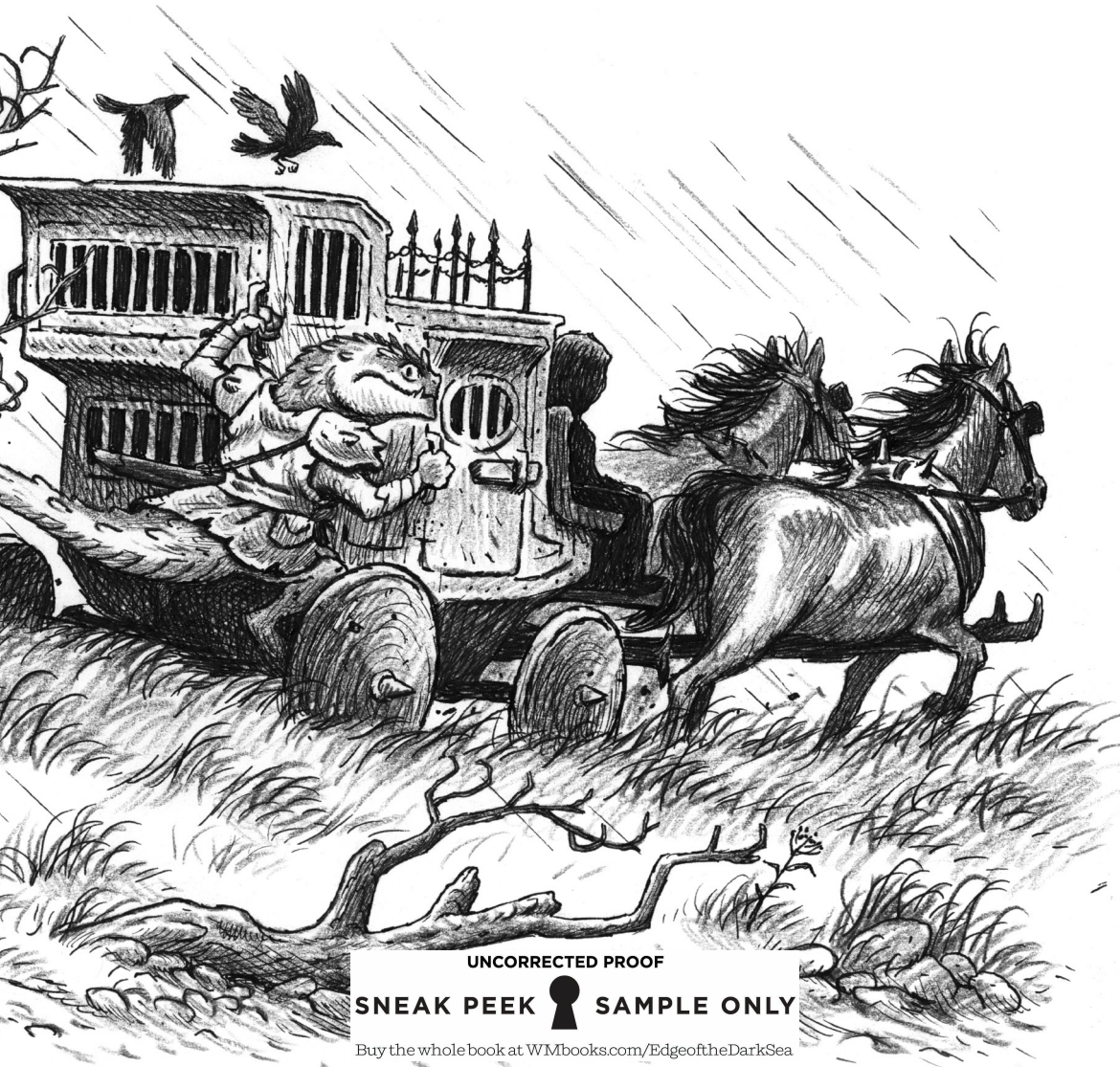


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It's no wonder that Janner had a hard time sleeping once he heard the faint thud of hooves and the jangle of chains. He could see in his mind the forms of the crows circling the Carriage and perched atop it, hear the croaking beaks and the flapping of black wings. He told himself that the sounds were only his imagination. But he knew that somewhere in the countryside that very night, the Black Carriage would stop at some poor soul's house, and the children there would be taken away, never to be seen again.

Only last week he had overheard his mother crying about the taking of a girl from Torrboro. Sara Cobbler was the same age as Janner, and he



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remembered meeting her once when her family had passed through Glipwood. But now she was gone forever. One night she lay in bed just as he was now. She had probably kissed her parents good night and said a prayer. And the Black Carriage had come for her.

Had she been awake?

Did she hear the snort of the black horses outside her window or see the steam rising from their nostrils?

Did the Fangs of Dang tie her up?

Had she struggled when they put her into the Carriage, as if she were being fed into the mouth of a monster?

Whatever she had done, it was useless. She had been ripped away from her family, and that was the end of it. Sara's parents had held a funeral wake for her. Being carried off by the Black Carriage was like dying. It could happen to anyone, at any time, and there was nothing to be done about it but to hope the Carriage kept moving when it rattled down your lane.

The rattles and clinks and hoofbeats echoed through the night. Was the Black Carriage getting closer? Would it make the turn up the lane to the Igiby cottage? Janner prayed to the Maker that it would not.

Nugget, Leeli's dog, perked his head up at the foot of her bed and growled at the night beyond the window. Janner saw a crow alight on a bony branch outlined by the moon. Janner trembled, gripping his quilt and pulling it up to his chin. The crow turned its head and seemed to peer into Janner's window, sneering at the boy whose wide eyes reflected back the moonlight. Janner lay there in terror, wishing he could sink deeper into his bed where the crow's black eyes couldn't see him. But the bird flapped away. The moon clouded over, and the *thump-thump* of hoofbeats and the *creak-rattle* of the Carriage faded, faded, finally into silence.

Janner realized that he'd been holding his breath, and he let it out slowly. He heard Nugget's tail thump against the wall and felt much less alone knowing that the little dog was awake with him. Soon he was fast asleep, dreaming troubled dreams.

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Nuggets, Hammers, and Totatoes

In the morning the dreams were gone.

The sun was shining, the cool of morning was losing ground to a hot summer sun, and Janner was imagining that he could fly. He was watching the dragonflies float across the pasture, putting his mind into a dragonfly's mind, to see what it saw and feel what it felt. He imagined the slight turn of a wing that sent it zipping across a meadow, whipping left and right, lifting on the wind up over the treetops, or scaling down the craggy drop to the Dark Sea. He imagined that if he were a dragonfly, he would smile while he flew (though he wasn't sure that dragonflies could smile), because he wouldn't have to worry about the ground tripping him up. It seemed to Janner that in the last few months he had lost control of his limbs; his fingers were longer, his feet were bigger, and his mother had recently said that he was all elbows and knees.

Janner reached into his pocket and, looking around to be sure no one was watching, pulled out a folded piece of old paper. His stomach fluttered as it had when he found the paper the week before while sweeping his mother's bedroom. He unfolded it now to brood upon a sketch of a boy standing at the prow of a small sailboat. The boy had dark hair and gangly limbs and looked undeniably like Janner. Big billowy clouds whitened the sky, and the spray of the waves burst up in splashes that looked so real and wet that it seemed to Janner that if he touched them, he would smear the picture. Beneath the drawing was written "My twelfth birthday. Two hours alone on the open sea, and the best day of my life so far."

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There was no name on the picture, but Janner knew in his heart that the boy was his father.

No one ever talked of his father—not his mother, nor his grandfather; Janner knew little about him. But seeing this picture was like opening a window on a dark place deep inside. It confirmed his suspicion that there was more to life than living and dying in the Glipwood Township. Janner had never even seen a boat up close. He had watched them from the cliffs, specks cutting slow paths like ribbons through the distant waves, sailed by a crew on some adventurous errand or other. He imagined himself on his own ship, feeling the wind and the spray like the boy in the picture—

Janner snapped out of his daydream to find himself leaning on a pitchfork, up to his knees in itchy hay. Instead of feeling the ocean wind, he faced a cloud of chaff and dust shaken by Danny the carthorse, impatiently harnessed to a wagon half full of hay waiting to be carried across the field to the barn. Janner had been working since sunrise and had made three trips already, anxious to finish his chores.

Today was Dragon Day Festival and the only day of the year that Janner was glad to be in the quiet town of Glipwood.

The whole village waited all year for Dragon Day, when all of Skree seemed to descend on Glipwood. There would be games and food, strange-looking people from faraway cities, and the dragons themselves rising up out of the Dark Sea of Darkness.

As far as he knew, Janner had never left Glipwood in all his twelve years, so the festival was the closest he got to seeing the rest of the world—and a good reason to be quick about finishing up with the hay. He wiped sweat from his forehead and looked wistfully over his shoulder at a dragonfly zipping away. Then he dug into the straw with a grunt and pitched it into the wagon. As he did so, his foot caught on a stone hidden beneath the hay and he lurched forward, toppling face first into a neat, fresh pile of Danny the carthorse's nuggets.

Janner leapt to his feet, sputtering and wiping his face with fistfuls of hay. Danny the carthorse looked at him, snorted, and tore up a mouthful of grass

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while Janner ran, quick as the dragonfly, to the water trough to clean his face.

Across the field and past the fence, Janner's brother Tink (whose given name was Kalmar) straddled the cottage roof, two nails between his lips and a hammer in one hand. Tink was trying to repair a loose shingle but having a hard time of it, so violent was his trembling. When he was younger, just riding on his grandfather's shoulders made him nervous, and though he laughed, his eyes were always wide with fear until he was placed firmly on the ground again.

Podo, his grandfather, always assigned the reparation of the roof to Tink because he thought it would do him good to face his fear. But Tink, now eleven years old, was still as frightened as ever. Shaking like a leaf, he removed a nail from between his lips and hammered it into the roof as timidly as if he were hammering his own face. He looked out across the field to see Janner trip headlong into the water trough, and he wished he were finished with his chores so he could play a game of Zibzy¹ with his big brother at the Dragon Day games.

Tink was useless on the roof, but when his feet were on the solid ground he could run like a stag.

With the first tap of the hammer, the nail slipped from between Tink's fingers. He tried to catch it, missed, and threw himself down, hugging both sides of the hot roof. Nail and hammer clattered down the roof in opposite directions and over the edge. Tink groaned because it meant having to inch his way over the edge and down the ladder again. It also meant that it would be that much longer before they were able to go into town for the festival.

"Lose something?"

Tink's fear turned to grumpiness. "Just throw it back up, will you?"

1. Zibzy gained wide popularity in Skree in the year 356. A lawn game played with giant darts (hurled high into the air by the offensive team), a whacker (a flat board with a handle), and three rocks. Injuries abounded, however, and because of the public outcry the game was banned. In 372, it was discovered that a passable version of the game could be played by replacing the giant darts with brooms. For complete rules, and a deeper look into Zibzy's fascinating and bloody history, see *We Played, We Bled, We Swept* by Vintch Trizbeck (Three Forks Publishing, Valberg, 3/423).

Tink heard laughter, then the hammer flew up, end over end, and landed a few feet from him. He gathered his courage to reach near the edge and grabbed the hammer with a trembling hand just before it slid back down.

“Thanks, Leeli,” he called, trying to sound a lot nicer.

Leeli sat back down on the steps at the back of the cottage and continued peeling potatoes, humming to herself. Nugget was at her feet, tail wagging, panting in the welcome shade. Soon Leeli worked her way to her feet with a small wooden crutch and brushed the potato peelings from the front of her dress. Carrying the bucket, she limped into the house, Nugget close behind.

Her right leg twisted inward at an unnatural angle below the knee, and the toes of her bad leg trailed lightly along the wooden floor. When she was little more than a baby, she had learned to walk with a tiny crutch under her arm, and every year her grandfather made her a bigger one, each more ornate and sturdy than the last. This one was made of yew and had little purple flowers etched along its length.

Leeli plopped the bucket of peeled potatoes onto the table behind Nia, her mother, who was tossing ingredients into a large pot of stew.

“Ah, thank you, dear.” Nia wiped her hands on her apron, then pushed a few stray hairs behind her ears. She was tall and graceful, and Leeli thought her mother was so beautiful that the plain dress she wore fit her like a royal gown. Nia’s hands were strong and callused from years of hard work, but gentle enough to braid Leeli’s hair or to stroke her boys’ faces when she kissed them good night.

“Would you fetch your grandfather for me?” she asked. “He’s been in the garden gathering herbs for at least an hour now, which can only mean one thing.”

Leeli laughed. “The thwaps are back?”

“I’m afraid so.” Nia turned back to her stew just as another clatter sounded above them. Her eyes followed the sound across the ceiling to the window, where she and Leeli saw Tink’s hammer fall to the grass. A muffled moan came from the roof.

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“I’ll get it.” Leeli limped out the back door and tossed the hammer back up to Tink.

Janner loped up to the cottage, sopping wet from the waist up, bringing with him a terrible smell and a swarm of fat green flies buzzing about his head.

As Leeli limped around to the front of the cottage to find her grandfather, she heard her mother shriek and shoo Janner out of the house, where he was promptly bonked on the head by a falling hammer.

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Thwaps in a Sack

Leeli's one-legged grandfather was on his knees, growling at something in the garden. Fat red totatoes hung from the vines; round heads of lettuce burst quietly from the ground in long rows; sprouts of greenions, carrots, and sugarberries—her favorite—were yet bright and dewy.

Like Leeli, Podo got along fine with only one leg, though instead of using a crutch, he strapped on a wooden stump below the knee. He never talked about how he had lost his leg, but it was no secret that he had been a pirate in his wild youth, and he entertained his grandchildren nightly with tales of his adventures at sea.

Like the time all eighteen of his crew fell ill from eating a batch of bad ponkfin they had looted from a fishing boat near the Phoob Islands. Podo was the only one who hadn't eaten any and was left to sail the ship alone through a storm while his crew sloshed about, moaning in the hull.

"And that's not the worst of it," Podo would say. "I tell ye! That was with the Skreean Navy hot on me stern, cannons firin' and arrows whizzin' through me hair. That's how come it parts in three places, see? Still can't catch a whiff of ponkfin what I don't get the urge to trim a sail and run for cover . . ."

The Igiby children would squeal with delight, and old Podo often got so worked up that he'd need to dab the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

He was wiping his brow with the handkerchief now as he squinted through the greenion sprouts.

"Grandpa?" Leeli said from behind him.

Podo whipped his head round, waving a knotty wooden club at her. His

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long white hair was frazzled, and he looked like a mad old hag. “Eh? Watch yerself, lass. I like to have banged you on the head with me whopper.” His white, bushy eyebrows shot up and he held a gnarled finger to his lips. “Thwaps!” he hissed.

Suddenly, a small, hairy figure leapt out from beneath a totato plant and squealed.

Podo bounded after it.

Nugget, who had been whining happily, lost all restraint and pounced into the garden with a bark.

The common thwap was a little bigger than a skonk¹—not much more than a ball of fur with skinny arms and legs standing as high as the middle of Podo’s remaining shin. The old man’s club found its target and sent the little critter flying through the air, but not before another one darted out of the garden and bit Podo fiercely on his stump, with its long, yellow teeth. The first thwap crashed into the trunk of a nearby tree and dropped to the ground, where it immediately stood up and hurled a pebble at the old man. It struck Podo squarely in the forehead, and he staggered for a moment, shaking his head while he beat at the thwap whose teeth were stuck in his wooden leg.

The thwaps squealed and darted back into the garden. A moment later they reappeared, one with a totato in its furry paws, the other with an armful of carrots. They dodged another swipe from Podo’s club and shot into the garden again.

Podo roared and swung his club above his head. “Avast, foul rodents!”

A gust of wind moved the garden leaves in waves. Podo’s white hair flew out behind him, and he leaned into the breeze with a fierce set of his jaw. A thwap appeared from behind a sugarberry plant and threw another rock. Podo swung his club and sent the stone zipping back into the garden as the thwaps dove for cover.

“Aha!”

1. Bip Thwainbly, *The Chomping of the Skonk* (Publisher and date unknown).

A few moments passed as the thwaps squeaked and twittered among themselves.

Podo's face wrinkled even tighter. He lowered his club and cupped a hand over his ear, as if he could have understood them.

Suddenly, a fat, red totato whizzed through the air and burst on Podo's face.

"Not the totatoes!" Podo blinked the juice from his eyes and batted another totato away with his club. "Not my totatoes!"

Just as Leeli turned away she saw him dive into the garden, headfirst, howling all the while. She smiled and limped back to the cottage, which was thick with the smell of breakfast.

Nia tromped past her to the garden without a word, snatched two leaves from a rosepepper plant, and returned to the kitchen, ignoring Nugget's barking, Podo's howls of rage, and the thwaps sailing through the air.

Janner, who had finally managed to clean the manure from his face and hair, walked back to the house, dripping wet.

Tink, skinny as a rake, sat at the table beside Leeli. His eyes were fixed on the large pile of sausage sizzling on the stove, and the sound of his growling stomach filled the room.

"Well! That's better." Nia folded her arms and tried not to smile at Janner. "I thought I'd see you with fresh grass growing on your face by now."

Janner blushed and shook his head as he took his seat.

Leeli and Tink tried to hide their giggles, as Nia pulled up a chair and sat with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, watching her children eat. Janner stared out the window, deep in his thoughts; Tink hunched over his plate like a buzzard, eating the hotcakes and sausage as if they might try to escape; Leeli watched her brothers and fidgeted with the hem of her gown, humming and bobbing her head back and forth while she chewed.

"Eat well, my dears. It's going to be a busy day," Nia said smiling.

The children's eyes widened. "The sea dragons!" they cried in unison.

Nia laughed and pushed herself up from the table. "*The summer dusk bath split in twain the gilded summer moon, and all who come shall hear*

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again the dragons' golden tune," she sang.² "Coming just like they have for a thousand years. Finish up your breakfast and we'll go on to town. The chores will wait."

With a loud crash, the back door burst open and there stood Podo, drenched with sweat and out of breath. "THWAPS!" he bellowed, holding out a sack with something squirming and screeching inside. Podo smacked it with his club and the squealing promptly stopped.

Nugget yipped and danced at his feet, nipping at the sack.

"There are two more of the little stinkers out there, but these three"—he shook the sack—"won't be munching on any more of our vegetables, I can tell you that. Lousy, thievin' little thwaps . . ." He noticed his three grandchildren and his daughter watching him and cleared his throat. "Don't worry, now. I'll be tossin' 'em off the cliff straight into the Dark Sea after I eat a few of yer fine hotcakes, honey." He nodded to Nia, trying to sound less gruff.

Nia's mouth dropped open. "How could you throw them into the sea?"

Podo scratched his head. "Easy. See, I take this sack here, and I . . . dump it out. Over the cliff. Simple as that."

Leeli sat with her fork in her hand and a look of horror on her face. "Grandpa, you can't just kill them!" She pushed back from the table as the boys rolled their eyes. She hobbled on her crutch to her towering grandfather and looked up at him with a pitiful sweetness in her eyes.

Podo loved his little granddaughter like nothing else in Aerwiar, and she knew it.

"They're such *sweet* little things, Grandpa, and they never harm anyone."

Podo sputtered and pointed to the scratches on his arms.

Leeli didn't seem to notice. "And all they take is a few of our vegetables each year to feed their baby thwaplings. I can't believe that you would do such a thing. Please, Grandpa, don't kill the little fuzzies." She grabbed his

2. From "The Legend of the Sunken Mountains," a traditional Skrean rhyme. A later version of the tale was printed in Eezak Fencher's *Comprehensive History of Sad, Sad Songs*. See page 279 in Appendices.

shirt, pulled his face to hers, and kissed him on a grizzled cheek. “Come on, Nugget,” she said, and she left the kitchen.

The sack squealed and Podo smacked it again, but with less vigor. With a grunt, Podo plopped the sack on the floor beside the table and shoveled a hotcake into his mouth.

“Now Janner, lad,” Podo said without looking up from his plate, “It can get rowdy out there with the festivities going on, and you know the Fangs get even meaner when it looks like we Skreecans are having a grand time of it.”

“Yes sir.” Janner looked down at his plate and clenched the sides of his chair, bracing himself for what he knew was coming.

“And you’re the oldest, which bears a noble responsibility. It means—”

“It means that I have to keep an eye on Tink and Leeli and make sure they get home safely. I’ve heard the same thing every day of my life, and I’m not stupid.” Janner surprised even himself. His cheeks reddened when he saw the look of shock on his mother’s face. He knew he had gone too far, but it was too late to turn back. Years of frustration decided to explode over hotcakes that very morning. “What it means is that I’m a nanny, that I never get to do anything *I* want to do.”

Tink snorted and tried to hide his laughter by shoving another large bite into his mouth. Janner kicked him under the table, which only made Tink snort again.

“I don’t want to spend my life fretting over Tink and Leeli, following two little kids around, fussing over them like an old woman and wasting my life!”

“Son—” Podo started.

“I’m not your son! You’re not my father, and if my father were alive, he’d understand.” Janner already hated himself for what he had said. He was breathing hard, staring at the stove, afraid to look at his grandfather’s face. His chest felt hot, and tears were coming. He put a hand in his pocket and squeezed the folded drawing of his father. Like never before, he wished he were on that boat, out on the Dark Sea of Darkness, far away from Glipwood and from the way he felt right now.

Podo chewed and swallowed his hotcakes slowly, considering his grand-

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son in a heavy silence. “Tink, clear yer plate and go get dressed, laddie,” he said without taking his eyes off of Janner.

Nia stood by the stove looking at the floor with her hands on her hips.

The grizzled old man wiped his mouth with a napkin and gripped the sides of the table with his big hands.

Janner was in trouble. He knew it.

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A Stranger Named Esben

The door swung shut behind Tink as Nia pulled up a chair between Podo and Janner.

“Lad, do you know I love you?” said Podo.

Janner nodded, then added, “Yes sir.”

“I know I’m not your father. He was a good man. A brave man. He fought well and died well in the Great War, and it’s my duty to raise you children as near as I can to what your father would want.”

Janner stole a glance at his mother. She fought back tears as she stood and busied herself with clearing the plates from the table.

“Now lad, you’re getting long of leg and yer voice is getting thicker. I expect you figure you’re nearing manhood, do ye?” Podo looked at Janner with one white bushy eyebrow cocked up and the other eye squinting at him. “Speak up, lad.”

“Well, I’m twelve! I know that’s not old, but . . .” He broke off, unable to think of what to say.

“Sometimes ye feel like yer brother and sister might weigh ye down like an anchor, is that it? Sometimes ye feel like this little town’s too small for the notions in yer head?”

Janner stared at his hands. With a deep breath, he pulled the picture from his pocket. Nia stopped her cleaning as Janner unfolded the picture and spread it flat on the table. He could hold his tears back no longer; they dripped from the end of his nose onto the picture, mingling with the spray of the sea.

Nia hugged Janner’s head to her chest and smoothed his hair for a long time. “I wondered where that picture had gotten to.”

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“It’s him?”

Nia nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“And he drew it?”

“Yes.” Nia dabbed the tears from the picture with her apron. “That was a different time. A different world.” She was quiet a long moment. “Before the Fangs. Your father would want nothing more than for you to sail your own seas, and one day you will. But if he were here he would tell you the same thing your grandfather is telling you. There’s a time to sail and a time to stay put.”

“Laddie, I understand more than ye might know.” Podo’s voice was softer. “But hear me: I was there when your pa died. I didn’t see it, but I was there all the same.”

Janner looked up sharply. “You were there? What happened?”

“Aye.”

“Papa, no—” Nia said.

“It’s time he knew something of where he’s from, lass.” Podo pointed at the drawing, then at Janner. “Look at ’im. He’s the spitting image—”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything. Raising Esben’s memory from the dead will do no good. *No* good.” Nia’s voice trembled.

Janner hated seeing his mother so upset but desperately wanted to hear more. “His name was Esben?” Janner hoped to keep Podo talking.

Podo and Nia looked at him with sad eyes.

Nia kissed Janner’s hair. “No more. Please,” she said to Podo and left the room.

Janner was silent.

Podo was silent.

The thwaps in the bag were silent.

Finally, Podo cleared his throat. “Well, you must trust me. I see your father in you. He was a great man. He fought for us. *Died* fighting for us. Your wee sister and brother are treasures, same as you, and we wouldn’t have our treasures lost.” The old man leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Blood was shed that you three might breathe the good air of life, and if that means

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you have to miss out on a Zibzy game, then so be it. Part of being a man is putting others' needs before your own."

Janner thought of Tink and Leeli. The idea of always having to look out for them still galled him, but he did love them. He wanted to be a good, brave man like his father—whose name he had just heard for the first time. "Yes sir. I'll try," he said, not quite able to meet Podo's eyes. Janner folded up the picture and looked at Podo questioningly. Podo gave his permission with a nod, and Janner placed the picture back in his pocket with care.

"So, lad, since you're so old now, why don't you and your brother and sister head over to the festival without yer mother and me for a while. We still have some chores to mind. You're in charge."

"But, Mama said that Leeli couldn't—"

"Hee," Podo laughed. "I'll see to yer mother. Just keep yer sister close. Your mother and I'll be along directly. Can you handle that?"

"Yes sir," Janner said, suddenly unsure that he could.

Podo clapped his hand on the table. "Right, then. Now. There's something I need you to do for me before you three head out to the festival." He handed the sack of thwaps to Janner and lowered his voice. "Would you mind dumping these stinkers over the cliff for yer dear Podo?"

Janner's eyes widened. "What?"

"Aw, I'm foolin'," Podo said with disappointment. "I couldn't do that after Leeli's little performance." Podo reached into his pocket and handed Janner three grayish coins. He took another bite of hotcakes, swallowed and burped. "Buy yerselves some munches."

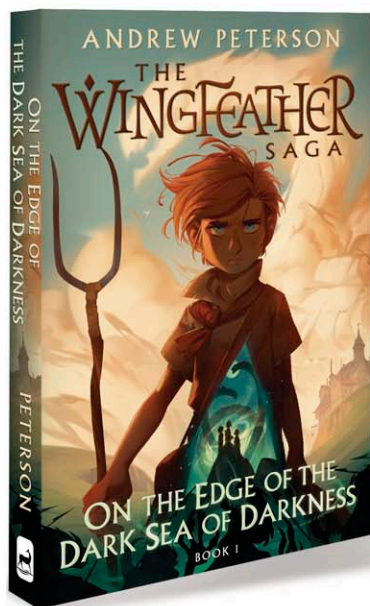
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