

--Hrothgar, the living shield--

The whole land of Fire spoke of him, his fame grew immensely when he appeared in front of the all powerful Patron of Fire, Astaroth, with a proposal. Hrothgar was a builder of great stamina and imposing stature. Coming from a known family of particularly strong, wingless dragons, his tall, muscular body combined with his mild demeanor caught the eye of women of all races. Though his passion was his craft, he has also seen the battlefield on more than one occasion, participating in great battles alongside known heroes. It was during one such battle that he began to have doubts about the power of Fire Lands. It was undeniable that their offensive capabilities were simply unmatched. However, when backed into a corner, it quickly became clear that the kingdom's defense left much to be desired.

This was the reason that forced Hrothgar to talk to the mighty Patron face to face. Preparing for the meeting, he donned his finest plate armor and quickly set off for the Patron's palace, without even making an appointment. Luck seemed to be on his side, as Astaroth's day was rather uneventful. Bored out of his mind, on this one day, he was actually happy to have an unannounced guest. The giant Crocodile agreed to an audience, if only to get some amusement from another ridiculous idea his subjects usually bring him. Soon later, Hrothgar stood before Astaroth, his imposing height completely dwarfed and diminished by the Lord's overpowering presence. Indeed, from the Giant's perspective, the dragon seemed rather small and almost cute. Hrothgar stood there in shock for a few seconds, trying to grasp the presence of the living god. Astaroth looked at the visitor and in his low, sulfurous voice, he spoke.

"You came here, so speak, dragon. What was so important that you felt the need to see me in person?"

Hrothgar took a couple of breaths, gathered his thoughts and explained to the Patron any inaccuracies in the defense of the city that he had seen. Before Astaroth had time to say anything, the dragon quickly suggested a solution.

“Walls... my lord. We should erect massive walls around the city to protect the weakest from harm during battles and break the will of any attackers dumb enough to mess with you. If you allow me, I can develop these walls for you, prepare the design and erect them. All I would need is...”

“**Slow down, dragon!**” Astaroth spoke menacingly and pierced the newcomer with his fiery gaze. Seeing the displeasure on his master's face, the builder fell silent. The giant crocodile monarch felt a momentary urge to throw the visitor out, preferably through one of the windows, but he thought about it for a moment and abandoned his initial plan. “**Even if I were to agree, why would I choose you of all my subjects? After all, if I thought your idea was a good one, I wouldn't outsource it to a nobody like yourself.**”

Hrothgar was offended by the monarch's crude words, but he kept his composure and with calmness in his voice replied. “I do not deny that you have outstanding architects my lord, but it is my family that has built houses in this city for generations. I know this city like the back of my hand, and I have participated in more than one battle at your side. I believe that I am the one who knows best where and how to erect fortifications.”

The patron, seeing the pride and confidence of the dragon, smiled mischievously. Although the urge to throw the visitor out, still most preferably through the window, remained strong, he couldn't deny indulging in his curiosity. Would the newcomer be able to accomplish what he promises? Hrothgar, while confident in his abilities, could sense he was playing with fire.

The dragon even began to doubt whether it was reasonable to catch his lord off guard like that, completely unannounced. Little did he know that this very insolence was the only thing that saved him from punishment.

"Well then!" Growled the patron, making the agitated dragon jump. **"I offer you a test, little one. Just outside our city, on a piece of barren land you will erect a section of your wall, and if I am unable to knock it down, I will let you build the rest around the city. I give you access to my builders and as much stone as you need. In a month I will come to check the fruits of your labor."** He leaned back on his throne, his amusement palpable.

And so Hrothgar, with the help of the finest builders in town, set to work. He prepared a design for a massive wall that would stand 12 meters tall, its thickness initially exceeding 3 meters. However, after careful consideration and taking into account the unimaginable strength of the monarch, Hrothgar decided on a final thickness of 5 meters. Since this was only a prototype, to minimize construction time, the dragon decided on the length to be a conservative 15 meters. When the design was ready, the dragon, along with the royal builders, began construction, making every effort to ensure that the wall was solid and perfectly executed.

As promised, on the day of the test, Astaroth left his castle and went to the outskirts of the city. When he reached the agreed spot, an impressive structure appeared in front of him. The divine being admired with interest the creation of the builder, who stood right next to it proudly puffing out his chest. The mighty crocodile stood in front of the wall for a few seconds, looking for any possible weak spots. When he didn't see any, Astaroth closed his eyes, took a big breath, and with one accurate blow, and remarkably little effort, made a massive breach in the wall, sending debris all over the area. A short moment later, the structure collapsed like a house made of particularly thin and wobbly cards.

Hrothgar stood there, his jaw open in disbelief, completely speechless. Noticing the dragon's shocked expression, Astaroth shrugged and scoffed.

"It seemed more sturdy." Hrothgar did not respond and only looked at the rubble that just a moment ago proudly represented his abilities.

"Hrothgar," the crocodile spoke coldly. **"I will give you one more chance. Build a wall that actually defies my abilities, and I will appoint you my personal architect."** After these words, he turned and walked away amused. Hrothgar gulped, and wiped sweat off his forehead, he knew that his life was on the line.

He could not afford to fail, so he once again sat down to his plans and began to make sweeping changes. He chose the hardest possible stone, which he ordered to be brought from the northern end of the land, and changed the parameters. Now the wall was to rise 18 meters, while its thickness was to exceed 8 meters, he further reinforced the entire structure with a sturdy metal frame. There was a lot of work, but he did not lose his optimism. Together with the same group of master builders, They all worked around the clock, so that after a month, this monumental structure could tower over the barren lands.

When the agreed date came, Astatorh appeared on the spot once again again.

"Well this time you impressed me, this is pretty big." Said the crocodile, noticing that the dragon's demeanor was no longer confident like last time. Hrothgar only nodded and looked vigilantly at the result of his hard work, examining the situation. He waited anxiously for the monarch to start the test. The ruler stepped in front of the wall again, took a similarly effortless swing and struck a blow at the powerful wall, but this time, apart from the cracks, the wall stood tall. The dragon's eyes shone, but the evil smile on Astaroth's face caught him off guard. He looked at the ruler, and then at the wall.

He saw that, quickly, new cracks started forming, spreading throughout the structure, and before the crocodile could turn around to look at him, the wall collapsed with a rumble that could be heard all around the city.

“Hrothgar.” the mighty crocodile spoke again, and the dragon lowered his gaze.

“I will give you one more chance. Build a wall for my glory that will be able to resist my strength, and everyone in the city will be able to admire how excellent a builder you are. This chance is your last. Don’t disappoint me again.” He smiled, proudly presenting his large set of razor sharp teeth, then he turned away and left the humbled dragon alone.

Hrothgar sat on the rubble and thought. He didn't understand why, after such a humiliating defeat, Astaroth still felt like tormenting him, but he wasn't about to give up. He assessed the damage, looked at the destroyed building and finally realized that the wall alone was not enough to stop the power of the absolute monster that was his lord. Thinking outside the box, this time he wasn't going to change the design, only improve it. He already knew what he had to do.

Another month passed, and again, working around the clock, the builders erected a new wall. When Astaroth arrived on the scene again, he noticed an unusual sight. The wall stood before him, unchanged, exactly the same as before, yet when he looked at Hrothgar, the dragon stood more proud than ever. Intrigued, the ruler walked around the wall and, rather confused, and then decided to start the test. He stood in front of its wall, just like he did twice before, took a swing and struck. Quickly, he felt some mystical pulse of energy bounce off the wall and push him away. Surprised, he almost lost balance.

The ruler stood like that for a moment, baffled, trying to understand what had actually happened, and he laid his questioning eyes upon the builder. Hrothgar approached the ruler and looked at his work, for the first time, completely unharmed. He spoke. "The last two times I noticed that you deliberately didn't use all your strength, my lord. I suspect that you would have been able to blow down any wall, even this one, if you felt like it."

"A wise observation" replied the surprised Astaroth. He was never one to shy away from a compliment. "but I still don't know why it didn't collapse this time."

The dragon smiled at the ruler. "Well, Master, from the outside it is the same wall as last time, but I have made changes on the inside. You see, I was only trying to make the wall indestructible to any physical strength, this was my mistake. Part of your strength, Lord, comes from magic. I did not account for that. So, inside the wall I had a few large crystals placed to absorb magical energy. However, your power is so great, it seems that this one could not absorb it and gave it back to you. That's the whole secret. Now I can confidently say that this wall, you will have to actually try to break down."

"Heh, good thinking, little one. Well, as promised, I will allow you to erect a wall in my honor, Defender." replied the crocodile, and, without congratulations, he turned around and walked back to his palace.

News of Hrothgar's deed carried across the land, and as work began on building the new defenses, many came to see the proud defender. The dragon later became famous during repeated sieges, when no force was enough to even scratch his walls. He repeatedly took part in battles, during which his heroic and proud nature helped him save even the weakest and most vulnerable ones. Among the inhabitants of the Fire Lands, he became known as "The Living Shield."

The man's fame grew into a legend that reached even distant lands. Many defenders took counsel with Hrothgar, bards sang songs about him, and fair young ladies went wild at the sight of the proud dragon. Years passed, and the "Living Shield" rebuilt more cities according to his designs, and now everyone knew that the land of fire was built on unmatched offense as well as defense. As for himself, it seems the dragon did not handle his fame all that well... he's still single.

