

The Mercenary's Path

D. Shylov

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Chapter 1 (Mercenaries)

The car jolted violently. While the first few bumps were bearable, now all the junk accumulated in the cabin loudly announced its presence with a clatter.

"Hey, woman! Keep an eye on the road! You could have avoided that rock," the dorth grumbled irritably from the front passenger seat.

"When you're driving, you can steer around it. But for now, shut that thing under your nose and enjoy the desert breeze," snapped Elena.

"Are you talking about the refreshing specks of sand that smack me in the face?"

"That's right! And if you call me 'woman' one more time, I'll be the one smacking your weathered face."

"Fine! But if Kara stalls again, I won't lift a single finger," the dorth snarled, turning away.

The car jolted again. The short man exhaled loudly, furrowing his brows, but kept silent. Elena barely smiled, not wanting to continue the pointless quarrel. The view outside the window was already so depressing and ruined the mood more than any quarrel could.

They were surrounded on all sides by the desert. Endless and untamed. Anyone who stepped here immediately regretted it. Grains of sand. Ugly grains of sand, the desert's tiny helpers, gave no respite. They crawled into eyes, nose, collar, even socks. There was no escaping them here. The only salvation was a settlement, with water, roofs, walls, and the usual bustle, but it was far behind them.

From somewhere up ahead came an exultant shout, similar to the excited cries of a savage who had stumbled upon something edible. Elena hit the brakes sharply, making Orum bump his nose on the windshield and puff in annoyance.

A tall, skinny man in a black coat pulled up to the car on what had once been a yellow but was now just a filthy four-wheeler. Elena disliked how people here referred to what barely resembled an ATV, but every time she corrected her partners, they looked at her as if she were out of her mind. The four-wheeler's driver killed the engine, pulled down the bandana covering the lower half of his face to reveal an unshaven chin, and let out a joyful yell, much like a five-year-old child.

"Guys, I found it! It's just a few minutes away from here. We're really lucky. The fire lizard is still young and hasn't grown too big yet. And you know what that means? Exactly! We can take it down without even breaking a sweat. Easy money."

"Al, are you sure about this? Absolutely sure? Could it be another mirage, enhanced by your late-night drinking session yesterday?" the girl asked through the grid that served as a window.

"Yes, I'm sure! And your sarcasm, not-so-young Elena, is unnecessary."

"Oh, you lanky..."

"Onward! To adventure and gold!" Al hastily cut the girl off mid-sentence, started the engine, and sped off on the four-wheeler toward their goal.

He wisely decided not to tempt fate with further jabs at his partner and, with a sense of duty fulfilled, retreated a safe distance from potential danger.

"Well then, time to get to work," the dwarf muttered under his breath.

He leaned forward and half-disappeared under the seat, searching for his battle axe. A few seconds of grunting later, the weapon successfully emerged from the depths beneath the seat.

The axe was only slightly smaller than its owner. A fine and deadly piece, forged from a special dark-red alloy that could slice through metal with minimal effort. Every time Elena looked at that formidable weapon, she felt a pang of envy. She once tried to pry out of Orum where he had gotten that masterpiece of the blacksmith's art, to which the dwarf slyly replied, "Trade secret."

Elena shook her head, forcing herself to stop admiring the axe. She passed a hand through her blond hair, the tips of which just reached her neck, and then moved on.

Within a few seconds, the car was already at full speed, trailing slightly behind the four-wheeler as it raced across the deserted lands. A plume of sand and dust billowed in its wake, settling back to the ground slowly—almost as though it were reluctant to descend.

Elena's eyes, with their narrow vertical pupils, gleamed with excitement. At last, for the first time in over ten days, she had a chance to do something wild. She couldn't stand dull routine, so whenever an assignment came along, she eagerly accepted it. "Down with boredom! Make way for reckless deeds!" was her life's motto. The same, however, couldn't be said of her partners. One of them cared only about how much the job paid—it didn't matter what he had to do, even if it involved babysitting newborn puppies all day, as long as the money was good. The other one simply didn't care at all; wherever the team went, he went too.

Elena could feel the adrenaline start to boil inside her, flooding every cell of her body and granting her an unstoppable surge of energy.

The girl, swept up in her excitement, raked the sharp claws of her left hand across the steering wheel, leaving shallow grooves behind. Because of the incredibly tough golden scales covering her fingers, palm, forearm, and shoulder, the wheel once again took damage. This unique feature of her arm had saved Elena and her partners' lives on more than one occasion, but every time she scored the steering wheel—forcing them to buy a new one—Orum never missed a chance to chide her for not keeping her claws in check and for scratching up the car's "fragile" interior.

Al, who was riding ahead, began to noticeably slow down and came to a stop within a few seconds. Elena pulled up next to the four-wheeler, turned off the engine, and stepped out of the car—making sure to grab her katana, her trusty companion in any fight. Then again, only Elena referred to that Monks' blade as a katana. Even her colleagues assumed she had simply given her sword a special name.

Confidence. That was the feeling that awakened in Elena every time she held the blade in her hand. The black hilt with red rhombuses lined up in a row; the smooth blade with three notches left by foes it had felled; the dark blue scabbard... which she had recently lost. Fleeing from two dozen nomads and accidentally dropping the scabbard along the way was, of course, a solid excuse. But Master Zin, in his time, would have beaten her half to death for such carelessness and made her trim every bush his sharp gaze could spot. And if he ever found out that she hadn't sharpened her weapon for nearly an entire season, constantly putting it off... Not even the Primal One herself could guess what he might have done to his student.

Following Elena, Orum clambered out of the car, his axe resting on one shoulder, a bulky cloth sack on the other, and clad in a brand-new chainmail shirt. He had recently bought this armor at a settlement sale. The dwarf, having a strained relationship with Lady Luck, preferred not to tempt fate. Still, when direct combat called for his involvement, he never skimped on protection.

"And what about an armored eye patch or a steel cover for your gray beard? Perhaps a cast-iron helmet for your bald head?" Al asked cheerfully, thoroughly enjoying his own jabs.

Orum wisely stayed silent, ignoring the verbal jabs aimed at him.

The sun was already halfway below the horizon, and the air was gradually filling with the blissful coolness of the night. Two emotions were etched on the faces of her companions: the relief of escaping the unbearable heat and the anticipation of battle.

"It's there, resting between the rocks. Honestly, I can't blame it—after stuffing myself with seven goats, I'd probably lie down for a nap too," Al whispered enviously as they moved a fair distance away from their vehicles.

Elena and Orum remained grimly silent—they hadn't eaten since early that morning.

After trudging on foot for a few more minutes, the trio finally stopped and silently gazed at a cluster of massive boulders, their presence in the desert a mystery. Among the enormous rocks lay the fire lizard.

What magnificent and enchanting creatures they are, so unlike humans and other humanoid beings. Take this young specimen, for instance: a deep orange hue of scales covered the entire surface of the lizard's body. Its wings, neatly folded on its back, seemed small and frail, but when fully extended, each spanned over eight cubits in length. The creature's head was adorned with spines and horns, each the size of a human palm. And the fangs protruding from its maw could strike primal fear into any unprepared observer. Truly, these are beautiful beings. But work is work. And today's job for the mercenaries was this handsome beast.

Elena quickly assessed the situation and, following tradition, decided to take control of the operation into her own hands:

"Well, here's the thing—I have an idea, but for my own peace of mind, I'll ask again. Ori, are you absolutely sure that your arm is fine?"

"Just because some nomad grazed my shoulder with an arrow doesn't mean I'll shirk my duties. I'm fine—worry about yourself instead," the dorth grumbled irritably.

"Great, then listen up. Here's the plan. Al, your job is to distract it. When I give the signal, you'll hit that lizard with fire and whatever else your heart desires—give it a real thrashing."

The lanky mercenary broke into a smug, bloodthirsty grin.

"That's easy," he replied playfully.

"Ori! What traps do we have on hand?"

"Wait! Maybe we just, you know, use the machine gun?" Al interrupted her.

"Oh, right. And who used up the last fifty rounds on nomads last season?"

"Ah, true. How could I forget? That was a blast. Maybe then we could..."

"No maybes!" the girl cut him off sharply. "Your brilliant ideas always end in deep... regret."

"You're so harsh. You need to find yourself a man who can keep you in check."

"So, what traps or bombs might make our job easier?" Elena steered the conversation back on track, ignoring the mercenary's comment.

"Well, for a creature this small, a spike mine with a one-second delay should do the trick."

"And what exactly is that?" Elena asked, deciding to clarify since memorizing their short-statured colleague's entire arsenal of traps and mines was no easy task.

"It's a small cube, no taller than half a cubit. When something steps on it—in our case, the fire lizard—a mechanism inside triggers, releasing two spikes, one upward and one downward. Each spike is three cubits long. One anchors the trap to the ground, while the other pierces the lizard, wounding it and limiting its movement. Since it's a young specimen, the scales on its belly should be thinner and not as tough as the rest of its body. That's precisely the spot the mine is designed to strike."

"That'll do. We'll set this thing up about ten cubits in front of the fire lizard's snout. Then, you take your axe and hide by the rocks to its right, while I'll position myself to its left. Once you're in place, I'll give the signal to act. Your job is to damage its right wing, and I'll take care of the left. We need to make sure it can't take off. After that, we just finish it off without any fuss. Its weak spots are the maw and the belly. That's it! Let's go!"

Elena dashed off toward the rocks to the left of the target. The dorth pulled a steel cube out of his bag, grabbed his axe, and scurried toward the lizard's snout as quickly as his short legs would carry him, trying to make as little noise as possible. Approaching the target, he set the trap with trembling hands, covered it with sand, and kept glancing nervously at the sleeping monster. Then, stepping as quietly as he could, he headed toward the rocks on the right.

Al, meanwhile, slung his shotgun over his back—it hung securely on a strap—took three steps forward, planted his feet wide apart, and dramatically rolled up the sleeves of his black coat,

revealing numerous tattoos to his colleagues. Oh, how he loved to show off. The mercenary closed his eyes, clasped his hands together, focused on his inner sensations, and directed one of his many internal streams of magical energy toward a specific design on his body. On his right arm, a tattoo in the shape of an oval lit up with a red glow. Slowly, Al began to spread his hands apart. Between them, a small fireball formed, shrouded in an orange haze. When the ball reached a size comparable to the surrounding boulders, and his arms were stretched wide, the mage opened his eyes and waited. The entire sequence of movements took him no more than five seconds.

A faint whistle sounded. With an exertion of will, Al hurled the blazing ball straight at the fire lizard's head. It wouldn't cause much harm to the beast, but there was no doubt it would wake up and turn its attention to the audacious intruder who had interrupted its slumber. Without wasting any time, the mercenary drew the shotgun from his back and froze, waiting.

The stillness of the night desert was shattered by a loud explosion—the ball had struck the creature's snout. Without hesitation, Elena and Orum charged the enemy from opposite sides. Gripping the katana's hilt with both hands, the girl began slashing through the membranes of its left wing. The dwarf, with a single powerful swing of his axe, severed the entire limb at its base.

Caught off guard, the fire lizard let out a furious roar. With a swipe of its right paw, the beast flung the small man into a rock. Orum, meeting the unyielding boulder face-first, lost consciousness and slowly slumped onto the sand.

"Hey, you vile beast! I'm right here!" Al shouted, drawing its attention. "Let's dance!"

The creature stopped roaring and charged toward the tall man with the weapon. A loud click. The mine was triggered. A second later, the unpleasant sound of flesh tearing filled the air.

"Damn it," Elena whispered.

The spike pierced the fire lizard not in the belly, as the mercenary had expected, but at the base of its tail. It didn't go all the way through but instead impaled it like a pitchfork, slightly lifting its body off the ground. This wouldn't hold it for long. The girl lunged at the writhing tail, gripping it tightly with her claws, and began pulling it back, hoping to stall the enraged lizard.

Meanwhile, Al walked toward the pinned opponent at a leisurely pace, clearly savoring the moment.

A shot. The mercenary aimed straight for the open maw. Another shot. There was a chance this could deal some damage to the enemy. A third shot. Out of ammo. Tossing the shotgun aside, the man now stood face-to-face with the lizard. His face glowed with pure madness and an insatiable thirst for victory. His arms rose parallel to the ground, and the tattoos of small arrows on his wrists flared to life. In the next moment, two streams of fire burst from his palms, directed at the enemy. But the beast had already shaken off its shock and retaliated with a fiery column of its own, its claws scrabbling furiously, desperate to move. The two forces collided, but it accomplished little. Neither side sustained significant damage, though the air around them began to noticeably heat up.

The next moment, what many would call an "unexpected turn of events" occurred. The tail, that Elena was holding tore away from the lizard's body with a sickening crunch, leaving her clutching it in her hands. Meanwhile, the creature's body, propelled by inertia, continued its charge

toward Al. Now, the man's life depended entirely on his reflexes. The mercenary deftly leapt to the side, out of the fire lizard's path.

The beast, realizing it was wounded, chose not to continue the fight and bolted away.

"Stop, you damn creature!" roared the towering brunette, his voice filled with rage, as he raised his shotgun while simultaneously pulling four shells from his pocket.

"Let it go. It won't get far anyway. Did you see those wounds? It's bleeding all over the place. It'll drop dead somewhere nearby. And if it doesn't, we can easily track it by the blood trail. Let's go find Ori instead. Our so-called warrior still hasn't come to his senses."

The colleagues found the dorth among the boulders. He lay quietly with his eyes closed, clutching his axe tightly. A lump the size of an apple had already formed on his head—a mild concussion was guaranteed. Without much ceremony, Al hoisted Orum onto his shoulder, grabbed the sack with his free hand, and headed toward the car and four-wheeler. Elena, meanwhile, picked up the short man's deadly weapon.

As they approached the vehicles, the girl—who had been calmly walking with the axe on one shoulder and the katana on the other—suddenly felt... something. It could best be described as a potent cocktail of madness, fury, and frustration.

"Well, you were right—he dropped dead nearby, and we found him easily," Al remarked, tossing the dorth's sack at his feet.

The girl was seething with anger because the scene before her was anything but encouraging: what was left of the fire lizard lay like dead weight on the car. Well, what used to be a car... Now it was a giant, mangled chunk of metal on wheels. It was beyond repair.

Elena threw the axe to the ground, swiftly pulled a kunai—also known as the Mountain spike—from behind her back, and hurled it at the carcass without aiming. The faint whistle of the blade cutting through the air was barely audible. A moment later, the weapon embedded itself deeply into the half-closed eye of the dead lizard.

"Why is it that everything always goes wrong for us? Why? Where did we mess up so badly? Huh? Ugh... Fine. Let's start unloading the stuff from the car," the girl said in a calm voice as she headed toward what remained of Kara.



Chapter one (Dorm)

"Dad! Daddy! Da-a-ad! Hey, Dad!"

"May the crawfish pinch your butts off! What is it now?" came a furious but muffled voice from a small open hatch in the deck.

"Lam needs to go to the bathroom."

"And do I really need to get up to teach my ten-year-old son how to handle his business on a ship?"

"He's afraid of polluting the river. Lam thinks that irni are watching him right now and, the moment they see his blasphemy, they'll hang him from the nearest tree."

"Ah, I clearly didn't spank you two enough when you were kids! Toss him overboard, let him splash around for a couple of minutes, do his business, and then pull him back up!"

Hearing his father's instructions, ten-year-old Lam instantly went pale. Even his deep tan, as dark as the crust of burnt bread, couldn't hide it. The boy's frightened blue eyes made it abundantly clear that there would be no convincing him—he was certain the irni were waiting at the bottom of the river, ready to drown a young blasphemer for desecrating their deity.

"He's afraid to do it, dad."

"Eat it!" The head of the family was beyond furious.

"Dorm, why do we need to eat something right now?" the younger brother asked, both frightened and curious.

"Don't mind it," Dorm said. The younger boy didn't quite grasp the meaning of those words, but Dorm knew that with a few letters swapped, it would turn into the favorite curse word of the local fishermen.

The next moment, a rusty bucket flew out of the hatch in the deck. It shot upward abruptly, only to realize mid-flight that it was far from achieving the status of an artillery shell. With a loud clang, it crashed onto the deck near Lam's feet.

"Do I need to explain what that is?" asked the voice from below.

"No! Thanks, dad!" the ten-year-old dark-haired boy replied cheerfully, grabbing the bucket.

A few minutes later, a satisfied and joyful Lam held out the rusty container, now full, to his brother.

"And what am I supposed to do with this?" Dorm asked.

"Well, we need to hide it somewhere until we dock."

"I have a better idea," the older brother said with a grin. He walked to the edge of the deck and dumped the bucket's contents into the river.

Lam let out a terrified scream. His vivid, childish imagination was already conjuring a horrifying scene: earless, pale-skinned irni with solid black pupils tightening a noose around the boy's neck while laughing maniacally. A moment more, and he might have fainted, but instead, Lam covered his mouth and put on an extremely pitiful expression.

"Oh no-o-o!" Dorm realized too late. His younger brother only ever made that face in one situation—when he had done something wrong but didn't want to get spanked for it. Usually, upon seeing this "innocent" child with an expression of genuine confusion, their parents ended up blaming everything on the older brother.

Behind Dorm stood his father. He realized this from the sharp smack upside the head that made his vision go dark for a moment.

"But..." the boy began, but didn't manage to finish, as an equally strong follow-up landed on him.

"I need ten minutes of silence. Just ten minutes. I'll untangle the net, and we'll fish. But if I tear this damn net because you're distracting me, then I'll tear into you next! Am I making myself clear?!"

"Yes," Dorm replied sullenly, rubbing the back of his head.

"Good, that's better!" the father concluded more leniently and descended back into the hold.

"Why does he always want to tear someone apart?" Lam asked cheerfully, fully realizing he wouldn't be hanged today. His face practically glowed with happiness, which, in turn, deeply irritated Dorm. Without warning, the older brother smacked the back of the younger one's head with a tense hand.

"Hey! What was that for?" the boy hissed angrily, clutching his head.

"Dad asked me to pass that along. He couldn't reach."

Lam, with a look of indignation in his eyes, stuck out his tongue at his older brother and padded off barefoot toward the bow of the ship.

In truth, what Dorm, his father, and younger brother were sailing on could hardly be called a ship. It was just an ordinary fishing boat with a cargo hold, a small but powerful engine at the stern, four oars, and remnants of green paint that looked more like moss—though perhaps that's exactly what it was. During the warm seasons, the River of Nations was teeming with such vessels, but today, no other fishermen were visible in the trio's vicinity.

Dad needed about ten more minutes to untangle the net, which meant Dorm could spend that time peacefully doing nothing. The boy scooped up some water in his hand, splashed it on his face,

neck, and the back of his head, and, with a sense of duty fulfilled toward his beloved self, sat down on the deck. Silence, still waters, and lazy tranquility—as Dad often liked to say.

Even under the unbearable heat, reeking of fish and muck, Dorm felt fantastic. The warm season had only just begun, and instead of toiling in the fields or gardens like most of his peers, he was basking in the sun, lounging on the deck.

Watching the clouds lazily drift past the River of Nations, Dorm immersed himself in his favorite daily activity—counting the days until school. According to the universally accepted dorth's calendar, there were five cold and five warm seasons. Schooling took place only during the cold seasons, known as: Golden, Platinum, Silver, Lead, and Bronze. During the warm seasons—Malachite, Emerald, Jade, Ruby, and Amber—lessons were suspended since most children were busy helping the adults. Each season consisted of forty days. Dorm grinned even wider, as it was currently the second day of the Emerald season, meaning there were still one hundred and fifty-eight days left until school resumed.

The fishing vessel drifted slowly along with the current, right in the middle of the river, forcing the crew to endure the unbearable heat. They could have traveled closer to the shore, lined with various trees whose shade would have shielded the overheated fishermen. However, there was a high risk of running aground or puncturing the hull on a rock. So, there wasn't much choice.

"Dorm! I see something!" Lam called out, sounding either confused or excited.

"What a revelation. I see things too: a field, birds overhead, and my dumb little brother," the sixteen-year-old dark-haired boy replied lazily, not even bothering to move from his spot.

"No, look! Over there! Do you see it?" the boy said, pointing somewhere ahead.

Dorm squinted slightly, straining his eyes as he carefully scanned the distance. A small cluster of reeds, a solitary tree with long branches dipping straight into the water, and beyond it, an endless, perfectly flat field covered with pale yellow wheat.

"So what? Haven't you ever seen a willow before?"

"No, to the right of the tree, do you see it?" the boy retorted impatiently.

The older brother squinted again, and this time, he did see it. What he saw sparked panic in his curly black head.

"Dad! Get up here! Dad!" Dorm tried to speak in a whisper, but the fear inside him wanted to scream, resulting in something closer to a hoarse growl.

"Well, that's it! You're doomed, my dear sons," the father replied.

"Dad, there's a fire lizard," Dorm felt sweat bead on his forehead, his heart pounding wildly, and his voice quivering as he uttered the word that began with "F."

Dad didn't respond. The tall, sturdy man, dressed only in gray shorts, silently leapt out of the hold. He scooped up Lam in one swift motion, covered the boy's mouth with his hand, and,

making as little noise as possible, jumped overboard. Dorm followed his family, plunging headfirst into the water. When he resurfaced, his father was already tying a rope to an oar mount, while Lam's head, with wide, frightened eyes, stuck halfway out of the water.

"Alright, boys! That may be a young fire lizard, but we need to get out of here as fast as we can. If it spots us, we're done for. But as long as it's busy finishing off that cow on the shore, we've got a chance to slip away."

"Dad, I'm scared," Lam whimpered.

"Son, everything's going to be fine. If we quietly hide under the riverbank, the beast will finish its meal and fly off. The key is to get out of its sight quickly."

"And what if it spots us?"

"Don't worry, son, it won't hurt us. We're in the water, and it's still young and dumb. It'll breathe fire at us, we'll dive under, and that'll be the end of it," Dad said, trying to smile, though it was clear he was wound as tight as a bowstring. "Dorm, I'll swim ahead and pull the rope. You grab onto it a bit farther back and swim second. Lam, you just hold onto the side of the boat."

"Alright, Dad," Dorm croaked, feeling himself trembling.

The man wrapped the rope around his right arm, pushed off from the boat with his legs, and began swimming in the direction opposite the fire lizard. Dorm grabbed the rope as well, doing his best to help his father. Lam obediently clung to the side of the boat, quietly sniffing.

Time dragged on unbearably slowly. Dorm felt as if they'd been towing the boat for an eternity, though in reality, not even five minutes had passed. When the boy's feet touched the muddy river bottom, he nearly shouted with joy.

A few more long and nerve-wracking minutes later, all three of them were sitting waist-deep in water, their backs pressed against the steep riverbank. The boat shielded them from the river's side.

"Dad, can I take a look?" Dorm whispered.

His father nodded wearily. The swim, towing the boat with two children clinging to it, had drained all his strength.

The boy cautiously leaned his head out of the shelter, just enough for his right eye to see something—anything. The fire lizard was gone. All that remained was trampled wheat, the remnants of the cow's carcass, and massive bloodstains. From here, they looked like tiny drops of cherry compote.

"It flew away?!" the boy asked, half-confirming his own thought.

"The beast might still be circling nearby. Let's sit tight for a bit."

Dorm returned to his previous spot next to his family, but he couldn't stay silent for long—his thoughts swirled in his young mind like eels in a bowl.

"Dad, where did it come from?"

"I don't know, son. I'm no scholar, but the fact that a winged creature managed to slip so far into the kingdom means big trouble is coming."

"We need to tell the soldiers about this!" Dorm suggested anxiously.

"Yeah! And quickly," Lam chimed in with a trembling voice, supporting his brother.

Everyone fell silent. Time seemed to flow like thick jelly through a sieve—slow and reluctant. Lam was too scared to say anything; his fear whispered that the fire lizard might still be nearby. Dorm pondered how the flying creature had managed to penetrate so far past the border. Their father prayed to every god he knew, hoping that he and his sons would live through the day.

"Looks like the beast is gone. Grab the oars, and let's get to the village," the father said as he slowly stood up, turning his head in all directions.

"But we could just use the engine and get home really fast," Lam suggested naively.

"Son, oh son," Dad smiled, "if we start the engine, the beast will be on us faster than the boat can push off from the shore. So grab an oarus, sit in the boateus, and row the watereus!" Dad always believed that the right time for a joke was right here and now.

Chapter 2 (Mercenaries)

It was well past midnight. The Sevana brightly illuminated the surrounding area, giving the buildings a sense of mystery—perhaps even intrigue. Yet, on a cosmic scale, there wasn't much to illuminate. Two dozen two-story houses built from massive reddish logs, a small market, a goat pen, and a giant tavern with the peculiar name "The Lonely Friend." The second and third floors of the establishment housed rooms for travelers. The vast basement was packed with dozens of barrels of beer and wine. The ground floor featured a visitor's hall and a kitchen.

That very late evening, the main hall of "The Lonely Friend" was bustling with people. Only about a dozen candles lit the entire room. It was fairly dim, but the faces of the visitors were still visible.

Behind the bar stood the tavern's owner—a portly, bald man with enormous black mustaches and a greasy apron. With his shrewd eyes, he scanned the faces of the visitors, deciding who needed a refill, who might want some food, and who he could chat with to extract some useful information.

Everything was as usual, except for an unfamiliar trio sitting in the corner of the hall, who wouldn't leave the owner's mind at ease. It wasn't uncommon for travelers to stop by, but for some reason, this group unsettled him.

The girl stood out the most, with her mop of light hair that barely reached her neck and a pleasant face. Her outfit wasn't particularly striking, yet it wasn't plain either: a quilted leather jacket missing its right sleeve, gray fitted trousers, brown boots, and leather gloves. She seemed like an ordinary girl—if not for her eyes. There was something off about those blue eyes, though in this dim light, anything could be imagined.

To her right sat a towering, short-haired brunette dressed in a sleeveless black shirt and dark green, loose-fitting trousers. His arms were completely covered in tattoos, and a small black triangle was positioned just beneath his left eye. This man, with sharp facial features and stubble that blended into a modest beard, was confidently and incessantly explaining something to his companions.

The last of the trio was a stocky short man with a bald crown, a long gray beard, and a black patch over his right eye. A typical representative of his race, with the reddish skin characteristic of dorths and eyes that looked as if they were outlined with kohl. His gray tank top, black trousers, and heavy boots fit perfectly into the overall style of the group.

After staring at them for a few more minutes and attempting to read their lips to discern their conversation, the tavern owner finally lost all interest in the trio. Just regular mercenaries, the kind who only cared about drinking and forgetting everything until their next side job. You couldn't even make much money off them—they'd fill up on beer and garlic croutons, and that'd be it.

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Al said, shaking his fists indignantly over the table. "Let's go over this again. Step by step. You're obsessed with melee weapons, right?"

"Exactly! Melee weapons are the true tools of a warrior. He hones his skills for years, choosing a blade or axe that becomes an extension of his hand. And in battle against an opponent, victory depends directly on the fighter's skills, his weapon, and his mind!" Orum agreed, punctuating his speech with loud bangs of his fist on the table.

"Great. Let's move on. And you hate ranged weapons, right?"

"I despise it! It insults the very essence of the word "weapon". What's noble about pulling a trigger and putting a bullet in an enemy? Even a child could do that—it doesn't require any special skill!"

"So, that's settled. You love swords and hate firearms. Moving on. You also love any kind of mechanism—like machines, traps, mines, and so on, right?"

"Exactly."

"But a rifle is a mechanism too!" Al exclaimed, frustrated by the inconsistency. "How can you hate a rifle but love a mine? They're basically the same thing!"

"Don't confuse a pile of crap with a shovel!" Orum said sternly. "A rifle is a tool for dishonest killing. But a mine or a trap—that's noble hunting."

"Gentlemen, let's finally drink to a successfully completed job," Elena interrupted the argument, which had long since begun to annoy her.

"Agreed! My friends, my dear colleagues, we took down our fourth fire lizard!"

"And wrecked two cars in the process," Orum, ever the staunch realist and grumbler, added as usual.

"Old man, you're too hard on us. Losses are unavoidable in our line of work. Better to lose a car than one of us. Oh! That's a perfect toast. Let's drink to that!" the brunette exclaimed, raising his fourth mug of beer.

Orum didn't agree with Al's statement. Calm, kind, and sensible though he was, the perpetually grumbling old man had been deeply attached to their last car. He'd even given it a name—Kara. And the fact that his beloved vehicle was now rusting and rotting somewhere in the desert weighed heavily on his mood.

Ordering another round of dark beer, Orum slammed his fist on the table again, drawing the attention of his colleagues, and said:

"I just don't get it. Why? Why live in the desert? Why haul massive logs for days just to build houses in the middle of nowhere? Why suffer through this heat every single day? Why?"

"Ohhh, my one-eyed friend," Al drawled, taking a hearty swig from his mug, "I've got a wonderful story just for you."

Elena smiled. She really liked evenings like this. She could take off her glasses without worrying that anyone would notice her unusual pupils, sip a glass of beer, and listen to tall tales.

"The answer to your current question lies in the caves. Did you see the entrance to one of them, just off the main street? The one guarded by three brutes with shotguns and a water mage?"

"Yeah."

"So, here's the deal. These days, the locals fence off those caves and post guards because they contain water, which they sell or trade for other goods with merchants and travelers. But decades ago, no one knew about these underground tunnels and natural water pools. Back then, only griffons and nomads lived in the desert since it was their ancestral habitat. For other races, these lands were dangerous and deadly. But, as always, everything happens eventually. Kren—later known as Kren the Yellow-Handed—turned thirty. He was just a small-time thug. Life offered him no bright prospects, and he simply drifted along, stealing here and there. One day, he got lucky and swiped a painting. A simple enough painting, one that could bring him more trouble than profit. He was on the verge of selling it when it turned out the artwork belonged to one of the oldest noble families in the Kingdom of Vindin, which at that time was called the Kingdom of Bitrom. The uproar was massive. Kren, after giving it some thought, came to the logical conclusion that it was time to run. The thief gathered his modest belongings and fled. He took the task so seriously and thoroughly that after a couple of seasons of being relentlessly hunted, Kren found himself in the desert. A wild and dangerous land, but better here than in a royal prison.

Half a season of wandering through the sands brought him to the entrance of a cave. Just an ordinary rocky passage leading underground. A suspicious place, but he was desperate for water—or at least some shelter from the unbearable heat. He had no choice but to go down. The cave was enormous. A vast underground lake, its surface mirror-clear. And at the bottom... at the bottom lay deposits of gold.

And so, people began moving into the desert, building settlements around the underground caves filled with gold. Years passed, and the volume of precious metal being mined grew steadily. But nothing lasts forever. Before long, the caves were emptied. The people were disheartened. What now? There was no going back—they weren't welcome there—and by then, they had grown accustomed to desert life. So, they had no choice but to stay."

"Gentlemen, I'm going to step outside for some fresh air. The buzz has really hit me," Elena interrupted the story, as Al was getting carried away, and it was unclear where or how this tale might end.

"Be careful. Around here, they like to "have fun" with lone girls," the dotrth said with evident concern.

"Ori, don't make me laugh. Have you not seen our warrior in action? She could take down a dozen cavalymen with just one of her claws. Go on, sweetheart, go whereve... whor... whi... you get me," the man said good-naturedly in a whisper.

"Well then, Master Orum, the lady's leaving us, and you know what that means? Exactly! Time to discuss delicate matters."

"Oh, how polite you've become. Must've taken some serious effort not to discuss 'delicate matters' in my presence, huh?"

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Elena rose from the table and unsteadily made her way toward the exit. The beer had thoroughly relaxed her.

Outside, a cool breeze was blowing. And, surprisingly, it was just a regular breeze—no sand in it. Strange, but pleasant. Elena closed her eyes and tilted her head back, savoring the nighttime coolness. She felt so calm and at peace. If only it could always be like this.

With an unhurried step, Elena strolled down the street. She simply wanted to take a quiet walk, far away from Al's incessant chatter.

The road was illuminated by the Sevana (the local moon, three times larger than Earth's and with a perfectly smooth surface—at least to the naked eye) and billions of stars that filled the night sky. For as long as Elena could remember, she had always loved spending entire nights gazing at them. There was a certain magic in it. Hundreds of thousands of celestial bodies frozen against the black canvas of night, forming constellations and clusters, reminding living beings of the insignificance of their existence.

Stopping in her tracks, she noticed some movement to her right, between the houses. "Could it be a stray dog? No, that silhouette's far too large for a dog. And whatever it is, it's not moving on four legs—it's on two. Oh my goodness, it's a person!" Elena thought, surprised at her own deductive skills, though not entirely sober.

A man approached her unhurriedly, dressed in a red coat embroidered with golden threads, black velvet trousers, and a long gray cloak draped over his shoulders. On his feet, he wore tall brown boots with spurs that jingled with each step, a sound that inexplicably irritated Elena. His attire was entirely out of place for these parts—or any place, for that matter. Clearly, the man was hopelessly confused about fashion, mixing styles into an unrecognizable mess. His face was clean-shaven and well-groomed, with unnaturally thin eyebrows. It was strikingly attractive, yet it evoked a sense of unease and fear. The long, sleek black hair tied neatly in a ponytail left no doubt that this man was far from a local.

"Good evening, Elena. Isn't this a delightful night?" the gentleman in the embroidered coat said pleasantly.

A scene from an old detective movie immediately came to the girl's mind. A stranger approaches the protagonist, invites them for a walk. Then, after leading them around a corner, offers a deal that could solve all their problems. But in return, demands something impossible.

"May I take a walk with you?"

Oh, great! What an unfortunate turn of events. The tipsy haze left Elena in an instant, replaced by a sharp sense of vigilance.

"Listen, fancy boy, get lost while your legs are still intact!" the mercenary replied with a feigned smile. At that moment, she regretted leaving all her weapons back in her room at "The Lonely Friend." Fortunately, she still had something up her sleeve to surprise the stranger if he decided to attack. But for now, he showed no signs of aggression. On the contrary, he appeared as friendly as could be.

"Elena, it so happens that the stars aligned, and I was coming specifically to see you," the stranger said. His head twitched, his eyes closed for a brief moment, and then a good-natured smile appeared on his face.

Seconds passed as the man stood there, smiling, while Elena tried to recall whether she had met him before. And how did he know her name?

"How do you find the local cuisine? Don't you think it's a bit... dry?"

The mercenary's eyes widened, and her face took on an expression of genuine surprise. A knife to the side from this stranger would have startled her less than that question. What did he mean by that?

"Well, I won't beat around the bush. I've never been one for long preludes, and I can see that neither are you. I have a business proposition for you. To save time on persuasion, let me just say this: I know what your sleeve and leather jacket are hiding. I also know the cause of the mutations in your body. And to completely dispel any doubts— I am very well acquainted with your mentor, Master Zin."

"Go on," Elena said in a hoarse voice after a brief pause, completely stunned. A couple of seconds with this fancy stranger, and he already knew more about her than anyone else in the world.

"I, or rather my... let's say, leader, can help return you home. And by home, I mean the place you came to us from. However, my leader requires a favor in return," the man in the coat said in a businesslike tone. "I suggest we discuss this in my car. You know, even in a place as remote as this, the walls have ears."

The man walked deeper into the alley from which he had emerged. Elena, without fully understanding why, followed him. A few meters beyond the building they passed, there stood an enormous white... "Pickup", her mind supplied, recalling a word she had heard long ago, and certainly not in this world. She had never seen vehicles like this in the desert. In fact, she had never seen anything like it anywhere in this world. Not a trace of rust, just a polished, gleaming white body. It was immediately clear this wasn't one of those clunky contraptions mass-produced by the dorths in their workshops. No, this was a custom-built vehicle, possibly even assembled by hand. Against the desert backdrop, it looked like a gentleman in a tuxedo standing in the middle of a manure pile. The warning bell of Elena's instincts was already ringing loudly inside her skull.

Next to the open rear doors of the pickup stood a dorth. His face was hidden behind a black half-mask. Two daggers hung at his belt, and it was clear he didn't carry them for decoration.

Elena climbed into the vehicle, and the doors shut behind her. The stranger walked around the pickup and settled in beside her. An awkward silence filled the air. The man pulled a small flask from the inner pocket of his coat, took a couple of sips, and then returned it to its place.

"Your task is to find the irni twins—a brother and sister. Their location is the eastern part of the Irni Valley. Once you find them, you'll need to deliver the twins to the port city of Musalem, which is north of the Monk's Mountain. In the port, you'll find a ship named "Swift Minor". That vessel will take you to the island. There, each of us will get what we desire. Any questions?"

"How am I supposed to know it's them? The eastern part of the Irni Valley covers half the country! That's an unrealistically large area to search. And anyway, what makes you think I'll believe you? Let alone agree to this wild venture?" Elena couldn't process such a massive influx of information, and the questions started spilling out of her on their own.

"The distinctive feature of these twins is their eyes—they're brown. And they each have five fingers on their hands, like humans, not three like the rest of the irni. How you find them is your problem. I'll just tell you this: they were last seen near the outskirts of the Supreme Palace. As for the rest..."

The stranger, with a mysterious smile, placed a small, elongated case into Elena's hand.

"You can always refuse. But I don't think that would be in your best interest. Until next time, Elena."

The door opened, and the man, without a trace of emotion, turned his head to the side and commanded the driver:

"Drive."

The pickup steadily picked up speed, moving away from the settlement. Stunned, Elena, unsure of what to do next, opened the small case. She felt as though her eyes might pop out of their sockets from sheer astonishment. Inside the box lay a battery. A simple alkaline battery. As a child, Elena remembered her father putting just such batteries into the remote control for the TV. The last time she had seen something like this was seven local years ago.

On her way back to "The Lonely Friend", only one question filled Elena's thoughts: "What the hell was that all about?"

Chapter 3 (Mercenaries)

Elena couldn't fall asleep. For hours, she tossed and turned, trying to banish intrusive thoughts, and only by morning did she finally doze off. But even then, her dreams were restless and grim. Faceless demons with red blotches for eyes were chasing her, intent on tearing her apart. At first, it seemed like she was managing to escape them, but the faster Elena tried to run, the slower her movements became. In the end, she was desperately flailing her limbs, but in reality, she wasn't moving at all. "If you don't do something, they'll catch you!" her rational mind screamed. Too late. They caught her. The claws of the fastest and most agile monster dug into her shoulder. An unbearable pain enveloped her entire body.

The mercenary opened her eyes. Dim light. The pillow and sheet beneath her were soaked with sweat. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest, as if trying to break through her ribcage and escape. Her head buzzed, and the heavy thoughts hadn't gone anywhere. And then there was that nightmarish dream. Elena sat up, reached for the battery on the chair, and stared at it once again.

"Alright, time to get up. I need to go to those fools and tell them about last night's meeting. How do I even start? 'Listen, last night some guy came up to me and hinted that he could send me back home, but in return, I need to find someone, bring them somewhere crawling with fire lizards!' Yeah, if I were a merchant, I'd never sell a thing with such eloquence. Oh well, I'll figure it out as I go..."

This internal monologue gave Elena a small boost of courage after the night's terrifying dream.

Getting out of bed and quickly washing up, the mercenary descended to the second floor. Creaking floorboards. Peeling walls. Strange odors. It was now clear why the "apartments" on the third floor cost significantly more. Elena found the room she was looking for and, with a groan of worn hinges, pushed open the flimsy door, its once-white paint now cracked and flaking.

A sharp stench of stale alcohol hit her nose. Elena had to open the single, grimy window to avoid suffocating and let a bit of light into this dark, manly den. Two single beds with something that could have once been called feather mattresses. A massive brown wardrobe. A chair. A painting on the wall so thick with dust it was impossible to tell whether the artist had intended to depict a horse or a poker. The only thing missing to complete the image of a bachelor's lair was a pile of smelly socks in the corner of the room.

"Guys, get up! We have a very important conversation that can't wait," Elena exhaled in resignation. No reaction.

"Rise and shine!" she shouted this time.

Al was sleeping on his stomach, his face buried in the pillow. A moment later, after another "Rise and shine," his dark-haired head twitched and began to slowly lift.

"Begone, white-haired fiend! May the eternal darkness swallow you whole for such an audacious act!" Al roared, though his eyes remained shut, and his face was still heavy with sleep.

"What?" Elena didn't quite catch his meaning.

"My dear, our precious treasure, I beg you, kindly toss your lovely self out the door—and don't forget to close the window on your way out. Much appreciated," Al's tone now resembled the sleepy purr of a tired kitten. The talking head, eyes still shut, flopped back onto the pillow with a helpless sigh.

"But this is really important!"

"She won't let us be now, will she?" the dorth spoke up this time.

"As always, my short-statured friend, you are absolutely right."

Al and Ori slowly began hauling themselves out of the beds lined against the wall. With every movement, the tall mercenary accompanied his actions with snide remarks, most of them aimed at Elena.

Not waiting for them to fully wake up, she started speaking:

"Last night, when I..."

Something slammed into the door with incredible force. A second of silence. Another blow, and the door flew off its hinges. Two figures burst into the room. The first—a well-fed dorth in a black half-mask. He lunged at Ori, pressing a dagger to his throat, right by the carotid artery. The second—a man in a dark blue leather vest. On his right arm, one of the many inscriptions in an unknown language glowed violet. A necromancer. In an instant, a purple haze wrapped around Al, paralyzing his movements. Elena was the only one left without an opponent. Wasting no time, the mercenary sprang toward the masked dorth, aiming to deliver a crushing blow with her left hand.

"If I were you, madam, I wouldn't do that," the man in the embroidered coat said with a thrill in his voice. Licking his upper lip predatorily, he stepped into the room.

"You," Elena froze in place as if rooted to the ground. She was surprised, but not too much. He had let her go far too easily last night.

"We had a good talk last night. But this morning, I realized that the information—and the motivation—was insufficient. So, I'd like to speak with all of you. May I?"

The stranger gestured toward a chair. Without waiting for an answer, he approached the rickety excuse for a seat, settled into it with an air of grandeur, and swiftly pulled a flask from his coat pocket. With practiced ease, he unscrewed the cap, took two swigs, and returned the flask to its place. His assessing gaze lingered on Elena—particularly on her arm, concealed beneath the leather sleeve of her jacket. For a split second, a satisfied smile flickered across his face. Licking his upper lip, he continued:

"Now, where was I? Ah, yes! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Sebastian. My companions here are Caleb and Elum. As for your names—I already know them quite well, so you needn't trouble yourselves with introductions."

Another long pause. This time, Sebastian's piercing gaze settled on Al, whose entire demeanor radiated hatred toward this man.

"I want you to understand right away that I am not your enemy," Sebastian said in the silky voice of a serpent tempter. "Though..." his eyes briefly rolled toward the ceiling, his face twisting into a manic grimace. "I do have a story to share with you. I ask that you do not interrupt me. If you attempt to do so, my friends will make sure you unlearn that bad habit—for life. Agreed?"

A heavy silence filled the room. The only sound was the tense, rapid breathing of all three captives.

"Let's begin. Gentlemen, your companion here probably hasn't had the chance to tell you why I need you. Don't worry—I'll do that for her. Although... no. First, I'd like to tell you what awaits you if you choose not to cooperate with me."

Sebastian rose from his chair and stepped toward the motionless Al.

"Mr. Alpacine. That's right, isn't it? Did I pronounce your name correctly?"

In response, there was only a trembling exhale—one seething with rage.

"I know all about your misdeeds—small and large, those done for noble causes, and those for personal gain. But among them, there is one..."

His tongue flicked over his upper lip, resembling a serpent ready to strike.

"...honestly, I can't even begin to imagine what they'd do to you in the Kingdom of Vindin if I were to deliver you there. But neither I—nor you, for that matter—would benefit from that. So, let's move on."

Spinning sharply on his heels with a sharp jingle of his spurs, he strode over to Ori.

"The esteemed Orum," his gaze slowly drifted downward. The man's face twitched. "Tell me, when was the last time you saw your son? It must have been a while. I, however, had the pleasure of watching him and his family just a season ago, enjoying themselves at the city fair." Once again, Sebastian's tongue flicked over his upper lip. "Fine little dorths. It would be such a shame if, due to some... unforeseen misfortune, they ended up a head shorter."

A long pause. A moment later, the man was standing right next to Elena. Running his palm along her cheek, Sebastian leaned in close to her ear and slowly whispered:

"What I can offer you, dear Elena, you already know."

A sudden sidestep. The tips of his fingers from both hands touched. Maintaining this posture, Sebastian turned back to his chair.

"Why am I telling you all this? We need the twins. The irni. A brother and sister. Your goal is to deliver them to my leader. They are of great value to him, so it is in your best interest to ensure they arrive unharmed."

The man pulled out a pocket watch, checked the time, and licked his lips.

Throughout all her years here, Elena had only seen such a luxury as a pocket watch a handful of times. They cost an outrageous amount of money. Ordinary people—whether dorths, irni, or humans—mostly relied on the sun or the large clock towers found in some towns and settlements to tell time. Life here was harsh and unforgiving. Most craftsmen who could have made affordable pocket or wristwatches instead dedicated themselves to producing weapons and cars—it was simply more profitable.

"If you're so impressive and dangerous, with your little gang of thugs, why don't you go find the twins yourself?" Al said, not even bothering to struggle anymore.

"A reasonable suggestion, Alpacine, but I have far more important matters to attend to. And given the stories and legends surrounding the three of you, I'd say you're more than capable of handling this trivial task. Ah, but listen to me rambling. Perhaps, deep inside, a great orator slumbers within me," a dreamy smile flickered across his face, "but let's get to the point. We have an agreement. Apologies, but I must take my leave. Though, I must admit, I've greatly enjoyed your company. You're such excellent listeners."

Sebastian rose from his chair and strode toward the exit.

"Oh, right! A small detail—almost forgot. Caleb, the tall one with the tattoos, will be accompanying you. To assist you on this arduous journey, of course. And, naturally, to ensure you stay on track. We're done here. I'm sure you have plenty to discuss. Caleb will be waiting downstairs. Have a wonderful day."

Elum, Caleb, and the man in the coat hurriedly left the room. The haze that had enveloped Al vanished, and in the very next second, he collapsed onto the floor.

The same thought flashed through Elena's mind as it had the night before: "What the hell was that all about?" Things were starting to take a very strange and dangerous turn.

For the next three minutes, not a single word was spoken in the room. Elena sat in an uncomfortable chair, nervously tapping the claws of her left hand against the armrest. Orum stood by the window, staring blankly at the horizon. Al, meanwhile, was finishing his second flask of water, pacing the length of the room with his long strides. The tense silence dragged on.

"Phew!" Al exhaled loudly, finally pulling away from his flask. "Thirst quenched. And now, what should we do? Exactly! Discuss today's business."

The mercenary screwed the cap back onto his now-empty flask and flopped onto the bed.

"Let's summarize this fine morning, shall we? Some fancy little peacock in an expensive coat kicks in our door, barges into our room, and sics his attack dogs on us. Then, he politely threatens us—well, more specifically, me and Ori. You, however, " he jabbed a finger in Elena's direction, "he decided to gently stroke and whisper sweet nothings into your ear. But that's just the appetizer. After that, he throws out some vague instructions about irni twins and struts off—without forgetting to leave us a personal necromancer to keep us company. Did I miss anything? No, I don't

think so. Ah, wait—one tiny detail... I've never in my life met irni twins! That race doesn't even have such a concept! Elena, care to shed some light on the situation?"

"They also have brown eyes and five fingers on each hand."

"Who?" Al was momentarily thrown off by this information.

"Well, the twins. Five fingers, brown eyes, identical like two drops of water..." Elena said it as if explaining to a small child the difference between a boy and a girl.

"Alright, we'll get back to those mutants later. What I'm more interested in is—who the hell was that creep in a dress just now?"

"I met him last night. When I stepped outside, " Elena said, staring at the floor. "Sebastian offered me a deal. His master—the one he calls his leader—will send me home in exchange for the irni." She exhaled sharply. "But whatever! You heard everything yourselves, I'm not going to repeat his words. As for details, all I know is a rough route and that we don't have any strict time limits."

"Wait, wait. So you, our great commander, listened to his offer last night and immediately agreed? Deciding that there was no need to consult with us, the lesser beings?"

"I didn't give him an answer. Neither yes nor no. I wanted to tell you everything in the morning—once you sobered up. But he got ahead of me. So don't start blaming me when you don't even know the full story," Elena said, her temper slowly starting to boil.

"Why did you even start talking to him?"

"He convinced me he was worth listening to. You know, not many people in this world are aware of nearly all my secrets."

"Oh, fantastic! Just brilliant. So this whole mess is because of you—because you were the one they really wanted, not us... You could have just told them you'd handle it yourself instead of dragging us into this."

"Al, shut up! We're all in the same boat. Blaming Elena isn't going to solve anything or make our problems go away. We need to decide what to do next," Orum said coldly, turning away from the window. Ori rarely spoke with such firmness and resolve, but when he did—it was best for everyone to stand back.

"Oh, of course. You two have nothing to lose. One of you gets a free ticket to a bright and sunny future. The other—well, they threatened to kill a son he hasn't seen in decades and probably doesn't even remember the name of anymore. Or maybe," Al stood up from the bed and clapped his hands, "the kid's already rotted away long ago, and Sebastian just wanted to scare you. Meanwhile, all I was promised..."

"Shut up! Shut your filthy mouth!" Orum roared in a fit of rage, refusing to listen to the stream of insults. "Don't you dare speak about my family like that. The only thing in this world worth caring about."

"Oh, really now?" Al snapped, leaping toward the dorth. His eyes burned with fury. "Since when did you get so sentimental, huh? Answer me, shorty! If you were the one promised a noose around your neck, what tune would you be singing then?"

"Both of you, stop! The last thing we need is to kill each other," Elena shouted desperately, yet firmly, as she stepped between the man and the dorth.

"I can tolerate your jokes and jabs. I can even endure mockery. But you have no right to insult my family! Not even with a single word!" Orum's right hand slowly clenched into a fist.

"Too big and loud words for someone as small and quiet as you," Al's voice dripped with hatred and open contempt. "Go on, hit me. Let's see what comes of it."

"You're pathetic! A petty, miserable, selfish man! You've never had a family, and you never will! Because you're not worthy of being loved or cared for. All you ever think about is your own hide and your money. And that's exactly how you'll die—alone, in some filthy gutter, clutching your last gold coin with trembling hands."

The dorth turned on his heel and quickly walked out of the room.

"You're such a bastard," Elena whispered, swung her right—normal—hand, and punched Al in the jaw with all her strength. Something cracked. The mercenary's head jerked to the side.

"Go on! Hit me back, and let's see what comes of it," Elena seethed with rage, ready to strike again—this time with her left hand.

Al was breathing like a hunted horse. A storm of emotions raged inside him. But the punch to the jaw had sobered him up—at least a little. He knew that if he started a fight now, the chances of walking away victorious were slim.

"I don't hit women," the mercenary rasped.

"Oh, so now you're noble? Or just scared?" A hint of mocking disdain slipped into Elena's words. "We're not done with this conversation," she added before turning and walking out after the dorth.



Chapter two (Dorm)

Their home village greeted Lam, Dorm and father with twilight and an unpleasantly thick fog. A gray haze hung motionless over the water's surface, creating the eerie illusion that the clouds had descended from the sky and frozen in anticipation above the river. As their small boat drifted closer, the fog eagerly embraced it, allowing them into its domain.

As they docked at the frail wooden pier, the fishermen could make out only three other boats moored alongside theirs and a few faint, scattered glows barely visible through the dense gray fog that blanketed the village. One of the settlement's oldest rules stated that at dusk, every household must light a torch and place it outside by the front door. No one remembered exactly when this tradition had begun, but every villager had known since childhood: fail to light your torch, and trouble would follow.

Through the dense fog, it was nearly impossible to see beyond ten cubits, but the silhouette of a modest, single-story hut at the end of the pier was unmistakable. Even in complete darkness, the father and his sons could recognize it. Home. Their home.

As soon as the boat touched the wooden railing and their father began securing their "ship," Lam, without a word of warning, shot onto the dock like a bolt of lightning. He sprinted toward the house, vanishing into the fog like a little ghost, his dirty heels faintly glowing in the dim light.

"Great. I wasn't planning on telling your mother about the fire lizard. But that little rascal is going to spill everything—probably with all the gory details."

"Oh, he definitely can," Dorm chuckled, helping his father secure the final knot. The day's voyage and hauling the boat on his back hadn't been for nothing—the raw blisters on his hands were proof of that.

"Well then, let's go take what's coming to us," the father said with a wink.

The door to their home was wide open, but neither father nor son could step inside. Standing in the doorway was a full-figured, brown-eyed woman with striking, expressive features—and an unmistakably fierce expression. Her arms were crossed over her ample chest, and one foot tapped impatiently against the wooden floor. It wasn't visible beneath her long brown skirt, but the measured rhythm of her sandal striking the boards made Dorm instinctively hunch his shoulders. She didn't wait for them to come any closer, likely out of concern for the potential damage their bodies might suffer. Instead, she fired off warning shots from a distance:

"Oh, you two half-witted fools! When will you start listening to me!? What did I say? He's too young for the trade! Fine, your father—that ragged old boatman—he's a lost cause, nothing short of the grave will set him straight. But you, Dorm... You're a smart boy, with a head full of brains, not dead carp! So tell me—what in the world possessed you to drag your little brother onto that leaky tub!?"

"Mother, calm down. Nothing happened. Everyone's safe and sound," the father carefully tried to interrupt the rapid-fire scolding.

"Shut your trap, you half-baked sailor! What if that beast had eaten you all alive?! What would I have done then? Losing you two blockheads, fine, I could live with that—but Lam...? Tomorrow, I'm sinking that boat, and you're both going to work the fields! It's close to home, and at least the soldiers can cover you if anything happens. And if I so much as suspect you're even thinking about getting near the water, I won't be held responsible for what I do next. And you!"—she jabbed a finger at Dorm—"You're starting evening summer school tomorrow! We didn't drag you and your brother to another village for three years just so you could spend your break talking like your father and forgetting everything you learned! Am I making myself clear?! Wash your hands and sit down for dinner!"

With that, their mother stormed inside the house.

Dorm and his father weren't in a hurry to step inside. They knew all too well—this was just the beginning. The real storm was yet to come, waiting for them at the dinner table, deep within their mother's domain.

"You know what, son? You go inside, and I'll head over to the soldiers to report the beast we saw today."

"But... Let me come with you. It's late, and walking around the village alone isn't exactly safe," Dorm tried to seize the chance to escape his impending fate.

"It's no more dangerous than staying in our house right now," his father retorted and gave him a firm shove toward the door.

Dorm was about to protest, but his father had already vanished without a trace. The boy let out a heavy sigh, squared his shoulders, and bravely stepped over the threshold.

"May fortune smile upon you, son," his father whispered with amusement, peeking from behind the corner of a neighboring hut as Dorm marched toward his fate.

The village where the father and his family lived was small, no more than a hundred and fifty souls at best, which meant around thirty houses, give or take. They were built in two rows, with a single main street running down the center. This street began at a pair of massive wooden gates and a modest barracks housing about a dozen soldiers and ended at the dock. Not long ago, by royal decree, every village and hamlet—no matter how sparsely populated—was required to house at least ten soldiers. The kingdom was vast, bandits were plenty, and King Vindin was determined to protect his subjects—or perhaps to ensure they kept no secrets from him. The common folk had plenty of theories about his true intentions.

The father needed to stop by the barracks and report the fire lizard sighting on the outskirts. By now, it had become second nature for the villagers—whenever something went wrong, they would inform the soldiers.

The farther the father walked from his house, the stronger the feeling that something was off. Persistent shouting echoed through the fog, shadows darted back and forth along the low fences, and dogs barked non-stop. Every door he passed stood wide open, yet the houses were eerily empty. Everyone in the village knew him for his uncanny instinct, and right now, it was screaming in his ear—danger was coming.

The first silhouette to emerge from the fog before him was that of a cargo truck. As the father approached the barracks, he realized there were two of them, while two more were already leaving the village.

The doors of the small two-story barracks stood wide open, with people constantly rushing in and out. Stepping over the threshold, the father froze in shock at the scene before him. In the tiny room, where previously only two duty soldiers had been stationed, now stood about fifteen troops clad in pale yellow military uniforms, along with a dozen men and women shouting at them. Adding fuel to the fire was the soldiers' commander—the only one among them carrying an automatic rifle. He tried to yell back at the people, but it was clear his efforts were getting him nowhere.

Now, all doubts were gone—something very wrong was happening in the village. The father grabbed one of the villagers with force—a lean man in his forties, someone he knew from a few fishing trips together. His name was Grygon.

"What's going on here?" the father bellowed into the man's ear.

"They're taking the kids to war!" the man shouted back.

"What the hell are you talking about? What war? We haven't fought anyone for a hundred years!"

"Tell that to my two sons—they took them and sent them off to some military training camp."

Something clenched in the father's chest.

"Who are they taking?" he asked, his voice suddenly tight.

"Boys and girls, from fifteen to twenty-five!"

Hearing these words, the father finally let go of the man, who immediately resumed shouting about his sons. But the father of the family was now thinking about his own children. Lam was safe, but Dorm was already sixteen. A thought flashed through his mind—he could hide the boy or quietly send him down the river in a boat. Better that than the army.

The man burst outside like a whirlwind and sprinted toward his home with all his might. The fog had thickened even more—he could barely see beyond his own hands. That's why he noticed the three figures emerging from nowhere far too late. He had no time to slow down or even change direction before he crashed straight into the soldiers. One was knocked flat on the ground, while the other two stumbled from the impact. As for himself, he tumbled forward uncontrollably. Upon landing, he felt a sharp crack in his right foot.

The soldiers did not take kindly to the incident, and without asking questions or bothering to investigate, they began kicking the man mercilessly, cursing him with every blow.

"That's enough, let's go. We still have three more houses to check," one of the soldiers said, noticing that his boots were already stained red, while the man on the ground barely stirred.

Chapter 4 (Mercenaries)

Visitors in the spacious hall of "The Lonely Friend" were becoming more numerous by the minute. The reason for this sudden influx of customers was simple—it was midday. Even the most reckless daredevil sought shade, food, and drink at this hour. And "The Lonely Friend" was built precisely to cater to such needs.

Opening the unassuming wooden doors of the largest building in the settlement, travelers were immediately greeted by the innkeeper's wife, who would offer them a seat at a vacant table or at the bar, where guests were served by the owner himself—a familiar figure to many locals, a bald, portly man in a grease-stained apron.

At that moment, his keen gaze, just as it had been the night before, was fixed on the mercenaries. They wore the same outfits, though the girl had now added a pair of round, black-lensed glasses with a steel frame and thin wire temples. However, it wasn't this small change in the blonde's attire that once again caught the mustached man's attention—what piqued his interest was the new addition to their group. The owner of "The Lonely Friend" had seen many different visitors in his lifetime, and with his well-honed instincts, he could tell at a glance—there was a necromancer in his establishment.

A face with no distinctive features and a mask of emotionless detachment. Dark brown, almost black eyes that evoked unease. Through his short dark hair, mystical inscriptions were visible, covering his entire scalp. Tattooed words, meaningless to the uninitiated, also sprawled across his sinewy yet wiry arms. Completing this eerie image was a dark blue vest, its dozens of pockets revealing the short metal hilts of throwing knives, devoid of any embellishments. All in all, if you ran into someone like him in a dark alley at night, you'd have to wash your pants.

Observing the suspicious quartet for a couple of minutes, the tavern owner shifted his attention to a group of noisy dorths, considering them more solvent than this rabble.

Meanwhile, among the ranks of the brave adventurers, a seed of discord was sprouting—one the size of a small barn. And the silent necromancer, merely by his presence, accelerated its growth several times over. The emotions from the morning's events had somewhat subsided, but the atmosphere was still far from friendly—about as far as walking to the River of Nations.

The three mercenaries stared intently at the necromancer, waiting. Waiting for something.

"Well?" Al asked impatiently. There was no response. "Maybe we should just slit his throat and get on with our business?"

"Kaleb, perhaps you could share some details about our joint mission? Or are we supposed to figure everything out on our own?" Elena kicked her partner under the table, forcing him to shut up.

How many thousands of times had she already told him to keep his suggestions to himself? Her instincts told her that it would be wise to first establish contact with the necromancer, figure out what kind of person he was, gather some useful information—then, depending on the situation,

maybe go for the throat. But that seemed unlikely. Elena was sure that if they did something like that, Sebastian would track them down anywhere, and a pat on the head was the last thing they'd get. For now, they had no choice but to cooperate.

Caleb remained silent as he pulled a roll of paper from his pants pocket and tossed it onto the table.

"Maybe he's deaf?" Al asked, only to receive another kick to the shin.

The man shot an angry glance at Elena, then carefully took the roll of paper between two fingers and unfolded it with visible disgust. It was a map. Orum unceremoniously snatched it from his partner's hands, placed it on the table, and smoothed it out. Two hemispheres, accurately depicting the physical and political map of the world. A route was also marked, which, judging by everything, they were supposed to follow. The starting point was on the western side of the Nomads' Desert, where they presumably were. From there, the line stretched northeast to the River of Nations, then followed its course toward the Mixed State. From there, it continued to the eastern part of the Irni Valley.

"Why don't we just head straight east, directly to the Irni Valley?" Elena asked while examining the map.

"Because going straight through would mean crossing the nomads' lands, and lately, they've become far too aggressive. They cut down any foreigners they encounter, without hesitation," Orum said in an unnervingly calm tone. Losing all interest in the map, he shifted his focus to his beloved pipe.

Caleb nodded, indicating that Ori had voiced a reasonable thought. Deep breaths could be heard from Al, who was doing his best to resist the urge to start another round of cursing.

"Caleb, what else do you have on the twins?" the girl addressed the necromancer again.

Zero response. No reaction whatsoever. He didn't even blink.

"What the hell do you need them for?" Al asked more bluntly.

Caleb slowly shifted his gaze from the wall to Al. Without taking his eyes off the mercenary, he pulled out one of his many knives and, with absolute calm, began methodically picking dirt from under his nail with the flat, leaf-shaped blade.

"Well then... We have a route. Let's assume we also have a target. But to reach it, we need to get a few things: transport, water supplies, and provisions for at least half a season. Weapons are in short supply here, so for now, we'll have to make do with what we have," Elena declared in a commanding tone, not giving her companions a chance to interrupt. "I'm listening to your suggestions."

"All of that we can buy at the local market. Good thing we have enough money after completing the fire lizard contract," Ori muttered matter-of-factly, exhaling a puff of tobacco smoke.

"I take it, our dear necrom-a-a-ancer, won't be financially contributing to the shopping, yet will be eating and drinking along with everyone else?" Al inquired with biting sarcasm. Without lifting his gaze, Kaleb simply moved from cleaning the dirt under his thumb to his index finger.

"Got it. No more questions."

"Then let's not waste time and head to the market. Let's see what we're dealing with," Elena concluded, summing up the conversation.

All four of them rose from the table and made their way toward the exit.

The street greeted the mercenaries with unbearable heat. Even though the walk from the tavern to the market took no more than a minute, it felt like an eternity as they slowly melted under the mercilessly scorching sun.

Buying a couple of barrels of water, a sack of salted meat, and a sack of hardtack wasn't much trouble. Finding grains, spices, salt, and vegetables that wouldn't spoil in such heat took a bit more effort. But when it came to the vehicles, things were downright grim. Under a low canopy beside one of the residential buildings stood three rust-covered wrecks. Yet, the price tags on their windshields ranged from three to five hundred gold pieces. Outrageous sums for such goods.

Standing to the right of these clunkers, Al managed to irritate everyone within earshot in just a couple of minutes and had already gotten into an argument with the short young seller, who wore nothing but linen shorts.

"You've completely lost your mind! Three hundred gold pieces for this wreck? Did some emperor drive it before?"

"If you don't like it, don't buy it! Limp your way to the next village and haggle there! I said, I'm not lowering the price!" the merchant shot back just as loudly.

"Well, maybe at least for half the price?" Al asked in a pleading tone.

"No!" The seller was as firm as a rock and wasn't going to budge.

"You... swamp vermin! May malarial mosquitoes feast on you, you stingy desert rat!" Al turned around and stomped off toward his waiting companions.

"We wouldn't have made it past the next cactus on that junkheap anyway," Al exhaled. "And what does that mean? Exactly! We need to come up with something."

Orum, who had been silent all this time, cleared his throat loudly, drawing attention to himself.

"Here, hold this," the dorth handed his pipe to Elena.

Approaching the farthest, slightly more intact vehicle, Ori called out to the seller.

"Sir, are these your vehicles?"

"Yeah, they're mine," the young merchant replied lazily.

"I'd like to buy this one, but the price is unreasonably high."

"I'm not lowering it."

"Then I have a proposal for you."

"I'm not agreeing to any proposals."

"At least hear me out first. In the half-hour we've been standing here, you haven't had a single buyer, and I doubt any will show up anytime soon."

"Fine," the seller reluctantly agreed.

"You will tell me everything about this vehicle! Every advantage, every flaw, every breakdown, every malfunction. Everything that works poorly or doesn't work at all. The key point here is absolute honesty. As you might have noticed, I'm a dorth. Which means I know a thing or two about cars. And if this technological marvel breaks down in the middle of the desert because of something you failed to mention, it won't be hard for me to come back here with my friends. See that unfriendly necromancer with the knives? Tearing your head off would be child's play for him," Orum finished his speech in a monotone.

"And where's my benefit in this deal?"

"After a detailed rundown of this vehicle, I will buy it for any fair price you name."

Merchant opened his mouth to say something, but dorth's last remark pleasantly surprised him.

"Agreed. Shall we start the inspection?" the seller now offered amicably.

Orum gave a firm nod.

"This beauty is five years old..." the merchant began in a businesslike tone, but Orum's eyebrow suddenly creeping toward his hairline made him pause.

"This vehicle has been running strong for ten years without a hitch..." the other eyebrow joined its runaway twin.

"Alright, this junker is over fifteen years old," the merchant admitted, realizing that the dorth actually knew his way around vehicles. Deciding not to waste time, he resolved to lay out everything as it was. "I've personally had it for five years now. A solid workhorse, but with a few... minor issues. Let's go over everything in order.

Let's start with the body. The entire frame of this vehicle consists of a single, seamless, completely resistant to any influence... layer of rust. The only exception is the hood. I made that myself. Out of wood. Pretty reliable—if you don't speed up too much. Otherwise, it starts smoking and might catch fire. That happened once. Had to carve a new one.

Moving on to the interior. Oh—just set that door aside for now. It's lightweight, so taking it off and putting it back isn't too difficult. The seats—wonderfully soft seats. Except for the back ones. You'd best avoid sitting there, unless you want a few stray spikes to accidentally skewer your spine. Safety first, after all.

What's next? The gearbox. Four-speed. Forward. Reverse. No idea what the other two gears do. Tried shifting into them plenty of times, but nothing happened. I'd recommend leaving them alone, just in case. You never know—maybe a wheel flies off or the trunk falls off.

And then we have the pedals. Gas. Brake. Everything as it should be. The steering... square."

"The steering wheel, you mean?" Orum clarified.

"No, no. I mean a square. When I bought this wild, untamed mustang, it already had a steering square. Now then, the windows. They exist. Front and back. The side ones? Someone smashed those long ago. And judging by the bloodstains, they probably used their head. I still can't scrub some of them out. But hey, that's actually a plus! When driving through the desert, no windows mean it's not as hot. The only downside is the sand. Lots of sand."

"What's that metal box under the front passenger seat?"

"Oh-ho! That? That's my pride and joy! My own invention—a stove."

"A stove?" Orum was utterly dumbfounded. "You put a stove in a desert vehicle?"

"How else did you expect it? You think traveling through the desert at night without windows isn't cold? Oh, it's freezing! So I found a solution. Of course, there are a few inconveniences. You always have to throw in more firewood. The cabin reeks of smoke. And the passenger sitting next to it? Well, they'll be roasting like a steak on a skillet.

Alright, we've covered the exterior and interior. Now, let's move on to the technical specs. Speed! This little beast can do a lot. But there's one small catch! The only way to determine how fast you're going is by watching the trees."

"Trees?" Orum asked, bewildered.

"Trees," the seller confirmed, "or rocks. Basically, any objects along the road. If they flash by too fast for you to make them out, you're going fast. If you can see them clearly, you're going slow."

"Got it," the dorth exhaled. "And what about the engine?"

"Oh, that's in great shape! I recently went over it, greased everything, replaced what needed replacing—runs like a dream. The only catch is that out of three crystal slots, only one actually works." The merchant paused, gently stroking the steering square.

"That's all?" Orum asked, trying not to breathe in the car's direction.

"Pretty much. There are some minor issues, but none that'll leave you stranded in the middle of the desert."

"Alright then... Name your price," Orum muttered bitterly.

"Y'know," the merchant said slowly, "telling you all this, it's like I just relived the last five years of absolute torment. I poured so much time, effort, money, and nerves into this car. It was in this very seat that I had my first kiss. It's the very thing that unlocked my full potential for swearing and cursing. You know what? I don't think I can sell it after all. Sorry."

The seller climbed out of the vehicle, picked up the detached door lying nearby, and walked away with it.

"P! Pathetic failure!" Al burst out laughing as Orum returned to his companions, who had taken refuge from the sun under a small canopy.

""P"! Piss off!" Orum grumbled.

Emerging from behind the corner of a building, a dorth leisurely approached the group. He was dressed in black patent leather shoes, gray trousers, and a gray jacket worn over a bare torso. Under the sun, his thick red hair gleamed like gold. His face was lit up by the friendliest smile, revealing all thirty-two teeth to the world. For Elena, this character instantly triggered a wave of nostalgia, throwing her back many years. He was the spitting image of old uncle Vasya the neighborhood drunkard—except this one was nearly half the height, stockier, well-groomed, and, strangely enough, seemed to have touched up his eyes with makeup.

"Excuse me, I happened to overhear your conversation with that scrap metal merchant. You need transport?" the dorth whispered in a smooth, seductive voice.

"Yeah, we do. But preferably one that can actually start," Al replied.

"You all seem like serious people. So, straight to business. My name is Prik, and I host races not far from here. What is the prize? A brand-new vehicle. Shall I go on?"

Orum immediately perked up. The grimace of despair vanished, replaced by a friendly smile and equally friendly eyes.

"Mr. Prik, how about we discuss this matter over a bottle of wine?" the bald dorth politely suggested.

"With great pleasure."

All five started heading toward the tavern, but Orum turned his head and silently mouthed, "I got this." With that, he made it clear the conversation was meant to be private. A minute later, both dorths disappeared through the doors of "The Lonely Friend."

"You know, I never noticed this entrepreneurial streak in our bald friend before."

"Shut up! After your antics this morning, I'm not speaking to you at all until you apologize to him," Elena said, making it clear with her entire demeanor that she had no intention of continuing the conversation.

Silence settled once again. Only the lazy shouts of merchants calling out to passersby to buy their goods and the bleating of hundreds of goats, just as exhausted from the heat as the people, filled the air.

About twenty minutes later, Orum emerged from the tavern. His cheeks and nose had already taken on a playful flush, but since his skin already had a reddish tint, the effect made it look as if he had been dabbed with beet juice. He was clearly tipsy. Almost managing to reach the rest of the team with confidence, the dorth stumbled, but his arms, sticking out in different directions, helped him regain balance just in time. Orum let out a satisfied huff.

"Alright, listen up. The race will take place over there," the dorth waved a hand vaguely to the side. "Fokr... fucr... four... crews... will taking part. Each of these, uh... crew... consists of a driver and a mage, whose job is to knock the opponents off the track. The vehicles are provided by Prik. The entry fee for participants is a hundred and fifty gold pieces." Orum slowly relayed the information, hiccuping and fumbling his words in the process. "The winner gets a brand-new ride. That redheaded swindler somehow convinced me that the prize is actually worth the risk."

"Are you sure we should take part?" Elena asked.

"I'm sure we'll win," a drunken yet sly grin spread across the dorth's face.

"I'll be the mage, that's a given," Al said. "But who's driving? Maybe Elena? At least she's got both eyes, which is kind of important for racing."

"I'll be the driver. And I need to be fresh before we start. By the way, the race begins at seven in the evening," Orum mumbled. "So get ready, fiery rooster. I'm going to sleep."

With an unsteady gait, the dorth made his way toward the tavern, whistling some tune.

"No-o-o-o-o," Al groaned miserably. "I don't want to die in the same car with that reckless drunk shorty."



Chapter 5 (Mercenaries)

Since their vehicle had been flattened into a pancake by a fire lizard a few days ago, the mercenaries and Kaleb had to travel on foot. And a trek through the desert meant a wardrobe adjustment. To shield herself from the sun and sand, Elena wrapped her right arm with a strip of light-colored fabric, put on her goggles, pulled a bandana over her head, and covered her mouth and nose with something resembling a mask. Al donned his black cloak, a bandana over the lower half of his face, and a wide-brimmed brown hat that he hadn't owned the day before. Orum threw on a shirt so washed out it had turned pale blue and topped it off with a black knitted cap. Kaleb kept it minimal—just a cloth wrapped around his neck and mouth, leaving the top of his head and arms exposed.

Half an hour of walking under the scorching sun was no casual stroll. With every step on the burning sand, Al managed to get on everyone's nerves with his endless whining. Every five minutes, Elena was tempted to slit that chatterbox's throat, but the mercenary always seemed to sense the thin line—one more word, and he'd be in for a beating.

"I hate you," Al quietly growled under his breath after a long silence.

"Who exactly are you talking to?" Elena asked, surprised by her partner's sudden statement.

The tall mercenary stopped in his tracks, bent in half, unfastened his right boot, and with all his might kicked it forward. The heavy footwear spun a few times through the air, covering an impressive distance for such a projectile, before landing in the sand sole-up.

"You can't hide now, little servant of darkness," Al declared triumphantly and rushed toward the boot, flashing a massive hole in his sock right at the heel.

He plopped down on his backside, grabbed the boot, and started shaking it with all his might.

"Looks like he's a bit overheated," Orum muttered.

"Yes! Ha-ha-ha!" Al howled in triumph as a tiny pebble tumbled out from the depths of his footwear. With a satisfied look on his face, the mercenary slipped the boot back on and marched forward as if nothing had happened.

Elena and Orum stole a glance at their new companion, as if by accident. They were both curious—how would necromancer react to Al's latest outburst? But Caleb remained as cold-blooded as ever, not even blinking—literally. More than that, he still hadn't uttered a single word.

"Orum, tell me, how do you always manage to sober up after just a couple of hours of sleep and even look refreshed?" Elena asked, more out of boredom than curiosity. "I've noticed it more than once. No matter how much you drink, even if it's till morning, a few hours of rest and you're fresh as a cucumber. Not a hint of a hangover."

"Maybe it's the result of years of practice?" the dorth replied with a mysterious smile.

"Well, we're almost there, and that means what? Exactly!" Instead of finishing his sentence, Al pulled a flask of water from beneath his coat and downed it in one go. Then he stuffed the empty flask back inside and noticeably quickened his pace, forcing Orum to break into a run.

"And now we're definitely here," Elena said fifteen minutes later. What she saw reminded her of a football stadium, like the ones her father had taken her to a few times when she was a child.

A massive oval-shaped section of the desert had been fenced off with enormous stripped logs, each about thirty cubits high, with a rusty mesh stretched between them. Inside, wooden stands had been built in two tiers, complete with a canopy. Prik had clearly poured a fortune into hauling this much lumber deep into the desert. And then he likely spent just as much again on constructing the stands. But any dorth who values himself and his reputation never does anything for free, which meant this place was bringing in an incredible profit.

Near the far stand, right on the sand, lay a heap of rusted and twisted car bodies—a kind of obstacle for the racers and a scrapyard for the losers, all in one place. Clearly, the safety of participants was of no concern to the organizers, but that was precisely why the stands were packed to capacity.

"Oh, look at all the people!" Elena exclaimed, watching the dorths, humans, and irni bustling about.

"Not surprising," Al said, pulling off his coat and slinging it over his shoulder. "What do people mostly do around here? Exactly! Survive! There's never enough food or water. It's a constant struggle for resources. Gryphuses. Nomads. And that's just scratching the surface of what these poor souls deal with daily. But no matter how bad things get, any thinking creature always craves bread and circuses. If you can manage the first, finding the second—without losing a limb—is a real challenge. That's why any large-scale entertainment event in the desert, like these races, makes the organizers mountains of coins."

"Keep moving!"

"Don't block the entrance!"

"Why would I want your vegetables? Pay the entrance fee in gold!"

"Move along, move along!"

Near the giant gates that served as the entrance to the stands, four irni were collecting coins. Watching the races from the uncomfortable wooden benches cost five gold pieces. A wooden sign with a neatly painted "5" made that clear. Quite a sum, but not too much for the locals, whose main crowd consisted of bandits and merchants.

"Hmm... Considering that this place holds around twenty thousand people and it's already half full, it makes me sick to think how much that enterprising shorty is raking in," Al remarked.

"I'm more interested in where so many people in the desert are coming from," Elena added.

"Prik should be waiting for us somewhere near the entrance. He said he'd personally greet all the participants," Orum said, turning his head in search of the red-haired dorth.

"There he is," Al waved his hand lazily toward the left.

And indeed, not far from the entrance, Prik stood surrounded by a rather motley crew. Most likely, the other race participants, waiting only for them. Seeing the mercenaries, the dorth lit up like a gold coin.

"And here come our final racers!" the red-haired shorty clapped his hands joyfully. "Follow me, everyone."

The crowd of participants moved toward the farthest grandstand, circling the "stadium" along the perimeter of the barriers. Above the arena, the roar of thousands of spectators and a dozen engines never ceased for a second. At the moment, about a dozen racers on two-wheelers were showcasing their skills, hyping up the crowd with various stunts. The audience was thrilled, watching them. Numerous jumps, flips, and other masterful tricks kept everyone entertained.

The diverse group of participants following Prik slowly made their way to the farthest grandstand. More precisely, to its rear side. Here, four identical-looking vehicles awaited their crews. All of them had their roofs cut off and featured a single seat—the driver's. A little to the side stood another vehicle, clearly larger than its roofless counterparts. But the participants couldn't get a good look at the mysterious machine—it was covered with black fabric.

Prik clapped his hands loudly several times, and before each grandstand, people in green shirts appeared on the arena. They stood out noticeably against the general backdrop, causing the audience to immediately fall silent and fix their gaze on them. The riders on two-wheelers also instantly recognized the start of the main event and quickly left the arena to take their seats in the stands.

The dorth cleared his throat, making sure his voice was crisp, and began speaking, drawing everyone's attention:

"Welcome, participants!" His clear, loud, and well-projected voice would make any orator envious. "Today, you have a unique opportunity to prove yourselves and become heroes in the eyes of this demanding crowd! Today, some of you will rise above this place, cementing your victory for years to come! And some will lose, leaving with nothing but disgrace upon their names! Participants! Turn your gaze to the iron beasts that will aid you on your path to victory!" Everyone turned their heads toward the machines. "These four marvels of dorth engineering will be your friends, your enemies, and your weapons! Each steel beast possesses its own unique trait—Speed! Durability! Maneuverability! Balance!"

The dorth fell silent, pausing deliberately to heighten the anticipation of both the participants and the spectators who managed to catch his words. Meanwhile, across the arena, beneath each grandstand, his assistants in green shirts echoed his speech, shouting roughly the same pre-rehearsed phrases to ensure the entire audience understood what was about to unfold.

With a slow, sweeping motion, Prik reached into his pocket and pulled out a small green pouch.

"Drawing lots!" His powerful voice rang out like thunder in a clear sky. "Participants! Line up!"

Eight racers slowly formed a row, grouping in pairs. The spectators immediately began sizing up the teams, shifting their gaze from one pair to another, mentally calculating who might be worth betting a dozen golden pieces on and how much that dozen could multiply if their chosen team emerged victorious.

The first in line were two dorths.. Most likely brothers, or perhaps a father and son, as they bore a striking resemblance to each other, though their exact ages were difficult to determine. Their gazes were steady and cold, exuding confidence. Both clutched identical black steel helmets in their hands. They wore matching brown jumpsuits made of reinforced leather, with additional protective plates covering vital areas of their bodies. There was no doubt—these two lived for racing, likely spending most of their lives tinkering with cars. It was strange to see them among the participants, given that the competition required a driver and a mage in each team. And everyone knew that no dorth in the world possessed magic.

Next in line were the irni. Typical representatives of their race—tall, slender, with white skin and solid pupils. For people who had never seen an irni before, the term "solid pupils" was always a bit perplexing. What did that mean? Well, quite simply, their entire eyeball was covered in a single color, without any irises, lenses, sclera, or other familiar details. The color of their eyes depended on the type of magic they wielded. Red—fire; blue—water; green—restoration and healing; gray—transmutation; black—necromancy. It wasn't the three fingers on each hand, the lack of ears, the white skin, or the blue lips that unsettled humans and dorths the most—it was those impenetrable, solid pupils.

The eyes of one of the irni, dressed in a long gray robe, were blue. The pupils of the other, clad in a ragged, dirty jumpsuit, were gray. The one in the long robe had two rather large flasks hanging from his belt, and intricate patterns could be seen on his neck. A water mage. Only they had such tattoos. And, of course, blue eyes. Looking at this team, it seemed as if they had only recently met and decided to join forces for the sake of victory. Most likely, that was the truth.

The third pair in this lineup, surprisingly, were women. Their appearance made it clear that they had been dealing with cars for more than a few years. Dirty mustard-colored tank tops, short shorts that had clearly been used more than once or twice to wipe hands stained with grease or something else, and both had their heads nearly shaved. The taller one had a belt around her waist with a dozen tools of various sizes and purposes dangling from it. The other's arms were covered in tattoos, some of them identical to Al's. A fire mage.

And finally, the last participants were Al and Orum. To someone seeing them for the first time, this duo might have also given the impression of seasoned racers.

Prik, after thoroughly shaking the contents of his pouch, approached the first pair of contestants. One of the dorths reached in and pulled out a wooden ball with the number two on it. The same process was repeated by all the participants. Orum ended up with number three.

Clearing his throat again to adjust his voice to the right tone, Prik continued:

"Now you all know which of the four steel beasts will be yours. The mechanics will inform you about the specifics of each machine, so we won't dwell on that for now. And now—the rules of the race! Each team must consist of a driver and a mage. This is the most important rule. However, since one of the competing teams consists of dorths, and as you all know, they cannot wield magic, the organizers have made an exception. They will be allowed to use incendiary rockets, which, in a way, can still be considered part of the fire element."

The murmurs of discontent among the crowd began to grow louder. Prik, paying little attention to it, continued in a booming voice:

"Now, let's move on to the race conditions! On the left side of the arena, you'll see a white line—that is the starting point. On the opposite end, there's a heap of scrap metal. The racers' task is to complete three laps while maneuvering around that pile of junk. The mages' task is to prevent their opponents from reaching the finish line. And now, for the most important part, " the dorth slowly approached the fifth vehicle and grabbed the edge of the black cloth, "the prize for winning this competition!"

Waiting a few seconds to build suspense, Prik made a swift motion and yanked off the cloth. A brief silence followed. Then, the grandstands practically exploded with roaring applause. Even the participants couldn't help but clap along.

Before them stood a masterpiece of a vehicle. A massive off-road beast, painted in a matte dark gray. Not a single trace of rust. It was either brand new or had only been driven for a few seasons at most. Every window was reinforced with thick steel bars, welded securely in place. The front bumper had been modified into a sturdy framework of thick steel pipes, clearly built to withstand heavy impact. And the final touch that made this machine a true desert juggernaut—six wheels: two in the front and four in the back.

Prik himself gazed dreamily at this beauty, letting out an involuntary sigh. The dorth shook his head, snapping out of his daze, and spoke his final words before the race began. His voice was loud, sometimes breaking into a shout:

"Let's begin this great race! Let everyone feel the significance of this moment and do everything to claim victory! Or to make sure their rivals don't! To your cars!"

The stands erupted into a deafening roar. Some spectators even tore at their clothes, screaming in wild excitement. This race would be remembered in the desert for a long time.

Chapter I (Sa-Ag)

Glass. The first thing, that Sa-Ag saw upon opening his eyes at five in the morning was glass—smudged with dust and dirt. First, the glass enclosure, and beyond it, the pre-dawn sky, already beginning to brighten. The ceiling of the room where the irni lived was made of glass, as were the walls, doors, and floor.

The barracks, attached to a small living area, was a single-story structure. So when Sa-Ag got out of bed, he saw the ground beneath his feet and the barely visible, sturdy support beams in the dim light.

A hundred push-ups. A brief rest. A hundred knuckle push-ups. Another short break. A hundred crunches. A pause. A hundred squat jumps. His body was fully awake now. Time for the mandatory connection session with the Primal One.

Sa-Ag lay on his back on the floor. He crossed his arms over his chest so that the left was on top. Then, he crossed his legs, placing his right foot over his left. His eyes closed.

Dissolve consciousness into the flow of time. Sink into the depths, feel the calm, and the barely perceptible ringing in the ears, rolling in waves like ripples from a stone thrown into water. A light tingling in all three fingers on each hand. A faint, ghostly breath. The Primal One had granted Sa-Ag permission to live through this day.

The irni opened his eyes. The same glass ceiling, only now the sky had grown much brighter. The sun would soon rise. Sa-Ag rose to his feet, feeling a surge of strength and the pulsing flow of magic coursing through him.

In the corner of the glass room stood a massive chair with a broad backrest. Sa-Ag's neatly folded belongings rested upon it. He approached the chair silently and began to dress. A black T-shirt. Wide, dark blue pants adorned with slightly lighter teardrop-shaped leaves—standard camouflage coloring. A belt with a buckle in the shape of the same teardrop-shaped leaf. Combat boots. Two holsters. The first—strapped to his right thigh, secured with straps just above the knee. The second—attached to his belt on the right side. On the left side of the belt—wide, short scabbards. A jacket with a high collar and a hood, the same color as the pants. On his back, near the right shoulder—a specially designed semicircular harness.

Now, the weapons. For any warrior, weapons are an extension of their essence, their working tool, their loyal companion.

Sa-Ag knelt beside the bed, reaching underneath to grasp the cold metal chest. His fingers clenched tightly around the handle. A sharp pull. The chest barely budged. A few more tugs, and he managed to drag it out from under the bed. The sound of metal scraping against glass produced an unbearably unpleasant screech. The irni winced instinctively. Leaning over the lid, Sa-Ag hooked a finger under its edge, lifted it, and set it aside.

Resting on a glass stand inside the chest lay his first weapon, one that had faithfully served him for many years.

A blade known as a katar. It was a sharp, elongated triangle, one cubit in length. The "H"-shaped grip was positioned perpendicularly to the blade.

Sa-Ag carefully picked up the katar with his left hand and a sharpening stone with his right. A few minutes of precise honing, and the deadly edge was ready for use. He slid it into the scabbard on his belt.

The irni removed the glass partition, revealing the second level of the chest.

Inside lay his trusted khopesh—a long, sickle-shaped sword with a two-handed grip. Sa-Ag retrieved the weapon from the drawer and meticulously set about sharpening it. Typically, the blade of such a weapon was honed only on the outer curve, but Sa-Ag sharpened both sides. Ten minutes later, the unusual weapon found its place on his back, secured in its custom holster.

Sa-Ag removed another transparent partition, revealing the bottom level of his so-called "weapon vault." There rested two pistols and six magazines, each holding ten rounds.

Four magazines were tucked into special chest pockets. Two remained for the pistols. Now, for the cleaning process—daily maintenance and lubrication of the mechanisms was an essential ritual for any firearm.

Ten minutes later, the pistols were secured in their holsters, each equipped with a clever latch mechanism that allowed for quick and effortless draws.

The sun had risen. Its rays passed unhindered through the glass walls, flooding the room with brilliant light. Soon, the soldiers would be waking up. Sa-Ag had no desire to cross paths with them. He opened the glass door, stepped into the spacious barracks, and locked it behind him. A sharp, indescribable odor hit his nose—the unmistakable stench of hundreds of worn soldier's boots.

Moving swiftly and silently, the irni crossed the sleeping quarters and entered a long glass corridor. No statues, no paintings, no weapons, or any decorations—just glass.

The barracks and the small annex where Sa-Ag lived were connected to the palace of the Supreme. The warriors stationed here were the Supreme's personal guard, including Sa-Ag himself. On paper, he held the title of Senior Watcher of the Second Ten. But that was only on paper.

Reaching the end of the corridor, the irni stopped before a set of transparent doors. Four deliberate knocks with his fist.

"Forty-three?" came a muffled question from the other side.

"The rascal by the docks."

The doors slid open without a sound. Two sentries stood inside, their faces weary and indifferent. Their uniforms were identical to Sa-Ag's.

Second floor. The Supreme's reception hall was on the fifth. Sa-Ag ascended the stairs at a steady pace. The hour was still early, and he encountered no one on his way up. Only the rich aroma

drifting through the palace indicated that the cooks were already awake and at work. Through the glass steps beneath him, he could make out a dozen dark figures bustling in the basement kitchen.

Sa-Ag lifted his gaze, looking into the distance where the residential buildings began. A vast emptiness separated the Supreme's palace from the nearest homes of ordinary irni. Not a single blade of grass grew there. Each morning, workers mowed down every trace of vegetation to nothing. As a result, a barren expanse surrounded the palace—completely visible from any point within the Supreme's residence, while at the same time allowing any resident of the capital to observe what was happening within the palace grounds.

Fifth floor. Large, transparent double doors with crystal handles. Four sentries stood at attention beside them, dressed in the same dark-blue uniforms adorned with teardrop-shaped leaf patterns.

"The Senior Watcher of the Second Ten of the Supreme's Guard has arrived by the Supreme's order."

"Proceed," one of the sentries replied grimly—the one standing closest to the door. He reached out, pushing open the right panel to let Sa-Ag inside.

The irni stepped into the room. The doors closed behind him.

Bare walls. No carpets on the floor or any other luxuries. A massive wooden desk. On the desk, hundreds of neatly stacked papers. On one side of the desk—a wooden throne adorned with wavy carvings. On the other—four ordinary chairs with high backs.

Besides Sa-Ag, there were two other irni in the room: one sat on the throne, the other occupied one of the chairs.

The first was an elderly but broad-shouldered and tall figure, a full head taller than the average irni. His weary red solid pupils radiated wisdom and confidence. His white hair was braided into a long plait, revealing two auditory openings. A simple gray everyday robe, though crafted from top-tier materials. The sleeves were rolled up, exposing several tattoos.

The second, seated in one of the chairs, was also tall but gaunt. Sharp, almost protruding cheekbones. Piercing gray solid pupils. His left hand was missing a thumb. His white hair was loose. Unlike the first, his robe was golden, with an enormous embroidered image of a bird's head—long, sharp beak included—stretching across the back.

"May the waters of the Primal One always wash over your fortune," Sa-Ag said, tilting his head to the right and closing his eyes.

"May the Primal One guide you on your life's path," replied the irni sitting on the throne, mirroring the gesture.

"May the Primal One guide you on your life's path," echoed the irni seated on the chair. His head remained in the same position, and his eyelids did not even twitch.

"Sa-Ag, Commander of the Hiddens, come in, sit," the elder in the gray robe smiled.

"Thank you, Supreme One," Sa-Ag responded and took a seat at the farthest empty chair.

"The Advisor and I were just discussing a certain detail regarding your next assignment..."

"Supreme One, with your permission, I must go carry out your directive," the irni in the golden robe interrupted. His voice was dry and rough, like fallen leaves. Only the Advisor could allow himself such boldness.

"Of course, Advisor Bi-Is, you may go," the elderly irni allowed wearily.

"May the waters of the Primal One protect you," the Advisor's voice seemed arrogant to Sa-Ag.

"May the shores of the Primal One shield you," the Supreme One replied, tilting his head to the left and closing his eyes.

Bi-Is turned around and quickly left the reception hall, closing the door tightly behind him.

"Forgive me, Supreme One, but I believe the Advisor should be hung from a branch for daring to interrupt you."

"Calm yourself, Sa-Ag. It is his job to interrupt me and offer the necessary counsel."

"I would not dare to argue with you."

"Don't be so harsh on him. I know you two don't like each other, but you are both valuable and useful irni."

"Thank you for your praise, Supreme One."

"Sa-Ag, stop it! I've told you a thousand times, we've been through so much together... Besides, there's no one else in the reception hall right now, so just Ki-Im."

"As you say, Ki-Im," the Commander of the Hidden agreed politely.

"That's better. Sa-Ag, please, let's quickly go over your new assignment so I can get some sleep. Third day without rest."

"I'm listening."

"Carnivorous mushrooms," the Supreme One exhaled wearily, handing Sa-Ag a sheet of paper covered in writing from top to bottom.

"Again?"

"Unfortunately, yes... Again. Only this time, humans are cultivating them."

"Humans? Here?"

"What was it you said about hanging someone from a branch for interrupting?"

"My apologies."

"In short, yes. You are well aware that boiled and ground carnivorous mushrooms are an expensive and highly potent drug. No one has heard anything about them for about two years. But just a season ago, two corpses were found right near the palace. Irni who died from an overdose of these mushrooms. They were discovered at night, and the traces were immediately covered up. No one in the city knows about this yet. But that's only for now. Oh, the uproar it will cause if the people find out..." The Supreme One shook his head grimly. "I've gone three days without sleep trying to deal with these growing problems. Now, back to you. I assume you already know what your mission will be?"

"Find the distributors, learn from them where the den is, and quietly eliminate everyone involved."

"Correct, but also not quite. The distributors have already been found and interrogated. You know our interrogators well, so a lot of information came to light. Near the capital—about a day's journey from it—there are three small factories growing carnivorous mushrooms. We only know the exact location of one. Your task is to go there, eliminate everyone, but first, find out who their boss is."

"Act at my own discretion? Or follow your plan?"

"Assess the situation, Sa-Ag, but I must know the name of the irni who orchestrated this entire operation."

"Irni?"

"Exactly, Sa-Ag. I am certain that an irni is the one in charge of this enterprise. A human wouldn't be able to distribute the drug in the capital."

"Understood."

"Good, Commander of the Hiddens. And one more thing. You will report the outcome of this operation directly to me, not to your Curator. No paperwork, no reports."

"Understood."

"That's not all. For this mission, the Advisor's nephew will be under your command."

"But..."

"No 'buts'! I know exactly what you're about to say."

"Forgive me, Supreme One, but I will not be babysitting some rookie on a classified operation."

"And you don't have to, Sa-Ag. I know how you feel about promotions through connections. I oppose it as well. But I cannot refuse Bi-Is."

"As you wish, Supreme One," the Commander of the Hiddens gritted through his teeth.

"Relax, I've reviewed this recruit's dossier. He's quite skilled and resourceful, so there shouldn't be any issues."

"When do I start the operation?"

"Immediately! Your team and the transport are waiting by the barracks, Commander of the Hiddens. But before you go, I have something for you."

The Supreme One pulled open a drawer beneath his desk. One by one, he placed a holster, an unusual drum-fed pistol, and a small sealed wooden box on the table. The holster was simple but made of quality leather, the kind that fastened securely to a belt. The pistol was black, with a thickened barrel and a protruding drum on either side.

"Hmm," the Commander of the Hiddens muttered thoughtfully, carefully taking the pistol into his hand. "Reinforced grip with additional metal plating, a drum for three rounds of a caliber unknown to me. May I?" he gestured toward the wooden box.

"Of course," the Supreme One replied, watching as Sa-Ag's interest in the pistol grew stronger.

Inside the box were nine dark red rounds with conical bullets. Sa-Ag picked one up for a closer look, but it didn't tell him much. He had never seen such ammunition before.

"Did I actually manage to surprise you?" the Supreme One said with a smile. "These bullets are made from a special dorth alloy. They pierce through any fire lizard like a needle through silk. But you can't fire them from an ordinary pistol. The dorth gifted me two special revolvers and eighteen rounds of this unique alloy in exchange for helping them resolve... well, you know the story. You were the one who dealt with the smugglers on their land."

"Supreme One Ki-Im, this is an incredibly valuable weapon. I believe it would be better if you kept it for yourself."

"Nonsense, Sa-Ag. In your line of work, a weapon like this will never go to waste. I insist!"

"Thank you."

"Mm," the Supreme One muttered, rubbing his eyelids.

"Requesting permission to start the operation."

"Proceed."

"May the waters of the Primal One protect you!" Sa-Ag stood up, taking his new weapon with him, inclining his head to the left and closing his eyes.

"May the shores of the Primal One shield you!"



Chapter 6 (Mercenaries)

Once, Orum tried to explain the principles behind the local vehicles and their unique features. After a two-hour lecture, Elena only managed to grasp two key points.

First, these vehicles ran on special crystals crafted by dorths in their workshops and factories. Each engine had multiple slots of different sizes where these crystals had to be inserted. They stored a special type of energy that powered the vehicle's mechanisms. Over time, this energy depleted, and for a smooth ride, the used crystals had to be replaced with fresh ones. Essentially, they functioned as both fuel and a battery.

Second, rubber wasn't used in the production of wheels. Instead, they were made from an unknown for Elena, but highly flexible metal, the manufacturing secrets of which were known only to the dorths. These specialized tires contained thousands of miniature supports inside, maintaining the wheel's round shape. As a result, they were impervious to nails, glass, and other relatively small objects. However, bullets could pierce the wheels completely, rendering them unusable. Once shot through, they couldn't be repaired—only discarded.

There was one more important feature, though it applied not just to the vehicles but to the world as a whole. There were no electronic devices here. Such technology simply didn't exist in this world. No televisions, no tape recorders, no telephones, and not even basic light bulbs. The local scientists had yet to come up with magic of that kind. The most advanced thing they had, which could be compared to the conveniences of the civilization Elena had once known, were the dorth-made crystals used in engines and lamps. But such lamps cost as much as a good pistol. So, candles, fireplaces, and fire magic were still the go-to sources of light.

A deafening roar of four powerful engines echoed across the stadium. It snapped Elena out of her thoughts about the peculiarities of local transportation. Shaking her head to clear away unnecessary musings, she focused her full attention on the sand of the arena.

The old, filthy convertibles (or at least, that's what they were called in the foreign films Elena had watched in another life) rolled up to the starting line, making it clear to the spectators that the moment they had paid for and traveled deep into the desert for was about to unfold.

"Ori, let's put our bickering aside for a while and win this damn race together," Al shouted mischievously, settling himself securely on the platform behind the driver's seat to avoid being thrown off like a cork from a bottle during sharp turns. He had wisely entrusted his cloak and hat to Elena for safekeeping.

"We'll see how you behave, chatterbox," the dorth grumbled, his irritation boundless.

"And just like that, we have a temporary truce! And what does that mean? Exactly! We need a plan. Listen up, you old grouch. The mechanic said our junk heap has average stats—meaning it's sturdy enough and not too slow. Using my brilliant brain, I've come to the logical conclusion that you should avoid clashes with the dorths, whose vehicles have tougher armor, while I'll focus on neutralizing the water irni, who could be a real pain for us. And of course, let's not forget about the charming ladies. A few well-aimed fire blasts could knock them out of the race."

“Yeah. Get ready—we’re about to start.”

“Always ready for some fun.” A glint of madness was beginning to flicker in Al’s eyes.

To the right of the starting line, a stunning young woman appeared, clad in a skimpy hip wrap, a tiny top, and holding a white handkerchief in her hands. Most of the men in the stands immediately started whistling and murmuring in approval. Only those who had come with their wives remained grimly silent. Upon spotting the nearly naked girl, their expressions turned into the utmost display of outrage and feigned indifference. Everything about them screamed at their wives, “I don’t like skinny ones. How can she shamelessly show herself in public like this?! You’re the best, my dear.” Meanwhile, the rest of the crowd was thrilled and excited. A half-naked woman with a white cloth had stepped onto the arena—this was it, the moment everyone had been waiting for.

The girl raised the white handkerchief above her head, a mischievous smile spreading across her lips. The roar of the engines grew louder. The sheer power restrained by the drivers demanded release. The handkerchief dropped. A deafening eruption of cheers. Four steel beasts tore forward, desperate for victory.

Two girls immediately took the lead. Their vehicle had a more powerful engine than the others, giving them a clear speed advantage. This instantly signaled to the rest—aha, they’re fast, which means weak armor. Time to hit them with something serious.

One of the girls, the one covered in tattoos, turned to face the other racers and raised her arms. A glowing symbol, resembling the letter “T,” flared to life on her right forearm. A moment later, two massive firebirds materialized above her head. Their blazing bodies were connected to the magician’s fingertips by two thin streams of fire. She clearly wasn’t planning to unleash them just yet, waiting for the perfect moment.

Following closely behind, though slightly trailing, were the irni. The mage—the one in the gray robe—had most of his tattoos concealed, but there was no doubt he was casting a spell. He sat on the platform behind the driver, his eyes closed, face tense with concentration. A faint bluish mist began to envelop their vehicle. The irni had decided to focus on defense.

The dorths and Al with Orum were bringing up the rear, keeping a safe distance from each other.

For now, no one attacked or rammed their opponents. Everyone was still picking up speed, studying their rivals, and assessing the track. There would be plenty of time to smash each other to pieces later.

The leading car approached the heap of scrap metal, confidently swerved around it, and sped back in the opposite direction. The other crews followed suit. As soon as the dorths and Al with Orum straightened out after their maneuver, it served as an unspoken signal—the chaos was about to begin. The real show, the reason the spectators had come, was finally kicking off.

The dorth, who played the role of a mage, abruptly pulled out two single-shot pistols with wide barrels and tried to aim, but he was being thrown around too much. The shorty shouted something to his driver, for now refraining from using his weapons.

Al caught sight of the dorth's movements from the corner of his eye, and he didn't like them one bit. The mage decided not to waste time—he had to strike first. Focusing, he directed one of the swirling streams of magical energy within him toward the oval-shaped tattoo on his skin. This time, however, he didn't bring his palms together as he usually did. Instead, he simply turned them downward, backs facing the ground. A small, pulsing fireball formed in each hand. Without wasting a second, Al flicked his left wrist, launching one of the fiery spheres at the car beside them. It hit—but not quite where he had aimed. The ball of flame left a dent in the right door of the dorths' cabriolet. The impact shook their vehicle hard, forcing them to slow down. Now, Orum was in third place, swerving erratically in all directions. He could already feel it—the shorty with the pistols wasn't going to let that attack slide. And he was right.

The enraged dorth spread his legs wide, aimed at Al, and pulled the trigger. The incendiary rocket never left the barrel—at that very moment, Al launched his second fireball. The flaming mass struck the raised pistol dead-on, detonating it. The dorth let out a wild roar, flailing his burning hand in agony.

The gap between the third and second cars widened significantly.

Meanwhile, the battle among the race leaders was just as fierce. The tattooed girl unleashed one firebird after another at the pursuing vehicle. But it was pointless. Every single one shattered against the watery dome created by the irni mage.

Driver had to turn soon, so she ceased her barrage, catching her breath. The birds drained too much energy.

The four cars veered around the bend, passing dangerously close to the stands. Drivers slammed their gas pedals to the floor. Lap two.

Orum, glancing in the rearview mirror, noticed movement on the opponents' car. Oh, that couldn't be good. One of the dorths, gripping an axe, was carefully making his way onto the hood.

"Al..." Ori started, his voice uneasy.

"I see him! Don't worry, I'll handle it! You just help me out! Hit the brakes—now!" the mercenary shouted into Orum's ear, barely heard over the deafening roar above the arena. Every spectator considered it their duty today to scream their lungs out.

The cabriolet, with the warlike, shouting dorth on its hood, suddenly began closing the distance. Orum also slowed down. When only a couple of feet remained between the vehicles, the short warrior wasted no time—he leaped forward. How much courage did this little bearded man have? Already mid-air, the dorth noticed the "W"-shaped tattoo on the tall man's shoulder and his wicked grin, but it was too late to react. A fiery wave in the shape of a semicircle formed in front of Al. With a burst of energy, the mercenary sent it surging toward his opponent. A rising hum. Boom. The wave collided with the dorth, launching him backward onto the windshield. The impact was so strong that, after shattering the glass and the steel mesh covering it, the flying warrior crashed into his driver, knocking him out of the seat. The car veered sharply to the left. At insane speed, the out-of-control vehicle smashed through one of the barriers connecting the stands, skidded a little further, and finally came to a stop.

The spectators erupted in thunderous applause. The crowd roared in triumph at such a spectacle. But after a few seconds, the excitement slightly died down—because the race was still on.

Maneuvering around the pile of scrap metal, the remaining racers pressed on, now down to six competitors. The next stretch leading up to the turn passed without any major changes or incidents. The race leaders fought to maintain their position, relentlessly bombarding the pursuers with spells. Meanwhile, Orum was pushing his machine to the limit, desperately trying to catch up with the rest. Another turn. And now—the final, third lap.

The girl, who had been relentlessly sending her fiery birds to attack the water barrier over and over, was drained. Sweat poured down her face in streams, and her hands trembled treacherously. Pausing her assault for a moment, the mage gathered the last remnants of her magical energy from different parts of her body and directed them to the same tattoo resembling the letter "T." Raising her hands above her head, she clasped her palms together and closed her eyes, focusing all her concentration on the spell. A few seconds later, she slowly spread her arms apart, her fingers twitching in a deliberate motion. Another firebird emerged, but this time, as her fingers continued to move, the bird grew in size. Soon, a massive creature with wings, nearly as large as one of the cars, was soaring above her head. Al's jaw instinctively dropped at the sight. This girl clearly knew more about fire magic than the average pyromancer. Opening her eyes, she guided her creation in a wide arc toward the irni. The enormous bird swooped behind their vehicle, suddenly diving beneath the water barrier—then exploded. Strangely, there was no characteristic blast sound. The protective sphere, unable to withstand the sheer force of the explosion, popped like a soap bubble.

The girl wiped the sweat from her forehead with a trembling hand, gave a satisfied smile, and collapsed onto the floor of the car from sheer exhaustion. She had lost consciousness. The irni sitting on the platform, maintaining the water barrier, realized that the protective sphere was gone. Slowly, he stood up, dusted off his robe, and glanced around. The pursuers were still far behind, but the lone girl behind the wheel of the leading car clearly piqued his interest. Cracking his knuckles, the irni stretched his right hand toward the race leader. The sharp-edged pattern on his neck became shrouded in a faint blue haze. Now, he just had to wait for the perfect moment. The final turn before the finish line was approaching.

When only about twenty cubits remained before the heap of scrap metal, the mage gave a slight upward jerk of his right hand. In an instant, a jagged ice spike as tall as a person erupted from the ground, right in front of the speeding car. The driver reacted in time. The vehicle swerved sharply to the left, narrowly avoiding the obstacle. She had pulled it off, but her relief was short-lived. Unable to brake in time, the cabriolet crashed into the towering pile of junk and stalled. From the upper layers, twisted metal parts and other debris began to rain down onto the track. But the irni had already made it through before the avalanche fell, and victory was already gleaming in the driver's eyes.

"Al, the irni have already passed the turn! If we don't do something now, we're screwed!" Panic was slowly creeping into Orum's voice.

"I can try to knock them off course and buy us some time, but I'm almost spent. If I push myself any further, I might pass out."

"You really need to work on your endurance. A couple of spells, and you're already gasping?" The dorth started to grumble but quickly reconsidered—now wasn't the time for that. "Do whatever you need to do! I can finish this race even without you! Just act, they're getting close!"

Their opponent's car was rapidly closing in. Al straightened to his full height and channeled the last reserves of his magical energy toward the "W"-shaped tattoo on his body.

Patience. The timing had to be perfect. A second too early or too late, and he wouldn't even graze them. The opponent's hood lined up with Orum's. Impulse. A powerful wave of fire struck the irni's cabriolet with immense force. Unable to withstand the impact, it veered sharply to the left and stalled. Success! The driver panicked, desperately trying to restart it. No luck.

"Floor it, Ori! Drive us to victory, my little bald stallion!" Al shrieked with excitement, instantly forgetting his exhaustion. "Ahhh! There's junk all over the road ahead! We're done for! You can't even see half of it with that damn face wrap!"

"Don't be scared, kid! You're about to witness what a real dorth can do," Orum grinned smugly as he steered into the final turn.

Massive chunks of battered metal lay scattered across the road, having tumbled from the peak of the scrap heap. The gaps between them were minimal, and hitting one of these surprises meant kissing victory goodbye. But not this time. Orum weaved through the debris like a seasoned racer who had been doing this his entire life. For the second time today, Al's jaw dropped involuntarily. It had been a while since something surprised him this much. Dodging the last obstacle, their car shot onto the final stretch, and the dorth slammed the gas pedal all the way down, charging toward victory.

Meanwhile, the irni finally managed to restart his cabriolet—on the seventh try. As he slowly gained speed, he noticed his opponent closing in fast. Within seconds, the two cars were neck and neck. The crowd roared in excitement, shouting things like, "Go! Push it! Take him down!"

Elena found herself standing up from her seat in the stands. It had been a long time since she'd felt such tension. Without even realizing it, she was shouting along with the crowd: "Crush him!"

The cars were neck and neck. Both mages were completely drained, leaving everything up to the drivers' skill and the power of their machines. The entire audience, as if with one mind, shot up from their seats, waiting for the final moment. Only Kaleb remained seated, but his gaze was locked onto the cars, and his right foot tapped anxiously against the floor. Not that anyone noticed.

One hundred cubits to the finish line. The irni's car suddenly began pulling ahead.

Fifty cubits — half a car length ahead.

Even the unshakable, stone-faced Kaleb couldn't take it anymore. Jumping to his feet, he muttered something under his breath, his voice tense. Out of the corner of her eye, Elena noticed one of the necromancer's tattoos glowing faintly on his arm.

Twenty cubits. In the next instant, the irni's car, which had been confidently holding first place, fell silent. Just like that, the roar of the engine running at its limit vanished.

The finish line. Elena didn't see who had crossed first—her attention was entirely consumed by Kaleb. He smiled faintly, then sat back down, slipping once more into the emotionless mask he always wore.

The crowd erupted. As one, they surged onto the arena, rushing to celebrate the victors.

Chapter three (Dorm)

When children leave the warm, cozy home of their parents—whether by choice or force—they all react differently to such a radical change in their lives.

Some weep around the clock, cursing their cruel fate, their strict parents, their crazy neighbors, the drunk relative, and everyone else they can think of—everyone except themselves, of course.

Others rejoice, thrilled to finally be free from overbearing guardianship, convinced that now, at last, their independent adult life is about to begin.

And then there are those—the majority—who simply fall into a stupor, overwhelmed by the abrupt shift in their existence. The question "What do I do now?" looms over them like an immovable boulder, threatening to split their heads open.

But when children are forcibly taken into the army, their reaction is almost always the same—fear and a crushing sense of helplessness.

Dorm had been chewing over similar thoughts in his head for about six hours now. At first, he was in despair. Then, he cycled through various scenarios of his imminent death—a stray bullet piercing his chest, a sword lopping off his head, magical fire reducing him to ashes, and countless other grim possibilities. Eventually, he grew tired of these thoughts and shifted his focus to the other recruits riding with him.

Altogether, there were twenty people packed into the covered bed of the truck—nine boys, ten girls, and a single soldier tasked with ensuring that all nineteen recruits reached their final destination.

Dressed in simple gray garments, frightened and exhausted, the future soldiers huddled together on wooden benches nailed to the truck's sides. They all looked to be about the same age, except for two boys sitting beside the soldier, who appeared to be around twenty. Dorm had seen them a few times at the docks near his home. They were speaking quietly with the soldier, occasionally exchanging smiles. It almost seemed like these two weren't being taken to the army at all, but rather heading off to work in the fields—no panic, no fear. Had they already accepted their fate?

But the expressions on the others' faces were just as miserable as Dorm's. To keep himself from spiraling back into thoughts of his impending doom, he mentally forced himself to check off the words "Nothing can be changed now" and started searching for some silver linings.

First off, he would learn how to handle weapons and become a real man. Wasn't that every boy's dream? Wasn't it this very desire—to be a soldier—that made young boys pick up the sturdiest sticks they could find and beat each other black and blue, shouting in excitement? Dorm would get to experience all of that in full now.

Second, he would get free food. Now that was a solid plus! It didn't matter if winter came, if the harvest failed, or if the rains dragged on—soldiers always got their meals.

Third...

Dorm's optimistic train of thought was cut short by a sharp slap to the top of his head.

"Are you already shell-shocked!? Get your ass out of the truck, are you deaf?"

The soldier stared at the boy, waiting. He was the last one left in the cargo bed.

"Uh-huh," Dorm mumbled and climbed out.

The sight that greeted him was anything but cheerful.

An eerily flat, trampled plain stretched endlessly in every direction. Hundreds of dusty yellow tents of various sizes and shapes dotted the landscape, with dozens of stern-faced soldiers moving among them. Groups of fresh recruits milled about, and here and there, a rare figure in civilian clothing hurried from one place to another.

Behind the newcomers loomed the military vehicle park. The majority of it consisted of off-road vehicles, stripped down to bare frames instead of armored bodies. The other dominant presence was the transport trucks, identical to the one that had brought them here. Both types of vehicles were painted in pale yellow, mottled with green patches across their exteriors.

There was no particularly deadly war machine in sight. Judging by everything, the vehicles here were meant solely for transporting soldiers and officers.

Dorm and the other eighteen recruits were lined up in a single row, each handed an apple, a piece of bread, and a single bucket of water to share. While the young ones greedily devoured their meager rations and darted frightened glances around, soldiers began to gather near their formation.

Within ten minutes, four men in faded, pale-yellow military uniforms stood before the new recruits, whose ranks had swelled by another two dozen fresh arrivals. They stared off to the right, toward the main cluster of tents, clearly displeased.

"Well, where the hell is he? He already gets first pick of the rookies, and now he's late on top of that!" one of them muttered irritably.

"And as always, you're burning with impatience, huh? Eager to grab a couple of girls and send them off to find some booze?" said the tallest of them, and all four burst into laughter. Most of the girls, upon hearing those words, exchanged horrified glances.

A moment later, the soldiers suddenly fell silent, straightened up, and directed their gazes over the heads of the recruits.

Noticing this abrupt shift in their behavior, the newcomers began glancing around, trying to figure out what had caused such a reaction. The answer wasn't long in coming.

A man was approaching the lineup of recruits. Or rather, not just a man—but a towering mass of flesh and muscle barreling toward ordinary mortals at full speed. He was absurdly tall and of an impossibly massive build. Yes, exactly, there was no other way to describe this walking war machine.

As he got closer, the recruits managed to take in more details, and their awe only grew—some even began to tremble with fear.

His face and entire head were completely shaved. The left side of his neck and shoulder were covered in old burn scars. His attire consisted solely of loose, pale-yellow trousers and a gray tank top. He was barefoot, and it was doubtful that a single pair of boots existed in all of the Kingdom of Vindin that could fit those massive feet.

The giant was armed with two daggers and a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. The arrangement of these instruments of death was highly unusual—at least, Dorm had never seen anything like it before.

A small, double-edged blade was secured in a special leather sheath on his right wrist, positioned so that the hilt slightly protruded above his knuckles.

The second dagger, which more closely resembled a short sword, was also sharpened on both sides. Its placement was somewhat perplexing—strapped along his torso on the left side, practically at the edge of his abdomen, with the hilt pointing downward. At first glance, it seemed impossible to draw this weapon in the heat of battle. However, its highly unusual sheath provided a clever solution. The backside consisted of a solid sheet of an unknown alloy, molded to fit the blade's contours. The outer side, however, featured two narrow metal strips running along the edges. To unsheathe the dagger, one had to twist it within the sheath until it clicked—only then would it release from the slots, allowing its wielder to cut down enemies with ease.

The double-barreled sawed-off shotgun was holstered on his left thigh, positioned for easy access with his left hand. After the unusual placement of his daggers, this location for a firearm seemed almost disappointingly conventional.

The massive, barefoot brute paced up and down the line twice, scanning the recruits with a quick, assessing glance before coming to a halt right in the middle. Then, in a voice more reminiscent of a bear's roar, he bellowed:

"The redhead, the skinny one, and... let's take this bug-eyed one—follow me." The last part was clearly directed at Dorm.

Three recruits hesitantly stepped out of the lineup, uncertain whether they had truly been chosen. Casting nervous glances at the rest of the newcomers, they trailed after the giant. Though he walked at an unhurried pace, his massive strides forced the recruits to break into a jog just to keep up.

They walked past dozens of different tents, soldiers, training grounds, armories, and shooting ranges. At first, all of this made a strong impression on the boys and the girl—after all, it was their first time in a military camp—but by the twentieth identical shooting range, their interest had faded. Everything here was just too monotonous.

While the recruits followed the strange barefoot giant, Dorm managed to take a good look at his fellow unlucky companions.

Redhead, unsurprisingly, turned out to be a red-haired girl, slightly older than Dorm. Her hair was woven into a thick braid, and her forehead, right up to her cold blue eyes, was covered by thick bangs. Cute freckles dotted her nose.

The second one—no surprises again—was a very tall and skinny guy, about eighteen years old. He also had bangs, but while they suited the girl, his were perfectly straight and reached the middle of his forehead.

Dorm himself probably didn't look any better at the moment: thick black hair sticking out in all directions, tattered pants, and a dirty shirt.

The recruits turned past another medium-sized yellow tent and stopped in a small clearing. The ground was completely trampled, without a single trace of grass, and enclosed on three sides by a hastily assembled wooden fence, about waist-high.

The giant turned to face the trio.

"From now on, I am your captain, your teacher, your father, your mentor. In the army of the Kingdom of Vindin, we have no names—only military nicknames. You will call me Boar, and you will address me with respect. As for you greenhorns, from now on, you're Redhead, you're Twig, and you're Bug-Eyed. Any questions?"

All three remained silent, cautiously glancing at their new commander from beneath their brows. They had plenty of questions, but none were in a hurry to ask them.

"To at least establish some kind of contact and get acquainted, tell me about yourselves," the bear-like voice boomed, leaving no hint of friendliness. It made them want to take off running as far away as possible—maybe even to another country.

At this suggestion, Redhead tensed up, while Twig broke into a cold sweat and started trembling slightly. Dorm had no choice but to take the first hit. He stepped forward and, trying not to stammer, began:

"My name is Dorm. I'm sixteen. Son of a fisherman. I have no training in warfare."

Boar nodded approvingly, and Dorm stepped back into place.

"My name is Kravchik. I'm twenty-four. I have a wife and a little daughter. I paint," Twig blurted out nervously.

"How old?"

"Who?"

"Your daughter!" the giant thundered so loudly that Kravchik's knees nearly buckled.

"Three."

"Name?"

"Kr... Kravchik," the recruit stammered.

"Not yours! Your daughter's!"

"Mama. I mean Mi... M-Mika. Her name is Mika."

Boar gave him a barely noticeable nod, making Twig sweat even more, then turned his glare to the girl.

"I'm Redhead, I'm seventeen, and I'm a future warrior of the Kingdom of Vindin," the girl declared, not breaking eye contact with the giant.

"Ha!" Boar bellowed so loudly that Kravchik flinched in fear. "See that, brats? A woman, and yet she figured out how things work around here faster than you two. Learn from her!"

Without waiting for any response, their new commander turned around, took off his weapons, his shirt, and carefully hung them over the fence.

"And now, a little initiation," the giant cracked his neck and his knuckles for emphasis. "Attack me. However you can."

Dorm, of course, expected something like this, but maybe in three weeks—after they at least taught him something.

Boar raised his hands and clenched his fists at face level. The giant was dead serious. Strangely enough, Redhead was the first to charge. She took a couple of confident steps forward and, keeping her palm straight and tense, swung it at the man. Or at least, she tried. Because as her open hand came at him, Boar simply swiped his massive paw in return.

Whatever she had been hoping for, it clearly didn't work. A second later, she was already sprawled on the ground, groaning in pain as she crawled off to the side.

"Bug-Eyed, maybe it's your turn now!?" Boar bellowed in all seriousness, not even sounding mocking. Did he really expect a sixteen-year-old fisherman's son to put up any kind of fight against a seasoned warrior the size of a house!?

A surge of adrenaline shot through Dorm's head, sending his thoughts into a chaotic frenzy. And then, a phrase from his father surfaced—something he had said a few years back when three bullies had beaten him up: "Son, if you ever have to take on a brute and you can't back out, aim between the legs and run."

Deciding to follow that simple yet effective strategy, Dorm cautiously approached his new commander.

Unlike Redhead, he didn't charge headfirst at the enemy. He tensed up, stopped two steps away from Boar, and—by pure chance—glanced into his eyes. There was no mockery, no pity, not even anger. Only pure focus. Boar snorted and, without moving from his spot, swung his massive left fist, aiming straight for Dorm's cheek. Dorm had always been naturally quick, so it wasn't too difficult for him to duck low and avoid the strike. He was already preparing to unleash his devastating attack when...

BAM!

A filthy, barefoot heel, the size of his entire head, slammed right into his forehead. It was the first time in the young fisherman's life that he had ever blacked out.

Chapter II (Sa-Ag)

"Ka-As, to the right, stop behind the tall bush."

The inconspicuous dark blue van smoothly changed direction. Driving over the blue grass that had never seen wheels before, the transport of the Hiddens came to a halt.

The day was nearing its end, but the sun had not yet disappeared beyond the horizon. Because of this, a very strange atmosphere reigned in the forest. The last rays of sunlight pierced through the blue leaves, filling the air with warmth, yet the dark coloration of the foliage added gloom and coolness.

"I'm going to scout the target. First, Second, survey the surroundings. Ka-As, handle the briefing and make sure the new Third understands the situation."

"My name is..." the young irni with blue solid pupils began to speak but couldn't finish his sentence. Two fingers tightly gripping his throat stopped him.

"Don't you dare argue with me or interrupt, Third!" Sa-Ag's voice was quiet and insidious, like the hiss of a snake ready to strike its prey at any moment. "From now on, I am your Commander, and you will speak to me as an equal only when I allow it."

"Commander, orders received. Should we begin carrying them out?" the driver asked.

"Yes, Ka-As, proceed. If I don't return in an hour, start the mission without me. We cannot return to the Supreme One empty-handed." The fingers released the young irni's throat.

Sa-Ag, sitting in the front passenger seat, slightly opened the door. A couple of ever-present mosquitoes immediately flew into the van's cabin, emitting an irritating high-pitched buzz. The Commander of the Hiddens swatted away the most persistent one and leaned forward. Right under the door lay exactly what he needed—a decently sized dry stick. He picked it up from the ground and wedged it between the door and the frame, leaving a wide gap.

The irni placed his hands on his knees and closed his eyes. Focusing, he directed the strongest magical flow into the tattoo on his back. His body obediently responded to the manipulation. His head began to shrink and wither. Muscles lost their mass, the process accompanied by an unpleasant cracking sound. Three seconds passed, and on the seat where Sa-Ag had just been, his camouflage uniform and weapons lay in limp folds. Only a small lump remained where his stomach had been. And that lump began to move, expand, and twist. A snake's head peeked out from the sleeve. Without giving the van's passengers a chance to examine it, the creature slithered toward the slightly open door. In an instant, the long, gray body of the reptile disappeared from the vehicle's interior.

"First, Second! Scout the area! Third—you stay with me," the driver commanded after the departure of the Commander of the Hiddensf.

Two irni, their hoods pulled down to their noses, opened the van's rear doors and disappeared into the forest just as silently.

"Rookie, do you have any pressing questions before I brief you on our mission?" Ka-As leaned back against the seat and tilted his head, staring at the ceiling.

"Why do you call me Third?" There was a hint of offense in the voice of the young, proud warrior.

"The Commander of the Hiddens Sa-Ag assigns numbers to all his subordinates."

"He calls you by name."

"That privilege must be earned, Third. Sa-Ag acknowledges strength and loyalty, and those qualities only surface in the irni over time," Ka-As was starting to get irritated by this newcomer. "Any more pointless questions?"

"No," the young irni replied with irritation. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Here's our mission." Ka-As shoved a crumpled piece of paper into Third's hand. "Read it, newbie. Meanwhile, I'll take a nap. Stay alert. Wake me if anything happens."

"But you were ordered to brief me and bring me up to speed, not leave me to figure it out on my own," the voice was firm and indignant.

"Go ahead and complain to your direct Commander about it," Ka-As said indifferently, with a faint hint of mockery. He pulled up his hood and settled more comfortably into the lowered seat.

The next twenty minutes in the van passed in silence and calm. Only then did First and Second return, slipping into their seats soundlessly and beginning to clean their weapons.

"First, Second," the newcomer finally broke the silence, tearing his gaze away from the crumpled sheet. "Doesn't it bother you that you're called by numbers instead of the names given by the Primal One?"

"Never ask such pointless questions again," First replied, casting a discreet glance at Ka-As, who was dozing.

"Your job is to follow orders, not to flaunt your uniqueness and eloquence, newbie," Second added without looking up from cleaning his pistol.

The conversation was over. First and Second moved on to sharpening their knives, while Third continued studying the text on the sheet.

The sun had set. An impenetrable darkness immediately enveloped the forest. All its inhabitants fell silent, leaving only the faint rustling of tree crowns stirred by a gentle breeze.

A soft thud against the open door of the vehicle broke the natural tranquility. In an instant, Ka-As yanked off his hood, sat upright, and fixed his expectant gaze on Sa-Ag's attire.

The gray snake slithered into the sleeve and disappeared into the camouflage jacket. For about twenty seconds, nothing happened. Then the once-motionless jacket began to swell. Small, wrinkled fingers emerged, followed by the sickening crunch of bones. The hood lifted. A few more loud snaps, and Sa-Ag returned to his former state.

"Report," the Commander of the Hiddens ordered, his voice weary and slightly disoriented.

"Briefing completed," Ka-As responded crisply.

"Nothing detected on the outskirts," First reported. The newcomer wisely chose to remain silent.

"We move out in five minutes," Sa-Ag said, now with more confidence and clarity.

"What are the scouting results, Commander of the Hiddens?" the driver asked.

"A large hangar. The first floor has rows of carnivorous mushrooms. The second floor is a living space. Ten people. Two at the entrance on the stairs. Two patrolling the perimeter along the barbed wire. The rest are on the second floor, including their leader—a heavyset man with glasses. I need him alive. Also, there are three kolnuses. Right now, they're asleep, and waking them is difficult. But they can sense irni blood instantly. The entire surrounding area is littered with traps. Step into one, and you're done for. Does everyone know the weak spots on a kolnus?"

"I don't, Commander of the Hiddens Sa-Ag," the newcomer stated confidently.

"The neck and frontal area are not covered by plates. That's where you strike." Without waiting for further questions, Sa-Ag continued, "Ka-As, First, Second—you handle the people and clear the hangar. The kolnuses are mine and Third's. Is everyone's weapon ready?"

All four nodded in affirmation.

"May the waters of the Primal One protect us," Sa-Ag murmured quietly.

"May the shores of the Primal One shield us," First, Second, and Ka-As responded. Third remained silent—his nerves before the upcoming mission had drained him of all the words he had learned since birth.

The forest was dark and stifling. The wind, which had just recently rustled the leaves, had vanished. The night birds made no sound. The forest sensed something ominous and fell into silence.

Five shadowy figures, blending seamlessly with their surroundings, approached the barbed-wire fence. Three silhouettes silently broke away and moved along the perimeter. Two remained in place.

Sa-Ag peered into the darkness, trying to see if he had missed anything important. The massive wooden hangar and the eerie silence surrounding it were unsettling, filling him with a sense of unease.

In his left hand — katar. In his right — khopesh. He needed to find a weak spot in the fence. The most vulnerable point was where two strands of barbed wire intersected. Sa-Ag quickly located it. With the katar, he pulled one strand downward, while the khopesh lifted the other upward, creating an opening. The newcomer slipped through first. Sa-Ag followed. Now, the irni were on enemy ground. The katar went into its sheath. The khopesh onto his back. A pistol now rested in his right hand. Third held a rifle with a shortened rifle.

Two shadows silently crossed the exposed section of the territory, visible from the second floor, and pressed against the hangar wall. All clear. Sa-Ag moved first. Third followed closely, trying to step exactly in his tracks.

A loud snap. Then a dull thud—the sound of a rifle hitting the ground.

Sa-Ag turned his head, raising his pistol toward the source of the noise in one swift motion. A fleeting spark of fury flickered in the Commander of the Hiddens' eyes at what he saw.

Third stood frozen behind Sa-Ag, both hands clamped over his mouth, his breath rapid and muffled. Suppressed groans occasionally slipped through his fingers. His right leg was caught in a trap, droplets of blood visible against the metal jaws. If Sa-Ag had been young and inexperienced, he might have panicked. But Commanders of the Hiddens were never young or inexperienced.

He knew without a doubt—just a few more seconds of hesitation, and the kolnuses would be upon them. A course of action formed in his mind faster than the irni could reach for the katar in its sheath.

Sa-Ag stepped in close to the newcomer. The H-shaped grip of his blade settled into its familiar place in his left palm. The Commander of the Hiddens leaned in even closer, whispering into Third's ear with cold disdain:

"Mistakes are not forgiven among the Hiddens."

The katar shot upward in a swift, deadly motion. The blade slid effortlessly into the neck, three-quarters of its length vanishing beneath the skin. The bloodied tip emerged from the other side. A sharp yank backward. The blade tore free. A fountain of blood followed. Now the kolnuses would come. All three of them.

Sa-Ag pried open the trap that had clamped onto Third's leg, then dragged the convulsing body away from the hangar—toward the open space between the building and the fence. There would be more room to fight there. A guttural howl echoed close by.

The Commander of the Hiddens calmly stepped five paces away from what was now a corpse, tossing his crescent-shaped khopesh to the opposite side of the body. Then he took a few more steps back. He closed his eyes. Sa-Ag's clothing, no longer containing a body, crumpled to the ground.

Three massive beasts burst from behind the corner of the hangar. Even on all fours, they were as tall as Sa-Ag. Their bodies were covered in armored plates. Their elongated muzzles,

reminiscent of a dog's, bore small, beady black eyes. Their limbs resembled human hands, but with long, razor-sharp claws.

The beasts had been drawn by the scent of blood, now pooling in excess beneath the newcomer's body. The three kolnuses surrounded the corpse, tearing into it without the slightest suspicion that another irni was present.

Sa-Ag, now transformed into a snake, lay hidden near the discarded khopesh, waiting for the creatures to become fully engrossed in their feast. One of them stood just a few cubits away from the blade.

It was time to use the skill that had once earned him the title of Commander of the Hiddens.

The kolnuses, consumed by their feeding frenzy, failed to notice the naked irni materializing out of nowhere. Without hesitation, he snatched the crescent-shaped blade from the ground, crept silently up to the nearest beast, and with a precise, practiced motion, slit its throat with the inner curve of the khopesh. Not waiting for a reaction, Sa-Ag once again channeled the magical current toward the tattoo on his back. A gray snake darted away from the collapsing kolnus corpse, slithering toward the pile of discarded clothes. The sword clattered to the ground, drawing the attention of the remaining two beasts. They began to growl, confused by their fallen kin's behavior. The massive creatures abandoned the mangled irni remains and, moving slowly, even cautiously, approached the lifeless kolnus.

A gunshot. Another. A third. A fourth. The second kolnus collapsed to the ground, its forehead torn open.

Another shot. A sharp clang. The bullet struck an armored plate.

The last remaining beast finally noticed Sa-Ag. And Sa-Ag knew it. A shot. Another ricochet. Now the creature understood where its enemy was—and what kind of threat he posed. The pistol went back into its holster. A quick sidestep. The kolnus's massive clawed limb barely missed him.

Sa-Ag reached for the magical current, trying to direct it—too late. The beast's second clawed limb lashed out, catching the Commander of the Hiddens by the leg. That could be fatal. The katar flashed from its sheath in an instant. A quick thrust into the creature's limb. The kolnus snarled—but did not let go. Realizing the pain might come again, the beast flung the irni aside.

Sa-Ag sprang to his feet, snatching up the sword. A deep inhale... He didn't have time to exhale. The kolnus lunged at him, massive claws outstretched. This would have been the end for Sa-Ag—if not for the distance. It was too great. By the time the beast was mid-air, the Commander of the Hiddens had already sidestepped out of its trajectory.

Time to finish this. A sudden dash forward. Sa-Ag moved behind the kolnus. The khopesh in his left hand. The pistol in his right. A leap. With the curved edge of his sword, the irni hooked one of the plates on the beast's nape. A sharp tug backward. The kolnus's head snapped up, exposing its throat. Four shots. The lifeless corpse crashed to the ground.

"Stupid, weak beast," Sa-Ag muttered, securing the khopesh on his back. Now, all that was left was dealing with the humans.

The Commander of the Hiddens moved in short, swift steps to the corner of the hangar. If his subordinates hadn't taken care of their targets yet, then this whole spectacle with the kolnuses had surely drawn the attention of the hangar's occupants. The irni carefully peeked around the corner. No one. The stairs were empty.

Sa-Ag moved closer, aiming his pistol at the second-floor door. Silently, he stepped onto the first stair. The second. The third... A creaking sound. The door swung open. Sa-Ag tensed.

"Commander of the Hiddens," Ka-As's voice came from behind the slightly open door.

"Is the task complete?"

"Yes."

"The one we need?"

"Yes, he's here."

"Bring him outside."

The door swung open wide. A body flew out headfirst and tumbled down the stairs. Just as it had been described in the briefing. A heavysset man. Glasses. A few bruises on his face.

"Are you in charge here?" Sa-Ag asked, his tone as if addressing a pile of filth.

"N-no, of course not! I'm just a worker," the man stammered.

Ka-As, First, and Second descended the stairs, taking position behind Sa-Ag.

"First, sit him down against the wall."

"Yes," First replied and grabbed the man by the collar.

"Where's Third?" Ka-As asked, glancing around.

"Weak," Sa-Ag said quietly, then stepped toward the man now slumped against the wall.

"Are you in charge here?" the Commander of the Hiddens asked again.

"I already told you—no! I just handle sorting and packaging!"

Sa-Ag locked eyes with the man. He swallowed hard. The irni's solid pupils had always unsettled humans, making them nervous—forcing them into mistakes.

A lightning-fast motion. His left hand moved. The katar flashed from its sheath. A wide arc. The blade severed the man's hand at the wrist. His eyes widened in terror. Blood immediately

sputtered from the stump in all directions. The severed hand hit the ground. The man let out a strangled sound before slipping into unconsciousness from the pain.

"Ka-As. Bring this man back to consciousness, but make sure he feels every bit of the pain we've given him."

The irni stepped toward the slumped body, closed his eyes, and directed the magical flow to one of his tattoos. He ran his three-fingered palm over the man's bowed head.

"A-A-A-A!" The man screamed a second later. Sa-Ag struck him across the cheek. Then again. The scream turned into ragged sobbing.

"Are you in charge here?"

"Yes. I'm in charge," the man admitted weakly, cradling his severed stump.

"Who do you report to?"

"I've never seen him," came the same quiet response.

Sa-Ag crouched in front of the man, locking eyes with him. Silence. The Commander of the Hiddens grabbed the man's mutilated arm, squeezing firmly just below the elbow.

"Who do you report to?"

"I don't know! Irni!" the man screamed.

That wasn't enough for Sa-Ag. He took the katar into his left hand once more. With a sharp, precise motion, he drove the blade straight into the exposed bone of the stump. The man howled again. This time, it was a scream of pure agony. Sa-Ag twisted the katar slightly clockwise while keeping a firm grip on the man's elbow. A sickening crack echoed.

"I only saw him once! An irni. Wore a gray cloak. It was night. He had his hood up. But I saw a scar on his nose!"

"Did he limp?" Sa-Ag asked without hesitation, his voice calm.

"What?" The man stared at him in confusion, struggling to comprehend the question. His eyes were locked onto a single point—the blade, still buried inside his arm.

"The irni with the scar on his nose—did he limp?"

"Yes! Yes! He did! On his right leg!" the man confirmed through sobs. He was no longer screaming, no longer wailing—just quietly weeping.

"Ka-As," the Commander of the Hiddens said simply, pulling the katar free from the man's ruined arm.

A gunshot. A red dot bloomed on the man's forehead.

"Mission complete. We return to the palace."

Chapter four (Dorm)

A bucket of ice-cold water could wake even the half-dead, and if this invigorating procedure was accompanied by a loud "Up, fledglings! Time to become warriors!", then the eyes opened on their own, darting around in search of the source of the voice.

Only one of Dorm's eyes managed to open. The other stubbornly refused to face the world. He gingerly touched his eyelid with a finger and hissed involuntarily from the pain. And as if the physical pain wasn't enough, its twin—splitting headache—joined in. Getting hit by the heel of a charging giant was definitely worse than bumping into a door. How long had he been out? A few hours? A few days?

"I said get up, weaklings!" Boar's insistent roar suggested there was a real chance of getting another heel to the eye.

As Dorm slowly came back to his senses, his pain-ridden brain finally started processing the world around him.

He and his fellow sufferers, Redhead and Twig, were lying on the ground near the tent. They had taken a good beating, just like Dorm. The girl's left arm was swollen and bruised, while Kravchik was breathing rapidly and with a wheeze.

"You have fifteen minutes. The water barrel is behind the tent, your uniforms and personal belongings are inside, near the entrance."

The instructions came from the left—the side Dorm couldn't see due to technical difficulties. He turned his head toward the voice. Boar was sitting on a massive fallen log, drinking something steaming from a tin mug, watching his new recruits. He was still barefoot, but his weapon and focused gaze were right where they needed to be.

"Bug-Eyed, Twig—you may not be fully men yet, but you're in a military training camp. That means in fifteen minutes, I don't want to see any shaggy hair or ridiculous bangs. You're not women, and long hair won't make you any prettier. And shave—especially you, Twig. That patchy stubble is annoying. If it grows like a mess, don't bother growing it at all."

The three recruits obediently got up and shuffled toward the tent.

The setup inside was strictly military: a wooden cot with a thin mattress, a plain writing desk, a massive duffel bag, three cooking pots of different sizes, and various small essentials like a spoon and a whetstone.

To the right of the entrance, three neatly stacked piles of clothing lay on the ground. On top of each was a bar of soap, a toothbrush, and a razor.

Redhead cleared her throat delicately, prompting the boys to grab their new belongings and step outside.

A little later than the time their commander had given them, the recruits lined up in formation. Boar silently rose from the log, clasped his hands behind his back, and began the inspection.

The pale-yellow trousers, black tank tops, and mustard-colored boots were the same size for everyone, giving the recruits a slightly ridiculous appearance. On Twig, the tank top hung like a sack on a newborn, while Redhead's boots were clearly a few sizes too big.

Shaving hadn't gone smoothly for the male recruits either. Their freshly shaven heads gleamed under the sun, covered in dozens of small cuts. But at least Twig and Bug-Eyed now looked like their commander's younger brothers.

"You failed to meet the time limit! Twenty push-ups!"

No one dared to argue with Boar's verdict.

Dorm, accustomed to physical labor since childhood and suffering only from a swollen eye and a headache, completed the task quickly and effortlessly, barely losing his breath. The others, however, struggled.

Redhead couldn't even lean on her swollen arm and tried to push up with her good one. Lacking any real athletic ability, she barely managed three before giving up.

Twig, after his first attempt at a push-up, collapsed helplessly to the ground, clutching his chest and wheezing as he struggled to breathe. Boar must have damaged something, making it difficult for his lungs to function properly.

"On your feet, weaklings," Boar ordered, unwilling to watch the pathetic efforts of his recruits any longer. "Congratulations on your first failure. You failed to complete your morning routine in the allotted time and disobeyed an order. You're losing your breakfast. Follow me."

Redhead and Twig got to their feet, and all three of them trudged after Boar.

Once again, they moved through the rows of tents, training grounds, and all the other camp structures they had already seen. Dorm had even managed to mentally divide the tents into four categories: officers' personal "quarters," storage tents for supplies and weapons, "barracks," each housing twenty soldiers, and mess halls. Overall, the camp's architecture wasn't exactly impressive in its originality.

Beyond yet another massive tent, which served as a dining hall for hundreds of soldiers, lay an open field. Vast, untamed, and endless. Not a single tree in sight—only thorny thistles, tall withered grass, and the occasional lonely bush. If one ignored the noise of hundreds of voices behind them, it was almost possible—though with great effort—to imagine standing in a pristine, untouched plain. No wars, no death, no problems... just nature.

Without warning, Boar sprang forward and barked, "Follow me."

The next stretch of time—however long it was—became a brutal ordeal. The giant leading the charge never slowed for even a second, and just when it felt like their lungs were about to burst, he somehow sensed it—and sped up.

Redhead ran second. At first, she tried to keep up with Boar. Where she got that idea was anyone's guess, but within ten minutes, she had fallen far behind him—though still far ahead of her comrades.

Dorm was third in this grueling marathon. He gasped for air, "coughed up his lungs," and felt his legs growing numb, but he never stopped, not even for a second. He couldn't allow himself to. How could that be? A girl could keep going, but he couldn't? His old man would've laughed in his face.

And bringing up the rear was Twig. How he was holding up was hard to tell—Dorm could only see a tiny black silhouette far behind, still moving, at least. Bug-Eye glanced back from time to time, checking if Twig was still running or if he had finally collapsed.

"A river... maybe I'll just drown in it... and it'll all be over..." Dorm wasn't sure if that was just a thought or if he had actually spoken out loud. But ahead, the River of Nations really did come into view—wide, fast, and refreshingly cool. With a final burst of effort, he pushed himself forward. The thought of water gave him a bit of extra energy... or maybe that was just his imagination.

Dreams of the river. Something solid underfoot. A sudden flight. A rough landing. And blissful stillness, face down in the dirt.

Dorm couldn't care less about what had just happened to him—death, a stone falling from the sky, or simply tripping over his own feet.

The fisherman's son lay on the ground, greedily gulping air, his mind blank. The pain in every muscle of his young body consumed all his thoughts.

After what felt like an eternity, somewhere on the edges of his fading consciousness, Dorm heard a voice. It was so faint that he couldn't make out the words, just an irritating buzz—like the droning of a persistent fly.

"...mmghm... get up... fast... into the water..."

Unexpectedly, Dorm caught the last part of the sentence, but he still had no real desire to move. Something grabbed his leg and wrist. In a normal state, he would have kicked and struggled. But he had no strength left.

A summer breeze brushed against his face. Freefall. Wind whistling in his ears. Impact—no, splash.

Without warning, the water slapped against his stomach and swallowed his exhausted body whole.

Pure bliss. The River of Nations felt like it had pulled Dorm back from the brink of death. His mind cleared, his limbs obeyed him again... but for some reason, breathing still wasn't working.

"Get to the surface, you fool!" The voice in his head—sounding suspiciously like his old man—barked the order.

Dorm felt the muddy riverbed beneath his feet, planted himself firmly, and prepared to push off for a swift rise to the surface—but there was no need. All he had to do was straighten up; the water here barely reached his chest.

Opening one eye—the other still refused to emerge from beneath his swollen eyelid—Dorm spotted a bridge. Wide, solid, built from massive logs, sturdy enough for two vehicles to pass each other with ease. Resting his hands on the railing, Boar stood atop it, gazing down at the recruits with his usual impassive expression.

"Swim to the other shore!" the giant bellowed before casually making his way across the bridge.

Dorm glanced into the distance, trying to gauge the length of their upcoming swim. At a rough estimate, it looked to be about two hundred cubits. In reality, it might as well have been a thousand. That was the thing about water—unless you were a sailor, you could never judge distance correctly.

He turned to look around. Redhead and Twig stood beside him, waiting. Each secretly hoped this was some kind of joke. But no. This was harsh reality.

"Well, shall we?" Dorm asked gloomily.

"Drown me, please. I'm not going to make it," Kravchik rasped.

"Weaklings," Redhead scoffed and was the first to push off toward the bridge.

The current was strong, the river was long and wide, and their muscles were exhausted—like they had been filled with lead. On top of that, they couldn't swim in a straight line but had to move diagonally to reach the relatively even sandy shore instead of getting tangled in the reeds.

To distract himself from the torment, Dorm tried to keep a conversation going in his head. But for some reason, it only made things worse.

"Why are we even swimming?"

"Maybe I should just sink and be done with it?"

"Or why not just let the current carry me somewhere, crawl onto the shore, and run away from this damn camp?"

But something told Dorm that enduring a soldier's hardships was far better than becoming a deserter. In the Kingdom of Vindin, all deserters faced the same fate—they were hunted down, had

their legs chopped off at the knees with a rusty axe, and were then set free to crawl wherever they pleased.

"A-A-A-A! Help! Dorm! Redhead! Someone! Anyo..." The last word gurgled into the water.

The three recruits had been swimming close together, so they all heard the cry immediately. Dorm didn't hesitate for a second—he just dove down, blindly grabbing hold of Twig's bony shoulder and yanking him back to the surface.

Swimming became unbearable. Twig thrashed and groaned, while Dorm's muscles had gone completely numb from the strain. At this rate, Twig was becoming a deadly anchor, and they had only covered a third of the distance.

"Redhead! Redhead!" Dorm shouted, realizing they wouldn't make it to the other shore. They had to turn back. Twig might have looked light, but right now, he was impossibly heavy. The girl's help was absolutely necessary. "Redhead, help!"

She turned back, her gaze lingering on Dorm's face for a moment.

"This is life. Everyone's on their own," she murmured barely audibly, then turned away and continued swimming toward the far shore.

"Oh, f..." Twig, still flailing, latched onto Dorm's neck in a desperate attempt to stay afloat. Dorm immediately sank, gulping in a mouthful of water. The situation worsened by the second.

With no other choice, he dove deeper, breaking free from Twig's grip, then swam sideways underwater before surfacing a few cubits away from his drowning companion.

"Kravchik! Kravchik! Listen to me!"

"Dorm, I can't... I can't anymore..."

"Shut up and listen to me!"

"I can't..."

"Shut your mouth and turn your brain on, or we're both going to drown! Do you know how to float on your back? Inflate your stomach like a buoy and just float! Can you do that?"

"I used to... when I was a kid."

"Do it now and trust me."

Surprisingly, Twig obeyed. Without issue, he flipped onto his back and floated. The moment he stopped thrashing, the current carried him along effortlessly. Dorm grabbed Twig—who now resembled a lifeless log—by the arm and leg. He had no strength left. So he let the current take them both, using only light kicks to steer himself and Kravchik toward the shore they had been pushed from.

Right now, Dorm wanted nothing more than to kick off his boots, strip off his pants, and even undress Twig to lighten the load. But the last remnants of common sense held him back. Losing government-issued gear would get them both beaten half to death by Boar... though... who cared anymore?

Dorm braced himself to shed some weight, but then his booted feet touched the riverbed.

"We made it," he whispered barely audibly and let go of Twig. Feeling that he was no longer being held, Twig panicked for a moment, kicking wildly. Then his feet found solid ground, and he stilled.

At first, the water reached his chin. Two minutes later—his waist. Three more, and it was down to his knees. A steep sandy embankment suddenly rose before Dorm's face. He nearly crashed into it, barely managing to move through the water.

He needed to climb up, to where it was dry and the sun burned hot. But he couldn't. Not physically. Not mentally. Dorm simply turned around, leaned against the embankment, slowly slid down, and blacked out.

Chapter 7 (Mercenaries)

If one had to sum up the next seven days of the mercenaries in a single word, it would most likely be "stability." Routine, monotony, and repetition would also fit, but "stability" captured it best.

Wake-up at dawn. A few dry biscuits and thin broth for breakfast. Packing up. Al set off first on his four-wheeler as the scout. Ori took the wheel of the off-roader. A long drive under the scorching sun until midday. A stop. Lunch—just a couple of pieces of dried meat and some vegetables. An hour's break. Elena took over as the driver. Another stretch of endless desert travel until sunset. Night camp. They had decided against traveling after dark—it was far too dangerous. In the desert, trouble after sunset could be very serious.

And so it went for seven days straight. No unusual or urgent situations. Even Al's jokes were the same every single day. In a word—stability.

The only minor event that occurred during the journey was that Caleb spoke. The necromancer managed to utter a whole three phrases:

"We're going the wrong way."

"One of the barrels is out of water."

"I'll take the first watch."

Progress, indeed. Turns out, this corpse-making machine was capable of speech—though he rarely used the skill. Upon hearing full, coherent sentences from Caleb, Al even felt a little disappointed. The mercenary had always loved mysteries and riddles, finding the intrigue of the unknown to be their most captivating quality. And just like that, the veil of mystery was gone.

The eighth day of their thrilling journey was drawing to its logical conclusion.

The sun had already disappeared beyond the horizon, and Al, leading the way, began searching for a relatively flat surface to set up camp for the night. Elena gradually slowed the vehicle, following the four-wheeler. After a few minutes of searching for a suitable spot, the transports came to a stop. The two passengers and the driver stepped out, surveying the area. Nothing new. The same endless, tiresome sand, with no sign of vegetation in sight. They were beyond sick of it. Even a tiny, withered cactus or a lone shrub would have been a welcome sight.

They didn't bother setting up a proper camp with tents and a fire. The off-roader and four-wheeler were positioned on the leeward side to block the wind. Sleeping bags were tossed directly onto the sand in a semicircle. Dinner was simple. Using magical fire, they quickly cooked a stew in a pot with a few pieces of meat and some unidentifiable vegetables. The finished slop was portioned out onto plates. Modest, but filling. Exactly what they needed after a dull day of travel.

Setting aside his empty plate and cracking his knuckles, Caleb spoke in a voice devoid of any emotion:

"We are currently on gryphuses territory. They are not nomads, but if they capture us, we most likely won't make it out of the desert alive. That's why we're getting up an hour before dawn and crossing the next stretch of desert as quickly as possible."

"Then why don't we just leave now?" Elena asked, a perfectly reasonable question.

"No."

"But what about..."

"No. I'll take the first watch," the necromancer said, rising to his feet.

"Why the hell should we even listen to him?" Al snapped, always quick to flare up when something didn't sit right with him.

Caleb didn't react to the words directed at him. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on Orum.

The dorth, who had been calmly chewing his dinner, suddenly froze. Caleb swiftly raised his left hand, fingers splayed toward Ori. A pair of words flared violet on his forearm.

Elena had already reached for her katana, ready to sever the necromancer's arm all the way to the shoulder.

Caleb flicked his finger upward, and from behind the dorth's back, a scorpion emerged. It was massive, black, wreathed in a violet haze, with a stinger no smaller than a human finger. The creature thrashed and writhed, but it was in vain.

Caleb observed its struggle for a few more seconds before clenching his fist. In an instant, the black creature shrank down to the size of a button, unable to even let out a sound before vanishing. His hand lowered, and the tiny black speck dropped into the dorth's bowl. Without another word, Caleb turned and walked toward the vehicle.

Al and Elena quickly finished their meals, Orum took a disappointed sip of water, and the mercenaries settled into their sleeping bags. They could have continued arguing with Caleb—demanding to know on what grounds he had appointed himself commander, reminding him that he was here only as support or, at best, a supervisor. But eight days of monotonous travel and the grim fate of the scorpion had drained any rebellious spirit from them. They needed at least a few hours of rest before another grueling day on the road.

Unfortunately, sleep refused to come. Anxiety was the culprit. Orum was the first to give in. He crawled out of his sleeping bag, walked over to the vehicle, pulled his bag from the trunk, took out a small box, and tossed it onto his sleeping bag. Then he walked over to the four-wheeler and grabbed Al's shotgun from the seat.

Returning to his spot, the dorth sat down and began cleaning his weapon.

Meanwhile, Al lay on his back, staring up at the night sky, whistling a tune only he seemed to know.

Caleb, leaning against the car hood, stared intently into the darkness.

Elena rested her hand under her head, watching the dorth work with keen interest. Though he often claimed to have no respect for firearms, his love for mechanisms and his obsessive need to keep them in perfect condition always won out.

The firearms of this world were nothing like those Elena had seen in her own. There, they were technological instruments of death—sharp, precise, without unnecessary embellishments. Here, they were works of art—fantastical, yet still deadly. Take this shotgun, for example. Its wooden stock was adorned with carvings resembling swirling clouds. The pistol grip extended unusually far downward. The trigger had a wave-like curve. The hammer was shaped like a woman's leg. The long, broad barrel was covered on both sides with six distinct engravings. Each was a craftsman's mark. A house with a chimney, from which an axe protruded—symbolizing the factory that produced the shotgun's parts. A fireplace with crossed swords inside—marking the workshop where the weapon was assembled. A circle with a pair of glasses in the center—signifying the master gunsmith who put it all together. On the other side of the barrel, identical symbols were etched.

"Who are the gryphuses?" the dorth suddenly broke the silence, still running a cleaning rod with a metal brush through the barrel.

Al didn't even turn his head, continuing to whistle his tune. He had no intention of answering, though he probably had some tall tale about them. Elena decided to share what little she knew.

"They are a race that inhabits only the Nomads' Desert. In general, they resemble humans—their bodies are human-like—but there are some differences. Their arms, from the wrists to the shoulders, are covered in feathers, or more likely down, though they can't fly. Their heads are bald, and instead of a mouth and nose, they have a long, downward-curving beak. Their hands have sharp claws, and below the knees, they have eagle-like talons. They can't speak, instead communicating through strange clicking sounds made with their beaks. What else? Hmm. In terms of behavior, they resemble a tribe of savages. But that doesn't stop them from riding motorcycles and ambushing trade caravans with automatic weapons."

"On what?" Orum asked.

"On two-wheelers."

"A very enlightening lecture, Professor Elen, but you forgot one tiny little detail," Al added cheerfully, a bloodthirsty grin on his face. "The gryphuses eat only raw meat. And they don't care whether they bring down an animal or a human. And what does that mean? Exactly! They'd eat a dorth just as happily as a human."

There were no further questions. Orum finished cleaning his weapon, returned the shotgun to the four-wheeler's seat, tossed his bag into the off-roader's trunk, and buried himself in his sleeping bag. A few minutes later, they all drifted into a restless half-sleep.

Elena woke up to someone gently tugging at her shoulder.

"Get up. Your turn," a voice whispered from the darkness.

The girl crawled out of her sleeping bag, still warm from her body heat, and a shiver immediately ran through her. Any trace of sleep vanished instantly. It wasn't hot anymore. After throwing on her leather jacket with the right sleeve cut off, she headed toward Caleb. She wanted to try talking to him face-to-face, now that the opportunity had presented itself. Perhaps he would be more talkative this time?

The necromancer was about to leave again. This had been happening for the eighth consecutive night. Caleb's routine was always the same: he would wake Elena, retrieve a huge sack from the trunk, take a bit of water with him, and vanish into the darkness. He returned at dawn, dragging the same sack behind him, only this time it was fuller. What Caleb was gathering remained unknown, but Al never ceased his attempts to find out whenever the necromancer was preoccupied with something else.

Shifting hesitantly from foot to foot, the girl finally decided to start the conversation.

"Back at the arena... it was you who helped our team win, wasn't it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I saw the tattoo on your arm light up, and the very next second, the enemy's vehicle stalled."

"And do you know that the range of any spell, especially necromancy, is strictly limited—except for particularly powerful magic? I don't consider myself a necromancer strong enough to overcome a hundred-cubit barrier."

Of course. How could she have forgotten such a basic fact? Elena felt her cheeks warming. Hopefully, the darkness hid it well. But then why had the irni's vehicle stalled? And why had Caleb cast a spell?

As if reading her thoughts, Caleb answered quickly:

"After the race, I checked the losers' vehicle. Al's shockwave damaged their engine. That's why it stalled. As for the spell... I had to teach a thief a lesson. That's all. I'll be back at dawn." Abruptly ending the conversation, he turned and strode confidently into the darkness.

Silence returned to the camp. Only the quiet snoring of the dorth remained.

Jumping onto the hood of the car, Elena tilted her head back and indulged in her favorite pastime—stargazing. She had always had a soft spot for the stars. Tonight, the sky was clear, and every visible celestial body was laid out before her like an open book.

More out of habit than genuine expectation, Elena tried to spot the Big or Little Dipper. A pointless effort. She had been in this world for years now, but she had realized on her very first day

that the constellations here had nothing in common with the ones she had admired since childhood. And yet, every time she lifted her head, she still tried to find something familiar.

She must have sat there for at least half an hour, though it felt like only a few minutes. Her backside had grown numb with the cold—it was time to get down, warm up a bit.

A few squats later, and the blood was rushing through her veins again. Much better.

Suddenly, she felt that something was off. Something had changed. There was no movement in sight, yet a growing sense of unease crept up her spine. What was it? And then it hit her—like being jolted awake from the deepest sleep by a bucket of ice water. Sound. The sound of engines. Far away, on the opposite side of the vehicle and the four-wheeler, the distant roar of engines rumbled through the night. Damn it. She had to act. Fast.

"Get up! Move!"

"Elena, my dear, why the hell are you waking us up?" Al grumbled.

"We have company."

Orum and Al shot up as if scalded. They heard it too. And it didn't promise anything good. Nervously glancing in the direction of the noise, Elena hurried to pack her sleeping bag and belongings. Her thoughts raced at breakneck speed. Faster. Faster. They were still far away—there was a chance to escape. And where the hell was Caleb?

Soft footsteps behind her. She turned her head. A rifle butt came swinging toward her. Darkness.

Chapter five (Dorm)

Sunset. There was a kind of natural magic to it. Part of the sky was painted in vivid crimson hues, the sun, like a smoldering ember, slowly and inevitably faded, while from the opposite side, creeping darkness swallowed the last remnants of light. A mesmerizing sight from any perspective—even if viewed from the ground, with just one eye open.

Dorm lay still, watching the sunset—not because he feared ruining a beautiful moment, as poets often wrote, but because he was in pain. Real pain. His swollen eye throbbed, and every muscle in his body had seemingly decided it had fulfilled its yearly workload and gone on strike.

He had no idea how long he had been lying there or how much longer he would have remained motionless, but the scent pulled him back from the brink of the dead. The smell of a campfire. Of food. A blissful aroma of something unknown, bubbling and sizzling in a pot.

No matter how bad Dorm felt right now, his stomach had it far worse. He hadn't eaten since the moment he was thrown out of the truck and given those pathetic scraps of food.

A young, growing, and utterly exhausted body demanded sustenance. Not just demanded—roared for it with loud, angry growls. For a moment, Dorm even thought the vibrations from his stomach might trigger an earthquake.

He tried to sit up. Yeah, right. His abs flat-out refused to lift their owner. He had no choice but to roll onto his stomach. But even that got him nowhere—his arms rebelled just as much, refusing to tense up. The fisherman's son hadn't felt this helpless in a long time. The last time he remembered anything like this was when he had spent an entire day swinging a sledgehammer, helping his father break down the brick wall of an old shed.

After a few minutes, through some incomprehensible feat of willpower—and a whole lot of grunting—Dorm finally got to his feet. Staying upright was a challenge, but there was no way he could handle a second attempt at getting up.

Drawn by the smell of food, two more bodies rose from the dead—one with a red head of hair, the other bald and lanky. Their movements were sluggish and painfully slow. A depressing sight.

A little off to the side, just like in the morning, Boar sat on a stump, dressed in his ever-present pale-yellow baggy trousers, barefoot, sipping something from a steaming tin mug. Before him, a fire crackled, and next to it stood three pots of varying sizes, each covered with a lid.

The giant silently placed his mug on the ground, got up, went into the tent, and returned with three bowls, spoons, tin mugs identical to his own, and a massive black sack.

He tossed the sack onto the ground and sat back down on what seemed to be his favorite stump. Ignoring the danger of the scorching metal, the recruits' commander removed the lid from

the largest pot with his bare hands. Inside was some unknown orange-colored porridge that vaguely resembled buckwheat. Boar used a wooden ladle to fill three bowls with the contents of the pot, set them down beside him, and then looked expectantly at the clueless recruits, who stood hesitantly, shifting on their trembling legs.

"If you don't want to eat, throw the porridge in the trash and wash the bowls," Boar said. These words worked better on the recruits than any persuasion or offer. Slowly, they approached and carefully took their bowls, expecting some sort of trick at any moment. But no one hit them or snatched the food away, so they sat in a circle around the fire and eagerly devoured the porridge. The sticky orange substance, as it turned out, was actually quite tasty.

While the recruits shoveled fuel into their empty stomachs, Boar pulled the second pot toward him—a much smaller one than the first. Inside was nothing but boiling water.

The giant turned, reached behind the stump, and retrieved a wooden chest with intricate carvings along the sides that resembled plant stems. Well, to Boar, it was a chest. But in Twig's hands, for example, it would have been a mid-sized trunk—one he likely wouldn't have been able to carry.

The recruits would have probably been very surprised by this wooden chest—it stood out too much from the rest of the rough military setting. But they were far too engrossed in their dinner. Even if the giant had pulled out a heavy-caliber machine gun, it wouldn't have affected their appetite in the slightest.

Boar carefully, almost as if afraid to damage it, opened the chest. Inside were about three dozen cloth pouches and roughly the same number of small glass jars. After briefly rummaging through them, the giant pinched one of the jars between his fingers, pulled out the cork with his teeth, and took a deep breath of the aroma wafting from within. Inside, packed tightly together, were dried purple twigs.

Boar shook three of them onto his massive palm, resealed the jar, placed it back in the chest, closed the lid, and tucked it behind the stump. The dried twigs went straight into the pot of boiling water.

In the meantime, the recruits had finished their dinner and were now watching as their commander methodically stirred the contents of the pot with a ladle.

"Grab your mugs, fill them to the brim, and drink every last drop—otherwise, you won't be able to get up in the morning."

The trio obediently took their tin cups and stepped closer to Boar. Redhead was the first to reach for the purple liquid. She was used to doing everything herself, so she boldly dipped her cup into the pot, and immediately got smacked across the hands by a massive paw. The contents splashed everywhere, and her cup went flying a couple of meters away.

"Show some damn respect for what you eat and drink, or you'll end up shitting yourself or worse — dying!" Boar roared. "Especially when drinking such a noble beverage as tea!"

Redhead frowned, her breathing quickened, but she didn't say a word. It was clear that keeping her temper in check took tremendous effort. Silently, she picked up her cup and held it out for the tea. Boar scooped from the pot with his ladle and filled her cup. He did the same for the two bald recruits, pouring the fragrant drink into their mugs.

The recruits returned to their spots near their dirty bowls, sat down on the ground, and brought the cups to their lips. The tea was both bitter and intensely sweet at the same time. With each sip, Dorm felt his strength and energy slowly trickling back into him, bit by bit, almost imperceptibly.

"Alright, let's start breaking down what happened—in the order you threw yourselves at me," Boar bellowed, his voice like a truck horn in the middle of the desert. "Redhead! Hm."

The recruits' commander paused for a moment, took his cup again, and took a few slow sips.

"You're persistent, overconfident, and foolish. What were you trying to do with your palms back there? Slice sausage? What's wrong with using your fists? Though..." Boar scratched the evening stubble on his chin. "I liked it. Haven't seen anything like that in a while. Starting tomorrow, we'll work on your palms."

"Mm-hmm," Redhead responded without a hint of enthusiasm.

"Who was next? Bug-Eyed!" The giant tilted his head, carefully examining Dorm. "A typical young guy. Quick, sharp... you just need to bulk up a bit. But don't worry, we'll take care of that here—I promise," he said, winking at the bald recruit.

"Twig!" Boar suddenly barked. Poor Kravchik choked, dropped his cup, and spilled tea all over himself.

"Well, with you, we'll keep it simple—everything, all at once. We'll turn a pile of shit into a bullet—fast and deadly."

Boar drained the last of his tea, stood up from the stump—immediately blocking half the sky—and stretched with a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Alright! The small pot contains a special ointment. Before you pass out for the night, rub it on the areas that hurt the most. Twig—you cover your entire ribcage, and do it in two layers. The black sack has sleeping bags and a tent. You'll set it up yourselves, unless you're completely brain-dead. See you tomorrow."

Without any intention of continuing his monologue, Boar grabbed the chest from behind the stump and headed to his tent.

The first day in the army of the Kingdom of Vindin had been long, grueling, and exhausting. But, like everything in this world, it had finally come to an end.

Chapter 8 (Mercenaries)

A dull, throbbing pain in the head. Annoying, relentless. But how is it possible to feel a splitting headache when consciousness is soaring somewhere above, refusing to come back to the frail body? What is this strange sensation? And the dream — so unusual. A group of people had set up camp in the middle of the desert. At night, one of them wandered off into the unknown, and the rest were ambushed... But by whom? It was impossible to make out. Wait! This wasn't a dream.

It was as if a bolt of lightning struck Elena. Her consciousness instantly plummeted from unknown heights back into her fragile body, intent on making sense of what was happening.

First, the girl tried to move. Her hands and feet were tied, but that was something she could easily fix. Thrashing, she opened her eyes — only to regret it instantly. The blinding sunlight struck her at once, leaving her momentarily dazed.

"Calm your fire, warrior mother," a very familiar voice rang out, sending another wave of searing pain through her head.

"Al, is that you?" Her voice was hoarse and weak.

"No, it's your dearly beloved husband, passionately devoted. What, did you forget? Of course, you forgot... What a tragedy! Good people, what should I do now? My own dear soulmate has forgotten me."

"And where do you even come up with such stupid jokes? You actually think they're funny, don't you?"

"Spend enough time bored, and you'll start spouting even worse," a laugh echoed from somewhere to her right. Her vision was slowly returning, but her eyes were watering profusely, and the world around her was still nothing but a blurry mess.

"Where's Ori?"

"I'm here," a voice came from somewhere to the girl's left.

"What the hell happened?"

"Some nasty gryphuses thugs grabbed us during the night, tied us up, and dragged us to their lair. Soon, they'll start feasting on us," Al relayed the information with far too much enthusiasm.

"Well then, we've overstayed our welcome. Time to leave before they get to the main course."

"Not so fast... Once your vision clears up, you'll notice a little problem."

With every passing second, her sight sharpened, the range of her vision expanding. And sure enough, those "little problems" were coming into view.

The gryphuses lair, where the mercenaries were currently being "hosted," was located inside a massive crater. It spanned at least four hundred, maybe even five hundred cubits in diameter. The descent from the edges to the center was not too steep, allowing the inhabitants to move freely across the entire area. The three captives were tied to wooden stakes at the lowest point of the crater, on a small, well-trodden clearing. If they were to attempt an escape, their path to freedom would be, to put it mildly, far from easy.

As for the architectural structures in this giant pit, they took the form of enormous nests. The gryphuses built them from an assortment of sticks, feathers, clay, straw, and whatever else they could find. A particularly prized building material — one reserved only for the tribe's best hunters — was gnawed bones. Fortunately, though "fortunately" was hardly the right word here, such structures were few and could be counted on one irni's hand.

Adding to the eerie ambiance of the nests were their so-called roofs — patches of skin sewn together with long strands of black hair. Whose skin and hair they were... was something best left unknown.

Surveying the settlement, Elena counted around fifty gryphuses, half of whom were armed with automatic weapons. Now it was clear why escaping wasn't an option—they would shoot without a second thought.

To the right of the captives, under a small "leather" canopy, two guards lounged comfortably. Like the rest of their kin, they wore nothing but simple cloth wraps around their waists. Honestly, if this were Elena's first time seeing these creatures, she would have been utterly shocked, to say the least.

While the mercenary assessed the situation and their surroundings, one of the guards was rummaging through the belongings taken from them. Amidst the pile of confiscated items, she spotted her katana and Orum's dark red axe. That meant the rest of their weapons and gear were likely there as well.

"Any ideas?" Elena asked grimly.

"No, but I can tell you this — when the hunters of this tribe return in the evening, they'll be hungry." Al paused briefly. "You're the appetizer, I'm the main course, and the shorty here is dessert."

"We need to think..."

Silence settled over them. Elena, Orum, and Al made an honest attempt to think. For about five minutes. Then, the thought process simply stalled. Sitting tied to a stake under the scorching desert sun, there was only one thing they truly wanted — water. Thirst consumed their minds, pushing out any other thoughts, leaving only silent, desperate longing.

Minutes dragged on. It felt like an eternity had passed, but in reality, no more than half an hour. Al, who had heroically kept his mouth shut all this time, finally gave in — and began whining uncontrollably.

"Nooooo... I don't want this... Not death... I've lived such a hard life, not just to end up being pecked apart by these beasts..."

"Shut up! It's bad enough as it is," Orum snapped grimly, but there was no stopping Al now.

"I love life so much... Hey, up there in the heavens, or in the depths of the planet, or the river — wherever you are, if you even exist—hear me... I beg you... Let them eat the shorty first. He's so juicy and plump."

"Oh, you're such a whiner. And a selfish bastard, too," Orum tried once again to cut off his ranting.

"I'll never lie again! I'll help everyone, everyone, everyone — even for free! Primal One, come on, hear me, give me a chance to become good Al!"

"Would you just shut your damn mouth already?! Your whining isn't making this any easier, and it sure as hell isn't bringing anyone to help us!"

Al slowly turned his head toward the dorth. His gaze was sharp and piercing. A second. Two. Ten. It seemed like he was trying to drill a hole right through Ori's forehead.

"You know what?! I've had it with your damn lectures!" Al snapped. "What are you, some kind of model father now? Look at me, I'm so righteous, so pure, never done anything bad in my life. Always the perfect family man, earning my bread the honest way." He tried to spit dismissively onto the sand, but his parched throat and cracked lips wouldn't allow it.

"And what the hell was the point of saying that?" Ori muttered.

"Screw you!"

The conversation died out on its own. Luckily, Orum wasn't the type to argue for the sake of arguing or bang his head against the wall just to prove a point. Sure, there were times when even he lost his temper and went on rants so wild that his friends' jaws nearly hit the floor. But most of the time, he preferred to keep his opinions to himself and stay silent. He had a talent for recognizing the exact moment when it was best to shut up — when adding more fuel to Al's blazing ego would only make things worse. And this was one of those moments.

The silence dragged on while the sun slowly and mercilessly roasted the mercenaries. It was hard to say who had it worse — Elena, trapped in her leather jacket with the right sleeve cut off, her body drenched in sweat while her exposed arm was already covered in blisters; or Al and Orum, wearing only tank tops, their skin turning a scorching shade of crimson. Orum's bald head was the worst of all — just looking at it was painful. You could probably fry an egg on it in a split second.

Suddenly, lifting his gaze from his boots and knocking the back of his head against the log he was tied to, Al spoke:

"You know, I don't regret it. I've lived a damn good life."

Orum just scoffed indifferently while Al stared at some invisible point in the sky. Elena had nothing to say, nothing to argue against. She simply lowered her head helplessly and listened.

"You're always going on about what a professional you are, how great your life is, but we don't actually know anything about you. You've never told us a thing. We trusted you completely, and yet you know everything about us. Fine, in my case, there's nothing all that special, but Elena shared her deepest secrets with you. And I don't get how she could do that when she doesn't know a damn thing about your past."

"You really want to know about my past?" Al asked, surprised, shifting his gaze from Elena to Orum and back again.

"Well, you know, it'd be nice to at least know who I'll be dying alongside," Orum said with a somber smile.

Al froze for a moment, staring up at the sky, and then, all at once, the floodgates burst open:

"Well then, my little bald friend, my full name is Alpacine. I'm forty-three years old. Where was I born? No clue. Who were my parents? Another unanswered question. The earliest childhood memory I can dig up is a marketplace — I was about five years old, and together with a dozen other street kids, we were picking pockets from passersby.

I was an orphan, as you've probably already figured out. I lived in some small town on the outskirts of the Mixed State. The rest of us — kids abandoned to the mercy of fate, with no families— slept in a cave just outside the city's main gates. I stole, survived on whatever I could snatch, and my only goal was to make it through the day. That was my life until I turned sixteen. How many of my friends were killed or died from disease over the years? I couldn't tell you exactly. But the fact that I made it out alive — well, that was already an achievement.

One terrible, cold, rainy day, it was as if a bolt of lightning struck me. A revelation. Enough! Enough living like a cockroach — scavenging for scraps, hiding in the shadows. It was time for a change. I washed myself in a stream, stole clean clothes, and went looking for work. That day, for the first time in my life, luck grinned at me with what few teeth it had left. By evening, I had found a job as a cleaner in a small tavern. From then on, I lived in a tiny storage room, ate little, and slept even less. But it was honest work. In the three years I spent working in that tavern, I came face to face with death four times. The street kids I once lived with in the cave saw me as a traitor and tried to kill me. Four times, they almost succeeded. And four times, the tavern owner saved my life, paying for costly healer treatments. He was a good man. But I realized I might not survive a fifth attempt. Besides, spending the rest of my life as a cleaner in a filthy tavern at the edge of the world didn't seem like much of a future. They say that once a person gets what they want, they start wanting more. A wild idea came to me — why not try to become a mage? Everyone knew that only the irni could wield magic. But scientists in the Territory of Magic had discovered a way to transfuse irni blood into humans. Ninety percent of those who agreed to the procedure died. But those who survived... gained magical abilities. And so, I decided to take the risk. A ten percent chance of success? Hah. I'd had worse odds in my life. Gathering the few belongings I had earned in three years of work, I set off.

After a year of traveling extensively and surviving on odd jobs — some of them downright humiliating — I finally reached the Territory of Magic. Settling into an inn near the scientists' laboratory, I signed up for the transfusion. To my surprise, there weren't many volunteers. A ninety percent chance of death was enough to make most people abandon their dreams. But I wasn't like most people. I still remember it vividly. It was early morning. The lab was nearly empty, brightly lit. The walls were painted in a calming shade of blue, easing my frayed nerves — if only slightly. An irni with a forced, overly friendly smile approached me and asked which type of magic I'd want to wield if I survived. The options were fire, water, necromancy, healing, and transformation. Of course, I chose fire. Its raw power, its untamed nature — it had always fascinated me. After signing some paperwork and handing over every last gold piece I had for the procedure, I was led into a small room with a wooden bed. They asked me to lie down. Two irni entered. Both were covered in tattoos, their faces unreadable. One had red eyes, the other green. Some preparations. One of them — I don't even remember which — asked me to close my eyes."

Al paused, his gaze drifting somewhere distant. For a few moments, he remained silent, then took a deep breath and continued.

"The next moment, I died. I felt nothing. No thoughts. No pain. Just darkness. A void. I don't know how long it lasted — an eternity, maybe. But then, suddenly, there was fire. Inside me. Around me. It pulled me in, consumed me whole. I felt my body turn to blackened ash, then reform, only to be incinerated again. I sobbed, I screamed, but it was all in my mind. I died over and over, only to be reborn and burned anew. After an endless cycle of deaths and resurrections, something clicked inside my chest. The flames vanished. The agony was gone. And I came back. The first thing I whispered as I opened my eyes was: water. But no one answered. The room was empty. I was naked. And on my chest, inked in deep black — still smoldering, it seemed — was a small, circular tattoo. Luck had been on my side that day. Or rather, during those few days. Because I had been unconscious for a full seven.

Thus began the second life of Alpacine. A few days after my awakening, they discharged me from the laboratory and handed me a referral to the Academy for fire specialization. Just hours later, with my heart bursting with excitement, I became a student. And from there, everything played out like a fairy tale. I found friends. I found love. I became one of the top students in my class. I mastered spells one after another, inked my own tattoos using textbooks and my professors' guidance, and even started making a living as a tattoo artist. It was the dream life of a five-year-old street rat — sit tight, study magic, and keep practicing. But of course, that wasn't enough. By my third year, the knowledge I had wasn't satisfying me anymore. That's when my foolish head got fixated on mastering one of the strongest fire spells. My beloved tried to talk me out of it. But I was stubborn. One day, I convinced her to tattoo a small triangle under my left eye. One of its points had to be facing downward — that was a crucial requirement. Five minutes, and the symbol was in place. The essence of the spell was simple — every magical current in the body had to be evenly channeled into the triangle. As it absorbed that energy, it would engulf the caster in flames, granting an impenetrable shield and allowing them to use other spells without spending additional energy. The main challenge was to channel just the right amount of energy into the triangle—not too much, not too little.

The exhausting training began. I spent entire days in the training hall under the supervision of my teachers, trying to master the spell. But it was hopeless. Nothing worked. One moment, only my hand would catch fire; the next, just my leg; and sometimes, my entire outfit would go up in

flames. The instructors weren't much help either — they'd knock me out the second things got out of control, making sure I didn't burn everything to the ground. Days passed, and I saw no progress. At night, in secret, I stole the keys and snuck into the hall with my beloved and a couple of friends to train without supervision.

One of those nights, fate suddenly decided it had coddled me enough. Things had been going too smoothly — it was time to put little Al back in his place."

A single tear slid down the mercenary's cheek as he remained tied to the post. Elena and Orum exchanged a worried glance.

"Sometime after midnight, as usual, we grabbed some food, a little wine, and snuck into the training hall. I spent a couple of hours practicing diligently, but as always, it was pointless. No progress. We decided to take a break, have a bite to eat. But then, a thought struck me — why not try one more time? What if this time... it actually worked?

The currents of magical energy rushed toward the small triangle... and, miraculously, my face was engulfed in flames. Encouraged, I pushed a little harder and felt the fire spread across my torso. It was working. Just a little more effort. And then — a fatal mistake. Overcome with excitement, I lost control and poured far more energy into the spell than I should have. The last thing I remember was the burning sensation on my heels. When I came to, I was in the infirmary. My mentor visited me and told me what had happened.

The excess energy triggered an explosion within my body, a desperate attempt to keep itself from burning alive. The blast obliterated the training hall, one of my friends was burned to death on the spot, and the rest — everyone who had been inside at that moment, including my beloved — were left in critical condition, suffering from magical burns that were nearly impossible to heal. The next few hours of my life passed in a haze. I fled the academy without waiting to hear what the instructors would decide about my fate. I didn't think about my beloved, I didn't think about my friends — I just ran, blindly, without a destination.

Thus began yet another "life" of mine. With no idea what to do next and not a single coin to my name, I became a mercenary. I took on any job that came my way. Gathering mushrooms? Easy. Killing someone? Even easier. It didn't matter what the task was, as long as it paid enough to drown my guilt in alcohol. Every day, I drank and loathed myself for what I had done to the people I once cared about. Remember how Sebastian mentioned that he knew what I had done in the Kingdom of Vindin? Well, that was me — I killed King Krunor, Vindin's predecessor. They captured me, tortured me, but I escaped. And from there, I kept spiraling downward. My spells weakened, my magical reserves deteriorated because I wasn't developing them. I squandered everything I earned on booze and whores. Until I met Elena.

That once naive, yet incredibly dangerous child became something I could only describe as another gift from fate. She awakened in me the hope that I could still be of use to someone — that I could help, that I could matter to someone again. "

Al finished his story, lowering his head to his chest.

"You know, after all that, I only have one question for you," Elena suddenly said in a hoarse, weak voice.

"Go ahead," the mage replied emptily, not lifting his head.

"Is your real name really Alpacine?"

"Yes."

Elena snorted. Then she smiled. And then she burst into laughter — loud, genuine, and kind. Not mocking, not bitter, just pure amusement. She hadn't even realized until now how closely her friend's full name resembled that of a famous actor she had once heard of, long ago, in another world. When Sebastian had called Al by that name, she hadn't thought much of it at the time.

Al laughed too. Orum couldn't hold back a grin. Elena, still catching her breath, was about to say something when heatstroke caught up with her, and her consciousness once again drifted off to some distant place.

Chapter 9 (Mercenaries)

Elena's thoughts swirled in a chaotic whirlwind. She had lost count of how many times she had drifted into consciousness only to slip back into oblivion. This time, however, her attempt to open her eyes was unexpectedly successful. Orum and Al were still tied to the posts on either side of her. Their windburned, blistered faces remained motionless. She tried to make a sound — anything — but all she managed was a weak, raspy wheeze. It was enough to catch the attention of the guards.

One of the gryphuses approached Elena, shoving her with a massive, clawed foot before clicking its beak a few times. She lifted her head and locked eyes with the mindless creature. There was no pity or sympathy in its gaze — only anger and disdain.

Slowly, Elena shifted her focus to the bucket, then back to the gryphus, then to the bucket again. The creature didn't react, merely continued watching her, occasionally making ominous clicking noises.

The second guard, clearly reluctant, rose from his comfortable spot, grabbed the bucket and a cup, and moved toward Elena. A foul stench of sweat and musk filled her nostrils, a reek that reminded her of a horse that had never been washed in its lifetime.

The first gryphus, the one that had shoved her, turned and clicked its beak furiously at its partner. The other one whistled something in response and stepped closer to the bound girl.

Scooping up some water into the cup, the gryphus pressed it to Elena's lips. The warm liquid, carrying a strange scent and a slightly sweet aftertaste, felt like pure nectar in that moment. But just as quickly as it came, the relief was gone, the cup emptied. The gryphus moved on to give Al and Orum their share.

Night had already fallen. Throughout the settlement, the inhabitants were lighting small fires at a safe distance from their nests. The gryphuses were restless, eagerly awaiting the return of their hunters so they could feast on fresh meat. How exactly they planned to divide two human and one dorth carcass among themselves was a puzzle best left for seasoned cannibals.

"Good evening, everyone! Tell me, do you also have the feeling that your ass has been shoved somewhere around your stomach and that your face was recently preheated, as if to roast an entire ram on it?" Al, as always, was spewing nonsense. At the same time, he kept glancing at the gryphuses, who, after giving the captives water, had returned to their usual spot.

"I hate to admit it, but the whiner has a point. I haven't felt this awful since that drunken night at that backwater dive in the middle of a lake—the one you could only reach by boat," Orum muttered.

"Excellent analogy, my bald friend," Al burst into laughter.

"Elena, how are you holding up?" Orum muttered quietly.

The cool air seemed to clear Elena's thoughts, making them work faster. And one, in particular, refused to leave her mind, demanding immediate discussion.

"Doesn't it bother you that out of our entire crew, only the three of us are shackled?"

"What are you talking about?" the lanky mercenary asked, trying to sound genuinely surprised.

"Has the heat fried your brain? Did you forget there were four of us?"

It was as if someone had smacked Al on the back of the head with a rock.

"Holy sparrows, you're right! That quiet little necromancer! I never liked his face from the start. The moment things got dicey, he bailed!" Al fumed, his outrage boundless.

"Come on, are you truly this clueless, or just playing dumb?"

"Most likely the first one."

"Kaleb wouldn't just abandon us. I'm sure that if anything happens to us, Sebastian will skin him alive."

"Or maybe it's the other way around — maybe he wants to get rid of us as soon as possible. Then he'll just tell his boss, 'Oh well, the gryphuses attacked, I fought bravely to protect the three of them, but once they all went down, I made a heroic escape.'"

"You're hopeless," Elena sighed, amazed at the sheer stupidity and naivety of her older comrade.

"Right now, we've got bigger problems than a missing necromancer. We need to get out of this trap. Before they eat us — or before we pass out again — let's think through our options," Orum added, throwing in his weighty five gold pieces.

All three fell silent, doing their best to appear deep in thought. After about ten minutes — just as Al started nodding off again and Elena was on the verge of making a desperate dash for freedom—the solution to their problem presented itself on its own.

Near the edge of the crater, where the gryphuses lived, something exploded. When the ringing in their ears finally subsided, they could hear the sounds of battle — furious screams, bursts of gunfire, rapid and loud beak-clacking. Some kind of chaos had erupted, but the darkness and the weak flickering of the campfires made it impossible to see what was happening. The glow of flames and the thick black smoke rising from the blast site didn't help much either.

The bursts of automatic gunfire grew more frequent. The two guards turned their heads in different directions, trying to decide what to do — join the fight to defend their home or keep watch over the prisoners. A better moment to act might never come.

"Al! Ori! Time to run!" Elena shouted.

Without waiting for the mage to cast a spell, she tensed the claws on her hand, and the ropes snapped like threads.

From a sitting position, Elena lunged at the guards. But after just two quick steps, her body rebelled, as if protesting that it was too much to demand such intense movement after hours of sitting still. Her unsteady legs tangled, and her disobedient body crashed straight into the two gryphuses. All three of them collapsed in a tangled mess of limbs, talons, and arms. Dodging the claws reaching for her, Elena rolled to the side. She needed to attack immediately while they were still disoriented. Too late. The gryphuses had already regained their footing, raising their rifles to fire. That was it for her, she thought, raising her scaled arm to shield her face — at least some kind of protection. A sudden flash. The guards, engulfed in flames, writhed in agony, rolling across the sand. Al grinned wickedly, the arrow tattoos on his wrists slowly dimming.

Elena carefully got to her feet, listening to her body. It seemed to have loosened up a bit — good enough to join the gryphuses slaughter. Weapon. She needed to find that pile of gear she had spotted earlier in the day. There it was, to the right.

She sprinted toward the scattered belongings on the sand. Her right hand gripped her trusted katana, while her left claw seized a kunai. Now, focus. In battle, focus was everything. A deep inhale. Exhale. Her thoughts surged like a fast-moving yet controlled current. Steady, measured breathing. A test swing of the blade. Her movements became sharp and precise, while the enemies' actions seemed slow and sluggish. Perfect. Time to begin.

Without sparing a glance at her companions, Elena strode forward, fully prepared for battle.

A gryphus was charging straight at her. His ammo had run out, and there was no time to swap the magazine, so he tossed the rifle aside. A few more steps. The attacker abruptly changed direction, trying to flank the mercenary. A shadow appeared on her left.

"Not happening," Elena whispered defiantly, having already figured out the gryphuses' dull plan to surround her.

A barely noticeable flick of her left hand to the side. The kunai hit the sneaky gryphus square in the throat. A step, another... A swing of the blade. Too far. Another step, another slash. The gryphus jumped back. Lively bastard. The next moment, he decided to test Elena's defensive skills. A swift claw strike aimed at her head. Elena raised her katana to meet it. Block. Without hesitation, the gryphus spun, aiming the talons of his other foot at her throat. But here came the surprise. The girl caught his leg with her left hand. A piercing stab of the sword to the chest. The fallen enemy collapsed onto the sand, bleeding out. A rustle behind her. A sharp backhanded punch with her left fist. A sickening crunch of bones. The gryphus flew back a couple of cubits and landed motionless in the sand, his ribcage shattered.

Three down, but that was just a drop in the ocean. Another enemy came into view, focused on firing at someone. A swift dash in his direction, a broad, downward slash. The fourth one was done. Who was he shooting at? Elena turned her head, keeping her katana at the ready. What she saw made her lose focus for a moment. The gryphuses were shooting and fighting against... skeletons. Was she still not fully conscious? Or were these hallucinations caused by heatstroke? Where did they even come from? At a glance, there were about fifteen of them, all shrouded in a

faint purple haze. The fact that the gryphuses were trying to take them down with firearms made it clear they weren't the brightest. Most of the bullets simply passed harmlessly through the gaps in their bones.

Elena shook her head, snapping out of her stupor. A tailless skeleton of an enormous lizard dashed past her, chasing after a gryphus. What in the world was going on? It seemed she'd have to dive right into the thick of it to figure things out.

She approached one of the enemies she had taken down and pulled the kunai from its neck. Wiping the blood off the blade, she tucked it behind her belt. Footsteps sounded behind her. Without turning her head, Elena attempted a sweeping strike with her katana. Miss.

"Relax. It's me," came a voice — who would have thought — belonging to Kaleb. Half of his tattoos glowed with a violet hue. He held bloodied throwing knives in both hands, breathing heavily.

"Are you injured?"

"No. But my strength is running out. I won't be able to hold these skeletons for much longer. Where are the others?"

Good question. Elena tried to answer quickly, but there was nothing to say — she had completely forgotten about her friends. Turning her head, she spotted pillars of fire at the edge of the crater.

"There!"

Both of them rushed toward the blaze. The ground was littered with gryphuses corpses. Spent casings and abandoned rifles were scattered everywhere. The remaining inhabitants of the settlement were still trying to fend off the relentless skeletons.

And there they were — the rest of the team. Al was wounded. Three deep gashes, clearly left by a gryphus claw, marred his chest. Blood oozed from the wounds, staining the sand with dark red blotches. He was already unconscious.

Orum was dragging their motionless friend across the ground, trying to get closer to the edge of the crater. When he saw Elena, his face lit up.

"Finally! Where the hell did you run off to? We shouldn't have split up!"

"No time for arguments! Where's the car?" Caleb cut him off sharply.

"And you're here too," Orum's voice carried a note of distrust. "Get Al out of this pit — I'll go for the car."

The dorth disappeared into the thickening smoke that was rapidly engulfing the surroundings. There was no time to waste. Elena's gaze locked onto Caleb. He was clearly at his limit, barely able to stand, let alone help.

"Get out of the crater. I'll handle him myself."

The necromancer didn't even think to argue. He took the sword from Elena and staggered forward. She tightened her grip on Al's arms and began dragging him up, closer to the edge of the crater. With every second, the tension grew. Soon, Caleb would collapse, the gryphuses would realize that the raging skeletons were no longer a threat, and they'd come to figure out what was happening.

As if she had jinxed it, a soft pop echoed through the battlefield, and the violet aura surrounding the skeletons vanished. The bones, no longer held together by magic, simply crumbled into small heaps. That was bad.

Finally, the crater's edge. Elena pulled herself onto level ground, Al still slung over her shoulders. Just a few feet away, Caleb lay unconscious.

"Oh, just perfect! And what the hell am I supposed to do with these two now?" she muttered to herself.

The roar of an engine grew louder. From the opposite side of the crater came the sound of clicking beaks and gunfire into the air. The remaining gryphuses had heard the engine's rumble and were now thirsty for blood.

An old but clearly powerful and sturdy elongated vehicle, reinforced with gray metal plates across its body, pulled up beside Elena.

"Where's our off-roader?"

"Caleb and his skeletons wrecked everything over there. I only managed to salvage a couple of intact crystals... and this old beast."

There was no time or sense in continuing the conversation. Quickly lowering the two unconscious bodies onto the back seats, Elena jumped into the front passenger seat. Just as the dorth was about to slam the gas pedal to the floor, she suddenly leaped out of the car, pulled a kunai from behind her back, carefully took aim, and, putting all the strength her scaled arm could muster into the throw, hurled the weapon at a massive gryphus preparing to open fire with a heavy-caliber machine gun. The distance to the enemy was about sixty cubits. But that didn't stop the kunai from piercing straight through the gryphus's skull. With one swift motion, Elena was back in the passenger seat.

The engine roared louder, and the car shot forward, leaving the crater full of enraged gryphuses behind.

"Is Al badly wounded?"

"Don't worry! Just a few scratches. What about you? You okay?"

"Yeah. But if they decide to chase us, we're done for."

"They won't," Orum smirked in satisfaction. "We thinned out their tribe pretty well. They'll be too busy tending to their wounded."

"Still... it's a shame about the kunai."

Orum's eyes widened, almost threatening to pop out of their sockets, but he kept quiet. After a brief pause, he muttered under his breath, "Women..."



Chapter six (Dorm)

Three seasons slipped by almost unnoticed. Although, it depends on how you look at it. From the perspective of monotony—yes, indeed. When every day feels indistinguishable from the last and from the one yet to come, the boundaries of time blur away entirely. But when, amidst this monotony, you collapse every few hours from sheer exhaustion or from a brutal fist strike, rivaling both the force and dimensions of a warhammer, a fleeting thought inevitably sneaks in: perhaps kicking the bucket isn't such a bad outcome after all.

Each morning began identically — with reveille. Then came exercise, after which sweat poured like a waterfall, leaving arms and legs trembling like those of a decrepit old man. Twenty minutes for the toilet followed. And when the bald heads of Bug-Eyed and Twig shone under the morning sun like freshly polished pans, the recruits marched off to breakfast.

The future warriors received and consumed their morning portions in the communal dining hall. Breakfast never impressed with any culinary delicacies — it was always one of three types of porridge, two slices of tasteless bread, and a glass of lukewarm water tinted slightly brown. At first, many turned their noses up at such food, but after a week, every recruit was desperately searching for any way to get seconds.

After breakfast came twenty minutes of free time, during which recruits always tried to sneak in a nap in this brief moment of freedom, followed by the mandatory run and swim. Rain, scorching heat, or even a hurricane — it didn't matter. The daily ritual of running and water exercises in the River of Nations was considered an unquestionable, obligatory ordeal.

Throughout the first season, the trio of newcomers dragged themselves after Boar, swam across the river, and then the commander transported their barely living bodies back to the military training camp in his off-road vehicle. But when, once again, the recruits reached the opposite shore and found no vehicle waiting, Twig involuntarily burst into tears. From that moment onward, every day they had to cover the return journey on their own two feet, carrying backpacks stuffed with stones.

After returning to the camp, Boar gave the recruits a half-hour of rest, just enough time for them to remember how to breathe properly again, and then sent them to lunch in the communal dining hall. In fact, breakfast and lunch were the only times when Redhead, Twig, and Bug-eyed saw the other recruits. But even then, they didn't interact with anyone, as each of them energetically chewed their food, terrified that they might not have another chance to eat again that day.

After soup, salad, and a couple of apples, the recruits returned to their tent and slept for about an hour. Boar believed that an afternoon nap was vital for a soldier, and the newcomers eagerly agreed with this idea, falling asleep within seconds.

But it was after this nap that the real torment began, compared to which the morning routine was merely a leisurely stroll.

Boar divided the training ground — the same one enclosed by a low fence — into three imaginary sections. For the next two hours, each recruit occupied their designated corner, engaging in highly specialized self-improvement under the unbearably scorching sun.

For two hours, Redhead was provided with a huge log embedded with protruding spikes and a sheet of metal measuring five by five cubits. During the first hour, she had to practice striking the spiked log, delivering blows with the edges of her palms at various angles and planes. The second hour she spent in front of the vertically fixed metal sheet, repeatedly hitting a single point with straightened fingertips until a dent appeared by the end of the session. Needless to say, after two hours of this exercise, the girl's hands shook like those of the world's most hopeless drunkard. And as for her fingernails — there was nothing to even speak about, as they simply had no chance to grow, reduced instead to a bloody pulp.

In another corner, Dorm endured a different kind of suffering. Boar intended to mold the boy into his own miniature copy. For two relentless hours, Dorm lifted rusty kettlebells, dumbbells, massive logs, and hung from a horizontal bar for up to half an hour at a stretch. And whenever Dorm mistakenly thought the commander wasn't watching and allowed himself a brief rest, Boar's fierce roar immediately jolted him back into action.

In the third corner, day after day, methodically, relentlessly, and without much mercy, Boar beat Twig with two long sticks. He aimed to make the boy more agile, nimble, and swift. This desire was so intense that throughout the entire first season, Twig resembled a purple eggplant on thin legs rather than a soldier. There wasn't a single patch of healthy skin on his body. Even the ointment Boar provided every evening couldn't heal all the bruises fast enough.

After two hours of, shall we say, training, it was time for new knowledge. Boar explained and demonstrated various combat stances, techniques, holds, strikes — basically, everything that could help win a fight against an opponent. Naturally, the recruits practiced these moves on each other, desperately trying not to miss a single word from Boar.

Two hours of sparring and rehearsing moves later came the daily culmination of pain — the fight against Boar himself.

No matter how the recruits tried to oppose him — whether all together, individually, in pairs, or using all sorts of tricks — the outcome remained the same. Someone would be lying unconscious, another would cradle an injured limb, and yet another gasped for breath, the air knocked out of their lungs. Even after three seasons, nothing had changed except for the duration of their struggle. In some rare cases, the newcomers could hold out for as long as two minutes — but eventually, they were still beaten half to death by the barefoot giant.

After the daily beating of the "infants," a time of silence and calm arrived. The recruits recovered from their battles, washed clothes, cleaned the surrounding area, while their commander busied himself preparing dinner and various forms of "doping" for his charges — herbs, teas, ointments, and who knows what else, all intended to help the newcomers feel slightly better the next morning than they had the previous evening.

Gradually, Redhead, Twig, and Bug-eyed gathered by the campfire, quickly devouring food and tea, while Boar analyzed their daily successes and mistakes, highlighting what they'd need to work on tomorrow.

As for the recruits' relationships with each other, things were rather ambiguous.

"Kravchik... what... were you... thinking about... just now... while running?" Dorm asked, gasping for air between words.

The recruits had just returned from yet another morning run and were now coughing up their lungs, sprawled on the ground. The warm seasons was coming to an end — nights were growing chilly, but during the day, the sun remained just as mercilessly scorching.

"About the clouds. For me, the hardest thing has always been painting clouds. It's incredibly difficult to capture their texture and shades. I've ruined more canvases than I can count back home, trying to paint that miracle of nature. And what about you?"

"Me? About a ba-a-athhouse," Dorm drawled with pleasure. "Back home, my father built one himself, and every weekend he steamed my brother and me until we squealed like piglets. He never spared the oak whisks — beat us so hard it made you want to both die and live at the same time."

"Redhead, what were you thinking about?"

An awkward silence fell. The girl was in no hurry to answer.

"About how glorious it is to give one's life for the king..." Dorm began solemnly.

"...and how wonderful the life of a soldier is!" Twig finished the phrase.

"Idiots," the girl exhaled in resignation.

The recruits never quite became inseparable friends over the three seasons. While Dorm and Kravchik could at least call each other comrades, Redhead remained just as distant, speaking to the others only in short phrases.

"Alright, weaklings, move it to lunch. After that, we'll have something... unusual to do," Boar announced, trying to pique their interest. But with his voice, it sounded more like a threat — or a promise that after lunch, they'd be drawn and quartered, or maybe even dismembered altogether.

"What do you think he's got planned for us?" Twig asked without much enthusiasm as they made their way through the living tents and mess tents. "Shooting practice again, like yesterday?"

"Yeah, that was a disaster," Dorm admitted.

"Not for everyone," Redhead remarked smugly, following behind the boys. Unlike Bug-eyed and Twig, she had landed all ten shots on target instead of who-knows-where.

"Have you shot before?" Kravchik asked.

"A few times with a crossbow," Red answered reluctantly, averting her gaze. No more words would be squeezed out of her. Which was just as well — they had already reached the dining hall.

Lunch today consisted of soup, chicken finely chopped with cucumbers and onions, and a compote brewed from who-knows-what. Not exactly delicacies, but enough to fill an empty stomach. At least there was no need to push through lines — everyone knew their place, and by the time they arrived, the food was already on the table.

They devoured their meals quickly and in silence, not even daring to lift their eyes from their plates, as if afraid the food might vanish — or worse, be stolen.

"Redhead — you, to the firearms depot!" Boar commanded without any preamble as the trio stepped out of the dining hall. For the first time ever, their commander was waiting for them outside the tent after lunch. "You'll receive a pistol, ammunition, and a holster. Once you've signed all the paperwork and gone through the safety briefing, head to Range Four. Ask any soldier, they'll point you in the right direction. Move it!" His final word was barked so loudly and clearly that Redhead shot off like a bullet, vanishing among the pale-yellow tents. "And you, cue balls, follow me."

Dorm clenched his fists so hard it hurt his knuckles. He often did that when he wanted to snap back at Boar with something sarcastic. In his first days at the camp, he had made that mistake once. The giant sadist had then forced him to do push-ups until he blacked out. And that's not an exaggeration! On the sixty-fifth rep, Dorm truly lost consciousness. It was all thanks to his lineage. His father had always been a real pain, throwing around phrases like, "Damn you all, that's not how you fish!" as if they were everyday expressions.

Meanwhile, a faint chime of alarm began ringing in Dorm's head. Boar was leading them into a part of the camp they had never been to before — fully armed. Just like on their first meeting, a dagger was strapped to his right wrist, its handle jutting out above his fist, another blade rested at his side, and a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun sat holstered on his thigh. Yeah... this definitely wasn't just a casual stroll.

Boar stopped in front of a large tent, surrounded by barbed wire. Every ten cubits, an armed soldier stood guard.

"Get in," the giant commanded, letting Bug-eyed and Twig step in first.

The moment they entered, Kravchik let out an involuntary gasp of awe, while Dorm's eyes lit up with boyish excitement. They had stepped into the armory — the holy of holies for any soldier.

Five rows of massive oak racks, stacked with all kinds of melee weapons: sabers, cutlasses, daggers, two-handed swords, bastard swords, spears — there were even blades whose names could only be guessed.

Dorm wandered between the rows, his eyes darting from one weapon to another. It felt as if touching anything might break the magic of war, so he simply stared, mesmerized.

Boar stood by the entrance, in no hurry to explain or demonstrate anything. He waited, allowing his recruits to take in the sight of the weapons to their heart's content.

"All of this can kill you in an instant," Boar began abruptly after five minutes of silence. "Your task is to learn how to counter it — by finding your own weapon."

"And how do we know which one is ours?" Kravchik cautiously asked, peeking out from behind one of the racks.

"Don't worry, I've already taken care of that," Boar smirked. "What, you think I've been beating and studying you every day for nothing?"

The giant stepped deeper into the armory, leisurely sifting through the weapons.

"Bug-eyed, come here."

Dorm obediently stepped up to his commander. In the giant's hands was a plain steel-tipped spear and a long, empty quiver. A strange combination, but the boy kept his mouth shut. Without a word, he took the spear and quiver, following Boar as he continued scanning the shelves.

Reaching the end of the row, Boar picked up six steel darts, each two cubits long and sharpened at one end, and handed them to Dorm as well.

"Twig!" Boar called out shortly. The recruit stepped forward and received two short one-handed swords in scabbards made of tanned brown leather. "Give the second one to Redhead."

"Alright," Kravchik replied, slightly disappointed. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy — Dorm had been given all sorts of exotic weaponry, while he got standard short swords.

"I have other plans for you," Boar rumbled slyly. "Can you drive?"

"A little."

"Excellent. That settles it. We're heading to Range Four."

The so-called range turned out to be a massive training ground with various targets on the outskirts of the camp. By the time Boar and the boys arrived, Redhead was already there, sitting on the grass and basking in the warmth of the sun.

"Did you get it?" Boar asked shortly.

"Yes."

"Alright, take the sword from Twig as well."

Kravchik obediently handed the weapon to Redhead.

"Now then, I've decided to distribute the combat roles in your... let's call it... squad. Here's how it will be.

Bug-eyed — you'll be the all-rounder for mid and close-range combat. From a distance, you'll throw steel darts at enemies, and in close quarters, you'll wield a spear. Since you're a fisherman's son, you already know how to handle a rod, so you'll learn to use a spear easily. The principle is the same, and I'll help with the details.

Redhead — you'll be the squad's firepower. You have a pistol for now, and later, you might get something stronger. The short sword is for close combat.

Twig — you'll be the driver. The short sword is just so you don't get bored."

The recruits eyed their new weapons with suspicion. Throwing punches was one thing, but learning to kill with real weapons was something else entirely.

"And now," Boar paused, slowly drawing a dagger from the sheath strapped to his right wrist with his left hand, exposing its perfectly honed blade, "attack me!"

Chapter 10 (Mercenaries)

What is it like to spend an entire day in a car? And not just sit there, but actually travel? That is, to be trapped in a metal box on wheels for twenty-four hours, stopping only a handful of times for absolute necessities. The first few hours are bearable — you shift around in your seat, stare out the window, doze off, maybe even start a conversation with your companion. But then... Then the real suffering begins. Everything below your waist goes numb. Your back aches like hell. The monotonous scenery outside the window starts to drive you mad. And if, on top of that, a whiner has taken up residence in the back seat — well, that's it. You might as well abandon all hope.

Al, groaning quietly, started his whining all over again:

"How? Just how? How could you abandon my four-wheeler, my shotgun, and my magnificent hat to be torn apart by those beasts?"

"I already regret bringing you along! We should've left your lanky carcass to be torn apart too," Elena snapped, her nerves stretched to the breaking point.

"Oh, shut up! Thanks to you, anyone can now get a good look at my precious insides. Some great leader you are."

"Three scratches, and you've been whining for hours."

"I am not whining, I am simply stating facts."

Orum accidentally ran over a rock, making sure to twist the steering wheel just enough. Al's head smacked against the roof with a satisfying thud.

"Oh, I see! So this is your way of thanking me for saving your hide from that savage den?" the mercenary huffed, still refusing to calm down.

"I could have handled it myself," Ori already regretted running over that rock.

"Big words for someone who couldn't even find his little axe."

"Big words for someone who managed to blow off half his own boot with a spell."

Everyone turned to look at Al's right boot, from which dirty, crooked toes were now sticking out in all directions.

Caleb, who hadn't said a single word in the past twenty-four hours, finally gave up. Apparently, even someone as resilient and unshakable as him had a limit when it came to this chatterbox.

"I think we've lost any potential pursuers. It's time to make a proper camp."

Ori didn't need to be asked twice. The vehicle immediately began to slow down, and within moments, it came to a full stop.

As soon as they spilled out of the stifling metal box, everyone got to work — there was no time to waste. Dorth crawled under the hood to replace the depleted crystals in the engine. Elena rinsed Al's wounds with the last of the water from her flask, while Caleb rummaged through the trunk, inspecting its contents.

Once she was done tending to the cuts, Elena stretched her arms behind her head and let out a blissful sigh.

"The new crystals will last us another two days," Orum said, shutting the hood.

"We need water and food," Caleb added, closing the trunk.

"By morning, if we don't stop, we'll reach the River of Nations," Elena decided to enlighten her companions.

The reaction was strange. The men in the group stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"And what makes you think that?" Al was the first to snap out of it.

"A long time ago, I had an interest in geography. And during all this time on the road, I've had the chance to study the map Caleb gave us," she said, waving the rolled-up parchment.

"Then I don't see any reason to sit around in the middle of the desert. The blisters on my face won't go away from this," Dorth grumbled. "Let's go."

"Stop right there!" Al shouted, making Elena and Orum flinch and glance around warily. "No one's chasing us, we've got time, which means what? Exactly! I need answers!" The lanky mercenary narrowed his eyes and fixed his gaze on Caleb. "Who the hell are those damn twins? Why does your fancy master need them? I'd rather not be eaten alive, torn apart, or burned to a crisp for no good reason. Answer me, necromancer! We're not moving an inch until you do!"

Caleb cracked his neck, then his knuckles, yawned, and calmly climbed into the back seat of the car. Orum shrugged, spat on the ground, and took his place behind the wheel.

"Elena! Back me up here!" Al demanded sternly and loudly.

"Just get in already. It's obvious he's not going to tell us anything."

"Traitors."

Climbing back into the vehicle, the mercenaries resumed their journey.

Time dragged on, sluggish and unwilling. The scenery outside the window refused to change. The only silver lining — Al had fallen asleep, meaning they could finally get some rest from his endless whining.

Despite the monotony and calm of the past few hours, Elena's mind was overflowing with questions — questions that, judging by Al's latest outburst, troubled more than just her. What should they do next? Where would they get the money for the rest of the journey and supplies? Why would anyone need the irni twins, and why had Elena and her companions been specifically hired to find and deliver them? But the most pressing question, the one that had been gnawing at her for days, was — who exactly was Caleb? What was his story? He clearly hadn't ended up in the service of someone like Sebastian by choice. And what kind of hobby was it, collecting an army of skeletons in a little pouch while wandering the desert? No matter. The road ahead was long, and sooner or later, all secrets would come to light.

Elena tore her eyes away from the map and looked out the window. Something felt off. There was an unfamiliar detail in the desert landscape. She couldn't quite place it. Everything seemed the same as always — yet somehow, it wasn't. And then, like a bolt from the blue — it hit her. Bushes. Small, scraggly little things with sharp green leaves. She hadn't seen these low-growing plants in so long that it took her a moment to even process what she was looking at. A smile crept onto her face. Plants. She had missed them so much. After living in the desert for so long, you almost forget they exist. But the moment you see them again, you realize — vegetation is the foundation of life. But why the foundation? What makes them so special? After all, people survive in the desert without oaks, firs, maples, tulips, wild roses, or clover, don't they?

Well, first — shade. Lying back in a hammock for a nap on a scorching afternoon beneath the canopy of a giant chestnut tree — what could be better? Second — wildlife. Wherever there are plenty of trees, there's always some kind of animal you can eat, use its hide for clothing, and so on. And third — edible fruits from certain plants. Nutritious, useful, and no need to kill anything. But that was just Elena's opinion, and no one really cared about it.

Soon, trees began flashing past the window, and in some places, the sand gave way to real, dark soil, sparsely covered with grass. Orum noticeably pressed on the gas, clearly eager to reach the forest as quickly as possible and take a deep breath of fresh air. But with the increased speed, the darkness, and the ever-present rocks, the vehicle started bouncing violently from side to side. That was enough to wake Al up.

"Whoa! The scenery sure changed. Maybe we should stop for some sleep?" Al suggested, yawning.

"No. We'll stop for a few minutes — to take care of necessities, and Elena will take over driving from Orum," Caleb replied.

"You know, you've been talking way too much lately. I liked it better when you were quiet and brooding. And anyway, who put you in charge? We already have one big boss," Al snapped, flaring up instantly. But there was no response. His frustration, rising in an instant, disappeared just as quickly.

A few minutes later, they made a brief stop, switched drivers, finished off the last of their water, and continued on their way.

Now, on the back seat, Orum and Al were snoring softly, while Caleb, sitting in the front passenger seat, stared intently into the darkness, occasionally rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Time had long since passed midnight. Outside the window, trees of various sizes flashed by, their density steadily increasing. The lone roar of the engine was gradually joined by other sounds — the chirping of nocturnal birds, the occasional distant howl. As dawn began to break, a river appeared ahead—wide, swift, pure, and majestic. A forest was good, but a river within the forest? That was simply perfect.

Elena stopped the car right by the water, on a small sandy shore. Stepping out of the stifling cabin, she took a deep breath. How good it felt. The murmuring of the water, the sky slowly brightening, the stars not yet fully faded, the birds singing — all of it instantly pushed aside the worries and exhaustion of the past few days. Taking another deep breath, she removed her boots, rolled up her pants, and waded into the water up to her knees. Bliss. The cool water immediately washed away the dirt, the heaviness, and the fatigue.

Here it was — the River of Nations! Long ago, Elena had been curious about the origin of its name. Fortunately, she had Master Zin, who always had answers to any of her questions.

The River of Nations was the only river on the planet. It connected the Blue Ocean to the Sea of Fire Lizards, crossing every country and every state in this world, serving as the most significant and profitable trade route.

What was truly astonishing, though, was that no one dared to throw so much as a scrap of paper into its waters. It didn't matter whether they were rich or poor, an indifferent thief or an uncultured vagabond — everyone treated the river with respect.

For the irni, this river is nothing less than a deity. They worship it and call it the Primal One. It is the core of their religion. According to their beliefs, in the beginning, the planet was nothing but a lifeless desert, the Blue Ocean, and the Sea of Fire Lizards. The only living creatures were the fire lizards themselves, and even they remained confined to their island. But one day, powerful and untamed currents from the ocean and the sea surged toward each other, seeking to unite. And from this collision, their child was born — the Primal One. It grew, it strengthened, and everywhere the river flowed, plants began to sprout, and living beings emerged from its depths, including the irni themselves.

In gratitude for their existence and prosperity, the irni began to build temples along the banks of the Primal One, offering it gifts and praying fervently, hoping it would continue to care for them and grant life.

As for those who defiled the Primal One — by polluting its waters — the irni dealt with them harshly and without mercy: they hanged them. That way, the feet of the defiler would never again touch the sacred surface of the river, not even in death.

Elena liked this belief — it had at least a small, almost fairy-tale-like meaning to it. Her companions, however, disagreed and often argued with her about it. Speaking of companions, it was about time to wake them up and decide on the next course of action.

After a good swim in the river, the three mercenaries and the necromancer gathered to divide the tasks for the day, which they had decided to dedicate not to travel, but to "rest."

Elena stayed at the camp to wash clothes and tend to the vehicle. Orum volunteered to catch fish for lunch. Caleb went off — according to him — on a hunt. As for Al, being the most injured and the least useful, he was assigned to scouting. According to the map, there should be a bridge further east that would allow them to cross to the other side. The lanky mercenary was tasked with finding it.

By midday, dorth and the necromancer returned to camp. The first had caught about a dozen hefty fish, while the second carried six skinned rabbit carcasses over his shoulder. With no sign of Al, Orum started cooking. After so many days of starvation and choking down whatever scraps they could find, this was a true feast. Just as the last rabbit was finishing over the embers, the scout returned — dirty, furious, battered, and exhausted. Without a word, he sat by the fire and devoured an entire rabbit in under a minute. Only then did Al finally decide to share his report. His mission had been more than successful.

No more than a half-hour's drive — though, according to the ever-dramatic scout, it had felt like half his life — stood a sturdy bridge, more than capable of supporting the vehicle. On the other side, as the local fishermen had told him, there was a nearby fishing village. A place with real people, a tavern, and even a passable roadside inn.

The last words sent everyone scrambling to pack their modest belongings, load up the car, and hit the road. A cool forest was nice, of course, but a proper bed sounded far more tempting.

In just half an hour, the mercenaries had checked into a spacious shared room meant for seven people. At the moment, they were the only guests at the inn, so after locking the door, the trio collapsed into blissful sleep. Caleb waited about an hour longer, then grabbed his ever-present sack — considerably emptier after the battle with the gryphuses — and headed into the forest.

Unfortunately, after wandering the area, the necromancer found only a deer skull. Hardly an impressive find, but he had another goal in mind.

Moving further away from the settlement, beyond a grove, Caleb finally stumbled upon a white four-door off-road vehicle with a massive trunk. The car sat alone behind some bushes. Tossing his sack into the cargo area, he opened the back door and climbed inside.

"Hello, Caleb," Sebastian said pleasantly, turning his head toward the necromancer.

"Greetings."

"So, what's your opinion on our workers?" The man in the silver brocade coat with black buttons ran his tongue hungrily over his upper lip.

"Complete amateurs. I have no idea how they're still alive with such a lack of organization, discipline, coordination, and tactical skills," Caleb stated, looking his superior straight in the eyes, not breaking eye contact for even a second.

"And Elena?"

"Combat training — almost nonexistent. She relies purely on instinct, poking around with the Monk's Blade and her stronger arm. There's potential — both in combat, leadership, and personally — but it needs work."

"I see. Well, that won't be good news for the leader. Alright, keep moving along the route. In Kronum, you'll have a separate task — get in touch with my informant, a local moneylender called Sticky Miri. He's got new intel on the twins. I doubt he'll tell you anything truly useful, but we need to check."

"Understood."

"The orders regarding the mercenaries remain the same. That's all. We'll meet in Avalas."

Caleb gave a silent nod, stepped out of the vehicle, grabbed his sack from the trunk, and disappeared into the dense forest.

Chapter 11 (Mercenaries)

"I don't know about you, but I've had it up to my damn earlobes!" Al began his latest tirade, irritation dripping from every word.

"I know I'll regret this. I may even already hate myself for it, but I'll ask anyway. Could you whine a little more specifically?" Elena exhaled her last words in resignation.

"We've been driving along this river for five days now. Five long, unforgettable, and unbearably dull days. We've stopped in three fishing villages. And what have we been eating this entire time? That's right! As our ever-so-talkative guide Caleb would say, the answer to this pressing question is — fish. We've eaten nothing but fish! Damn fish! Fried, salted, smoked, boiled, dried, steamed... Look, I get that our finances aren't exactly great right now, but this is just too much..."

"Well, I've got good news for you. According to the sign we just passed, we'll be reaching a city in a few minutes. And there, you can finally eat something other than fish."

"Wait, wait! Did I hear that right? Did you just say the C-word?" the mage exclaimed.

"You heard right."

A sly grin, like that of a drunken fox, spread across the mercenary's face.

"Loose women, roasted lamb — Al is on his way!" the mage shouted excitedly, then fell silent, lost in his own thoughts. Occasionally, his musings were accompanied by a quiet chuckle.

Many signs indicated that the city was near. First, the road. Yes, it was small, yes, it was just dirt, but it was still a road. Second, the houses. To the left, in the distance, the rooftops of farms began to appear—dozens of them scattered around the outskirts of the city. And the well-tended fields, rich with crops, were a welcome sight after endless desert sands.

Elena sighed in resignation. They were entering civilized lands, which meant it was time to hide her "peculiarities" once again. Her scaled arm and cat-like pupils weren't immediately obvious, but drawing unnecessary attention in a big city was never a good idea. Leather jacket with a long left sleeve, leather gloves, black sunglasses — disguise complete. How had Orum managed to grab all of this in the frantic chaos of their escape from the gryphuses den? No idea. But Elena was deeply grateful to him for it.

To the right, a massive sign flashed past — Kronum. The idiot grin on Al's face grew even wider.

This settlement did not belong to any state, and as was customary for large cities in free territory, it had its own ruler. Usually, this was either a former wealthy merchant or a noble from one of the states who dreamed of building his own empire. In very rare cases, it was a commoner chosen by the community as their leader. However, the background of a city's ruler rarely had any real impact on the city itself. These settlements were almost always the same — travelers were bled

dry with exorbitant fees, while the local population toiled from dawn until night for mere scraps, all to sustain their so-called master. Places like these were known among the people as Free Cities.

And there they were — the main gates, appearing just around the bend. Massive, sturdy, reinforced with iron. Just as they should be. To the left and right of the gates stood towering stone walls, shielding Kronum from the outside world. These were hard times — bandits roamed freely, dangerous beasts lurked everywhere. Ten-cubit-high walls with marksmen stationed every hundred cubits were a necessary precaution.

Judging by the light, it was around five in the evening, meaning the gates, as expected at this hour, were wide open. But getting through wasn't that simple — two guards blocked the entrance. One lazily spun a rifle in his hands, while the other, clearly a rookie, scrutinized every incoming vehicle and interrogated each new visitor with excessive diligence. Both were dressed in light linen clothing, over which gleamed polished steel breastplates.

There were only three vehicles in line ahead of them, so the mercenaries reached the entrance in no time.

"Good day! What is the purpose of your visit to Kronum?" the rookie guard asked in a businesslike tone.

"Hello there," Orum said as slowly and pleasantly as possible. "We're travelers, just looking to stop by your fine city for some rest and to restock our supplies."

The young guard, his mouth slightly agape in surprise, let his gaze sweep over the passengers in the vehicle. Behind the wheel — a bald, bearded dorth with an eye patch. To his right, a young, short-haired woman in black sunglasses, a leather jacket, and gloves — in the middle of summer. In the back seat, two mages, both covered in tattoos from head to toe, and the necromancer was practically bristling with knives like a porcupine. At first glance, it was obvious — this was a group of kindhearted vegetarians and pacifists who had just gotten severely sunburned.

After finishing his bewildered staring at the "travelers," the guard cast a questioning glance at his colleague. The other one clearly couldn't care less — travelers, merchants, even hired killers, as long as they moved along quickly. With a lazy nod, he signaled his approval.

"That'll be four gold pieces."

Al was already prepared to voice exactly what he thought about that, but the necromancer swiftly curbed his outburst with a discreet yet effective jab of a knife between the ribs.

"Here you go!" Dorth beamed, handing over four coins.

"Your entry passes," the guard said, giving Orum a few small slips of paper adorned with images of some red insects inside a circle. "Have a good day!"

The vehicle rolled forward, entering the main street.

It was immediately clear that this was a city, not a village. A wide stone road stretched deep into Kronum, splitting it in half. Along the roadway, tightly packed together, stood three-, four-, and

five-story buildings made of red brick, all uniform in design. The ground floors of these structures were entirely occupied by various shops, stores, and taverns, while the upper floors served as living quarters.

The streets were teeming with hundreds of people, all hurrying off to take care of their own pressing matters. They were all dressed rather neatly, yet uniformly, in gray linen clothing. There were hardly any beggars in sight.

Evening was approaching, and many residents were making their way home from work. Their faces were tired, but content. Overall, the city was alive and bustling.

The most defining feature that set Kronum apart from countless smaller villages and earned it the grand title of "city" was its smell. The smell of a densely packed population. If you've never been to a place where several thousand people live in close quarters and where the word "sewer" is an alien concept, you wouldn't understand what that means. The sharp stench of sweat, filth, garbage, and stale air immediately took hold of your senses, refusing to leave your nostrils for a long, long time.

But there was one thing that set Kronum apart from other cities. The roads had surprisingly few vehicles. One would expect the main street of a large, bustling city to be packed with cars, but here? You could count them on one hand. Strange.

"Turn! To the right! There was a sign — Tavern Tasty Mess!" Al suddenly shouted, waving his arms wildly.

"Maybe we should find a place to stay first and then stuff our faces?" Elena tried to argue.

"How low of you to shame a man for wanting to stuff his face!" The mage's expression was utterly tragic. "But that's not even why I want to go there. A city tavern is that cozy little spot where you can always pick up the latest news and gossip, find a place to stay, get a good meal, and, of course, look for work. And we could use a few dozen gold coins to refill our supplies. Or perhaps Lord Caleb would be so kind as to sponsor us?"

No one wanted to continue the conversation because arguing with Al was harder than breaking through a cast-iron cauldron with your head.

Ori turned right, drove a few blocks, and parked near the tavern. The parking lot, by the way, had about a dozen well-maintained vehicles.

The mercenaries stepped outside, stretching their stiff bodies after hours on the road, and took a look at the building. A fairly typical three-story structure for this area, with living quarters and a common hall for guests.

As soon as they opened the doors, it became clear that they might be spending the night under the open sky once again. Inside, there wasn't even enough space for a dorth to collapse. People were everywhere. So many that even the bar counter was impossible to see. Fighting their way through the crowd seemed like an impossible mission.

"Go back to the car, I'll find out what's going on here," Ori shouted to his friends and, with surprising success, began squeezing his way toward the bar between the legs of the patrons.

Barely five minutes had passed — most of them filled with Al's endless whining about refusing to sleep in the car — when dorth returned with good news. Apparently, a famous local poet was performing in this tavern tonight, which explained the massive crowd. However, just a few blocks away, there was another tavern — more expensive, but with guaranteed open tables and even available rooms.

The travelers had no choice but to pile back into the car and head off in search of the new place.

A turn, two hundred cubits of straight road, another turn, then one more. There it was — the recommended establishment. Judging by the name, the owner's imagination must have been in a deep depression when coming up with it. Above the entrance to the two-story building hung a sign with the "incredibly original" name: Tavern.

From the outside, everything actually looked quite decent. Large, murky windows with iron bars on the first floor, solid oak doors that inspired confidence, and intricately carved railings. Inside, the quality was just as high. Including the prices, which were painfully steep. But at least the place wasn't crowded. The four newcomers took seats at an impressively long bar counter, large enough for the staff to serve thirty customers at once. Elena decided to keep her sunglasses on for now — it was still quite bright. The bartender eyed the new guests with a questioning look.

"Good evening. What can I get for you?"

"Greetings, my good man. What do you have to go with beer tonight?" Al cut in before Elena could ask anything.

"Crispy forest cricket knees in batter."

"Then we'll take a large plate of crickets, four beers, and..."

"I'll take a walk around the area," Caleb interrupted the mercenary and headed for the exit.

"Then crickets, three beers, and..."

"I won't have beer. I'll take kvass," Orum added quickly.

"Fine," Al was now genuinely annoyed. "Crickets, kvass, two beers..." The mage slowly turned his gaze to Elena. She flashed him a wide grin, giving him two thumbs up.

"Six gold pieces," the bartender stated the price immediately.

"Hold on," Al counted out six coins, then deliberately tossed in two more before continuing, "and bring us a serving of fresh news as well."

At these words, the bartender's interest in his new customers noticeably grew. With a swift motion, he swept the coins into the pocket of his apron. Even quicker, he filled three mugs, then

dashed to the kitchen to fetch a plate of battered cricket knees. Returning with a friendly smile, he asked:

"What exactly are you interested in?"

"We haven't been in civilized lands for quite some time, so we're interested in everything — with details," Al rattled off, pressing his lips to the frosty mug. "By the way, could you tell us what season and day it is?"

"Fifth day of the Jade Season," the man answered with slight confusion.

"So that means..." Al began tapping his fingers and silently moving his lips as he counted the days.

"That means it's the third warm season, and the last time we were up to date with the news was back in the Silver Season," Orum was the first to give an answer.

"Oh-ho," the bartender whistled. "You've missed quite a lot, considering everything that's happened over the past few seasons."

"Oh, so you think you're the smartest one here?" Al flared up instantly, turning to dorth. "Sure, you shorties get all the praise for inventing the calendar, and fine, credit where it's due. But there's no need to flaunt your arithmetic skills. We humans can count too, you know."

"Ignore him. So, what's the latest news?" Elena, disregarding Al's ridiculous outburst at Ori, turned straight to the bartender.

"Well... the biggest news right now is probably the fire lizards attacks."

"And what's so big about that?" Elena exchanged glances with dorth. "They've always been a problem."

"Oh no-o-o! This time it's different," the bartender drawled mysteriously. "They've started attacking in packs, in an organized manner, and all over the world. About ten days ago, they completely wiped out one of the largest port cities near the shores of the Sea of Fire Lizards."

"And how have the states reacted?" Al asked, chewing on the crispy cricket knees.

"Differently. The Kingdom of Vindin is mobilizing its troops for defense, though how exactly they plan to defend themselves is unclear — they don't have much equipment against fire drakes. The Territory of Magic has redirected all of its scientific resources toward studying the sudden herd behavior of the fire lizards. The dorths have repurposed nearly all their weapon factories to improve and mass-produce cannons and shells capable of wounding fire lizards."

"Wait, then what about regular ammunition and firearms production?" Orum was genuinely surprised by the news.

"Not at all. The dorths have always handled that, and now that segment of the weapons market is empty. And no one can replace them because the economies of other nations are focused on entirely different industries. Have you been to our weapon shop yet?"

"Haven't gotten around to it," Elena replied, surprised at how effortlessly a simple bartender tossed around economic and scientific terms.

"You should. Take a look for yourselves. A decent automatic rifle costs as much as a car, and a single round for a drum pistol goes for a gold piece."

"Oh, come on! Are they completely out of their minds?" Al's outrage was practically spilling over.

"Meanwhile, melee weapons are selling like hotcakes, and the number of applicants to the Academy has tripled. That's the kind of news we have," the bartender finished, clearing away the empty plate and mugs. "Want another round?"

"Hold on," Al muttered thoughtfully, digesting the information.

Given the new state of affairs, there was a real opportunity to make good money. Mercenaries were always in demand, and now, with firearms in short supply, their numbers and overall quality had noticeably declined. As for mages — they were always valuable.

"Tell me, good man, where could such glorious and brave hired warriors as ourselves find work these days?"

The bartender's face lit up at the question, already calculating how much in tips this kind of information might bring him.

"You're in luck. The gentleman in the red jacket by the window was just asking where he could find reliable escorts."

"Now that's good news," Al perked up immediately. "Then bring two more beers, deliver them to that fine gentleman's table, and put them on his tab."

Unfortunately, that was not the outcome the bartender had been hoping for, and his disappointment was painfully obvious.

Grabbing his companions by the arms, Al dragged them toward the stranger in the red jacket. The man was clearly a successful merchant — his red silk jacket, polished sharp-toed shoes, and gold rings on his fingers all spoke of wealth. Only one thing didn't quite fit the image — his face. The face of a drunkard. Long, greasy hair, a week's worth of stubble, cloudy eyes, a flushed, alcohol-soaked complexion, and bags under his eyes big enough to rival coin pouches.

"Good evening, esteemed sir," Al began cheerfully, taking a seat at the table.

"And may you stay in good health," the merchant replied in a tone that was both serious and heavily intoxicated. "What do you want?"

"I heard you were looking for people to escort your cargo — for a fair price?"

"Why rush straight into business?" The stranger grinned. "Let's have a drink first, to celebrate our acquaintance."

By the time he finished speaking, a waitress approached the table. Petite, pretty, with a stunning figure — a brunette with long, well-kept hair. Al was about to say something to the merchant as he reached for his mug, but when he glanced at the girl, he fell silent. Elena and the man in the red jacket were already raising their drinks for a toast, but Al seemed to have forgotten about everything in the world, his gaze locked onto the waitress.

"To our acquaintances," the merchant finally broke the silence. Everyone took a sip from their mugs — except for Orum. The Dorth silently pulled out his pipe and started stuffing it with tobacco at a leisurely pace.

"What, you don't drink? On the wagon?"

"I'm driving," the Dorth muttered.

"Fair enough. Name's Lokus, by the way," the man decided to introduce himself.

"I'm Elena, this is Orum, and this unusually silent man is Al." The mercenary could hardly believe the words coming out of her own mouth. The fact that "Al" and "silent" could exist in the same sentence was pure madness.

"So, the three of you work together?" Lokus drained his mug and signaled the waitress for another round. Clearly, he was no novice in the sport of drinking.

"The four of us. Caleb, our fourth, went out for a walk. He's not too fond of people."

"I get him. People can be so damn irritating sometimes," the merchant sighed wistfully.

An awkward silence settled in — at least for Elena. Lokus seemed lost in his own thoughts, Orum focused on puffing his pipe, and Al... Al hadn't stopped staring at the waitress for even a second. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Excuse me, but what about the job?"

"What?" Lokus snapped out of his daze.

"You were looking for escorts."

"Sharp observation," the merchant's eyes cleared in an instant, and he pushed his freshly refilled mug aside. "Escorts. I have two wagons loaded with cargo. One with red caviar, the other with fine fabrics. The day after tomorrow, my three assistants and I plan to head for the Mixed State. I can get good prices for all of it there. But as you can imagine, the journey is long, and the route cuts through lawless lands crawling with bandits — without any proper escort."

"We're ready to take the job, especially since it's right on our way," Elena blurted out with barely concealed enthusiasm.

"Hold on, young lady. I already figured out that your crew is eager to take the job. But the real question is — are you the right fit for me? How can you convince me?" He leaned back, studying them carefully. "A girl who won't take off her black sunglasses indoors, a fire mage, a dorth who looks like a battle-worn soldier who's seen far too much. You lot look more like bandits than hired guards."

At those words, something strange flickered in Lokus's eyes. Nothing obvious, nothing overt, but there was something about that barely perceptible moment that threw Elena off.

"Well... uh... we have plenty of experience in this field... Orum, why don't you explain?"

The dorth hadn't been expecting such a betrayal and simply exhaled a slow puff of tobacco smoke with a blank expression. Normally, it was Al who handled the smooth talking and embellishing of their strengths, but right now, he seemed completely out of commission.

"Relax," Lokus smirked, downing his mug in one go. "The moment you walked into the tavern, I already knew exactly who was who."

"What do you mean?" Orum's right brow crept toward his hairline in surprise.

"You see, I used to be a mercenary myself — quite a successful one, in fact. There was a time when stories circulated among our kind about a tall mercenary, a master of fire magic, with a tattooed triangle under his eye. I was always particularly fond of his work in the Kingdom of Vindin," Lokus said, pulling out a pocket watch and studying it thoughtfully before whistling. "Oh, damn, look at the time. I need to get going," he tossed a generous handful of coins onto the table. "You've got a ride?"

"Yeah," Ori replied, blowing out smoke rings.

"Then you're hired. I'll pay you one hundred fifty gold pieces."

"Two hundred fifty!" Al suddenly blurted out.

"Two hundred, and I'll cover food along the way."

"Deal, but we take fifty upfront — right now," the lanky mercenary put a firm end to the negotiations.

"Deal," Lokus nodded and tossed a pouch of coins onto the table. "I've rented a manor on the outskirts of the city, near the Northern Gate — the one with the blue roof. If you don't have a place to stay, you're welcome to come by. We leave the day after tomorrow at nine in the morning."

"Take care," Elena said, bidding farewell to their new employer.

"See you around," the merchant called back before staggering out of the tavern with an unsteady, swaying gait.

"Have you lost your damn mind?" Elena growled angrily, giving Al a few light punches. "You never shut up, but now you decide to swallow your tongue? Hello? Are you deaf?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

The question didn't exactly shock Elena and Orum, but if a fire lizard had suddenly crashed through the tavern doors and downed a few drinks with them, they probably would have been less surprised.

"The desert hasn't done you any favors. Maybe you've gone mad from the heat?"

"I'm going to introduce myself," Al declared, springing to his feet and heading straight for the waitress.

"I'll bet my share of the advance that this latest victim ends up in his bed by tomorrow night," Orum said with a gleam of excitement, well-accustomed to the mage's antics.

"I still believe in love. What if this is fate? I'm betting on feelings," Elena countered.

"I bet neither happens," Caleb murmured.

"What the hell... Where did you come from?" Elena asked, startled.

"I walked over," the necromancer replied in his usual neutral tone.

The look on Elena's face made it abundantly clear: has everyone here lost their damn minds?

Chapter seven (Dorm)

Something about this felt strange. For the first time since arriving at the military training camp, Dorm woke up on his own. It wasn't cold water, kicks, threats, boiling water, nettles, burning coals, or any of the other horrors that had torn him from his dreams before (oh yes, Boar had proven himself a true genius when it came to creative wake-up calls). No, this time, it was simply a clear mind. Unlike him, Twig and Redhead were still sound asleep. Trying to make as little noise as possible, Dorm began crawling backward out of their tent — small and cramped, but warm and cozy nonetheless. He had almost made it out when he suddenly sneezed. That was the signal for his companions.

Twig jolted upright, eyes wide with panic, and shouted:

"Boar, I'm already awake! Thank you for waking me! No need to hit me!"

Readhead just groaned, not even bothering to emerge from under the blanket, already dreading yet another "difficult" day.

"It's fine, it's not reveille yet, you can go back to sleep."

"Thank you, Boar, you're the best!" Twig called out just as loudly, his eyes still filled with fear, before flopping his head back onto the poor excuse for a pillow. Redhead didn't make a sound.

Outside, under the watchful gaze of the sun drifting across the sky, the Golden Season was in full swing. It wasn't freezing yet, but a faint mist of breath escaped from Dorm's mouth. Not quite frost, but the usual mud and dirt beneath his feet had hardened. That was about it. No other visible signs of the cold creeping in. The nearest trees with fallen leaves were at least a ten-minute drive away, grass was nonexistent in these parts, and there wasn't a single migrating bird in the sky — they had long since flown south. And yet, there was a strong feeling that the first snow would soon fall.

Lam was probably at school right now, mother busy cooking something, and his father preparing the boat for the cold weather. For the first time since arriving at the military training camp, Dorm truly felt homesick, and there was no telling when he would see his family again.

He washed his face, shaved, and put on the jacket issued for the colder weather — a dull yellow, stained with patches of green. He didn't feel like wearing a hat; on this crisp morning, even his bald head seemed to breathe in the freshness.

Dorm dragged out the moment of facing Boar for as long as possible, loitering near the tent and lost in thought. But then it suddenly hit him — reveille had already happened, and they had completely slept through breakfast. Strange. Extremely strange. That sadist giving them a day off? That had never happened before.

Things only got more confusing when he spotted Boar's muddy off-road vehicle parked in their training yard, with three buckets of water set beside it. No, Dorm didn't consider himself an

idiot — despite what his father used to say — the task was obvious even to a blind man. But where was the commander himself?

"A gift of fate," cried naivety. "Another trick," whispered common sense.

"Enough sleeping! Get up, I've got news!" Dorm called cheerfully into the tent, deciding to embrace his naivety. After all, he was still just a kid — sixteen years old — and believing in good luck wasn't a crime.

"Are we going home?" Twig mumbled sleepily.

"Did you manage to defeat Boar?" Redhead's sarcasm, once a rare occurrence, had now become an hourly phenomenon.

"He's not in the camp. Looks like we've got ourselves a day off."

Half an hour to wash up, shave, and finish off the leftover bread from the night before, and the trio was now standing in front of a thoroughly filthy off-road vehicle, its surface caked with massive, dried chunks of mud. It wouldn't be surprising if Boar had personally thrown a couple of extra buckets of dirt on top — just to keep the recruits from getting bored.

"So, how are we going to scrape this off? A knife would leave scratches," Twig pointed out.

"We'll have to do it by hand," Dorm added.

"Then you go ahead and pick off the biggest chunks, and Kravchik and I will start washing," Redhead suggested calmly, grabbing a bucket. No one felt like arguing with her decision.

Time passed slowly but pleasantly. For once, they weren't being beaten or trained to the point of unconsciousness. Instead, they simply moved wet cloths over metal, enjoying a rare moment of peace.

"Why are we even washing this thing now?" Twig broke the silence as the right side of the vehicle gleamed with cleanliness. "Boar's just going to drive it straight into the next mud puddle the moment he gets back."

"Lazy lout," Dorm muttered quietly, smiling to himself. He never would have guessed how often he'd end up quoting his father after leaving home.

"What does that mean?" Redhead asked without looking up, still scrubbing the rear bumper that smoothly transitioned into the support beams.

"That's what my father used to call slackers. And he always said that a man should be ashamed if he lets his home fall into filth."

"Yeah, Boar is the perfect example of a proper caretaker. Have you seen his tent? Spotless. And let's not even talk about how he makes us scrub the training ground clean every evening, even though by morning it's always littered with junk again."

"Do it right, because doing it wrong happens on its own."

"Another one of your old man's sayings?" Twig grinned.

"Yep."

"The more I hear, the more I'm convinced — your father's a wise man."

"That he is," Dorm smiled, peeling off a massive chunk of dried mud from the hood. The heavy grille on the front bumper was already spotless.

"My father was a carpenter. A good man too, just swore a lot."

"Was?"

"Got crushed by a log when he and the neighbor tried building a shed after a few too many shots of liquor. That was a long time ago. I wasn't even sixteen yet."

"I'm sorry," Dorm said.

"Nothing to be sorry about. You weren't the one who dropped it on him."

The conversation paused for a while, leaving only the sound of cloth scraping against metal and water sloshing in the buckets.

"Redhead, tell us about your father," Twig said out of nowhere, once again trying to draw the girl into a conversation.

"Easy!" Redhead suddenly blurted out, taking her comrades by surprise. "He's a drunk. Got wasted every day until he could barely stand, then beat me while screaming at the whole neighborhood about how ungrateful I was. My mother died giving birth to me, no siblings, so he took it all out on me. Once, he even smashed a bottle over my head," she said calmly and lifted her bangs, revealing a scar stretching across her forehead. The boys had never noticed it before.

"I'm sorry, Redhead." Bug-eyed said.

"Oh, shut up, Dorm. Don't pretend. No one actually cares about other people's problems. You don't give a damn about mine because you're too busy worrying about your own family. Kravchik doesn't care about us because all he thinks about is his wife and daughter. And I don't give a damn about your problems either. So let's all just shut up and finish washing this damn off-road vehicle."

Silence returned, broken only by the sounds of work.

When the job was done, Redhead spoke up:

"Let's go eat, and then we can go do something to unwind."

"Like what? Go for a nice little run to the river? Or maybe beat the hell out of each other until Boar shows up, laughs at us, and finishes us off with a single punch?" Kravchik asked skeptically.

"No, I suggest we head to the fighting pit," Redhead replied calmly, wringing out the rag.

"But Boar said if he ever caught us there, he'd tear our heads off," Dorm noted in surprise. Usually, the girl was disciplined and obedient, always following the commander's orders.

"Do you see him anywhere? He won't find out. Besides, you yourself said it — we have a day off. We can do whatever we want."

"One day, my daughter will ask me, 'Daddy, have you ever gotten into trouble because of someone else's stupidity?' And I'll tell her, 'Sweetheart, there was this one time when Auntie Redhead and Uncle Bug-eyed...'"

"Oh, shut up already! You don't have to come with us," the girl interrupted Twig.

"I didn't hear Dorm agreeing to this."

"And I didn't hear him refusing."

"Fine, let's go eat first, or we'll miss lunch too," Bug-eyed concluded.

After filling up on dumpling soup, cabbage salad, and a piece of lard with bread at the usual mess tent, the trio set off for the fighting pit.

Soldiers needed entertainment too, and what could be better for a warrior than fun combined with training? The fighting pit was exactly the place where anyone eager for a thrill could get it in full—along with bruises, scrapes, beatings, and, most importantly, valuable experience.

The system was as simple as a rock. A pit was dug, thirty by thirty cubits and four cubits deep. Two willing fighters were thrown in, and they pounded each other until one of them got knocked out. So where was the fun in that? The fun was in the fact that this was the only place in the camp where betting was allowed. Sometimes, full-fledged tournaments were held with rather generous prize pools. Even officers didn't shy away from the chance to test their skills against soldiers and make a few extra gold pieces on the side.

"Damn!" Twig blurted out as he took in the sight of the fighting pit.

"Agreed," Dorm added. Redhead just snorted.

The pit was real (Kravchik had half-thought Boar had made it up), and around it, soldiers had built stands with three levels of benches. They were low and uncomfortable, but still a far better option than just crowding around the edge, constantly at risk of tumbling in.

The trio squeezed their way toward the corner of the pit, but the stands were packed, forcing them to stand shoulder to shoulder with other soldiers. Each corner of the pit had an entryway for fighters, but even those were jammed with spectators eager to watch the action below. Where had

all these soldiers come from in the middle of the day, when they were supposed to be in training? That was a mystery. Dorm figured the officers must regularly bring their recruits here as part of their lessons.

Someone was already fighting in the pit. Redhead, Twig, and Bug-eyed were in for a shock when they saw who it was — Boar.

The giant was fighting another grown soldier, a man only slightly smaller than him. Both of them were exhausted, barely holding on. Their bodies were covered in bruises and scratches. This didn't look like a professional fight — it was more like a mindless slugfest between two overgrown meatheads. Neither of them dodged, neither defended. They just took turns landing full-force blows, waiting for the moment when one of them would finally go down.

"How long have they been at it?" Redhead asked a soldier in the crowd.

"About ten minutes."

"Huh, guess Boar isn't that tough after all," the girl sneered.

"Are you out of your damn mind, girl?" The soldier looked at her in utter disbelief. "Boar's a damn machine! This is already his eighth opponent today."

"Not bad!" Dorm whistled.

"Not bad? He's just getting warmed up! His record is seventeen wins in a row. That day, he could've taken down a few more, but he ran out of opponents. I put four gold pieces on him today."

Down in the pit, Boar took a brutal hit to the torso, dropping to one knee as the crowd erupted in excited murmurs.

His opponent didn't finish him off. Maybe he didn't want to, or maybe he just didn't have the strength. He stood over the recruits' commander, breathing heavily, waiting to see what would happen next.

"Come on! Get up! Is that it? Is that all the great Boar's got? Come on!" the barefoot giant's fired-up opponent shouted.

As the recruits had already learned firsthand, Boar was a simple man — you didn't need to ask him twice. If you asked for it, you got it.

With all his strength — or maybe just finally warmed up — Boar sprang to his feet, thrusting his elbow forward. The strike landed squarely on his opponent's beard. The man barely had time to clack his teeth together before he was flat on his back, unconscious. The fight was over.

The crowd roared with excitement, while two scrawny soldiers with ragged sacks at their feet were already gathering a line of winners waiting to collect their prize. They worked like clockwork — one handed out coins to those whose bets had paid off, while the other cross-checked names and amounts against the betting ledger.

Meanwhile, three soldiers — most likely subordinates of the fallen commander — hurried to retrieve his unconscious body. They jumped into the pit, doing their best to avoid making eye contact with Boar, and dragged their leader toward the edge.

Dressed in nothing but pants, the giant paced back and forth in the pit, stretching his legs. He looked like a beast trapped in a cage, ready to bite off the hand of anyone foolish enough to get too close. Every so often, he cast focused glances at the stands, waiting for his next opponent.

As the defeated fighter was helped out of the pit, Redhead, Twig, and Bug-eyed joined the crowd in chanting, "Boar! Boar!" That was when he spotted his recruits.

In just three strides, the barefoot giant crossed the pit, climbed up, shoved aside the gathered soldiers, and came face-to-face with his trainees. They barely had time to react.

"This is a violation, rookies. Did I tell you not to go near the fighting pit? You ignored a direct order. You're not ready for this place yet. We're leaving."

There was no anger in his voice — only stern determination, the kind that promised he'd beat the foolishness out of them at the first opportunity. They had barely started walking away when one of the scrawny soldiers handling the bets called out:

"Boar, leaving already?" His shout was more of a challenge than a question, and the crowd immediately fell silent, waiting for a response.

"Yes," the giant answered coldly.

"Then no payout! You said yourself — your minimum for today is ten fights!"

"I know."

"He's just scared to fight me!" another voice suddenly cut through the crowd. "I'll beat him so bad, he won't even be able to look his rookies in the eye!"

Boar had been answering with his back turned to the gathered soldiers, but now he slowly turned to face them.

"Who said that?"

"Me!" A man stepped forward — a soldier of average build in every way, bald with thick red mustache. Looked like one of the four who had greeted the batch of recruits that included Dorm.

"Cockroach," Boar said calmly. "Watch what spills out from under that mustache of yours, or I might just rip it off."

The crowd whistled and buzzed like a swarm of bees.

"Then go ahead, try it," the mustached man sneered defiantly.

"No," Boar replied, just as calm and steady as before.

"Are you refusing the fight?" one of the bet handlers chimed in. A withdrawal meant a nice profit for him.

"No, I have a better idea," Boar said, now addressing the mustached man directly. "Let's each put a hundred gold pieces on the next fight."

"Easy," Cockroach answered without hesitation.

"But the ones fighting will be the recruits — one of yours against one of mine."

"No problem. Let's do it!" The mustached soldier was clearly thrilled by the turn of events. He disappeared into the crowd, while Boar turned back to his trainees.

"And here's your punishment. One of you is getting in that pit. And you'd better not lose, or I'll beat you so bad even my ointments won't save you."

"I'll go!" Redhead declared immediately and, without waiting for a response, jumped down into the pit.

She didn't bother taking off her jacket or removing her boots. Instead, she simply crossed her arms over her chest and waited. The crowd kept buzzing and whistling, but none of it fazed her. She just stood there, unmoving.

Her opponent descended leisurely, as if savoring every second. A young man in a gray tank top and the standard pale-yellow soldier's pants. He was a full head taller than her, lean but wiry, and judging by the way he moved, quick on his feet. He brushed his messy black curls away from his eyes and sauntered up to Redhead, radiating self-satisfaction and confidence.

"You sure about this, girl? I don't want to hurt you."

Instead of answering, she struck — three quick blows with the edges of her palms: stomach, throat, shoulder. The guy staggered back, rubbing his arm.

"This is gonna be fun," he hissed.

And then it began.

Redhead effortlessly dodged all of the guy's attacks, countering with sharp, precise palm strikes wherever she could land them.

A strike. A step to the left. A sidestep. A hit to the stomach. Two jabs to the ribs. A step back. A poke to the shoulder.

The guy was getting frustrated — no matter how hard he swung, he couldn't land a punch. And since he was relying solely on his fists, he decided to mix things up. On impulse, he threw a kick. Even he was surprised by it.

Redhead had gotten too caught up in her rhythm and failed to dodge. His foot slammed into her ear, sending her stumbling to the side. A dull ringing filled her head. Not as bad as when Boar hit her, but she definitely felt it.

Flipping back onto her feet, she barely had a moment to recover before her opponent was already on her. He swung twice at her face, but Redhead dropped low, driving five stiff palm strikes into his stomach. The sixth never landed. Instead of doubling over in pain, as she expected, the guy suddenly jerked his knee upward while crossing his arms downward. In that split second, Redhead's left arm was caught right between his knee and his forearms. A sickening crack echoed through the pit. She let out a sharp cry and stumbled back. Her spine hit the cold ground. Nowhere left to retreat. Her left arm hung uselessly at her side.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to," the guy mumbled awkwardly as he stepped toward her, reaching out to help.

Big mistake. That was exactly what she had been waiting for. Like a snake, Redhead sprang at him, driving three stiff fingers of her good hand straight into his throat.

"Smart," Boar muttered under his breath, standing among the crowd above the pit. He was sure no one would hear him over the shouts of dozens of soldiers — but Dorm, standing right beside him, did.

Chapter 12.1 (Orum)

The sun was up. Time for me to get up too. My grandfather used to say, "You, young ones always complain that life is too short, that there's never enough time. Try getting up at dawn, with the sun. You'd be surprised how much you can do when you don't sleep till noon."

The room carried a light fragrance of clothes that hadn't met soap in weeks.

That's it. Time to move. No more lounging around. Damn, this hole where my eye used to be itches again. Every morning. Damn thing. Oh, great. My clothes. Where are they? On the floor. What a mess. We need to buy some new clothes at the market. For everyone except Caleb. Too shady. I don't trust him.

Alright. Wash up. Shave my head. Eye patch. Great gray beard, just look at you, Orum. A face fit for scaring children. Or maybe for playing the part of an old, battle-worn dorth, sitting by the fire, telling horror stories.

What do we have in terms of finances? Thirty gold pieces. Not much. And I still need to patch up the car, buy some clothes, and find myself a new axe. Lost the old one in the heat of the fight with the gryphuses. Damn shame, it was a fine axe. Only two like it in the whole world.

Where the hell do I get money? That pathetic advance we got yesterday isn't even worth mentioning — people would laugh. Wait! There are still three rifles in the trunk. The ones I grabbed from the gryphuses. Al kept insisting that we'd need firearms. But technically, he never said we needed all three. I figure if I sell two, he won't get too upset. Given the current state of the weapons market, I can sell them for a good price. Ah, youth... what would they do without me?

Everyone's still asleep, I guess. Carefully shut the door. The wide hallway on the second floor is empty. Hm. Maybe someone's already awake and will keep me company?

First door on the left. Only a tuft of light hair peeks out from under the blanket. Elena's asleep. Like a child. Always wanted a daughter, maybe not quite as dangerous as her, but just as beautiful.

Who's next? Oh, damn. And that smell. Al. Up all night again. Wonder how things went with the waitress? I really don't want to lose that bet.

Last door on the floor. Who's that lying so still? Barely even breathing. Caleb? Well, damn. I thought he didn't have a sleep function. Guess we're all human in the end. Old fool! You're a dorth. The family would laugh at you for saying that.

Down the stairs to the first floor. Right — front door. Left — big lounge leading to the kitchen. I'm going right.

The air is fresh outside. I love early mornings — quiet, peaceful, empty streets. Alright, time to grab the rifles and find something to eat. Something has to be open by now.

After walking two blocks with the sack of rifles on my back, I finally came across an open bakery. The name, by the way, was a real surprise. A neatly nailed sign by the door read "Bakerey." Illiteracy or creativity — who knows? Not like I have much of a choice at this hour. But one thing's for sure — the owner is definitely not a dorth. No dorth would allow something like that. The family wouldn't approve.

Two gold pieces for tea and two buns? They've lost their damn minds. Even in the capitals, prices are lower. Oh well. Money should come and go easily. That's not the main thing.

Half an hour of wandering through the alleys, and here I am on the city's main street. Nothing's changed since yesterday. Just fewer people around. But the market stalls and shops were slowly opening up. Good. At least there won't be any crowds.

A large gray truck parked by the roadside immediately caught my eye. Two dorths were busy around it. They looked like the usual kind — bearded, stocky, dressed in light cloth jackets. The younger one was setting up a long, wide table. The older one was... helping. With words and instructions, mostly.

"Long life to you, kin."

"And a good life to you," the one in charge replied, clearly surprised. "It's rare to meet one of our own in these parts."

"Agreed." He wasn't wrong — our kind rarely left the Steel Lands unless there was serious money to be made. "An assistant?" I nodded toward the other bearded one.

"Assistant? Hardly. More like a freeloader and a slacker."

"Father!" the younger dorth protested.

"Oh yeah? Am I wrong?" The older dorth scoffed. "Instead of building a career at a factory with that education of yours, you're wandering the world with your old man, living off him and getting in the way. I sank a fortune into you, hoping you'd become a respectable dorth. And you... bah!"

Honestly, I couldn't hold back a laugh. It had been ages since I'd seen other proper dorths. This little father-son exchange felt like a brief trip back home.

"So, what are you selling?"

"What else would a traveling dorth trade in a wealthy Free City? Weapons, of course."

"Oh-ho, then fate itself must have brought us together this fine morning. I just happen to be in the market for some arms."

"Grim, you thick-headed fool, stop fussing with that damn table! Can't you see we've got a very important customer?"

"I'm just a regular..."

"No, no! Not at all. I have a good omen that has never failed me. If the first customer at a new spot is a dorth, then I'll sell everything I brought, no doubt about it."

"Uh... Unfortunately, I was actually looking to sell, not buy."

The merchant fell silent for a moment, clearly debating something in his mind.

"That works too. The important thing is that an exchange takes place. And an exchange? That's trade."

"Fair enough," I chuckled. A dorth turning down a good deal? Now that would be unheard of.

"So, what's your offer?"

"Two rifles. Good condition. No ammo, though."

"Grim! Damn it all! Are you done with that table yet?"

"Uh... no, Father, you told me to..."

"Why am I cursed with this fool?! Look, good sir..." The dorth hesitated, realizing he still didn't know my name.

"Orum."

"You see, Orum, what kind of incompetence I have to deal with. Grim! You lazy stump! Hurry up and finish setting up that stand."

"I'm on it."

"My apologies," the merchant said with a guilty look.

"Nothing to worry about, I'm in no rush."

We fell silent for a minute, watching Grim struggle hopelessly with the table supports.

"Is this your first time here?" I decided to cut off another round of scolding aimed at Grim.

"Oh no, not at all. I'm practically a local here. Kronum, you might say, is my primary market."

"And how's business?"

"Awesome! Firearms are flying off the shelves like dandelion fluff in the wind."

"What about prices? I heard there's a shortage of firearms."

"That's true, but the people in Kronum aren't struggling. No matter how outrageous a price I set, there's always a buyer."

"Hmm. Strange."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I've been to many Free Cities. In all of them, the people lived in poverty — except maybe for the city's ruler. But Kronum is different. Lavish houses, wide streets, even paved roads. That's unheard of for Free Cities."

"Oh-ho, my dear Orum. The secret lies in local production."

"You mean the farms outside the city? You can't make much money from those, and whatever you do earn, the ruler will take."

"Is this your first time in Kronum?" the dorth merchant asked in surprise.

"Yeah."

"Have you ever heard about it before?"

"No, first time."

"Then you're in for a surprise," my conversation partner said with a sly grin.

"I'm ready to be surprised," I replied with genuine curiosity.

"Fire lizard farms!" The merchant wasn't lying — I was genuinely taken aback.

"And what do they do with them on these farms?"

"I probably shouldn't be spreading this around, but oh well, a fellow dorth can be trusted. I won't tell you where or how, but I've been there once. Under the city, not too far from here, there are catacombs. Old, but sturdy and absolutely massive. That's where they keep fire lizards. Well, not exactly keep — they use them. Long story short, the lizards breed down there. And the fruits of their love — their eggs — are what the people of Kronum sell. Fire lizard eggshells are one of the strongest and most expensive building materials out there. And as for the freshly hatched lizards, they're the most exquisite delicacy in the Kingdom of Vindin. The nobles there pay mountains of gold for tender baby fire lizard meat, roasted with ginger sauce. That's how the locals here make their fortune," the dorth said with a hint of envy in his voice.

"How do they manage to keep fire lizards under control? And underground, in an enclosed space no less?"

"It's a whole process! First, they blind them. Then they tear out their claws, chop off their wings, and pull out their fangs. But even that doesn't guarantee full safety. That's why they pump them full of powerful drugs every single day."

"Barbarians."

"Not agreeing. The people of Kronum have struck a gold mine, and I'm only happy for them," the dorth winked at me.

"Done!" Grim announced the completion of his work.

"Didn't even take half a year," mumbled his boss and, at the same time, his father, under his breath. "Well, Orum, let's take a look at your goods."

I shifted the sack, lifted it above the table, and dumped two rifles onto the wooden surface. The trader hummed. The trader touched. The trader examined closely.

"How much do you want for them?"

"A hundred each," I said without hesitation.

"Orum, come on now... You seem like a respectable and well-traveled dorth, yet you're robbing me in broad daylight. Out of sheer respect for a fellow of my stature, I'll give you a hundred for both."

"One eighty."

"One fifty."

"Deal."

One hundred and fifty gold pieces for two rifles — not bad. I could have bargained for more, of course, but I just wasn't in the mood for haggling today. The merchant handed me a heavy pouch of coins, shook my hand, wished me a good day, and went back to tormenting his son.

While I was offloading our war trophies, time had slipped past me surprisingly fast. Most of the shops had already opened, and the streets had grown livelier, with occasional bursts of children's laughter ringing through the air. Now, time for some shopping.

Half an hour of wandering through Kronum's markets had passed, and now I was finally ready to head back to the mansion. The only problem — how was I supposed to carry all of this? New crystals, a steering wheel and oil for the car, new clothes, new boots, sleeping bags, a sharpening stone for Elena, tobacco for my dear self, a cooking pot. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a decent axe. Nor could I find a scabbard for the Monk's blade. According to the merchants, such rare item had never even been seen here. Wait. I forgot something. Right. Parts for traps, mines, and bombs. This was going to cost me a fortune.

Phew. Made it. Finally. Tired as a dog. Not the same years anymore. Or maybe I just need to take better care of myself. Every day I tell myself I should ask Elena to train me. And every day I forget. Or maybe I'm just too lazy. Alright. Shopping's done. Now it's time to take care of the car.

The garage, which took up half of the first floor of the mansion, could easily fit three cars. And if you really tried, all six could probably squeeze in. Honestly, a house like this, with a garage like that — that's the dream. The only problem is that this dream will likely remain just that — an unattainable wish. You don't make a fortune in the mercenary business. Or rather, you can make

money, but the constant need to spend it on weapons, transportation, and supplies keeps the actual profit close to zero. And let's not forget — sometimes, you just need to unwind.

The sturdy garage doors opened effortlessly, without a single creak. Clearly, someone was taking good care of this place.

There she is, the old girl. I don't remember parking her in the garage, but oh well. How many miles have you traveled? How many owners have you had? Who did those gryphuses take you from? They must have tormented you, poor thing. But don't worry. I'll patch you up. We've still got battles ahead.

I popped the hood. Ah, that smell. The scent of nostalgia. Memories came rushing back all at once.

Thirty years old — my prime. A young, curly-haired dorth, fresh out of trade school. A whole life ahead, endless plans, strength to move mountains.

First thing's first — get a job. And where does a dorth go when he's just earned his degree, with not a coin to his name? That's right. The only option is the auto factory. Alright, the crystals are replaced, oil's topped up — just need to swap out the steering wheel.

And once again, memories. Orum at thirty-five. Five years of work experience. Carrying metal around the factory was already beneath me. Time for a promotion. My direct supervisor, supposedly out of his own goodwill, transfers a young but promising dorth — me — to the steering wheel stamping department. Better pay, an hour shorter workday. Career growth, alright — may rust take it. They send me to the office to get some paperwork stamped. I walk into the room, and I see her. The love of my life — Kara. It's worth noting that, for the most part, female dorths weren't much different from the males — just as rough, just as stocky, some even with mustaches. But Kara... she was perfect. A brunette, delicate and well-proportioned features, a pleasantly plump figure, and the most breathtaking green eyes. Ah.

I got completely distracted. I need to wash the car. In the desert, you can drive any filthy wreck, but here... this is the civilized world. Repainting it wouldn't hurt either, but I'm too lazy for that — too much hassle. I wouldn't finish in a day.

Got the water, now a bit of soap in there. Alright, perfect. I saw a sponge somewhere in the garage corner. Now, let's get you cleaned up, my dear. You'll look no worse than these city slickers.

And once again, the sharp memory characteristic of all dorths brought back a fragment from the past.

Noon. My five-year-old son, Rusty, and I are polishing the new car until it shines. I had gotten into racing back then. It just sort of happened. I was promoted to team lead on the assembly line, and my crew suggested we go to the races over the weekend. Why not? Plus, I turned out to be a pretty decent racer. And somehow, I ended up winning.

A long-awaited promotion, winning a car, a romantic dinner with my wife at one of the most expensive restaurants in town, tinkering with a car alongside my son — those were good days.

What's that noise? Hopefully, it's just Elena doing some morning exercise in the yard and not a fire lizard attacking the mansion.

Well, I've washed the car, handled all my tasks — might as well go see what's happening out there. And grab some food while I'm at it. Tea and two pastries won't get me far.

Chapter 12.2 (Elena)

How wonderful it is to sleep in a bed, on clean sheets, under a warm and soft blanket. And this pillow — it feels like it's made from the softest softness in the world. Amazing! Just lying here, enjoying the moment in this cradle of warmth and comfort. I could stay like this until evening, but no. Enough sleeping. The sun has long since risen, and I'm still in bed. But I deserve this! After so many days of wandering around with those brutes, I finally had a hot bath and slept in normal conditions — I have every right to this.

"Big morning stretch!" — as my mom used to say when I was a child. Every time I wake up, I remember that. Oh, how I miss her. And Dad. And my little sister. She's probably as tall as me by now. The last time I saw her, she wasn't even in school yet. A-a-alright! No sad thoughts. This day is too good to waste on sorrow.

Wow! Orum already bought new clothes and quietly placed them on the nightstand while I was sleeping. How thoughtful of him. Al and I would've been done for a long time ago without him. When will that tall fool finally admit this fact? Instead of saying thank you, he always teases and annoys the old dorth.

What do we have here? A white tank top — perfect. Black pants... So light. Amazing. He even washed my leather jacket, though it's still not completely dry. That's it! If I ever get married, it'll only be to someone like Orum — responsible and considerate.

Time for a workout. Push-ups. One, two, three, four... twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven... fifty-nine, sixty. Squats. One, two... forty-nine, fifty. That's enough for the morning exercises. Now onto something more interesting and useful.

I really wore Kaleb out yesterday, but I got what I wanted. Time to wash up, grab a quick bite, and train with him. Otherwise, that little necromancer will sneak off somewhere again, and I'll have to search the whole city for him.

First floor, spacious dining hall, the cook, a massive oak table, and a small plate of food already waiting for me. What do we have here?

The most delicious omelet. Just regular eggs and milk, yet the cook's skill turned them into a real delicacy. Where does Lokus get so much money from, anyway? He looks like a regular drunkard merchant, yet he managed to rent such a villa, complete with a cook and servants. Something feels off. But, as they say, everyone earns a living their own way. And if Lokus's wits allow him to afford a few days in such luxury, who am I to judge?

Let's head back up to the second floor. Kaleb's not in his room. Either he's in the inner courtyard, or he's already disappeared. I should grab my katana — if he's gone, I'll just practice on my own. 'Fighting shadows' is still better than lying around in bed all day. I think I can leave the leather jacket and glasses behind; the inner courtyard is walled off with six-foot-high brick walls, and the servants couldn't care less about any unusual hands their guests might have.

Lucky me, the necromancer didn't slip away — he's waiting in the courtyard. My mood, already good, just got even better. I really do love training: it's both useful and fun. And a sparring match with Kaleb promises to be even more interesting.

The inner courtyard of the mansion was a large square, enclosed on three sides by a high brick wall, with the fourth side being the house itself. The courtyard featured a well-maintained lawn, several benches, a few neatly trimmed bushes, and a towering tree with a massive canopy that provided shade. Under this very tree stood Kaleb, lazily flipping a throwing knife from hand to hand.

"Ready?" the necromancer asked, tilting his head slightly to the side, as if assessing.

Today, he was dressed in his signature dark blue vest, adorned with dozens of knives, gray linen pants, and light sandals of local craftsmanship.

"Always ready."

"Where do we start?"

"Will you summon a few skeletons for me to warm up?"

Kaleb silently nodded in agreement, his face betraying not a single emotion. That ever-present blank expression was infuriating.

At his feet lay the now-familiar sack. Its contents, brace yourself if you're faint-hearted — bones. The necromancer grabbed the sack by the corner and shook it out onto the ground. Dozens of bones clattered into a heap. Brrr. Kaleb closed his eyes, muttered something under his breath, and passed his hand over the pile. One of the tattoos on his forearm, a pair of strange words, lit up with a violet glow. Within seconds, the scattered bones fused together, forming two skeletons, both surrounded by the same eerie violet aura. One of them, instead of a human skull, bore an animal one — whether it belonged to a goat, a deer, or a cow was anyone's guess.

"Impressive," I murmured, always fascinated by magic — especially necromancy. "How many..."

The skeletons didn't let me finish. Or rather, Kaleb didn't. After all, he was the one controlling these two walking corpses. One lunged at me, swinging its bony fists, while the other moved to flank me from the side. Well then, let's see what two skeletons could possibly do against a warrior trained in various martial arts and combat techniques on the Monks' Mountain. Wait. Was Kaleb recreating the same situation from the gryphuses lair, where they had tried to surround me? What a bastard.

The first skeletal fighter kept swinging its arms, trying to land a hit on me. A step back — missed. A block with my arm, then another step back — missed again. It moved quickly but clumsily, so dodging this uncontrolled flurry of attacks wasn't much of a challenge. What's the second one waiting for? Was it holding back, waiting for a gap in my defense to strike? That had to be it. The bony thing kept its distance, clearly in a waiting stance. Alright, let's give it a chance to make a move.

The first skeleton aimed a punch at my temple. I ducked out of its trajectory, making it seem as though I stumbled. The second one noticed this supposed misstep and rushed forward, preparing to land a kick to my stomach. Maybe this trick would work on an untrained rookie, but not on me. I caught the incoming bony leg with my right hand and, at the same time, slammed my left — my scaled hand — hard into the second skeleton's ribcage. Done. The result exceeded all my expectations. One of them shattered mid-air, while the other lost its leg from the sheer force of my pull.

"What is this, a kindergarten? If these skeletons are what saved us from the gryphuses, then I'm disappointed," I said, adrenaline already surging through my veins, pushing aside my fears and even letting me tease the necromancer a little. Back when we first met, he used to give me the creeps.

Kaleb smirked slyly, and in addition to the first two glowing words on his forearm, a third one ignited. At that moment, the bones scattered on the ground swirled into a vortex, merging into a single form. In just a second, an upgraded skeleton stood before me. It was significantly taller than its predecessors, with two heads — one of them beastlike — two legs, and four arms. Its two upper limbs, noticeably shorter than the lower ones, gripped a bone staff, its core made from a spinal column. Oh, a fight with weapons? That meant the warm-up was over, and we were moving on to real training. This opponent was definitely on another level.

Where did I leave my katana? Not to the right, maybe — whoa! I barely dodged that attack. So, this bony freak decided not to waste any time while I was unarmed. That's not how you treat a lady, oh no! You're gonna regret that! A roll to the left, and with my right hand, I grab my katana. Alright, skeleton, show me what kind of monster a man with no emotions has created.

A couple of test strikes. The bone staff was protected by a violet aura, allowing it to withstand the destructive force of steel. Not bad. Another exchange of blows. What if I speed up the tempo? A straight thrust — the katana nearly reached its target, but at the last second, the skeleton deflected the strike to the side. Without losing momentum, I followed up with a spinning slash — again, the staff diverted the blade. A sudden wide swing — and yet another successful block. What if I tried overpowering it?

A lightning-fast dash forward. The blade and the staff crossed, producing a dull thud instead of the metallic clang that usually came with colliding swords.

Come on, push, girl! You have strength — he's just bones! Throw your whole weight into it! Within a few seconds, I was gaining the advantage. Perfect! Wait, why is Kaleb grinning? It looks like I'm wi... Ugh! A sharp impact to my ribs sent me flying to the side. I hit the ground, rolled back once, then again. I needed a second to catch my breath — stars were dancing in my vision. My own fault. I shouldn't have forgotten that my opponent had four arms! While I was locked in a contest of strength with two of its limbs, the other two landed a clean hit on my ribs. That was unpleasant. Back in the old days, Master Zin would have made me spend an entire day as a training dummy for the other students — eleven of them besides me — just for a lapse like that. Damn. I'm getting rusty.

If Kaleb had moved to a new level, then it was time for me to do the same. A deep breath, hold the air in my lungs for a few seconds, exhale. Time to take full control of my body. Something

in my mind flipped the switch from "OFF" to "ON." My heartbeat steadied, my breathing calmed. My perception of the fight sharpened, allowing me to react faster to any movement.

A swift dash toward the skeleton. A wide slash across its torso. The blade bounced off the staff. A quick retreat to avoid its free hands. A spin in place, a thrust aimed at the heart. The blade passed cleanly between the ribs, causing no harm to my opponent. Another mistake. A living person would have been finished by now, but this thing had no organs — meaning I had to attack it differently.

The skeleton decided not to stay on the defensive and switched to an offensive approach. A swift attack, but I could easily predict every strike, blocking with my katana or my left hand while simultaneously strategizing. How do I defeat it? What if I just rely on brute force?

A feint to the left — the skeleton shifted its staff in the same direction. A sudden dash to the right, followed by a powerful diagonal strike from above. Steel clashed against bone. With my left, clawed hand, I grabbed the skeleton's lower arm and yanked it aside with all my strength. Along with the limb, I managed to tear out most of its ribs. The skeleton didn't expect such a sudden turn of events and tried to retreat, but it was too late. The blade of my katana crunched through its bony frame, cutting it in half exactly where one of its arms had been moments ago — rendering it useless for battle.

A triumphant smile spread across my face, damp with sweat. I wasn't really tired, but the courtyard had no breeze, and the sun was already blazing. That, combined with the fight against the skeletons, had made me sweat in the most literal sense. Why on earth did I put on my new clothes? Idiot.

"Kaleb, let's take a short break?"

The necromancer shrugged indifferently and plopped down under the shade of the tree. And really, why would he care? He wasn't the one jumping around like a frisky goat under the scorching sun.

I grabbed the flask filled with water from the bench and followed the lazybones' example, comfortably planting my backside on the warm ground.

"Not bad," Kaleb nodded toward the pile of bones scattered across the yard.

"Oh, that was just messing around. I can do much more!" What are you even saying? Have you lost your mind? You're both adults, and here you are showing off like a little girl who just answered, what's two plus two?

"I said 'not bad,' and that wasn't a compliment. For a mercenary who trained with monks, there's almost no technique."

There was no continuation of the conversation. Time passed, and we just sat there like two dummies in silence. I needed to ask him something. Something simple and mundane. Now seemed like the perfect moment.

"Listen, Kaleb, I get that we're unlikely to become partners. And we certainly won't become friends. But we've been through a lot together. Don't you think we've earned at least a little bit of trust? Don't you think so?" And that's what I call asking about something simple and mundane?! Great. Now he's going to stop talking again, and it'll all be my fault for being too pushy.

"Maybe," the necromancer said thoughtfully. Whoa! We have contact. Now, I just have to not mess it up and ask the right question.

"Tell me about your past..."

What?! Tell me about your past? You're clearly out of your mind. He's silent. Why is he silent? That question must have upset him. There's no way I'll get an answer to it. Well, since I'm already on this slippery slope and clearly have no brakes left...

"What's so special about those twins? Why do you need them?"

Girl, have you lost it completely?! Shut your mouth before he calls you crazy and sics his skeletons on you.

"Listen carefully, Elena," his voice was cold and soulless. "You're right. We won't be partners, and we certainly won't be friends. The past couple of weeks, all I've done is pull you out of trouble — why? I've been babysitting you like children. You're unorganized, naive, and foolish. I have no idea how you're even still alive. You claim you're teammates and friends. Then tell me — why, back in the gryphuses lair, when you broke free, you didn't help your so-called friends but instead ran off swinging your sword left and right, completely forgetting you had a team? You're not professionals, not even amateurs. You're just a bunch of thick-headed dilettantes who imagine themselves to be mercenaries."

My gaze instinctively dropped to the ground. Any trace of a good mood had vanished. The only thing missing now was for me to start crying — but I wouldn't give him that satisfaction. That... that... Caleb. Right now, the thoughts in my head were like a storm crashing down on a peaceful village.

Why did he say that? It's my own fault — I shouldn't have pried. After all, he's right. When you get down to it, he was just assigned to us like a prison warden watching over inmates. But he's helped us more than once, just as we've helped him. It's his job. And yet... why did he say that?

"Do you know what separates a professional from an amateur?" Caleb continued, his cold gaze locked onto Elena. "Discipline. Discipline in behavior, in manners, in decisions — even in battle. Your little pack hasn't even heard of such a thing."

"Your so-called discipline just turns people into obedient lapdogs and slaves!" Elena snapped, refusing to stay silent.

"My so-called discipline," he echoed, "is exactly what separates an adult from a child."

For a moment, all thoughts in my head went silent. The storm in my mind disappeared in an instant, replaced by pure, untamed anger. Master Zin once said something very wise: "You must control your emotions in battle. Concentration is the path to truth. But... sometimes, to overcome an

obstacle, you must unleash your rage and let it solve your problems for you." Now was exactly that moment.

"Let's have a sparring match. You and me."

"Do you really want this?" His words were nothing short of mockery. "Keep in mind, even in a training fight, I use only real weapons and fight at full strength."

"I do too," my voice didn't waver. This smartass had managed to get under my skin with just a couple of sentences.

"Fine, but I have one condition."

"What is it?"

"If I win, you'll stop acting like a child and abandon your baseless youthful idealism," Caleb stated, his voice unwavering. "You will take responsibility for your decisions and lead these people properly. Otherwise, you will die. I'll say it again — I don't know how you've managed to survive this long, but I promise you, it's only going to get harder. And without discipline..."

I didn't let him finish, hurling the water flask straight at his face. Too bad the necromancer had lightning-fast reflexes. With ease, he sliced the flying object into two halves with a knife that had appeared in his hand from who knows where.

I don't want to focus or control the fight. I want to unleash my fury.

A backward roll from a sitting position, and my katana was already in my hand. Now this is going to be fun! Bring me this necromancer.

Caleb was already on his feet, taking a combat stance. Ah, so he's using the Rose style, as the monks call it. A knife in each hand, grips pointing upward, blades downward. His right hand covered the lower part of his face, while his left was positioned just at stomach level. Masters of this style are extremely dangerous opponents — but I don't care. Right now, I just want to beat the arrogance out of this show-off.

Three swift steps, a swing of the blade, and the fun began. I swung my katana with all my might, raining down blows on Caleb from every possible angle, putting everything I had into each strike without much thought for precision or strategy. The necromancer knew full well that he couldn't parry such powerful attacks with his knives, so he spun like a top, dodging the deadly blade.

Somewhere after the twentieth — or maybe the hundredth — strike, I felt a small trickle running from my shoulder down to my elbow. Did he actually land a hit? I quickly leaped back, giving my arms a brief rest. A glance at my shoulder — just as I thought! That bastard managed to slice me deep.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed an object flying toward me. I barely started turning my head when my left arm instinctively shot up to block. Clang. The throwing knife bounced harmlessly off my scales. Yeah, dream on. This arm can take bullets, let alone some puny little

knife. But where was its owner? He wasn't in my line of sight. And if he wasn't in front of me, then he must be...

I drop into a crouch just in time — two knives whistle past my head in perfect sync. No time to space out! Without waiting for my opponent's next move and without even turning around, I blindly thrust my sword backward. Aha. Got him. A quick forward roll, then I spin around.

Blood drips from Caleb's right leg, just above the knee. Too bad — it's only a scratch. A triumphant grin flashes across my face but vanishes just as quickly. The necromancer is already armed with new knives and charging straight at me.

I don't have time to reposition my sword for defense. I need to act — fast! Improvise.

What happened next, I only learned later from Orum. According to the dorth, who walked in on us right at that moment, after Caleb's sudden lunge, we locked weapons. My katana clashed with one of his daggers, but I caught the blade of the other with my left hand, unfazed by the risk of injury. Realizing the knife was useless now, the necromancer simply let it go, immediately pulling another from his vest pocket. Without hesitation, he slashed diagonally, driving the blade to the hilt into my right arm, just above the wrist. My katana slipped from my fingers, and then — Caleb's forehead crashed into my face with full force. End of training.

Chapter 12.3 (AI)

My head. My head hurts. It hurts unbearably. Why does it hurt? Looks like I... drank too much... way too much. I could use a sip of water. Need to open my eyes to find some. A-A-A! Damn sun. My eyes! What a terrible morning.

Oh! A glass of ice-cold water is sitting on the nightstand. An excellent and pleasant surprise. My slightly trembling fingers lifted the frosty glass container to my parched lips... O-o-oh yes! The nectar of the gods. Truly a healing liquid... That's it. The nectar was gone quickly and mercilessly. Need to get out of bed and find more! Though... My willpower, which had kept my eyelids open for so long, wavered, and they shut again, sending me back into the blissful land of dreams.

Ah! What? Where? Who dared to rattle metal so loudly, not letting normal people sleep? Elena? Orum? The necromancer? What bastard? I need to go downstairs and smack someone for this! Though... why bother? Might as well just lie down some more.

The bright sun had been hanging in the cloudless sky for quite some time. By midday, it had traveled a considerable distance, and now its rays fell on the opposite side of the house, finally sparing my eyes from their unbearable torment.

My head didn't ache as much anymore, but the world still looked somewhat dull and washed out.

What's the plan for today? Get up, wash up, shave, morning workout... well... I'll start that another day. My wounds haven't fully healed yet — what if they start bleeding from the strain? Gotta take care of myself, after all. Tomorrow, we set off on a long escort journey.

Back to the rough schedule. Wake up, wash up, breakfast — which is probably already lunch — drop by the casino to collect my winnings, and then off to my date with the lovely Isada. Oh, how I've been looking forward to seeing that sweet waitress, that enchanting creature. She's special, I just know it. And if tonight's trip to the theater goes well, maybe I'll start thinking about settling down — getting married, having a family, growing a little garden, and making an honest and safe living.

The mansion seemed deserted. Not a soul in sight. It was well past noon, and most had gone about their urgent business, including the servants and the cook. Strange. Because of this, I had to scavenge for food myself. Two apples and some bread. A meager meal for my boundless stomach, but after last night's binge, it was enough. Otherwise, it might rebel and ruin my entire day.

Where is everyone? Maybe in the inner courtyard? Hmm. Empty here too. After wandering around a bit and finding only small dried patches of blood — probably from a butchered chicken, which meant a great dinner ahead — I headed back to my room to dress properly.

The new clothes Ori got me weren't suitable for this special evening. What to do? Maybe I could find something decent in Lokus's wardrobe? He had plenty of money and expensive clothes. A pair of pants more, a pair less — I doubt he'd notice.

Hmm. Excellent white trousers. And this light-colored shirt commands respect. Even the size is a perfect fit. Well! Looking sharp! Now, what to do with all the junk bulging out of my pockets? A cloth pouch with twenty gold pieces, a city pass, a casino winnings receipt, a route map — I don't even remember how I got it, but I can't leave it unattended. Guess I'll have to take a small bag. Good thing there's a neat and convenient shoulder bag right here in Lokus's wardrobe. Alright, time to set off to meet my potential bride!

The city streets were hot and crowded. Judging by the atmosphere, today was a day off, and many townspeople, dressed in their finest outfits, were leisurely strolling under the scorching sun. Some wandered aimlessly from one shop to another, browsing various goods, others engaged in polite conversation with acquaintances, and then there were those who, at that very moment, were discreetly emptying the purses of the first and second groups. All in all, just another typical weekend in a perfectly ordinary, well-off town.

Closed. The sign made it clear to my not-so-sharp, post-drinking mind that the casino wouldn't open until seven in the evening. Given that no one had answered my shouting and pounding on the door for the past five minutes, it was safe to assume that seven hadn't arrived yet. Well, to hell with them. I'd come back later, after my date with the wonderful Isada.

Yesterday's all-night drinking session, with an excessive amount of alcohol, had left behind an unpleasant dryness in my mouth. A self-diagnosed case of extreme thirst. I needed to get some liquid for internal use. Or maybe a nice cold beer to set me straight? No, showing up to a date with such a beautiful girl while reeking of booze wasn't a great idea. Though, to be fair, I probably didn't smell like roses at the moment anyway.

"Juice! Buy fresh orange juice! Tasty, refreshing, and uplifting! Buy some orange juice!" shouted a plump man in a funny little cap, standing behind a small stall just a block away from the casino. "Juice! Orange juice!"

"How much for the juice?"

"Two gold pieces per bottle," the vendor answered cheerfully, shoving a small bottle filled with yellow liquid right in front of my face.

"That's a bit steep."

"I agree, it's not cheap. But orange juice is the best cure for a hangover! My grandma always used to say so," the merchant babbled, instantly noticing my less-than-perfect state.

"Alright, you convinced me. Give me that juice."

The merchant got his coins, and I got my drink. I twisted off the cap and took a couple of sips. It actually helped. The invisible vice that had been squeezing my temples all morning loosened its grip, and my disgruntled stomach grumbled happily upon receiving a few gulps of orange juice.

I screwed the cap back on and slipped the bottle into the small bag slung over my shoulder. Physical needs taken care of, now it was time to tend to my soul.

With an unhurried stride, gracefully weaving through the crowd, carried by the wings of love, I made my way to the massive round building without a roof. That very building was the theater.

Exchanging a few words with Isada yesterday, she had made it quite clear that she found me charming but was still at work. So, without much thought, I asked if she'd like to go out somewhere. Since I wasn't a local, I hit a dead end right after saying that—how was I supposed to know where people went for fun around here? But Isada came to my rescue, suggesting that we visit the theater the next evening.

And here I am, standing in front of the round theater for half an hour, nervously anticipating my meeting with this beautiful and charming girl.

Another turn of my head to the right — and there she is. A petite girl with a radiant smile is walking briskly toward me.

Slender legs, a beautiful bright blue dress matching her eyes, light makeup that highlights the natural beauty of her face, black hair neatly tied in a ponytail... But what is that?! Are those her ears?! Those two massive flaps swaying with every step — are they really her ears?! Although, honestly, they're not that big. Okay, Al, stop nitpicking every little thing, or you'll end up alone for the rest of your life. Better focus on her other qualities. Beautiful blue eyes, a charming smile, a cute little mole on her cheek, enormous ears — damn it! This isn't working. Pull yourself together! Don't pay attention to the ears. She's almost here. But how am I supposed to ignore them?! Under those flaps, a dozen dorths could take shelter from a storm, a hurricane, and an earthquake — and still have room for a card game with a table set up! Don't look at them! Just start a conversation, and you'll immediately forget about this tiny flaw because, after all, she is gorgeous.

"Hi, Al," Oh dear gods, they move in sync with her words.

"Good evening, Isada," Don't look at the ears, don't look at the ears.

"You must have been waiting for me for a while... Sorry, I got held up at work." She really does have such a lovely voice.

"It's nothing. I'm ready to wait for you forever, and no dirty cups or ears will get in the way of that."

"Excuse me, what?"

"I'm telling you, you have such beautiful, enchanting eyes that I lose my words just looking into them." Nice, compliment delivered, smooth save... A-A-A-A! What is that sound? Is that the wail of a dying seagull or a rabid donkey having its privates clamped in red-hot tongs? What is this? Wait... Is that her laugh? Hold me, bald dorths, that's actually her laugh. Alright, it's not all that bad. I just need to joke less and stop staring at her impossibly huge ears. Damn it, I almost forgot about the ears.

"Let's go stand in line, looks like the hall will be packed today."

"Yeah, there's as many people as... a whole lot." Nice, Al, you almost made a joke, but you held it together with dignity. Keep it up.

We approached the long queue. We ended up right behind a very large woman with an extremely thin companion. They were animatedly discussing something, clearly in high spirits. Probably devoted theater enthusiasts, excited about the upcoming performance. A funny pair.

"Al, Al, look!" The girl said it so loudly that about a dozen people turned to stare at us, including the couple in front. "Look at that huge lady who brought her broomstick along!" Well, we're doomed. So this is what shame feels like. I thought I'd never experience it, given my messed-up personality, but this... this is a whole new level. Everyone around was whispering, judging us with their eyes. At least she didn't laugh. A-A-A-A-A. There it is again, that sound that makes a goat's bleating seem like beautiful music.

Tears streamed down the full-figured woman's face in torrents, accompanied by loud sobs. Her companion took the "big lady" by the arm, led her aside, and began consoling her, gently patting her shoulder while offering a sandwich he had pulled from his pocket.

"Oh, I might have said that a little too loudly."

Too loudly?! Might have?! Even the deaf hobo sleeping in the next village probably heard that. I need to change the subject before things get even worse.

"Isado, why don't you tell me about your day? I bet it was quite eventful?"

"That's an understatement. Today was full of all kinds of funny and weird customers. The funniest were these two dorths who wouldn't stop arguing. Then there was this elderly couple who asked me to soak their crackers in honey because they had no teeth to chew with. And oh, the irni came in. Three of those freaks. Flashing their disgusting faces around, scaring normal people." — How lovely, she's racist on top of everything else. "And I got a new apron today, embroidered with brown thread. I immediately told the owner that brown doesn't suit me, but he insisted, and we started arguing..." Why is this line moving so slowly? "...and then he started yelling at me, can you believe it? Yelling! At me! Over a color..." God, I'm so thirsty. Where's that orange juice? Ah, here's the bottle. Ohhh, that's good. Never drank orange juice before, and I really should have. "...mom gave me three buttons, said it was necessary, otherwise it wouldn't hold, imagine that, and back in those days..." When did she jump from the apron to her mom? I need to focus, or she'll think I'm not listening. "...my brother said it was too short, needed to be longer, and made me buy a new one..." Her ears really are big and hilarious. They move so oddly when Isada turns her head. It's like they lag behind for a split second — her head turns, but the ears hesitate, then follow after. "And that's about it. Oh! Looks like it's our turn."

We had unknowingly reached the entrance. I handed the cashier six gold pieces, he wished us an enjoyable show, and immediately turned his attention to the next guests.

The crowd was truly massive. Only a few seats remained open — on the right side of the stage in the fifth and sixth rows. We had to hurry. A few minutes later, we had already taken our seats. According to the poster, this was a comedy. Saying I was afraid would be an understatement.

And what is a comedy, first and foremost? That's right — humor. And humor means what? That's right — laughter. And that... that is exactly what I'm starting to fear.

The last spectators rushed into the spacious, roofless hall. The curtain rose, the actors stepped onto the stage, and the performance began. Minutes passed. The play moved forward accordingly. There were jokes, skits, a bit of drama — the audience watched, smiled, and admired the actors' performances. But I couldn't focus on any of it. My attention and thoughts were elsewhere. Please, just don't laugh. Don't look at her ears! The actors are joking. Danger... Safe. She didn't laugh. Where should I put my bag? It's so uncomfortable. I'll set it on my lap. That works. What the...? My hand twitched involuntarily when something touched it. Does she want me to hug her? That, I can do. Finally, something pleasant. Just like that. Perfect. Ow. Why is she clinging to my chest like that? A-A-A-A! Is she trying to claw through my ribs to mine for ore, or is this affection? ...Probably affection. I'd prefer the ore. Why did everyone go silent? Oh. Right. It's a dramatic moment — the main character is dying.

"Al, Al..." There she goes yelling again. People from different sides of the hall started hissing angrily. "Al, I want a dress just like Elsa's! Al, will you buy me one?"

That was way too loud. Even some of the actors shot furious glances in our direction. What a disgrace. My palms suddenly felt sweaty. My forehead, too. Shame is an unpleasant thing. But soon, everyone turned their eyes back to the stage, forgetting Isada's outburst. Good. So, who's dying again? I should at least watch the play — paid for the tickets, after all. Ah, his brother betrayed him and shot him in the back. Got it. Pretty standard for... Wait. Something's wrong. What is this feeling? I can't pinpoint where the discomfort is coming from... It feels like... Oh no. Not this. Gods. Any gods. All the gods of all the races, I beg you! Please! Let this liquid slowly trickling from my lap to my knees be the cruel betrayal of my own bladder. Let me have soiled my pants like a child, rather than spilled the orange juice in my bag. Because inside that bag is my pass, my map, and — most importantly — a check for two hundred gold pieces.

Alright. Carefully slipping my hand into the bag. The top is dry — good sign. Now, a sharp dive deeper. Oh, for the love of... My index and middle fingers sank completely into a sticky substance. It's the juice. In despair, I tossed the bag under my feet and assessed the full scale of the disaster unfolding on my pants. And, oh, there was plenty to see. A massive yellow stain, slowly creeping down toward my knees. What to do? Think, Al, think. You've gotten out of worse situations. What do people do with wet pants? Exactly — dry them. And how do you dry pants quickly? Easy! I'm a mage. I just need to use a fireball spell but channel only the tiniest bit of energy — just enough to make my palm radiate heat without actual flames. Yes! Direct some energy into the tattoo... Perfect, warmth is flowing. Now, aim the palm at the stain. The heat is working. I just need to hold it for a bit, and the moisture will evaporate. I'm a genius. Now, I just have to pretend I'm completely absorbed in the play until Isada notices nothing. Alright, the protagonist is dead, so the play should be ending soon. Just a little longer, and this whole mess will be over. Need to finish drying the pants. Isada rested her head on my shoulder. Her ears are warm. Radiating heat, even. Maybe she's a mage too?

What's that smell? Something's burning. And why is it suddenly so hot in my pants? Oh, gods above. My pants are on fire. I shot up from my seat as if someone had shoved a needle into my backside. Desperately slapping at my legs, I tried to put out the flames. A few more frantic smacks against the fabric — and crisis averted. Fire extinguished.

A relieved smile, a quick glance away from my pants, lifting my head... And then, I hear it again. That wretched sound. The agonized wail of every cat in the world having its tail slammed in a door. Or, in other words — Isada's laughter.

A moment of realization. The full awareness of the situation I had just found myself in. And then, the slow, agonizing combustion of my very being from sheer embarrassment. But what exactly was so shameful? Well, picture this: a theater, the play in full swing, the final act unfolding. The audience is tense, the climax is near. And then — out of nowhere — somewhere around the fifth row, a tall, handsome man suddenly jumps up from his seat with a yell and starts frantically slapping his pants. You, as a spectator, are confused. Why is he doing this? Is it part of the performance? Is he about to rush onto the stage and join his fellow actors? A few more seconds pass. He stops hitting himself, freezes in place. And then, you see it. The reason behind all the commotion. On his once-immaculate white pants, from belt to knees, an enormous yellow stain. And just below the right pocket — a small, burnt hole. A moment later, the theater is pierced by a dreadful sound—the noise produced by the girl sitting next to the man in the formerly pristine white pants.

And so, what thoughts raced through my mind as I grabbed my orange-juice-soaked bag and calmly made my way toward the theater exit? "I still believe in love! Even after this! I still believe in true love, and I will find it! Not today, but someday, it will happen!"

Chapter eight (Dorm)

There were no available beds in the infirmary. The guy whose larynx Redhead had crushed was getting treated out of turn — he had a very real chance of kicking the bucket soon. Meanwhile, the girl with the broken arm was forced by the lone staff healer to wait in line with the rest of the unfortunate souls. There were around fifty battered, crippled, wounded, and just plain whiny patients, so the wait would likely last until morning.

Without wasting time, Boar fired up his polished-to-a-shine off-roader, shouted “Get in!” and had been tearing across the fields for about half an hour now, headed in a direction unknown to his passengers.

Kravchik sat in the front passenger seat, while Dorm was in the back with Redhead. She was pale as chalk and looked ready to lose consciousness at any moment — which meant she could easily tumble out of the doorless, roofless clunker. Dorm held her by the shoulders. The girl was shivering, so Bug-eyed threw his own jacket over her coat. He had no idea if it would help, but Redhead didn’t seem to object, and it definitely wouldn’t make things worse.

"Where exactly are we speeding off to with such purpose?" Bug-eyed asked, keeping his eyes on the girl’s swollen, bluish arm. After the fight, Boar had immediately torn open the sleeve of her jacket to assess the damage. No bones were jutting out at odd angles, but there was no doubt — they were broken.

"There’s a village not far from here," Boar bellowed in response. "A healer I know lives there. Good woman. She’ll help us."

"Don’t you have any healing salves that might help with the fracture?" Kravchik shouted, trying to be heard over the wind howling in from every direction.

"Tell me, Twig," the commander growled darkly, "do you think I’m mentally deficient?"

"Not at all."

"Then why are you asking me such idiotic questions? If I had a salve like that, do you think I’d be hauling us halfway across the world to find a healer? Or do you just think you’re the smartest one here?"

"Apologies. No more idiotic questions."

"I sincerely hope so. Better yet, shut your mouths and keep an eye on Redhead — I don’t like the look of her arm."

Dorm was surprised by what he heard, but stayed silent. Boar worrying about a rookie’s condition? Unheard of.

"And listen up, rookies — if you think I’m going to let your screw-up slide, you’re dead wrong. You might as well start preparing for more intense training."

From that moment until they reached the healer's house, only the whistling wind broke the silence. The village turned out to be a modest settlement of about twenty homes nestled at the edge of a pine forest. The healer's house was the largest and most luxurious among them. Even from a distance, one could tell — this wasn't the home of a sweet old lady, but that of a business-minded woman used to charging for her services.

Stopping at the entrance, Boar let his recruits out and gave his orders:

"Get her inside, push through the line if you have to, tell them you're from me. If she asks for money, remind her she owes me — shouldn't be any trouble. I've got other business to handle."

The recruits' commander spun his off-roader around with practiced ease and slowly rolled off toward the other end of the village.

"Maybe I should head to the Territory of Magic too and become a healer? I wouldn't mind living in a place like this," Kravchik said enviously.

"Let's just go inside already," the girl hissed through the pain with every step, opening the door with her uninjured hand.

Just beyond the grand double doors — adorned with two intricately carved swans — was a spacious reception room. Light-colored wallpaper, freshly painted orange floors, neat cushioned chairs lining two of the walls, and about a dozen elderly men and grandmothers sitting in line, waiting for their turn.

The moment Kravchik closed the door behind them, an awkward silence filled the room. The elderly patients stared at the newcomers like newborn puppies cruelly thrown to the wolves. And the trio didn't dare move, afraid that even the slightest twitch might provoke these seemingly harmless seniors.

Mustering some courage, Dorm took an uncertain step forward — and the attack came immediately.

"Young man, and where do you think you're going?" asked an ancient old woman, twirling a wooden cane with an iron bull's head in her hands.

"I just need to..."

"We all just need to ask something," the same old woman cut Dorm off. Among the locals, she was most likely the oldest and the loudest troublemaker. In a wolf pack, she'd undoubtedly be the alpha.

"Can't you see the girl's got a broken arm? She needs urgent help!" Kravchik jumped into the conversation.

"So what? I don't even have a leg," the old woman replied, tapping her wooden knee with her cane. "And look — I'm waiting in line like everyone else."

"We're soldiers of the Kingdom of Vindin, and we're supposed to be treated out of turn!" Twig blurted out, not sounding too confident.

"Sweetheart, you sure you want to play the privileges game? Not afraid you'll lose?" the old woman asked playfully. The rest of the elderly folks in the reception room let out a chorus of unpleasant chuckles.

The white doors leading further into the house swung open. Standing in the doorway was a short, plump woman dressed in tight pants that clung to her sizable legs, a long-sleeved top, gloves, a mask, and a cap. All of it was a vivid shade of crimson. In the army, she would've instantly earned a nickname like "The Crimson Lady" or something along those lines.

"What's all the commotion?" the woman asked in a commanding tone.

All the elderly people instantly began to act as though they were suffering terribly, radiating helplessness. The old crone with the cane spoke up in a voice as innocent as a kitten's:

"Violetta, these soldiers barged into the waiting room, started shouting and threatening to impale us all if we didn't let them through. We told them, 'Go ahead, noble lads,' and they said, 'Where's your respect — we're soldiers of the Kingdom of Vindin...'"

"Grandma Opanasa, enough! I'll handle this myself," the healer cut her off. It seemed she was the only one capable of putting the cane-wielding elder in her place. "Who are you and what do you need?"

"We're under Boar's command. We need help," Dorm said, eyeing the old woman with the cane. "The girl's arm is broken, and there are no open beds in the military camp infirmary."

"I see. Come in. Sit her down on an empty cot, and I'll get to you as soon as I can. Sweetheart, can you hang in there?" she asked gently, seeing how deathly pale Redhead's face had become. In response, the girl raised the thumb of her healthy hand.

The trio quickly crossed the reception area, feeling the angry stares of the hostile elders burning into their backs, and closed the door behind them.

They were now inside healer Violetta's office, which took up most of the house.

Soothing pink walls. Brand-new parquet flooring that still smelled of fresh wood. A neat writing desk, simple and unadorned. One wide cot along each wall. On one sat an elderly man, watching his leg swing back and forth. On another lay a pregnant woman, currently being examined by Violetta. The third cot was unoccupied. That's where the trio of recruits settled.

"May I go?" the elderly man asked, drawing out each syllable so slowly it was as if he were chewing the letters.

"Yes, I'll be expecting you in a week," the healer replied without looking up from the pregnant woman she was examining. Green light glowed from her hands as she slowly moved them over the woman's belly.

The elderly man stood up from the cot with excruciating slowness — criminally slow, really — and began to drift toward the exit at the pace of a caterpillar.

The trio watched him go, silently wondering how many hours it would take him to reach the next house.

"Don't be fooled. He may look frail, sick, and ancient, but he's healthier than all of us put together. " The healer said as she finished examining the pregnant woman. "The baby's fine, the pregnancy is progressing normally. I'll be expecting both of you back — with just as happy a smile — in ten days. And don't forget to take three spoonfuls of the tincture I prescribed you every evening."

"Thank you so much, see you soon," the woman replied cheerfully and left the office, radiating joy.

Violetta sat down at her desk, glanced through a couple of sheets of paper, and made a few notes.

"So why didn't Boar drop in himself?" the healer asked.

"He brought us and left to take care of some business — didn't tell us anything," Dorm replied.

"Oh, that one loves to stock up on rare herbs and roots again. Our forest is full of them, merchants even come from other countries just to..."

"Excuse me, Violetta, could you please take a look at my arm? Please, it really hurts," Redhead interrupted, her face ghostly pale.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry — of course, just a moment," the healer babbled, instantly forgetting about her papers.

But before she could rise from her chair, the door began to open — slowly, so reluctantly that Dorm thought for a moment it was the wind. But no. There, in the doorway, stood an old man.

He was dressed in a dapper brown three-piece suit, his gray hair slicked carefully back, and the thin tips of his mustache neatly curled. In his hands, he carried a worn, scuffed black bag.

As this stylish grandpa slowly stepped over the threshold, he was shaking so badly it seemed like sawdust might start pouring out of him at any moment.

"Grandpa Kolomiy, what is it now?" the healer called out to him immediately, not even waiting for his second step.

"Good day, Violetta, I'm here for my treatments," the old man said in a quivering voice, somehow managing to slip in a flirtatious note. "You told me to come today. And I've told you a hundred times — just Kolomiy."

"Right, you did. Alright, come in. Did you bring everything you need?"

"Everything I need?" the old man repeated with genuine confusion.

"You know — tinctures, towel, needles. I told you already. They're probably in the bag, check inside."

Grandpa Kolomiy slowly opened his bag and stared intently at its contents.

"Nope, it's just a bunch of crap in here."

"What kind of crap?" Violetta asked, clearly not following what was going on.

"Underwear, socks, milk," the trembling old man began listing.

"And why on earth did you bring that?"

"Not the faintest idea."

"Then go get what you're actually supposed to bring."

"Right away," Grandpa Kolomiy replied and shuffled out of the healer's office.

"And that's the job — just old suitors, grannies, and pregnant ladies," Violetta concluded. The trio sitting on the cot chuckled.

"And what are we grinning about? Gentlemen, are you in pain?"

"No!" Dorm and Kravchik answered in unison.

"Then leave the lady to me, and you two — out! I'll call for you when I'm done."

The boys obediently stood up and headed outside. Just before reaching the door, Dorm happened to glance back — and his eyes met the gaze of the old woman still twirling the cane with the bull-head handle. And he was sure he had never seen a more terrifying look in his entire life.

Magic. Magic is power. Magic is strength. Magic is responsibility. One word — so many meanings. For one person, it means a job; for another, power; for a third, death. Magic comes in many forms. The destructive force of fire, or the calm and fluid nature of water. The mystery and enigma of necromancy, or the wonders of healing. Or perhaps the strangeness of transformation? Which of these is the most useful? Scholars, soldiers, ordinary mortals — every thinking creature has spent years debating and trying to determine which branch of magic is the greatest. There is still no clear answer. But one thing has always been certain — throughout the years, healing has held the undeniable edge.

Blasting an enemy squad with a wave of fire or shielding your unit with a wall of water — those things are important. But stopping a bleed in time or healing a stab wound within minutes — those are everyday matters, and far more vital.

Healing mages, gifted with the ability to mend their fellow beings, figured things out long ago. Treating the wounded for money is far more satisfying than doing it for free. And the moment that thought crossed the mind of the first healer, the very next day, the world saw the opening of its first for-profit clinic.

Let's say a man gets stabbed in an alley. He barely fends off his attacker, clutching the bleeding wound. He kept his money, stayed alive. Great. But what next? Warm blood runs down his arms, and his consciousness begins to drift away from his mortal shell. What to do? And then, like a beacon of salvation, he spots a sign: "Healer Georges." With the last of his strength, the wounded man crawls to the door, collapses inside, and whispers in a raspy voice, "Help me..." He's lifted under the arms, carried into a room. A couple of hours of nonstop spellwork — and it's done. The man walks away alive and well, and the mage pockets ten gold pieces.

That's exactly how hundreds of healers around the world operate these days. And it was to one of them that Elena ended up, courtesy of a lousy necromancer.

The last thing she remembered was the start of a lovely day, then a training session with Kaleb — bam — and she woke up on the hard cot of some healer's clinic. Her right arm now sported three scars: two near the wrist, where the knife had gone in and where it had come out, and a third one on her shoulder. Not to mention a broken nose and a decently sized bruise under her eye. An hour, maybe an hour and a half passed — and now the satisfied healer was shoving an open palm under her nose, clearly expecting payment.

"How much?" asked Orum, appearing out of nowhere.

"For the urgency and the complexity of the wounds — twenty gold pieces," the healer replied.

The dorth silently counted out twenty coins and placed them on the writing desk in the corner of the room.

"She still needs a few hours of rest, some good sleep, and by tomorrow she'll be ready for heroics," the man added with satisfaction, rubbing a tattoo on his arm.

"Thank you. I trust it won't be too hard for you to forget about our visit — and the details of your patient," Orum said pleasantly, tossing a couple more coins onto the desk.

"What patient?" A look of honest confusion instantly spread across the healer's face.

"All the best."

"Take care."

Dorth and Elena quickly left the two-story brick building and headed toward the mansion. It was about a five-minute walk — or two, if they hurried. The sun was already nearing the horizon, bathing the street in a warm orange glow, offering passersby the last warmth of the day and a calming sensation that spread through the body in gentle waves.

"So?" the dorth asked wearily. "Care to explain why you two were trying to kill each other?"

"It was just training."

"What?" Orum blinked in confusion. "Training?"

"Nothing special, we were just sparring with weapons and got a little carried away," the girl said, not wanting to continue the conversation. All she really wanted was to get back to the mansion and collapse into bed.

"So your punctured arm is... normal? Part of the process, shall we say?"

"Exactly that," Elena smiled. A strange feeling was beginning to settle over her. Gratitude... toward Kaleb. She wasn't angry at him. She was grateful. The whole incident had made a few things clear: she definitely needed to improve her skills, and their team truly needed a leader.

"We're here," Orum muttered. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," the girl replied with a smile. "Thanks for your help. See you tomorrow."

"You owe me," the dorth said with a wink, then stuffed his hands into his pockets and headed toward the nearest tavern.

Elena carefully opened the door, listening to every rustle. She slipped unnoticed up to the second floor. Quietly, on tiptoe, she approached her room, slipped inside, quickly stripped off her clothes, collapsed onto the bed, and drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Her morning began abruptly — and not at all pleasantly. Just a few hours before departure, without warning or any declaration of war, Al burst into the room and started screaming like a madman that Elena had overslept and they were about to miss their departure. Still half-asleep, not understanding anything and asking no questions, the girl began frantically throwing her things together. A couple of minutes later, she was barreling down the stairs at full speed, dragging all her belongings with her.

She burst into the living room — then froze, catching the sound of a sly little chuckle from around the corner.

"Did that half-baked mage wake me up early on purpose?" Elena was ready to tear her companion into tiny pieces if that turned out to be true.

The mercenary, barely keeping her fury in check, stepped into the kitchen. At the large table, lounging comfortably, Orum sat puffing on a pipe and slowly sipping something from a mug. Caleb stood by the window, leaning against the sill, drinking what looked like orange juice from a tall glass.

"Oh, Elena! Good morning!" Orum greeted her cheerfully. Caleb simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"We're not late?" the girl asked through gritted teeth.

"It's only six in the morning — we're leaving at nine. So no, we're not late."

"A-A-A-AL! Where is that mistake of nature? Where's that long streak of idiocy? I'm going to gut him! That senile joke-addicted degenerate!"

"What happened?" the dorth asked, alarmed.

"That creature woke me up."

"That was... definitely a mistake on his part," Orum muttered under his breath, fully aware that a sleep-deprived Elena was a dangerous Elena. "Don't mind him, he's a fool."

"Well, if I see him..."

"No need to stress. Want some tea? Just made a fresh pot."

"Yeah," Elena replied, noticeably calmer, trying to quell the storm tearing her up inside. A cup of hot tea — actually, make that two — was exactly what she needed right now.

And the tea — fresh, fragrant. Just a few sips, and Elena's anger melted away. Ten minutes later, she had completely forgotten about the unpleasant wake-up call.

"Orum," came a voice from the living room, "is she still mad?"

"Ohhh, very," the dorth replied with a wink at the girl. "She's ready to skin you alive."

"Would freshly baked buns help fix the situation?"

"What kind of buns?"

"Apple."

"Bring them here — and pray I like them," Elena said in mock sternness.

She'd never been able to stay mad at that idiot for more than fifteen minutes.

Al cautiously peeked around the corner, quickly scanning the kitchen. Realizing nothing heavy was coming his way, he walked toward the table with newfound confidence, while Elena watched his every movement intently, like a cobra ready to strike at any moment.

"Don't be mad, sweetheart. I won't do it again," Al chirped, pouting as he extended the buns to the girl.

The mercenary decided not to say anything to the mage until she had tasted the treats. After a couple of bites, she involuntarily smiled with delight — the buns were exceptionally tasty.

Al didn't let her smile go unnoticed. The moment he saw it, he immediately relaxed and settled into an empty chair, no longer fearing for his skin.

"Enjoy."

"Uh-huh," Elena managed to reply, her mouth still full.

"Al, listen, I have a very important question for you," the dorth said as he turned to face the mercenary.

"I'm always open to such questions."

"How's the girl from the tavern doing?"

"I don't know," Al replied, instantly darkening.

"Wait, you mean she didn't stay over last night?"

"No," the mage answered, clearly disappointing Orum.

"But... you'll see her again, right?" Elena asked, finishing her bite.

"No. That's done."

"Damn."

At that moment, Elena was really hoping that the necromancer, for some unknown reason, had forgotten about the bet — or that money didn't matter to him. Yeah, right. No such luck. Caleb let out two very deliberate coughs into his fist, as if by accident. Even soulless killing machines need money. The dorth pulled a small pouch from his pocket and tossed it to the necromancer. With a disappointed sigh, Elena did the same. The two pouches spun through the air and landed neatly in Caleb's hands a moment later. He gave them a quick toss, weighing the gold pieces, then tucked his well-earned winnings into one of the vest's many pockets.

Seeing this whole money exchange, Al's eyebrows formed a perfect little rooftop, and his face twisted into a baffled expression. Like a fish tossed ashore, he opened and closed his mouth in silence. A moment of stunned confusion — and the mage finally realized what had just happened.

"This... This is what I think it is?" the mage shouted, breathless with outrage. "You! You were placing bets on my feelings?"

"Al, don't overreact, you..." Orum began to explain, but the mercenary cut him off instantly.

"What? I do this kind of thing myself all the time? Maybe. But who gave you the right?" He turned his gaze on Caleb. "And you? Fine, these two — nothing's sacred to them. But you. You're a warrior, a ruthless killer, devoid of emotion — why would you take part in this?"

In response to Al's accusations, the necromancer simply shrugged, set his empty glass on the table, and walked out of the kitchen.

No one in the mansion said another word for the rest of the morning. Caleb disappeared somewhere — probably off to restock his bone collection. Orum and Elena were busy hauling supplies and the provisions Locus had left behind into the vehicle. Al, meanwhile, sprawled dramatically on a bench in the inner courtyard, claiming he was deeply hurt and needed some alone time to sulk. In reality, he was quietly and somewhat sadly staring at the torn and crumpled check for two hundred gold pieces — a check that the casino had refused to accept due to its tragic condition after being soaked in orange juice.

Nine o'clock in the morning — time to move out. Parked in front of the mansion rented by the merchant Locus were two large gray cargo vans and one old but very reliable car. There were eight living beings gathered near the house: Elena, Al, Orum, Caleb, Locus — already a few shots into his morning, dressed in travel gear — and his three assistants. Elena paid particular attention to the appearance and peculiarities of those assistants.

Sar was a stocky, short, fair-haired man of middle age. He drove the van carrying the expensive fabrics. At first glance, he looked like a typical working man who'd spent years breaking his back for a halfway decent wage. The only thing that didn't quite fit was the pair of drum pistols hanging from his belt. They weren't just for show. As it later turned out, he was both driver and part-time bodyguard. Locus preferred to ride in the same vehicle as Sar. The merchant would always settle comfortably into the passenger seat and spend the entire journey sipping wine from a barrel securely fastened beneath the seat.

The last members of this company were Krin and Vlas. Both were water mages — and judging by the numerous tattoos covering their bodies, quite skilled ones at that. Beyond that, however, their similarities ended.

Krin was a tall, dark-skinned brunette in his thirties with a face that screamed "wanted criminal." At first glance, he gave off the kind of vibe that made you want to clutch your coin purse in sweaty, panicked hands and run to another planet.

Vlas, on the other hand, was a round-bellied, good-natured man in his fifties, always ready to lend a hand to those in need. He loved children, was a firm opponent of violence, and only ever used his fists for truly important reasons.

Why would Locus bother hiring two water mages as assistants — especially considering the hefty salaries they commanded? The answer lay in the cargo they were transporting in the second van: red caviar. This product spoiled quickly, and without proper storage conditions, by evening it

would turn into a foul-smelling, unusable red sludge. To avoid that, merchants hired water mages. For this exact task, they had a special spell capable of maintaining a zero-degree temperature in small enclosed spaces. However, since the maximum duration of this relatively simple spell (due to the limited magical flow of a single person) was only about five hours, transporting perishable goods over long distances required two mages. One would drive while the other kept the spell going. As soon as one was drained, they'd switch places. A very practical system.

So, the goods were packed and loaded. Provisions for the next few days were already stashed in the vehicles. The route had been agreed upon, and the dorth crystals were charged to the brim. Time to roll out.

Everyone piled into their respective vehicles and set off. The mercenaries led the convoy, followed by the van with the fabrics, and bringing up the rear was the one carrying the caviar.

At the city gates, the guards stopped the vehicles, collected the travel permits, checked all the paperwork for the cargo, and, satisfied, sent the travelers on their way.

Chapter III (Sa-Ag)

The Supreme Palace at night and the Supreme Palace during the day are two entirely different buildings. At night, it's quiet, dark, peaceful, and serene — only the occasional patrol pacing the halls disturbs the illusion of a crystal toy castle. During the day, however, there's not a single inch of free space. Workers, errand boys, soldiers, priests, and other irni wander from room to room as if on their way to carry out the Supreme's most critical orders.

Sa-Ag realized something was wrong immediately. The sun had long since passed its zenith, and yet there wasn't a single soul in the palace. The lines of irni that usually stretched toward the entrance from every corner of the capital had vanished without a trace. Even the kitchen staff, who were always visible through the transparent staircases, had left the basement.

Things became even stranger when Sa-Ag reached the Supreme's reception hall. Lined up shoulder to shoulder along the glass wall with its double doors stood ten irni. They were all wearing the same uniform as Sa-Ag — but in a vivid crimson, adorned with brown, teardrop-shaped leaves. In addition to their pulled-up hoods, their faces were covered by orange steel masks with only narrow slits for the eyes. Each soldier blocking the entrance — and the view — into the reception area held a loaded shotgun at the ready.

"Halt!" came a muffled command from beneath one of the orange masks.

"Senior Watcher of the Supreme Guard's Second Ten, Sa-Ag, reporting on a completed mission. The Supreme One personally requested this report."

"The Supreme Guard was disbanded this morning. No one is to be allowed into the reception hall."

"Soldier!" Sa-Ag was beginning to lose his patience. First, the empty palace — now this claim about the guard being disbanded. He needed answers, and fast. "You're standing in front of the Commander of the Hiddens!" He pulled a serpent-shaped badge from his breast pocket and held it up demonstratively. "I order you to let me through."

"Never heard of that rank," the irni behind the mask replied calmly.

The doors behind one of the soldiers opened.

"Let him through," came a voice that was unpleasantly familiar. The soldiers immediately stepped aside, allowing Sa-Ag to pass.

The changes to the reception hall's interior were drastic — so much so that even a blind man would've noticed. In the corner stood a luxurious red leather sofa. The walls were now adorned with numerous paintings of forest landscapes. A new carpet rustled softly underfoot. But the most important change of all: sitting on the throne was a different irni — the Advisor Bi-Is.

"Advisor, Commander of the Hiddens Sa-Ag reporting to the Supreme One on the outcome of the operation. Where is Supreme Ki-Im now?"

"Wait," Bi-Is replied curtly.

The gaunt irni in an ornate golden robe picked up a heavily scribbled sheet of paper.

"You have a rather dull and ordinary story, Sa-Ag," the Advisor's voice rustled like the turning pages of a book. "Born into a military family. At the age of ten, your father was killed on a mission. As irni law forbids a mother from raising a son, she gave you to a military orphanage. You lived there until twenty, studying the art of war. No exceptional achievements during that time, but you weren't a failure either. For the next twenty years, you trained under various masters of warfare, following your own judgment. At forty, like all irni, you entered the academy. Studied there for five years — standard course. Then served twenty years in the regular army. A brilliant climb up the ranks and solid knowledge of warfare. At sixty-five, you were recruited into the Hiddens. Now you're eighty — and here you are." Bi-Is finished reading the page and looked up from the text. "A perfectly average guard dog of the valley."

The doors opened silently, cutting off the words Sa-Ag had been about to throw at the Advisor. Another irni entered the reception hall. Even without seeing him, Sa-Ag knew exactly who it was — the limp in his step gave him away. The Commander of the Hiddens tensed.

"Li-Is, you're late."

"My apologies, Supreme One. Because of my injury, it took me some time to climb the stairs."

"It's all right, the Advisor. You're here now, so we can begin."

Sa-Ag couldn't believe his ears. Supreme One? Advisor? What's going on? When did that slippery, conniving criminal with the scar on his nose become the Advisor?

"What's the matter, doggie? Didn't see that coming?" the limping irni with the scar whispered with a predatory grin.

"Li-Is, you are now the Advisor, and as the bearer of that title, you are not permitted to speak to subordinates that way," Bi-Is said in a monotone voice, but with clear intent.

"Apologies, Supreme One."

"Ki-Im," the Commander of the Hiddens said quietly, lowering his gaze, "where is Supreme Ki-Im?"

"My predecessor died last night," Bi-Is stated flatly, without a hint of emotion. "In the middle of the night, he was found lifeless — right here, on this very floor."

"Cause of death?"

"None of your damned business!" the limping irni shouted.

"Advisor, do not force me to question the decision to grant you that title."

"My apologies," Li-Is replied, his voice trembling with rage.

"The cause of death is still unknown. The physicians are investigating."

"By irni tradition, the Supreme's throne must remain vacant for seven days, until his body is claimed by the Primal One. Only then do the priests of the Primal One name a successor."

"That's correct, Sa-Ag, those are the rules. But this morning, the priests came to my home and told me the Primal One commands that I take the throne today. The irni face many problems right now — issues that require immediate resolution."

Sa-Ag's instincts screamed that the priests' early visit to Bi-Is, the Supreme's death, and the bloodthirsty grin on Li-Is's face were all connected.

"Sa-Ag, it is not your place to doubt the foresight of the priests. However, I do have my doubts about you. Did you complete your assignment? What is the result of the mission?"

"Forgive me, Bi-Is, but I gave my word to report directly to Supreme Ki-Im."

"Supreme Ki-Im is no longer with us. So report to me," Bi-Is said calmly — but the corner of his right eye twitched slightly.

"The mission was a failure, Bi-Is. Your nephew died during the operation," Sa-Ag stated clearly, choosing to hold back the rest of the information for now.

The newly appointed Supreme didn't even blink at the news.

"As expected. Your competence is in serious doubt. In the past two years, you've lost six subordinates."

"And haven't failed a single mission..."

"Until today. Sa-Ag, I'll be honest — the valley is headed for great change, and relics of the past like you, Commander of the Hiddens, are slowing that change down. But... I'll give you a chance. One last assignment. Succeed, and the Hiddens will continue to exist. Advisor, hand him his new case."

Li-Is took a sheet of paper, hobbled over to Sa-Ag, and shoved the scroll into his hand.

"May the waters of the Primal One protect you," the Supreme said slowly, without bowing his head.

"Goodbye, Bi-Is," the Commander of the Hiddens replied calmly and turned to leave.

At that moment, he wasn't concerned about the consequences of the upcoming mission, nor about his farewell words that might have offended the newly appointed Supreme. He was thinking about only one thing: I wonder... is Li-Is in on the mushroom deal with Bi-Is, or is it simply the fate of every Supreme to keep at their side the Advisor with dirty business, dark thoughts, and buried secrets?

Chapter 14 (Mercenaries)

Many consider spending the night in the forest under the open sky the pinnacle of travel romance. "Just think about it," they say. "Above you, billions of stars stretch across the sky in wondrous patterns. The great full Sevana casts a mysterious twilight. The campfire crackles playfully at your feet. The leaves on the trees whisper gently, creating nature's own music." What utter nonsense and naivety.

Only a hardened city dweller — someone who goes into nature once every two years — could romanticize sleeping in the woods like that. But what would say people, who spend nine out of ten nights under the open sky?

A night in the forest means, above all, swarms of mosquitoes and other insects whose only goal is to suck every last drop of blood out of you. It means a constant fear that, while you sleep, some wild beast will come and gnaw you to pieces. And finally, it means waking up with a back that won't stop aching, thanks to the hard, damp ground. All this is just a small part of the joys of outdoor rest that a seasoned traveler could list.

Take Elena, for example. She could spend hours complaining about the endless inconveniences that followed her everywhere, but wisely kept her mouth shut. She knew perfectly well that if she brought it up now, Al would support her — and start whining about everything that bothered him too. And if Al started complaining, everyone would suffer. Better to let him doze off in the back seat. When he's asleep, he's so... quiet and... silent. Like a dream come true.

After an entire day of driving through the forest, the travelers had gotten a good distance away from Kronum — and they were thoroughly exhausted. It had long since grown dark outside the vehicles, and they hadn't made a single proper stop since morning. Locus insisted that they would only stop for overnight rest or in case of an emergency. According to him, it saved both time and money.

But the moment finally came when people, dorth, and machines alike needed rest — and it was time to find a suitable place to camp for the night.

The dirt road, winding through a dense deciduous forest, once again twisted sharply between two massive trees with perfectly round leaves and veered sharply to the right. Just beyond the bend, a large clearing opened up. It was an elongated oval, covered in low, somewhat trampled dark-green grass. The edges of this natural carpet were framed by thorny bushes that, from a distance, resembled wild rose brambles. The road cut straight through the middle of the clearing, dividing it into two equal halves.

On the right side, two battered old cars were already parked. A few steps away from the rusted vehicles, a sizable campfire blazed brightly. Four men sat around it, engaged in unhurried conversation. Upon noticing the newcomers, they didn't react much — but nonetheless shifted their weapons into a more convenient position within easy reach.

Orum, without wasting time debating whether the spot was good for camping or not, turned left and parked the car near the massive fire pit. This place often served as a reliable shelter for travelers passing through.

The two vans also pulled up on the left side of the road, and the tired passengers began climbing out. Krin looked noticeably exhausted, while Vlas, who jumped out of the driver's seat, seemed rather fresh. Sar, much like Orum, looked like a squeezed lemon. No surprise there — spending an entire day behind the wheel was no easy pleasure.

Only Locus didn't get out.

"What's with Locus?" Orum asked, concerned about their employer's condition.

"He wants to spend the night in the van," Sar replied indifferently. "Got drunk so badly he can't even take a few steps."

The dorth was perfectly satisfied with that answer and, turning on his heel, headed toward the bushes. The others, without discussing it aloud or assigning roles, naturally began setting up camp. Al, Sar, Vlas, and Krin went off into the forest to gather firewood, Elena pulled sleeping bags and food out of the vehicles, and Caleb — as was usual for him once it got dark — grabbed his huge sack and disappeared into the forest. Orum, meanwhile, had been struck by a traveler's worst nightmare: an upset stomach. As a result, he was temporarily relieved of duties and given unlimited access to the water supplies.

Twenty minutes later, the fire was burning bright, a respectable pile of firewood lay nearby, and five humans and one dorth were seated on their sleeping bags.

"Some hot food would be just perfect right now," Vlas said dreamily.

"Agreed," Krin added curtly.

"All in favor," Sar chimed in, and all three of them turned expectantly to Elena.

The girl didn't notice it right away, as she was too absorbed in her thoughts — debating whether she could finally take off those damned dark glasses or if she should wait until everyone fell asleep. Ten seconds of silence. Only the buzzing of mosquitoes and the crackling of the fire filled the air. The stares kept drilling into Elena, and she finally noticed.

"Oh, here we go," Al squeaked joyfully, making such a ridiculous face that even a cat who had just eaten a whole bucket of cream would be jealous. Orum also burst into laughter, preparing to enjoy the upcoming show.

"And why are you all staring at me?" Elena asked seriously.

"Well, it's just..." Vlas began hesitantly.

"...you're a woman..." Krin continued, sounding more confident.

"...so you should cook!" Sar finished firmly.

"Ooooh... Wrong move, gentlemen. A complete collapse of your offensive on all fronts — and you know what that means? Exactly! Prepare yourselves for moral retribution. Orum, grab a front-row seat — it's about to get good," Al said, barely holding back his laughter.

Orum was already laughing out loud — the deep, booming laugh that only a dorth could manage.

"Alright, men," Elena said, her tone cold as steel left out on a winter night, "just because I am, and I emphasize, a girl, doesn't mean I have to cook for lazy moose like you. And the fact that you've got something dangling between your legs doesn't give you the right to order women around. If you want to eat, you get your asses off the ground and start cooking yourselves." The girl stood up from her sleeping bag, approached the trio of 'moose,' leaned down close to them, removed her glasses, and slowly, letter by letter, asked, "Did I make myself clear?"

All three flinched involuntarily — her menacing voice and cat-like pupils did the trick. Elena, satisfied with the effect, quickly turned away, flashed a pleased smile, and disappeared into the darkness.

Vlas, Krin, and Sar now looked like guilty little kids who had just been scolded and spanked by an angry mother. Their heads and shoulders drooped, and none of them dared to speak. Clearly, they hadn't expected things to turn out like this.

As for Orum and Al, it seemed like this was probably the funniest evening of their lives. The dorth was clutching his stomach, rolling on the ground in tears, his cheek muscles cramped from laughing so hard that he could now only occasionally sob as he tried to catch a breath.

Al, on the other hand, was braying like a donkey that had been branded with a red-hot poker.

"So what's that all about?" Sar finally asked in an uncertain voice.

"She... just... doesn't... know... how to cook," Orum managed to gasp out between fits of laughter.

"Maybe we should teach her then?" Sar cautiously suggested, glancing in the direction Elena had gone.

"You better not blurt that out in front of her," Orum said, getting up from the ground, still twitching from leftover laughter. "Besides, we already tried. It's hopeless."

"Is it always like this with you guys?" asked Vlas, still not fully recovered from the shock.

"You kidding? That wasn't even her warmed up," Al said, wiping tears from his eyes.

"I'd even say she was in a good mood," Orum added, now a little more composed.

"You know, my short friend, I haven't felt this much joy in a long time," Al grinned.

"Agreed! Watching her rip into someone else instead of us — it's pure bliss. I'd pay good money to see her do that again right now."

Still occasionally chuckling, the mage and the dorth peeled vegetables, diced the meat, threw it all into a massive pot, filled it with water, added spices, and cooked dinner.

"Tomorrow it's your turn," Al said, devouring his food straight from the plate.

"No problem," Vlas shot back as he finished his portion and sprawled out on his sleeping bag. Orum, for obvious reasons, skipped dinner, sticking to sipping water from his flask.

"Al, what spell is the triangle under your eye for? I've seen plenty of fire mages before, but I've never seen anything like that." Krin spoke up, having emptied his bowl. Maybe he was just curious, but the rough, bandit-like look on the man's face made Al wary.

"The less you know, the calmer you'll sleep," the mercenary replied jokingly, but Orum caught the fleeting tension in his friend's voice.

"And here comes the star of our evening!" Al exclaimed, spotting the silhouette of the girl.

Elena silently returned to the campfire, ignoring the strange glances of her temporary companions. She quickly ate what was left of the still-warm dinner and lay down on her side. Before long, the others finished eating too, and the camp was soon wrapped in a blanket of dreams.

Vlas took the first watch. In three hours, Krin would relieve him. Because of the special cargo they were transporting, the interior temperature of the van had to stay around zero at all times, meaning one of the water mages had to constantly monitor it and sustain the spell.

The night turned out warm, calm, and truly summery. A pity it would be so short.

With about half an hour left until dawn and Caleb just returning from his nighttime excursions, Locus woke up. His head was pounding, and his mood could best be described as absolutely rotten. Climbing out of the van and finding that everyone except Krin was still sleeping only made his mood worse. "Enough sleeping! Time to move, you lazy bums!" he roared hoarsely, shoving everyone awake in the camp.

The people were grumpy and sleep-deprived, but if the boss said it was time to go, then it was time to go. Quickly packing up their sleeping spots and having a dry, hasty breakfast, the small convoy — two vans and a car — continued its journey.

Once again, the day proved to be calm, peaceful, and uneventful — right up until evening.

By evening, when there was still a good amount of daylight left, the travelers had to make an unexpected stop. Ahead, roughly three minutes' drive away, massive columns of smoke were rising into the sky. The dense canopies of the trees hid the source of the smoke from view, which forced Orum to bring the convoy to a halt.

"What are we thinking?" Al asked the whole merry company gathered around the van carrying the fabrics. Well — almost everyone. Locus, who had already had a fair amount to drink, was peacefully snoring away in the passenger seat of the van.

"According to the map, there should be a village up ahead..." Elena began.

"...and something's happened there!" the dorth continued. "Can we go around it?"

"No," the girl replied. "There's only one road, and the vans won't make it through the local wilderness."

"Come on, stop panicking," Vlas the plump one chimed in. "We're armed and dangerous, and it's probably just a fire. Big deal, a barn caught flame — it happens. We help them put it out, and maybe they'll feed us and give us a decent place to sleep."

"We need a scout," Elena said firmly and seriously. "Maybe it's just a fire, or maybe someone attacked the village. We need to check it out before we just waltz in there."

"Let the necromancer check it out!" Sar shouted. "He can summon some skeletons, they'll scout everything and report back."

"First of all, skeletons can't talk. They've got nothing to report with. Second, I can't send them that far — the spell's range doesn't allow it," Caleb replied dryly, then unexpectedly turned his gaze to Elena.

"Orum will go scout ahead, and we'll pull off the road and hide in the bushes for now. He needs to scout thoroughly, so he won't be back in just a couple of minutes," Elena said firmly, her voice insistent and steady.

"Why is Orum going to scout?" Sar asked unexpectedly.

"Yeah, why does Orum have to go scout?" the dorth echoed, clearly unenthusiastic about the idea. The thought of being the first to stumble into trouble wasn't exactly appealing — especially considering his terrible combat training.

"Because you're not tall, and you have more experience. You've told us plenty of times about how you used to sit in ambushes for hours, hunting all kinds of game," Elena said.

Orum grumbled something under his breath and headed for the car.

"Where are you going?"

"Getting everything I need for a fun night in the mud," the dorth grumbled back, waving them off.

A few minutes later, Orum, a small bag slung over his shoulder, disappeared into the forest.

"Let's get off the road," Vlas sighed.

Everyone piled into the vehicles, and Elena took the wheel in Orum's place. After driving about two hundred elbows into the forest, the travelers stumbled upon an old, abandoned shed. The roof had collapsed, and one of the walls was completely missing, though patches of whitewash still clung stubbornly to the remaining three walls.

The car and the vans tucked in tightly behind one of the walls, parking close together. The drivers shut off the engines. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Chapter 15 (Mercenaries)

Orum returned at dawn.

Elena and the rest of the travelers hadn't set up camp, so they'd had to spend the night in the vehicles. It was cramped and uncomfortable; everyone was on edge and barely got any sleep. Well, everyone except Lokus, who slept like a baby—occasionally waking just to take a few gulps from his wine barrel.

Just minutes before sunrise, Orum appeared in front of one of the vans' windshields. He looked exhausted, tense, and covered in soot.

"Well? What's the news?" Al immediately sprang out of the car and pounced on the dorth.

"Bad. Give me water," Orum croaked.

Sar promptly handed over a flask.

"Come on, spill it. What happened?"

"Fire lizards," the dorth exhaled after a long drink, then took another swig.

"Fire lizards destroyed the village, set up their colony, and are now raising humans like livestock?" Al blurted out. His expression on the final word made it abundantly clear—even he was shocked by the nonsense his mouth had just produced.

"Hold your horses, will you? Don't shove past the dorth into the workshop! You'll hear everything in a second, comedian." Ori took a third swig from his flask and only then started his report. "Alright, here's what I found out after a night of sneaking around and lurking in bushes. The village was attacked by fire lizards. The attack happened two or three days ago, best I can tell. There were three of them, by my count. Big, mature ones. They torched the entire village and ate almost all the residents. The ones they didn't finish off, they just left to die on the spot. Sadly, I didn't find any survivors."

"The fire lizards still there?" Vlas the chubby one couldn't hold back.

"No. They did their job and flew off."

"So... we can just drive through safely?" Al voiced the question everyone was thinking.

"Technically, yes! But those were full-grown specimens, which means they're incredibly fast flyers. So if they're holed up somewhere nearby, and they catch the scent of fresh meat, they'll be here in under a minute—considering their wing span and speed."

"Do they have such a good sense of smell that they can pick up prey from far away?" Vlas was starting to get nervous.

"More like hearing. If it were smell, they'd have attacked us already. We're getting off track here. It's all ifs and maybes. I say we should try to rush through the village now, because I didn't see even a shadow of them there all night."

"If they wanted to eat us, they'd have done it by now," Caleb chimed in, eyes scanning the sky intently. "And why would they even bother attacking us in the first place?"

"Well then, let's not waste any more time! Get in the vehicles, drive carefully, and if there's any sign of danger—floor it and get the hell out of there!" Elena summed things up decisively.

Not wanting to spend another second there, everyone climbed into their vehicles. The exhausted and drained dorth collapsed onto the back seat next to Caleb and passed out instantly.

Elena started the engine and got ready to move when suddenly, like thunder on a clear day, a long horn blast sounded from one of the trucks.

"What's going on?" Elena shouted, sticking her head out the window.

"Lokus is gone!" Sar yelled, clearly alarmed.

"What do you mean, gone?"

"I mean exactly that! When I got out to meet the dorth, he was still sleeping in the cabin. And now he's not here!"

"Maybe he went into the bushes to take a leak?"

"Impossible! He drank half a barrel last night! Even a healer's anesthesia doesn't hit people that hard. He would've been out cold till noon! He's gone!"

"What the hell?!" Elena exclaimed, already back inside the car, her head shoved toward the backseat.

"And where the hell did he vanish to?" Al chimed in. "Now we'll have to go look for him in the woods—with fire lizards possibly lurking around. Damn drunk."

Elena killed the engine. She opened the door. One leg out, then the other... But before the second foot even hit the ground, she yanked both limbs back in and slammed the door shut.

"You've got to be kidding me!" she shouted rhetorically.

"What now?" Al asked nervously.

"You'll hear it in a second."

And then they all heard it. And everyone knew that sound all too well. The roar of an adult fire lizard was hard to mistake for anything else.

"Floor it! It's right above us!" Al screamed.

Elena didn't need to be told twice. The car lurched forward, crashing through the forest undergrowth, with the two trucks barreling after her. A couple of times the vehicle clipped trees with its sides and front bumper, but nothing fatal. Being eaten by fire lizards, however—definitely fatal.

The road. Elena yanked the wheel, and the car skidded onto the dirt track. A bit of fishtailing—and then all three vehicles were tearing toward the ruined village.

"What the hell!? What kind of mad chase is this?!" Orum finally blurted, just waking up after smacking his head against the door.

Another roar echoed from above. And in the next second, just forty cubits ahead, the treetops erupted in bright flame.

"Fire lizard?!" the dorth screamed.

"No, really? It's your sweet mother," Al snapped back, voice taut with nerves.

"Shut up!"

Elena knew, they had to act. The fire lizard knew exactly where they were headed—and they knew where it was flying. In just a couple minutes, the vehicles would burst into the ruins of the village. And there—open space and certain death. As if to confirm her thoughts, a pair of scaly claws suddenly appeared just above the hood. Thankfully, the beast didn't know the exact dimensions of the car and couldn't reach the roof. The claws vanished. The thunder of its wings drowned out the roar of the engines.

"Quick! Ideas! What do we do? The village is just ahead, and we're screwed!" Elena shouted.

"Aren't you our fearless leader? Then you come up with something!" Al's response was far from what she'd hoped to hear. But something had to be done—time was slipping through their fingers.

"Ori! What about bombs, mines, traps, or any of that junk? Got anything that can take down this giant?"

"U-uhm... gimme a second..." Orum replied, mentally flipping through his inventory. "This one's too weak... that one's in pieces... wait! Yes! I've got two really powerful bombs!"

"Fantastic!" A glimmer of hope sparked.

"But they're not finished," the spark was snuffed out.

"And how the hell are they supposed to..." Elena's voice was once again drowned out by the fire lizard's roar.

"To activate them, they need to be heated. Which means they have to be somehow brought close to the beast, then heated, and boom."

"I'm a fire mage! I'll heat them!" Al exclaimed with sudden enthusiasm.

"The fire lizard'll roast you before those bombs get anywhere near it. Doesn't work. Plus, I haven't even taken these apart to check what's inside—I've got no idea if they're strong enough to pierce the scales of a full-grown fire lizard."

"Drive slower!" Caleb suddenly barked. "I've got a plan!"

"Maybe explain it before we take a scenic drive straight into death?"

"No time to spoon-feed you, crybaby! Who's the best shot here?"

"That'd be me," Al answered, somehow squeezing self-admiration into two short words.

"Grab the rifle from under your seat. When I say so, shoot a couple of birds."

"Are you insane? Where the hell am I gonna find birds?"

"Quit shaking like a girl. Open your damn eyes and look around! With the racket we're making, whole flocks are flying off the branches."

"If you say so, necro-boy. Chill."

"One more thing! Their wings need to stay intact."

"No promises."

The necromancer ignored the last comment. He slid back the rear seat, reached into the trunk, and pulled out his sack stuffed with assorted bones. Resting it on his lap, he closed his eyes and began whispering in an unknown language. He passed his hand over the sack, and the long tattoo running down his forearm lit up with a violet glow. With a sharp motion, Caleb dumped the contents of the sack out the window. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Al was just about to assume the necromancer was using this as a stylish way to bail on them. But no — to the right of the car, matching its speed stride for stride, something had begun running. It was a creature made entirely of bones, wrapped in a shimmering violet aura. Al scowled in disgust the moment he laid eyes on it. What a twisted imagination this necromancer had.

Something was running alongside the car. A human ribcage, spine, pelvis, and skull. Legs stuck out of the pelvis and shoulder sockets. In other words, it was a human skeleton — only instead of arms, it had another pair of legs. And right from the middle of its chest, a pair of arms protruded. Not exactly a sight for the weak of heart.

"Shoot!" Caleb commanded.

The order snapped Al out of his daze. He stuck the barrel of the rifle out the window, aimed, and smoothly squeezed the trigger, emptying the whole magazine into a massive tree.

Caleb waved toward the tree Al had just riddled with bullets, and the bone creature darted off in that direction.

The trees ahead were already thinning.

"Caleb! Now's the time to do whatever it is you're planning, or we're dead meat!" Al said in a voice that was a bit too high-pitched.

"Dorth, give me your bombs."

"Here!" Ori had already been holding two dense black spheres in his hands for a full minute.

Caleb carefully took the bombs from Orum. Meanwhile, the bony creature appeared outside the window again. It approached the open window on Caleb's side. In each of its arms — the ones protruding from the ribcage — it held a dead bird. A third carcass was clamped in its jaws. The monster jerked its head, flung its arms, and tossed all three corpses into the car. The tattoo dimmed, and the bone creature crumbled into dust.

Now Caleb had two bombs and three birds on his lap. A true math problem.

"Idiot! I told you the wings had to be intact!" the necromancer snapped and chucked one of the carcasses out the window. He closed his eyes again, began muttering, and waved his hand over the dead birds, which looked like hawks with oversized wings. Everything was as usual, except this time, the tattoos on Caleb's head flared to life. His scalp lit up with violet glow, and his short hair instantly burned off, leaving him completely bald.

The two brown birds suddenly twitched and sprang to life, hopping onto Caleb's shoulders. One had a gaping hole in its chest, the other was missing half its head. The necromancer grabbed a bomb in each hand and tossed them out the window. At the same instant, the birds took off from his shoulders, darted through the window, and caught the bombs mid-air in their talons.

"Not bad!" Al exclaimed in awe, watching the scene unfold.

"Aaaaahhh!" Elena screamed in despair — she didn't see the resurrection trick, being fully focused on driving.

A blinding flash of light. The vehicles shot out of the forest like corks from a bottle, bursting onto a scorched stretch of land. That this used to be a village could only be guessed from the charred corpses or skeletal remains poking out of the ground here and there. No houses, no barns, not even burnt-out trees were left in sight. Only blackened earth, heaps of ash, the acrid stench of smoke, and wisps of it still rising into the sky.

A thunderous roar above the vehicles. The predators had spotted their prey. Pathetic, tiny humans had spotted the massive fire lizards. Three versus three. Three enormous, grey, fire-breathing beasts against three machines packed with human meat. Who would come out on top?

The elongated car and two trucks were speeding across the scorched stretch of land. The three gigantic winged reptiles were arcing wide for the attack. A moment. Impact.

The rear truck slammed into the head of a fire lizard — a monstrous skull crowned with a dozen long horns. The vehicle was flung aside, spun, flipped, and smashed flat against the ground. The fire lizard's head? Untouched. The fanged beast landed next to the mangled wreckage. One-nil.

The second truck lost too. The fire lizard, no smaller than its companion, dug its claws into the roof and, flapping its wings like mad, began lifting the vehicle into the air. Realizing he wouldn't survive inside the truck, Sar leapt out. A short fall—and he hit the ground. One—one. Or not! A fire lizard's sharp eyesight was just as deadly as its hearing. Spotting prey outside the metal contraption, it dropped the truck, tucked its wings, and dove straight at the man. Two—nil.

The distance between the massive, grey-as-caked-mud fire lizard and the car was shrinking fast.

"Al! Do something! Distract it! My birds haven't reached it yet!" Kaleb shouted in a commanding tone.

If it had to be done, it had to be done. Al directed the internal flow of magical energy toward his tattoo. He focused. The fire lizard was only twenty cubits away when the mage began firing small fireballs at the approaching beast one after another. What could those little flames possibly do to a monster that size? Piercing its scales was nearly impossible. But that wasn't the goal. The fire lizard twisted its head, swatting at the fireballs and momentarily forgetting its target. That moment was enough. Its trajectory shifted slightly, and the beast soared past the hood by just a few cubits.

"I'm spent!" Al shouted, for some reason.

"I'm not," Kaleb replied coldly, tracking the enemy with his eyes.

Its companions were already feasting on their prey, while this one was circling back for another strike.

"Where are your birds?" Al asked, almost whining.

"Look closer."

A small black dot was flying straight toward the massive fire-breathing beast that seemed to cover half the sky. The fire lizard paid it no mind. Why bother with a fly when your wild, cornered prey is practically in your jaws? Big mistake. The explosion hit. It hit so hard that everyone in the car was thrown into the air.

"Wait, what? I thought you said those bombs had to be heated up first to really go off," Al said, confused.

"File a complaint with the manufacturer later. For now — shut up," Elena snapped, answering for the dorth.

"Well? Did it work?" Orum croaked.

"No. The scales held. It just got scratched a bit. But we've got one more shot," Kaleb replied, more focused than ever.

Because of the explosion, the fire lizard once again swept over the car without touching it. Another pass. The last one. Either the car, or the beast. Now, having learned the hard way, the fire lizard divided its attention, watching carefully for another tiny black dot heading its way. There it

was — another one. This time, it was going to get it. The fire lizard inhaled, aimed at the approaching bird, and opened its jaws. Exhale.

A column of fire burst from the creature's mouth, trying to incinerate the little bird. But — not a chance. The small flying creature, clutching a black sphere in its talons, dove sharply, closed in on the target, and then, gaining altitude again, dove straight into the fire — and right into the fire lizard's mouth.

Another explosion. This time not as loud — more muffled.

"Yes! Two-one! Eat that, you winged bastards! That's what you get messing with us!" Al yelled triumphantly, watching the massive headless corpse of the fire lizard plummet to the ground.

"Turn around! We've got to help the others!" Orum suddenly snapped out of it.

"No, Ori, there's no helping them now," Elena stopped his outburst.

"But we have to! It's our job! "

"Not anymore. Our employer vanished, or he's lying somewhere in the woods. And there's nothing we can do for those poor souls now. Right now, we need to get out of here before we're roasted too."

Chapter IV (Sa-Ag)

Sa-Ag decided to reread the task sheet one more time. There was suspiciously little information on it, but the number of questions it raised was plenty.

***Objective — eliminate three civilians.

Information on the civilians:

1. Im-Ma (97 years old),
2. Ur-Ra (39 years old),
3. Ri-Im (39 years old).

Reason — upbringing of male irni by a female individual. Elimination of the third person as a witness and inactive party upon discovery of the violation.

Deadline — three days.

Mission priority — elevated.

Execution difficulty — exceptionally high.***

On the back of the paper was a detailed topographic map of the area. The current target was marked with a red dot. Sa-Ag had already studied the map's contents. The target was a small house in the middle of an ancient, dense forest. Just some family of hermits living by their own rules in a wild and dangerous woodland. And that unsettled Sa-Ag. Usually, his squad was sent on missions that affected the future and well-being of the entire irni people. This, by all appearances, was a routine assignment fit for a regular Punisher unit. Either Bi-Is had decided to mock Sa-Ag, or...

"Commander of the Hiddens, Sa-ag," the driver's voice pulled the irni from his thoughts.

"What?"

"Some trouble? You don't usually reread a mission sheet three times."

"None," Sa-Ag set the paper aside and glanced quickly toward the back. First and Second were asleep on the floor of the truck. They needed rest—soon, they'd be relieving their comrades at the wheel.

"Does the name Im-Ma mean anything to you?" the Commander of the Hiddens asked.

"No... Although," Ka-As paused, repeating the name to himself several times as if tasting it.

"Think. It might help us."

"I remember now. That was the name of my neighbor when I lived with my father."

Sa-Ag sighed in disappointment. Clearly not the connection he was hoping for. He silently repeated the name Im-Ma once more and fell into thought. A persistent notion was circling in his mind, something he couldn't quite grasp yet. It was tied to the mission—but he still didn't understand how.

The Commander of the Hiddens instinctively rested his right hand on the holster of the drum pistol comfortably strapped to his belt. The weapon was new and hadn't yet become familiar. It would take time and habit to accept the massive upgrade from his old pistol as something natural.

"The Supreme One was your friend, wasn't he?" the driver asked.

"More of a good comrade—we shared a past."

"You think Bi-Is had something to do with the Supreme's death?" the driver asked cautiously.

"Without a doubt," Sa-Ag replied. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind to a subordinate. Ka-As was one of the few irni, that the Commander of the Hiddens could trust. "You're full of questions today."

"Well, you did once say I could speak to you as an equal."

"I'm beginning to regret that," Sa-Ag replied. He wasn't fond of chatting—he considered it a pointless activity.

"I remember now!" the driver exclaimed with sudden inspiration.

"What?"

"The name you mentioned. It belonged to the Commander of Hiddens before your predecessor."

"Are you sure? Information like that is usually highly classified. Where could you have heard it?"

"I don't remember, it just surfaced in my memory. Im-Ma—red irises, a close-combat specialist, expert in thrown weapons, died defending the Supreme One," Ka-As recited, as if quoting a textbook.

Sa-Ag didn't respond, deeply absorbed in his thoughts. These newly recalled details gave him plenty to think about.

Chapter nine (Dorm)

"Bug-eyed, wake up!" a persistent female voice roused Dorm.

"How's your arm?" the boy asked immediately, not even opening his eyes yet.

"Stop asking me that every time you see me — it's fine."

The girl disappeared from the tent, and Dorm finally woke up completely. The recruit slipped on his boots, laced them up, threw on his jacket, and stepped outside. The afternoon nap had done wonders for his mood, so he smiled and headed to the campfire with a good feeling.

There, as always, Boar was sitting on a stump, sipping tea from a tin cup. Twig was cleaning his sword, and Redhead sat on the damp, cold ground, her jacket off. She held her arms out toward the still-warm autumn sunbeams and stared into the crackling fire. After Violet's healing, her forearm looked unnaturally pale, and the girl wanted it to tan a little — it looked far too unnatural.

Dorm washed his face with the water from the bucket behind Boar's tent and joined his companions, settling his backside on the ground next to Redhead.

The recruits, following the tradition that had already formed, sat silently, waiting for the commander to finish his tea and give the day's training orders.

"Boar, may I ask a question?" Redhead suddenly broke the silence.

"Hm. You may," Boar sounded a bit surprised. The girl rarely asked him anything.

"Who are we being trained to fight?"

A pause hung in the air. Bug-eyed and Twig exchanged glances. Boar slowly finished the last of his tea.

"Right now, you're undergoing general combat training, the same for all soldiers of the Kingdom of Vindin. Once you're ready, we'll move on to specialized training."

"Boar, that's not an answer to my question," Redhead interrupted him. Twig and Bug-eyed exchanged another tense glance.

"You'll get the answer to your question only when the time is right," the commander replied with a smile.

"Got it."

"Redhead's arm is injured, it hasn't fully healed yet!" Boar suddenly roared, rising from the stump.

The recruits barely had time to react to that cryptic outburst when they were attacked. Six other rookies burst out of a tent. Two grabbed Redhead's arms. One landed a sharp kick to Twig's back, sending him to the ground. Three began beating Bug-eyed with their boots without a word.

Redhead cried out in pain. Kravchik tried to get up or at least swipe at someone with his sword, but each time he was kicked back down. Dorm curled into a ball and tried to look around. He had ended up close to the fire, and though his next idea felt a bit idiotic, getting trampled didn't seem like a great alternative either.

Bug-eyed, still lying on the ground, pushed off with his legs and slid forward just enough to slam his head into the boot of one of the attackers. That was all he needed. Hissing in pain, he thrust his right hand into the campfire and yanked out a burning log. With a sharp swing, he hurled it straight into one enemy's face, and then landed a full-force kick to the second one's groin.

The attackers were thrown off balance. The tide of battle had shifted. Dorm sprang to his feet, shoved the third enemy with all his strength into the fire, and ran over to Twig. On the way, without stopping, he drove his elbow into the back of the head of the rookie who had been keeping Kravchik pinned to the ground.

"Quick, we need to free Redhead," Dorm commanded. His palm was already covered in burns, but he'd worry about that later.

The boys ran over to the girl. She had already dealt with one of her attackers, but the second was still standing. Her recently broken arm was swollen and turning purple again.

Twig dashed at the enemy facing the girl and slashed at his calf with his sword. It was just a small cut, but enough to make the guy stumble back.

Dorm and Kravchik moved in shoulder to shoulder, shielding Redhead.

"Are you okay?" Bug-eyed asked.

"I'm fine. Pretty sure the arm's broken again."

"Gun nearby?"

"In Boar's tent, like always."

"We'll move slowly toward the tent entrance. We'll push them back."

"Got it."

The trio began slowly shifting their position while their attackers regained their footing. As they reached the tent entrance, Redhead dashed inside. The four remaining rookies charged at Dorm and Kravchik.

Two warning shots into the air—then Redhead aimed the pistol directly at one of the attackers. They froze.

"That's enough," Boar's deep voice rumbled approvingly. "Not bad."

Chapter 16 (Mercenaries)

The Mixed State. "A haven of peace, kindness, and equality!" The government broadcasts this slogan on every street corner, inviting anyone willing to become an honored citizen of this great nation. It doesn't matter if you're homeless or crippled, a failed dorth or an aging irni thief — you'll be welcomed here.

At first, the idea behind founding such a state was incredibly promising: to create a land free of discrimination and racism. A place where all races would be equal, where an irni and a human, man and woman, could love each other and live together without fear of judgment.

The idea was brilliant—appealing to many—and in just fifty years, the Mixed State rose where once there were only wild forests and endless plains. A vast, powerful, and progressive nation.

Its population doubled every year, the economy flourished, and peaceful relations with neighboring countries became a priority. It was the perfect place to live—except for two major problems. First, anyone could settle here, even a serial killer, and no one would bat an eye. Second, mixed couples couldn't have children. Seemed like minor details at first.

Years passed, the nation prospered, and the government was already eyeing border expansion—until everything went straight to hell.

Criminals poured in by the thousands, and for the average citizen, living alongside such neighbors became unbearable. The number of honest immigrants plummeted. Then came the demographic collapse—mixed couples, unable to bear children, vastly outnumbered same-race families. Timber exports, the backbone of the Mixed State's economy, crashed with a deafening thud as fewer people were willing to do honest work. A long-lasting crisis began to devour what was once a thriving land.

Centuries had passed since the founding of the Mixed State. And what do we have now? The slogan "A haven of peace, friendliness, and equality!" was still in use, and the ideals the nation was built upon—still alive and thriving. But only in the capital, fittingly named Haven. There, irni, dorths, and humans still lived peacefully side by side, earned their bread honestly, and believed in unity and the good in all races.

As for the rest of the Mixed State—an unending nightmare.

Take, for example, the city Avalas, named after a great scholar, the first man to settle in these lands alongside his irni wife.

Avalas was the second most populous city in the Mixed State. The estimated ratio of criminals to honest workers? Sixty to forty. And out of those forty, half were guards or soldiers

assigned to the city garrison. Of those, maybe a third were truly loyal to the government and the people. The rest? Could be bought for a single gold piece.

"Brutality"—that was the city's unspoken motto. Murder and robbery had become the grim routine of modern-day Avalas.

And it was in this very city that Elena, Orum, Kaleb, and Al had been staying for two days already. With almost no money left, Kaleb—driven by some surprising spark of altruism—had rented a small house in the city center using his own savings. Why the necromancer had suddenly decided to be so generous remained a mystery, but something about it definitely didn't add up.

"Al, toss in some firewood, please," Elena asked in a pleading tone, noticing the fire in the hearth was starting to die out.

"No! Get off your own rear and do it! I finally got comfortable in this chair and I'm not about to move," protested the mercenary, finally stopping his endless rocking in the chair.

"You lazy lumps deserve a good whipping with a stiff broom," the dorth muttered disapprovingly. He threw off his warm blanket, set aside his well-smoked pipe, and got up to fetch a few logs from the corner of the room.

"Thanks, Orum! You're the best," Elena said sweetly.

"Yes, you're the best! If I ever have a son, I'll name him after you."

"Poor kid," Orum sighed, tossing more wood into the fire.

"Why is he poor? Though, yeah, Orum isn't exactly a name for a great man."

"I'd take a vow of silence and join a monastery if I had a father like that," the dorth mumbled quietly.

"What was that? I didn't catch it!" Al began to raise his voice.

"He didn't say anything, you just imagined it!" Elena cut the argument short before it even started. Still, she noted with some satisfaction that Orum had delivered a solid comeback to the mage. Months of dealing with that chatterbox had made the dorth more sociable—and sharper with his tongue.

"Where the hell has Kaleb been all day?" the dorth asked as he sank back into his chair and lit his pipe.

"Not our business. He said to wait, so we wait," Elena said, her face darkening. "Even if I don't like it."

"By the way! Am I the only one wondering why we haven't bolted yet?" Al asked, catching the strange looks from his friends. He decided to clarify, "I mean, Kaleb's left us unsupervised for so long—we could've packed our bags two hundred times over and vanished into the unknown."

"Do you need a reminder who Sebastian is and what he promised us?" the dorth said grimly.

"Actually, I thought about that at the very start of this journey too," Elena added. "We could've gone to Orum's son, and together, we might've stood a chance against that strange man and his thugs. Or better yet, we could've packed up and disappeared deep in the Irni Valley forests... But then I came to a painfully obvious conclusion. If Sebastian managed to find us in a desert, in a village barely known to more than three hundred people... tracking us down again would be child's play for him."

"Mm. Makes sense," Al agreed.

"But there's something else that's been bothering me..." Orum said thoughtfully, exhaling smoke through his nose. "Why us? Why were we the ones chosen for this mission?"

"We're professionals," Al declared proudly, thumping his chest.

"Oh, please," the dorth snorted, spitting into the fireplace. "Judging by his appearance, he and his boss could easily afford to hire an entire army of trackers to find those twins—and another army of thugs to escort them." Orum slowly filled his lungs with smoke. "Honestly, I'm starting to doubt those mysterious irni twins even exist."

"Explain," Al said, clearly confused. Elena stayed silent—she had been mulling over the same thought for a while now.

"Sebastian wants something from us. Or maybe he wants *us* specifically. This might all be some kind of test. A half-baked mage and a half-blind old dorth—there's nothing special about us. But..."

"But the girl with strange mutations—she's the one worth paying attention to," Elena finished his sentence.

Silence settled over the room. Only the quiet crackle of the fire in the hearth broke the stillness.

"Elena..." Al said softly.

"Yeah?"

"I know I said a lot of crap back at the "The Lonely Friend", but over the past few years, you've all become really close to me, and I just wanted to say..."

"May I fall into a dung pit if this isn't heartwarming—heartless and selfish Alpacine getting all teary-eyed," Orum cheerfully jabbed.

"Ugh! Bald old fool! You ruined the whole moment!" Al snapped and started rocking nervously in his chair. "Forget it! I'm not saying another word!"

"No need," Elena said warmly, ruffling his hair. "We know what you were trying to say."

"Ah, screw you all!" Al grumbled, swatting Elena's hand away. "You try to open up a little and immediately get branded a whiner."

"Annoying, isn't it?" the dorth chuckled.

"Exactly! Everyone got it! Topic closed!" Elena cut in before the heartfelt talk could spiral into the usual bickering. "I have a suggestion."

"Go ahead," Orum and Al said in unison.

"Since we don't have answers to our questions yet, I suggest we forget about them for now—until something new comes up," Elena began. "And instead of sitting around waiting for Caleb, let's head over to the Mercenary House and earn a bit. We could really use the coin."

"What's the Mercenary House?" Orum asked.

"Maaaaan," Al drawled. "And this dorth calls himself a thug and a mercenary. Listen up and take notes, my short friend. The Mixed State? It's a lawless, cutthroat land. People are getting murdered, robbed, and all kinds of nastiness every second. The government can't keep up—big surprise, half the guard are the ones doing the crimes, and the rest are taking bribes to look the other way. So, long story short, the workforce can't handle it. That's when some genius had the brilliant idea to open the Mercenary House. It's a huge operation now, with branches even in the most piss-soaked villages of the Mixed State."

"Less babbling, more point," Orum cut in.

"Anyway. The Mercenary House is basically a middleman between mercs and folks who need stuff done," Al explained. "Let's say someone had their cargo truck stolen—or more commonly, they need a competitor taken out. They go to the Mercenary House, explain the problem. The staff listens, names a price, takes a cut up front, and sends the poor sod home to wait. Then comes our part—starving, freezing muscle-for-hire. We stroll in looking for work, they show us the open gigs, we pick the one that fits our skills and price range, and boom—we're hired. Simple as that."

"Wait," Orum narrowed his eyes, "so what does the Mercenary House get out of it?"

"Ten percent of the promised payout goes straight into their pockets."

"Ah, I see. So basically, any drifter who needs coin can just walk in and grab a job?"

"Not that simple. They have special membership cards," Al replied, pulling a small oval-shaped piece of metal from his pocket, covered in numbers and words. "These cards represent your access level. There are five levels. The first one's the easiest—it's given to anyone who's looking for a job for the first time. Typical missions at level one? Find a cow or clean a pigsty. The more crap you deal with, the more they trust you. And then what? Exactly! Level up. Easy math. I'm level five," he finished proudly.

"Got it. And if I want to..."

"Yeah, yeah, enough already," the mage cut the dorth off. "Too many questions. You'll see and figure it out once we get there."

All three got up from their warm chairs and went to their rooms to dress for the weather.

The weather in Avalas was the number one thing locals loved to whine about. Clouds were almost a permanent feature over the city, and the icy wind never seemed to stop. No one knew why, but it didn't matter what time of year you arrived — Avalas was always gloomy, and the cold wind cut straight to the bone. No wonder every second local was an alcoholic. With a climate like that, people had to keep warm somehow.

Half an hour later, the trio was already wandering the cold, gray streets of Avalas.

The architecture and layout of the city were rather unusual. Avalas was a huge oval that covered dozens of hectares. Around the perimeter of this oval stood ten tall towers spaced evenly apart. Well, there were only seven now — three were still under construction. The city had started building them couple seasons ago, when the first reports of mass fire lizards attacks came in. That was when the city council decided to erect tall towers around Avalas and mount dorth cannons on top so that, in case the winged beasts attacked, they'd be ready to defend themselves.

What surprised visitors the most was the absence of city walls. There were only towers, and just two hundred cubits beyond them, the residential buildings and streets already began. You could ride in and go wherever you pleased. The only exception was a designated entry gate for merchants. Every incoming trader had to register their goods there and report their revenue upon departure.

The city itself, when seen from a bird's-eye view, resembled a fishing net. The entire area was divided into hundreds of squares—small blocks separated on all four sides by wide streets. Each of these square blocks typically consisted of four sections: a dorth house, an irni house, a human house, and some kind of shop or company.

And it was precisely these blocks that astounded the imagination with their irrationality. This was because each of the four sections differed radically from the others.

The human houses were the most ordinary—single or two-story buildings made of red brick, with small windows barred with steel grilles and massive, sturdy front doors. Theft thrived in the city, so such caution was considered the norm.

The dorth houses differed from human ones the way a tree differs from a stump. These were perfectly round structures, without windows, and with small iron doors. All of them were gray. Only the upper half of the round building protruded from the ground—the other half was buried below. These houses also had two levels, or rather, one floor above ground and a massive basement below.

The irni houses, too, had their own peculiarity. They were made entirely of glass. To humans or dorths, this seemed like madness, but for the irni it was normal. In this way, they showed everyone that they had nothing to hide. Their homes were also two stories tall. There were no windows, since the floors, walls, and ceilings were all made of strong, transparent glass.

Elena and Orum had been trailing behind Al through the streets of Avalas for about twenty minutes, eyeing the bizarre houses of the locals and dreaming of the moment they'd finally find the Mercenary House. The cold here was brutal.

Dozens of passersby moved through the streets, wrapped in dark cloaks and hooded jackets. These gray shadows, combined with the gray clouds and the gray city itself, created an indescribable atmosphere of sorrow and decay.

Al, walking in front, was turning his head a full three hundred and sixty degrees, paying little attention to the people around him. A mistake. They couldn't take their eyes off him.

Rounding yet another semi-circular dorth house, the tall mercenary collided with a frail figure in a long black coat. The stranger clearly wasn't built for impact and, from the sudden bump with Al, landed squarely on his backside.

"Watch where you're going!" the mercenary snapped.

"Maybe you should open your eyes," came the muffled reply.

Al was about to smack the brat on the head, but the guy was already darting across the street. The mage's eyes went as wide as saucers, and he frantically began patting down his pockets.

"Yeah... not as young as I used to be," Al remarked gloomily.

"Did he pickpocket you?" Orum asked.

"Yep, took my last coins. But what a nimble rascal. I didn't even feel it. The thieving schools of the Mixed State are still going strong," the mercenary concluded and continued down the street, leading his companions.

Al stopped a passerby — there were noticeably fewer of them now, after the stolen wallet — asked something, the man gestured hastily to the right, and quickly made himself scarce.

The mercenaries followed the indicated direction and finally arrived at the Mercenary House. Orum let out a low whistle.

The Mercenary House was a real fortress! A massive three-story structure that occupied all four sections of the block. The front doors were made of noble redwood, and above them hung not just a sign, but a true work of art — the most beautiful engraving with the words "Mercenary House."

The three friends stepped inside. An enormous, brightly lit reception hall stretched out before them, taking up at least half the entire building. Polished parquet floors, plenty of chairs lined along the walls, and at the far end — a large desk. Behind it sat a pretty young woman in a white blouse and black trousers, rummaging through a large stack of papers.

Elena and Orum decided to leave all the talking to Al and immediately headed for the chairs by the right-hand wall. The tallest of the trio walked up to the girl at the desk.

"Good day," Al said with a radiant smile as he approached.

"Welcome to the Mercenary House!" the girl replied with a routine phrase and a routine smile. "Are you here for a job or to submit an application?"

"A job."

"Do you have a membership card?"

"Of course," Al said proudly.

"Please show it," the girl replied with an expression that clearly showed she didn't care whether he had a card or not. The mage handed her an oval metal tag covered with inscriptions and numbers.

"Ohhh, Mr. Alpacine. We'll find you something right away," the girl suddenly chirped. Apparently, mercenaries with level five clearance were a rare sight.

"Be so kind," Al said smugly.

The girl pulled out a small drawer, retrieved a heavy stack of papers, and began flipping through them with incredible speed. Within seconds, she triumphantly plucked out a sheet and handed it to Al.

"There's a special offer for you. Government contract."

The moment he heard those words, Al snatched the paper from her hands. He spent nearly a full minute studying the job listing carefully.

"Excuse me, miss, may I discuss this assignment with my colleagues?"

"Of course."

In response, Al let out a deliberately squeaky sound. He turned on his heel and strutted over to his friends with an exaggerated businesslike gait.

"Girls and boys, we've hit the jackpot," the mage babbled in a voice that wasn't his own. "We've landed a government contract."

"And what does that mean?" the dorth asked, looking at him in surprise.

"That means, my dear one-eyed friend, that we're in luck. Government contracts are rare. But! They usually get paid out of the city treasury — and in heaps of gold."

"Alright," said Elena, "get to the point. What's the job?"

"The authorities of Avalas ordered ten cannons from the dorths to use against fire lizards. Five of them were delivered, and the other five were snatched by some thieves right at the city entrance. So, our task is simply to find them and return them to the authorities."

"And how are we supposed to do that? How do we find these thieves? And why doesn't the city just take the cannons back from the bandits by force?" Elena's questions poured out one after another. But in response, Al only barely opened his mouth—and failed to say anything at all.

"How much are they offering for the job?" the dorth asked.

"One and a half... thousand... gold pieces..." Al said quietly and very slowly. As he pronounced each word, Orum's and Elena's eyes grew rounder and rounder.

"And that's after the ten percent cut taken by the Mercenary House," Al added, delivering the final blow to his friends.

"They don't pay that kind of fee for something trivial. Which means the mission is dangerous and important..." As always, doubt began to creep into the dorth's mind.

"Don't chicken out, baldy, we've got this!"

The front doors of the Mercenary House opened. Three dark figures stepped inside. They pulled back their gray hoods and confidently made their way toward the Mercenary House clerk sitting at the desk.

Leading the group was a girl. Or rather, a woman. She was slightly taller than Elena, with black hair braided into a thick plait, a pleasant face, and large blue eyes. Tattoo lines peeked out from around her neck. As for clothing, only brown boots with low heels were visible — the rest was hidden beneath a gray cloak.

The second was another girl. And she was... bald. Pretty, young, with freckles on her nose and a perfectly shaved head. It wasn't every day you saw a young woman with such an extravagant hairstyle. She wore a gray cloak and brown boots with low heels. Three things set her apart from the first woman: as already noted, the bald head; she was a head shorter than the first; and slung over her right shoulder was a long sniper rifle.

The last of the trio was a young man. At a glance, he looked to be around twenty-three or twenty-four. Slim and tall, just a bit shorter than Al. His dark hair was cropped into a short bristle, a long, nasty scar ran down his right cheek, and his skin was deathly pale. It looked as if someone had just drained most of the blood from his body — and he might faint at any moment.

Unlike his companions, he wasn't wearing a cloak. Enormous black boots with spurs, wide red trousers, and a gray shirt topped with a sleeveless chainmail vest. A strange and somewhat ridiculous outfit. But somehow, looking at him, no one felt like laughing. Most likely because of the sword. A massive two-handed sword hung on his back—only about half a cubit shorter than the man himself.

Altogether, the newly arrived trio immediately drew the attention of Elena, Orum, and Al. The newcomers, on the other hand, didn't notice them at first. It wasn't until they had covered half the distance from the entrance to the desk that the woman leading the group turned her head toward the other trio.

A mysterious smile appeared on her face. She stopped. Her companions followed suit.

"Well, look who it is!" Her voice was clear and confident. "Al!"

"Good day, Kira," Al's face darkened darker than the darkest cloud looming over Avalas.

"It's been a long time," the woman said softly and gently. "Looking for work here?"

"Yes," Al replied coldly.

"We're here for the opposite reason — reporting a job well done. By the way, meet Dina and Scar, my companions."

"H-h-hi," mumbled the pale one uncertainly. The bald girl just smiled and gave a small wave.

"And who's with you?"

"What does it matter? We're leaving anyway," said Al, grabbing Elena and Ori by the hands and dragging them toward the exit.

"You're always the same, Alpacine..." Kira looked at the trio with clear surprise, shrugged, and headed toward the girl at the desk.

"Good day. We've completed the job," Kira said politely and placed a crumpled sheet of paper and a small pouch on the table — one that reeked horribly. "So, about that Government contract? We've done some scouting, learned about the gang that stole the cannons, and we're ready to take the job."

Hearing this, Al froze in the doorway like a statue. Ori and Elena, whom he had been dragging along, bumped right into him. He slowly turned his head. A crazed, wicked grin lit up his face.

"We already took that contract," Al said smugly. "Sorry, Kira, but you're too late."

Saying that, Al sprang into motion and dragged the dorth and Elena with him. They managed to get down the stairs and take about ten steps when suddenly a wall of fire flared up in front of them, blocking the path.

"Hold it right there, Alpacine!" Kira stepped out of the doorway with her companions. "One more step and Scar will cut you all in half."

"Me?" the pale one looked at her in surprise. "I'm going to cut them? They don't seem mean... I'm not sure I want to do that."

"You'll cut them and you'll do it! They're stealing our job and our money!"

"Well, then maybe you're right! Fine," Scar muttered grimly and placed his right hand on the hilt of a massive sword.

"Are you all insane?" Elena finally decided to step in, though she instinctively tensed, ready to strike if needed. "Let's just talk this through calmly. No need to cut anyone up. Especially if you know Al. I think we can find a compromise."

"I like her," said Scar, letting go of the sword. "I won't cut her... For sure!" he added with more confidence.

"No one was going to cut you up anyway," Kira continued, now more composed. The wall of fire blocking Al's path vanished. "It's just — I know Al too well. There's no other way to deal with him."

"And I'm starting to like you!" Elena said cheerfully. "A woman who can shut Al up deserves respect."

"Yes, there aren't many of us in this world," Kira laughed.

"We're renting a place nearby — why don't we go there and talk it all through in the warmth?" Elena suggested, clearly amused by how Al's face was growing darker by the second.

"We'd be delighted to accept your offer," Kira winked at her.

Al let out a desperate groan, as if someone had just forced him to eat yet another bowl of porridge he'd grown sick of over the years.

Elena and Kira walked ahead, chatting like lifelong friends. Behind them, Scar and Dina admired the odd architecture of Avalas's houses. Bringing up the rear of this mismatched group were Orum and Al.

"Say, who is this Kira anyway?" the dorth asked with interest. "You two clearly go way back."

"Remember when we were captured by the gryphuses, and I told you about my past?" The dorth nodded. "Well... she's the girl I studied with at the Academy. The one I was in love with."

Chapter 17 (Mercenaries)

"A-a-a-al, I want to ask you something!" Elena sang playfully, hopping over yet another puddle underfoot.

"And I don't want you asking me anything," Al mimicked her gloomily. He no longer seemed angry or bitter — more sad and lost in thought.

"I'm not going to tease or annoy you, I promise," Elena ducked another branch swinging toward her face. The next one, though, smacked her square in the forehead. All thanks to this darkness. Seriously, what sane person goes for a walk in the woods in the dead of night?

Their ragtag group — five people and a dorth — had been pushing through the forest underbrush for nearly an hour. Kira, who knew the location of the bandit camp, led the way. Behind her walked Orum, Scar, and Dina. Ten steps back, dragging their feet, were Elena and Al.

"It's about Kira."

"What a surprise... Go on then, hit me with it. Orum's already grilled me with endless questions about her, now it's your turn."

"Is she the one? The girl from the Academy you loved?"

"That's right," the tall mercenary answered grimly.

"Then something doesn't quite add up between your story and the new facts. You said there was an accident. That Kira was badly burned and in critical condition. And that you blamed yourself for what happened, couldn't bear to look her in the eyes, and ran away. After that, you never saw her again. Right?"

"Well... yeah. So what's not clear?"

"The fact that just two hours ago, Kira told me a story about how, three years before we met, you and she worked together on a very strange job involving underground fights — for some mysterious client."

"Oh! So now you and Kira are best friends, huh? Go ask her about all the details then," Al huffed even more. The man was over forty, yet sulking like a child.

"Why are you acting like a kid? I can see something happened between you two. I've never seen you this down in all the time I've known you."

"It's just..." Al faltered, searching for the right words. "It's just... it's Kira. I don't know how to explain it to you."

"Just say it how it is — we're friends. I hate seeing you so quiet and down, it makes me feel awkward," Elena smiled warmly. "What happened between you two?"

"You see... nothing special really happened. Or rather, everything happened as it always does. After that incident at the Academy, we ran into each other a couple years later and decided to start over. We were together for about two seasons, and then she just disappeared... without a word."

"Then I understand why you're feeling this way."

"Wait, let me finish! That's not all. We got back together later. And then broke up again. Then back together. Then broke up again. It happened like... eight times. We'd get together, everything would seem fine, and then — bam — she'd just leave me without a word. And I was left standing there like a fool. I love her. And every time, I keep hoping things will finally work out. Even now. After all these years since I last saw her. I thought I was over her. Thought I'd moved on. But no. She walks into that damn Mercenary House, and just like that, the memories and the feelings come crashing back. And boom — I'm in love again... Just like the day I first saw her." Al kicked a rock that happened to be in his path, as if it were to blame for everything. It flew a few feet and splashed into a puddle, soaking his boot.

"But wait — does she feel the same about you?" Elena continued her gentle interrogation.

"Yes and no. It's hard to explain. But every time she comes back into my life, I feel ready to move mountains for her. And in the end... she wipes her feet on me and walks away."

"And now you're angry because you know it's all going to happen again?"

"No, I'm mad at her because the last time we 'got back together,' she told me she didn't see me as someone she could love, and then ran off with some rich prince who treated her like property."

"Al... I wish I could feel sorry for you and cheer you up right now, but you're such an idiot! Stepping on the same rake again and again..."

"You know..." Al gave a fleeting smile, "Ori told me the same thing. And I get it, I really do. But I just can't help myself."

"Alright, enough brooding, you big softie." A grin lit up Al's face. "I know, I know... I'm just as shocked as you are to hear myself call you a softie. Don't worry — we'll find you that one special woman who'll drool over you."

"Oh, they're everywhere!" Old Al was back.

"That's the Alpaine we know — a real pain in the ass and an unbearable chatterbox."

"Hey, have you ever looked at me and thought, 'That's the kind of man I could spend the rest of my life with'?" Al casually flexed his right arm, showing off his bicep.

"Sorry, but I'd sooner pick Ori over you!" Elena cut off the romantic ambitions of the newly awakened love machine.

"Fair enough!" Al agreed after a brief pause.

"You remember the plan?"

"Of course. Even if I don't like that Kira's the one calling the shots. You're our real commander."

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. She scouted the area, found out how many people are in the gang, and a whole lot more. All that's left for us is to play our part in her plan."

"The one who'll take half the earnings," Al squinted slyly, "but for that kind of money, I'm willing to be part of this heartless woman's plan."

"Good to hear."

The conversation didn't go any further, because Kira, walking in front, raised a finger to her lips, signaling them to be quiet. She motioned for everyone to come closer and began giving instructions in a very low voice:

"The camp of those scumbags is two hundred cubits ahead. There are thirty of them. All human, no mages. Three on watch, the rest are already asleep. The sentries are armed with shotguns and are constantly on the move. Dina, the sentries are your target. Take them out quickly and cleanly — you should have enough ammo, even if you miss once." The bald girl nodded confidently. "I, Elena, and Al will cut off their escape routes from three sides. Scar, you know what to do!"

"Do I? I know?" the pale wraith with the massive sword slung over his shoulder looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure I can handle them?"

"I second that!" Al cut in. "Let me thrash them all, and Scar can take my spot."

"No!" Kira said firmly. "No one can handle this better than Scar. Not even you, my dear," she added with a wink. Al scowled angrily.

"Alright then... if you say I can handle it, I'll give it a shot," Scar agreed gloomily.

"And Orum..."

"I know, I know — find the keys to the truck with the cannons in all this mess," the dorth clearly didn't like the idea one bit.

"Alright, everyone knows what to do! Let's move!" said Elena, and quickly disappeared into the darkness. She liked Kira, but the fact that someone else was giving orders right now — that didn't sit well with her. Leading and planning was her job. And when someone took that from her, it annoyed the mercenary deeply. "Damn necromancer brat. He's the one who planted these leadership instincts in me."

Everyone took their positions. Dina quickly scrambled up a tree with a forked trunk near its base. Al, Elena, Kira, and Scar surrounded the bandits' camp from four different sides. Orum lay low in the bushes near one of the sentries. Time to complete the mission.

The silence of the night forest was shattered by three consecutive gunshots. Moments later, three sentries fell face-first to the ground, holes in the backs of their heads. Dina knew her craft. She wasn't much of a fighter and had no magic, but she was an excellent sniper.

The noise of the shots woke the rest of the bandits. Twenty-seven drowsy bodies scrambled from their sleeping spots under the open sky, frantically whipping their heads around to understand what was happening. Some grabbed their weapons immediately. Others were still unsure — was it real or just their imagination?

Another shot rang out, and a huge brute who was loading his shotgun took a bullet between the shoulder blades. That was when everyone finally realized they were under attack. The camp burst into chaos as the bandits squinted painfully into the darkness of the surrounding forest.

Suddenly, a long wall of fire flared up on the right, lighting up everything around it. A moment later, another wall ignited behind the truck, joining the first at a right angle.

Noise. Confusion. People trying to understand what to do. Panic and disarray.

"Hold it, you brainless idiots!" someone shouted loudly — most likely the leader of the bandits. "Stop panicking! Grab your weapons! We take the truck and get the hell out of here. We're not surrounded by fire yet, so we move! If you can't fit — regroup at the second point."

It worked. The men clustered around the truck. One poor soul jumped into the driver's seat — and instantly took a bullet to the forehead from an unseen sniper. More screams. More panic.

Out of the darkness, a man stepped toward the truck — tall and thin, wearing ridiculous red trousers and a sleeveless chainmail vest. He walked slowly, hunched over. In his right hand, he held the hilt of a massive two-handed sword, dragging the blade behind him along the ground.

"Look! Look!" the bandit leader yelled, shouting over the noise of his own men. "It's just one guy! Take him down!"

No one moved. He may have been alone, but he radiated fear. And the sniper still hadn't been forgotten.

"Useless cowards! I'll deal with him myself! Out of my way, you bunch of girls!"

A man stepped out from the crowd. Short, but solid and muscular. In one hand, he held a drum pistol, and in the other — a large hunting dagger. Unlike the others, he didn't feel fear. Only rage.

"You're dead, boy," the man growled coldly, walking straight toward the pale figure in red trousers.

"Maybe. You're dangerous and angry," Scar replied uncertainly.

The distance between them closed to just a few cubits. The bandit leader struck first. A sudden lunge forward, dagger aimed straight for the chest. He was counting on Scar being too slow to block the attack with his heavy, oversized sword. That was his first and last mistake.

Scar dodged the stab with a slight move to the right, raised his two-handed sword with startling agility, and brought it down with inhuman speed and force onto the outstretched limb of his opponent.

The hand holding the dagger flew off to the side. The blade sank a quarter of its length into the earth. Scar didn't bother pulling it out—he grabbed the hilt with both hands and threw his full weight onto the pommel, driving it straight at his enemy. The bandit lost his legs.

"Kira!" the pale figure suddenly shouted into the darkness, bloodied sword in hand. "Look! You were right—I can do it!"

His shout snapped the bandits into action. Their leader was dead, and with him, any semblance of organization. Now it was every man for himself. About fifteen of them rushed toward the strange man in red trousers. The rest tried to flee. But they were in for a surprise.

Impenetrable walls of fire — and that crazed maniac with the sword — blocked their escape. There was only one small gap left between the flames. "There!" screamed the instinct for survival in five of the bandits. It betrayed them.

Seeing that the path looked clear, the five sprinted toward the opening. In the dark, something awaited them. Three thought it was a demon with massive claws. Two thought it was a fair-haired girl with a sword.

Those were their last thoughts. Elena dealt with them faster than any of them could raise a weapon or swing a blade.

But the rest still had a glimmer of hope — all they had to do was bring down the pale guy with the sword.

Two raised their rifles, aiming at the figure in red trousers. Another shot rang out. The riflemen dropped to the ground with holes in their chests.

Thirteen left. All armed. An axe, a mace, a sword, a dagger — every bandit had his own weapon, and every one of them wanted to bury it in that strange man with the two-handed blade.

In a second, thirteen thugs surrounded the thin young man. They all tried to strike at once, but the skinny swordsman parried their attacks with little effort. Scar's speed was inhuman. One moment he blocked a mace, and the next, his sword clashed with a razor-sharp blade.

Blows came at him from every direction, again and again, but Scar deflected them. No matter how good he was at defense, the circle was tightening with every second.

Elena saw it. Scar needed help — otherwise, he was done for. She rushed forward to assist him, took three steps, and froze in astonishment. The swordsman didn't need her help anymore.

At the center of the circle — ten men, no, already down to eight — raged a massive lion. It was as big as a full-grown horse. Its mane alone looked like a human-sized bush.

The beast tore the bandits in half, flung them aside, bit off heads with its massive fangs.

A bloody spectacle. But it ended quickly. The enemy was defeated.

The walls of fire vanished. Dina, sniper rifle in hand, stepped out of the darkness.

Everyone gathered at the truck, where Orum's bald head was already visible behind the steering wheel.

"Scar, the danger's over. You can shift back now," Kira said wearily.

The giant lion, still holding the bloodied two-handed sword in its jaws, nodded in affirmation. That this beast was Scar could only be guessed by the red trousers — somehow still intact on the creature's hind legs.

The lion spat out the sword, shook its massive mane, flinging off the blood, and began to shrink. Its torso hunched over, claws disappeared, hind legs lengthened with a crunch, while the front legs shortened. A sickening sound of bones twisting filled the air. Elena winced.

Before them once again stood the pale, skinny young man with a scar on his right cheek. Only now, the red trousers were the only thing left on him. Elena immediately noticed the tattoo of a lion on Scar's back — it had been hidden before under his shirt and chainmail.

"You could've at least taken off your new chainmail before transforming!" Kira said reproachfully. "Now we'll have to buy another one."

"There wasn't time," Scar began to defend himself. "They could've killed me while I was taking it off. Couldn't they?"

"Well, it's done now."

"I would've handled it better than him," Al muttered.

"Jealous?" Kira asked playfully.

"Of who? You and that brat? Don't make me laugh."

"Ooooh, I just love it when you get jealous," Kira said in a sweet voice. "Maybe we could go somewhere together after we get paid for the job?"

"Well..." Al drawled, glancing at Elena. The girl was shaking her head so vigorously from side to side that the mage actually feared it might fly off. "Why not?"

Elena let out a doomed groan. Orum leaned out of the truck's side window and spat forcefully on the ground, cursing under his breath.

"Do I hear that or not?" Scar asked suddenly, staring up into the pitch-black night sky.

"Hear what?"

"That... flapping sound. Flap, flap, flap... Is it just me?"

"Oh come on! Them again? Seriously?" Al groaned, like a child once more running into his usual bullies.

"Them? Who's 'them'?" Scar asked, still not lowering his head.

"Flying, fire-breathing bastards that have officially worn out their welcome."

"Who? Who?"

"Fire lizards, you pale-headed fool. Fire lizards. And a swarm of fire lizards means what? Exactly! Big troubles."

Now all five humans and the dorth tilted their heads back, peering into the darkness above. The flapping could definitely be heard. Or not quite flapping — it was hard to describe the sound of countless wings beating the air in unison.

"Well, looks like they're headed toward Avalas. So much for getting paid," Al remarked gloomily.

"They?" Kira asked, alarmed.

"Yeah, about a dozen of them. All different sizes. Pity about the city, but there's nothing we can do now."

"Are you kidding? We have to help the people!" Kira raised her voice.

"You must be joking!" Elena jumped into the conversation.

"But we have to..."

"We don't owe anyone anything!" Elena was starting to get angry. "We're not risking our lives for some bandit-infested town."

"We have the cannons — we can save them," Kira insisted.

"No! We're leaving!" Elena's voice was firm and resolute.

"Al! Please. Help us defend the city," the woman switched tactics. "We've been living in Avalas for six seasons now — it's become like home. Yes, it's full of bandits, but there are good people too. Without those cannons, they won't survive. Think of the children, Al! There are hundreds of kids who could burn alive tonight if we don't help."

"Sorry, but Elena's right. It's too risky. We barely handled one fire lizard, and now there's a whole swarm."

Silence fell over the clearing. Only the fading flaps of wings broke it.

"I know where the twins you're looking for are."

Kira's sudden, loud statement stunned everyone — everyone except Scar and Dina.

"Well, that's a twist," Orum muttered.

"How the hell do you even know who we're looking for?" Al was clearly shocked.

"Elena told me on the way here." The man shot a furious glare at the girl, but said nothing.

"I'll tell you what I know about them. I promise. But only after you help us protect the city."

"And why should I believe you? Maybe they're not the twins we're looking for. Maybe there are no twins at all and you just made it up!" Al was starting to boil.

"A brother and sister, identical like two drops of water. Brown eyes. Five fingers on each hand. Young, but since they're irni, they look about forty." Kira rattled off. As she spoke, Al's fists clenched involuntarily. His knuckles turned white.

"Well, if we're playing that game," Elena said, taking charge, "then we've got no choice but to help this already doomed city. Orum, can you handle those cannons?"

"Like it's nothing!" the dorth replied confidently.

"And what about your principles? No firearms and all that noble nonsense?" Al was grasping at anything — even the dumbest excuse — to go against Kira.

"Sometimes, you have to set aside your beliefs for the greater good," the dorth replied.

"Then enough talk — into the truck, fast. If we take any longer, there won't be a single stone left of Avalas."

Dina and Kira climbed into the cab with Orum. The rest had to jump into the huge open cargo bed with reinforced sides, where the cannons stood ready. As the truck rolled forward, Al leaned in close to Elena and whispered:

"For obvious reasons I don't want to start another fight right now, but when this is over, I've got a couple of things to say to you, oh mighty commander."

He sat down in the corner of the truck bed and didn't say another word.

Chapter ten (Dorm)

The sea. Vast and majestic. The tears of the whole world gathered into one enormous puddle. A source of inspiration for dreamers. A home to living beings — and their grave. All of this is the sea.

If that immense body of water had human emotions, it would be in a rage right now.

The white foam on the crests of giant waves looked like spit flying from the mouth of someone screaming in fury. And the sound of those waves crashing against the cliffs echoed like angry shouts. Anyone who dared to defy that rage would be instantly torn apart, crushed, and obliterated.

Dorm stood at the edge of a white cliff, watching it all. The rock beneath his feet was so high that even the spray from the towering waves breaking below couldn't reach him.

He stood and stared into the distance, where the edge of the sea met the sky. Unlike the furious water, the sky was calm and clear — only the yellow disk of the sun shrouded in haze, and a rainbow. Its colors were vivid and sharp, almost unreal, as if painted on.

A woman approached silently from the right. Her long, fair hair whipped about in the strong wind, obscuring her face. But that didn't matter. Who she was wasn't important. What mattered was something else — she was pregnant.

The woman, dressed in a thin white robe, with a belly already heavy with life growing inside, took Dorm by the hand. Despite the strong cold wind, the damp air, and her light clothing, her palm was warm.

When her fingers touched his, a wave of calm and serenity washed over Dorm's body. A blissful smile spread across his face.

He wished that moment would last forever — but suddenly, the woman stepped forward and leapt off the cliff into the deadly waves, dragging him along with her.

A brief moment of falling, the feeling of freedom, euphoria — and then Dorm plunged into the sea's abyss. It swallowed his body and mind completely.

Salt water stung his open eyes. Wave after wave smashed his body against the rocks. He felt his bones breaking. Saw his blood dissolving in the seawater. But he didn't care, because the peace that had come from the pregnant woman's hand still hadn't left him. And for that, Dorm was endlessly grateful to her.

Bug-eyed was woken by some kind of commotion outside the tent. Lying in his sleeping bag, wrapped in a wool blanket, he was warm, dry, and comfortable — but the strange movement beyond the canvas forced him to break off his dream, open his eyes, and listen to the night silence. Was it real, or just his imagination?

It could've been anything: a mouse (though what mouse, with snowdrifts knee-deep outside?), a routine patrol (though what patrol — their tent was far from the edge of the military training camp; patrols rarely came out here, and if they did, it was on personal business, not duty), or Boar with another of his nighttime panics (though what Boar — that giant wouldn't sneak around, he'd blow the tent over like a hurricane).

All these thoughts felt like sleepy delirium to Bug-eyed, the kind that hits when you're not quite sure if the dream's still going or reality's already kicked in. But then came the soft, deliberate sound of a slightly curved blade slicing through the tent fabric — right above the boy's head. A pretty solid argument in favor of reality.

His eyes had long since adjusted to the darkness of the tent, so Dorm didn't take his gaze off the blade. Instead, his hands fumbled along the floor, searching for a weapon. The spear was too bulky to keep inside the cramped shelter — it usually stayed outside — but his throwing darts had to be somewhere nearby.

Dorm couldn't help it — he glanced down. No darts in sight. But what he did see was Redhead's head already poking out of her sleeping bag, hair messy, and a hand holding a pistol. For a whole season now, Boar had let her keep a weapon on her at all times and had taught her how to care for it.

A thunderous gunshot. It sounded like a signal — triggering a cascade of gunfire from all across the training camp. Chaos and madness erupted.

Bug-eyed, Twig, and Redhead scrambled out of their confinement, pushing the now-dead intruder off the collapsed tent.

There was no time to look for clothes, let alone put them on. In undershirts, loose yellow trousers, wool socks, and armed, the trio stood knee-deep in snow, in the darkness, ready for whatever trouble was coming their way. And trouble was rushing at them from every direction.

Grabbing a steel dart from the edge of his quiver, Dorm hurled it at a shadow charging straight at him.

Fresh out of sleep, Dorm's muscles weren't exactly in top form, and his throw came out weak — the dart flew well above its target. The shadow didn't even notice it and was already dangerously close. There was no time to grab another dart or the spear. But had all of Boar's effort turning a scrawny kid into a pumped-up warrior been for nothing?

Rather than risk it, Dorm did what a donkey does when it drops — he simply jabbed his foot forward blindly. Direct hit to the gut. The shadow staggered back slightly, and in that moment, the second one emerged from Boar's tall, pale-yellow tent.

Cold, smooth steel of an elongated shape slid into a ready hand. A deep breath. A swing. A throw.

The dart sliced through the air with a whistle and struck true — pinning the enemy squarely to one of the training ground posts. The tip sank just left of the Adam's apple, right into the neck. If not for the attacker's gray clothing — similar to winter military gear — and the half-mask, which

had now shifted enough to reveal more, they might have seen the blood-blistered lips and red streams running down his chest. That poor bastard wouldn't be fighting anyone ever again.

The one Dorm had kicked was already charging in again. He was nearly close enough to slash the boy with his two curved knives — but before he could close the last three steps, the man in gray dropped like a felled tree. Redhead had shot him three times. She was a good shot, but hitting a moving target with precision — without risking a teammate — that was something else entirely.

Dorm turned to finally locate and grab his spear, but for a moment, he froze at the sight before him.

Redhead was calmly gunning down enemies as they rushed at her. With every bullet, she hit her mark flawlessly. Only reloading forced her to pause — a few seconds' break in an otherwise endless stream of deadly fire.

Meanwhile, Twig was fighting two opponents at once. He spun and twisted away from curved blades as if he knew in advance where they'd strike next. At the same time, he struck back with a short sword. His cuts landed every other swing — not killing blows, more like deep, ragged gashes. It looked like he was skinning pigs alive. He wasn't killing them outright — he left them bleeding from dozens of wounds that would finish the job soon enough.

This was it. This was what Boar had been preparing them for over the past six seasons — to kill, and not be killed. Dorm had played the scene of his first kill in his head hundreds of times. He thought it would be hard, that he wouldn't be able to go through with it. But the truth was different. No doubts. No remorse. No torment. Only satisfaction. I survived, and he didn't! I was stronger than him — and all that pain, all that training, it wasn't for nothing!

"Redhead! Twig! Do you see Boar?" Dorm shouted, finally grabbing his spear. For the moment, there seemed to be no enemies nearby — a chance to catch his breath.

"I don't see him," the girl replied, reloading her pistol.

"And he's not in the tent either, though the off-roader's still there," added Kravchik, as he watched three more attackers burst out of the commander's quarters. Twig had just finished off his two opponents; the snow within five cubits of him was soaked in blood. Twig himself looked like a butcher fresh from dressing two pigs, drenched in gore.

"Redhead, cover me!" Dorm shouted, gripping his spear in his left hand and pulling a new dart with his right.

The boy aimed at the nearest target, who noticed and started zigzagging. At the last second, Dorm shifted aim and hurled the dart at a second attacker. A sickening crunch followed, and then a wild scream — the dart hit squarely in the knee, shattering the kneecap.

The first shadow didn't make it to Dorm — it fell into the snow, spraying the white surface with a red fountain. Redhead hadn't missed. Looked like a headshot this time.

The last attacker, realizing the fight was lost, hurled a knife at Dorm from just a few cubits away while still running.

His left arm flared with pain, but Bug-eyed barely noticed. He drove the butt of his spear into the snow and lifted the point just in time. The attacker couldn't stop — Dorm skewered him like a pig on a spit. Redhead finished the twitching body with a clean shot to the head.

"Twig, do you have the keys to the truck?" Dorm asked, brushing the corpse off his spear.

"Yeah, I always keep the spare set on me."

"Then let's get in the vehicle and head to the main forces, to the range," Redhead said aloud — voicing the exact thoughts running through Dorm's mind. Those were the commander's standing orders in case of a surprise attack.

Redhead and Twig jumped into the commander's car. Dorm walked over to the man writhing on the ground with the dart in his knee. One precise stab to the heart ended it. He retrieved the dart and climbed into the vehicle as well.

And again — not the slightest trace of guilt. On the contrary, satisfaction. That shot to the knee? Beautiful. Sure, he'd aimed for the torso, but the result was more than satisfying.

The vehicle pulled away, circling wide around Boar's tent — and just as Kravchik was about to hit the gas, two soldiers in gray yanked Redhead from the moving vehicle and threw her into the snow. One struck her in the ribs, the other raised a knife aimed for her head — but it never landed. Dorm barreled into him, slamming him from above.

The second kick to the ribs never came — Redhead deflected the incoming leg with a sharp push. The blow had been hard, and the attacker's momentum carried his feet right over her. Without hesitation, she struck behind the supporting knee. He collapsed onto her like a sack of bricks. The soldier in gray hadn't yet realized what happened when Redhead locked her legs around his torso and her arms around his head and neck in a choking hold.

Meanwhile, Dorm had no trouble snapping his attacker's neck — but only after delivering a solid kick to the groin to throw off his resistance.

Bug-eyed ended Redhead's opponent with a precise dart to the heart. The twitching body went limp, and the girl let out a breath of relief, shoving the corpse off of her.

"You could've been faster. Or did you take your time on purpose, letting a poor girl stay in trouble a little longer?"

"Oh wow, you're actually admitting you needed my help? That's progress," Dorm grinned.

"Shut your mouth and get in this junk heap. Now," Redhead replied in a low, ominous tone.

The car tore off between the tents. At times, they even had to plow through them at full speed. Kravchik could only hope no one was inside.

Fighting raged all around. It felt like there were thousands of attackers in gray and only a few hundred defenders. Gray shadows flickered everywhere, but none dared to attack the vehicle that was tearing through the chaos like a battering ram.

"Shit!" Dorm cursed. A knife handle was sticking out of his right shoulder. The adrenaline was flooding his brain in elephant-sized doses, so the pain hadn't set in yet.

"We'll pull it..." Redhead started, but didn't finish. Something happened to the right wheel, and the vehicle swerved violently. Twig twisted the wheel like a madman, trying to regain control, but it was no use.

"Brake!" Dorm shouted mid-air. The vehicle crashed with tremendous force into something massive and unmoving. It eagerly spat its passengers out like cannonballs.

Ringin in the ears. Blurred gray shapes. Pain. Then — oblivion.



Chapter 18 (Mercenaries)

The closer the truck got to the city, the louder and clearer the screams became. There were plenty of other distant sounds — the roars of fire lizards, the booming of cannons, gunfire — but it was the desperate screams of humans, irns, and dorths alike that sent chills crawling across the skin and made the hair on your neck stand up. And it didn't matter if you were hearing it for the first time or the hundredth.

The trees flashing past on either side began to thin out. The sounds grew sharper, nearer. But the night's darkness and thick canopy overhead made it impossible to see more than ten cubits ahead. Orum was basically driving blind. Elena had already noted more than once one huge drawback of the local vehicles — no headlights.

Another bump. The truck, flying at top speed, jolted hard. A sharp turn, a skid — and the massive vehicle burst out of the woods onto the edge of the city.

Orum hit the brakes. The truck skidded wildly, but its path ended in a massive maple tree. The sudden impact left a deep dent in the right side of the cab, completely blocking the door. The abrupt stop gave the passengers a chance to gather their thoughts and take in their surroundings — and what they saw promised nothing good.

Right in front of the truck, about two hundred cubits away, stood a tower. Tall, stone, massive — now broken and burning. The lower half was still intact, but the upper half lay crumbled on the ground nearby. Perched atop the remaining section sat a fire lizard. From the truck, only its black tail was visible, hanging over the ruined wall. Judging by its size, the creature was at least five times bigger than the one Elena, Orum, and Al had killed in the desert.

Trying not to attract attention, Orum started moving again — very slowly. He didn't want the fire lizard to notice them now, so the truck crawled away at a snail's pace, inching past the shattered tower.

Once clear of the danger zone, the dorth slammed the gas and sped toward the second tower. It wasn't in view yet, but he desperately hoped it was still standing — and lizard-free.

Above them, the sky was putting on a surreal display. One half of the heavens was clear, starry, with the full Sevana glowing large and bright. The other half was cloaked in black storm clouds, streaked constantly with lightning. Only now did the mercenaries realize that what they'd thought were cannon blasts had in fact been thunder — though the cannons were definitely participating as well.

The truck roared along the forest edge, to the right of the city — the city that was now suffering. No, not just suffering. Avalas was burning alive. A bright glow and thick smoke hung over the skyline, hiding it from the night sky. The city was in agony — and dying — along with its people. Hundreds of humans, dorths, and irni fled in panic from the city into the forest. Many were wounded. Some were covered in horrific burns. Others dragged their dying relatives, friends, or comrades behind them. Among the fleeing were many guards and soldiers — the so-called elite of the Mixed State — thinking only of how to save their own skins. These cowardly deserters still had

a chance to escape. But the unfortunate, brave souls who stayed behind to fight and protect the civilians — they were facing certain death. Ten, maybe more, flying fire-breathing beasts swept through the skies, moving with chilling precision, like a deadly virus ravaging a weakened body.

The main attacking force was made up of small green fire lizards. Their targets: the streets and the people. They flew through the city, flushing civilians from hiding and burning them alive.

Three more, with dark red scales and double the size of the smaller ones, had a different goal: the vehicles. These beasts destroyed any transport they saw, cutting off all escape routes.

And then there were the two remaining fire lizards — jet black in color. Their size was truly staggering. Enormous harbingers of death, blending seamlessly with the night sky. Their targets: the towers equipped with cannons. Fortunately — or not — the fire lizards didn't know that out of ten towers, only five actually had cannons.

In the distance, the top of the second tower came into view. The structure was intact — and more than that, every ten seconds a cannon fired from it toward the city's residential districts. Orum stopped the truck and jumped out of the cab. The dorth ran to the rear doors and, with two sharp blows from a wrench (that had somehow appeared in his hands), popped them open. Inside, Al, Elena, and Scar stared at him with puzzled expressions. Dina and Kira, who had just arrived, looked just as confused.

"So why are we stopped?" Elena asked.

"Well, maybe you were planning to improvise as usual, or maybe you already have some wild idea," the dorth grumbled. "But I've actually come up with a solid plan while we were driving."

"Alright then, let's hear it — before the city's completely gone," Al said, throwing up his hands.

"Hang on a sec!"

Orum, surprisingly agile for his size, climbed into the truck bed and gave the cannons an evaluating look. He approached them, twisted various knobs, tugged on levers.

The cannons looked very much like enormous drum pistols — long barrels connected to bulky black cubes mounted on four wheels. Inside the cubes sat a rotating drum with six round chambers.

"Okay, I've got good news and bad news!" the dorth shouted, trying to be heard over the cannon fire from the tower. "The cannons are functional, but the mechanisms that heat and activate the shells won't work without dorth crystals. There are two in this crate — and I need both."

"Uh-huh. Got it. So what's the good news?" Al asked sarcastically.

"We've got two fire mages who can heat them manually!" A deafening roar from a fire lizard echoed overhead. "No time for whining! I need one thing — for you to do exactly what I say, and maybe, just maybe, we'll have a shot at saving the city. Are you in?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Go on, our short bald general — lay it out!" Al called.

"Perfect. We're splitting into three pairs."

"Wait, wait, wait..." Elena began to protest.

"No! No 'waits'! You all agreed to follow me — so shut up and listen! I'll speak fast, and I'm only saying this once!"

Elena was taken aback. She had never seen a dorth so confident and composed.

"Al, Kira, come here!" Orum led the fire mages to the open cannon bases. "You load six shells into this drum. Then close the lid tightly. Next, we move here," he pointed to the back of the cannon, "open this small hatch, and blast a continuous stream of fire inside! Got it?"

"Got it," Kira and Al answered in unison.

"Then, when you hear a whistle and a click — the mechanism's activated. Close the hatch and start aiming. Once you're locked on target, pull this lever. It fires the shot! Clear?"

"Yup," they replied together again.

"And now, Al — especially for you — you fire at ten-second intervals. If you go faster, the cannon could explode from overheating. Got it?"

"Yes, sir, my one-eyed general," Al quipped. Even in the most dangerous situations, he couldn't resist joking.

"After firing six rounds, open the lid, load in the next six, heat again, wait for the whistle and click — and fire! Need me to repeat anything?"

"All clear!" Kira replied quickly.

"And do you aim this thing like a sniper rifle? Compensate for wind, distance, all that nonsense?" Al asked.

"Nope. That's the beauty of it. Fire like you're blasting a shotgun at point blank. The shell speed is off the charts — we don't even have numbers for it yet," the dorth answered with excitement.

"Then I'm ready to shred me some lizards!" A flicker of wild excitement began to spark in Al's eyes.

"Perfect. Now you two," Orum turned to Scar and Elena. "You'll be the horsepower! After every empty drum, you'll have to drag the cannons back fifty to seventy cubits! It's tough, but that'll throw the fire lizards off and help you avoid a direct hit if they spot you. Think you can handle it?"

"Yes!" Elena answered confidently.

"I sure hope so... but honestly... no idea," Scar muttered darkly.

Orum wanted to slap the boy on the back of the head — but the dorth was half his height.

"You'll manage! Dina, I've got one question for you — did you figure out how to fire the cannon?"

The bald girl nodded decisively.

"We don't have fire magic, but we do have a free crystal we can use. So that's settled. Now we drop off Kira and Scar," Orum pulled two crates filled with black spheres from the corner of the truck bed. They looked almost identical to the ones Kaleb had used to kill the fire lizard near the ruined village. Without ceremony, the dorth tossed the crates over the right side.

"Scar, you'll have to transform, or we won't be able to move the cannons."

"Is that really necessary?" the boy mumbled uncertainly.

Without waiting for Scar's reply, Kira gave him a hard kick in the back, knocking him to the ground. A moment later, the familiar lion — the size of a small elephant — leapt back into the truck.

"That always works," Kira said with satisfaction.

"Scar — throw the cannons down. Kira — you're in charge here! The rest of you — we're moving on! Now!" the dorth started shouting again and jumped to the ground. The others followed. Only the lion remained in the truck. The beast slashed at the ropes holding the cannons with its clawed paws. It approached the two end cannons, threw its full weight against them, and shoved them out. A two-handed sword fell to the ground after the cannons. A moment later, Scar also leapt down.

"Al, go!" shouted the dorth, looking through the driver's seat.

"On it!" the mage shouted back, at the same time holding Kira in a tight embrace. "I love you, Kira."

"Al, you and your love again," the woman replied softly.

The mercenary pulled back slightly and looked at her closely. The woman squeezed his hand tightly and gently said:

"You know I'm joking."

Al turned and, with just a few of his long strides, climbed into the cab. It was cramped for four people.

Orum stuck his hand out the window one last time — fist clenched, thumb up. There was nothing else he could do for them. The dorth started the engine. A sharp lurch, a screech of spinning tires, and the truck sped toward the next tower.

And things were intense there. The second massive black fire lizard had finally figured out which tower was firing at it and decided to deal with this injustice.

The creature flew in a crooked, erratic pattern around the tower, dousing the structure in flames. Screams and moans echoed through the air, but the defenders continued to fire the cannons. The distance was short, but for some reason, those defending the tower hadn't yet managed to do any visible damage to the enemy.

Orum, trying not to draw too much attention from the monster, began to circle around the tower in a wide arc. He hoped the creature was too preoccupied with slaughtering the people inside the tower to notice the truck speeding through the darkness.

Turned out, it would notice. The black fire lizard — which seemed to take up half the sky — was looping around for another pass when it suddenly turned its head sharply toward the truck.

The creature immediately shifted its focus from the tower to the vehicle, adjusted its flight path, and began diving straight for it. To say Orum's soul dropped into his boots would be an understatement. The dorth didn't know what his companions were feeling at that moment, but he himself was quite certain that any second now, he'd die of sheer terror.

Desperately trying to do something — anything — the dorth jerked the steering wheel and slammed the brakes in an attempt to avoid the fire lizard. The distance between them vanished. Collision was inevitable.

And then it boomed. It boomed so loud that the truck's windshield shattered into tiny shards. What could have made that kind of boom? The answer was simple — a cannon.

The fact that the fire lizard had turned its attention away from the tower had given the defenders enough time to aim and fire well. Not just well — perfectly. The shell, or rather the forged black grenade, blasted out of the cannon at incredible speed and rushed after the winged beast. The pursuit lasted only a split second. Then the black sphere caught the fire lizard's wing. First, it punched clean through one of the membranes — then it exploded. The explosion was massive, blowing the creature's wing off entirely. And that saved the lives of Al, Elena, Orum, and Dina. The blast disoriented the monster, and before it could reach the truck — still a hundred paces away — it tilted sharply and crashed face-first into the ground.

What happened to the fire lizard afterward, the truck's passengers didn't see. They were already racing away at the machine's top speed.

They drove until the previous tower was no longer visible and the next tower's top — if it were daylight — would just barely be visible in the distance. At that point, Orum brought the vehicle to a halt. Two terrified, mud-covered young men rushed past, carrying an old naked man on a makeshift stretcher. The old man's chest and right arm were covered in gruesome burns. The tissue damage was so severe that scorched muscle and bare bone protruded from the shoulder. The odds of the victim surviving were catastrophically low.

"Well, Al, Elena — this is your stop," said Orum, watching the stretcher-bearers move off into the night.

"Why here exactly?" asked the mercenary, glancing around in all directions.

"Take a good look toward the city."

"Well... Fire, panic, people screaming... Nothing new..."

"Idiot, get out of the truck and shoot those red bastards while there's still someone left to scream!" Orum was more serious than ever.

The man obediently climbed out of the truck and looked toward the city. What he saw was more horrifying than anything they had encountered so far — and honestly, what could possibly be worse?

Two red fire lizards, medium in size between the black and green ones, were perched on the city gates — the same gates traders were required to pass through. Just off to the side of their perch loomed a mountain that hadn't been there before. A massive mountain made of twisted, burning, smoldering vehicles, all billowing thick smoke.

The creatures sat on the gates and waited. Whenever a vehicle tried to escape from the burning Avalas, they scorched it, snatched it up in their claws, and threw it onto the growing pile. Along with the dying passengers. Those who managed to survive or fall out of the wreckage — the monsters tore them apart with their teeth.

Rage surged through Al.

"Elena, you done unloading?"

"Yeah," the girl groaned, pushing the second cannon off the truck.

"Then, Ori, you guys move on — we'll have a little fun here."

"Good luck!" Orum shouted from the departing truck.

Dina, sitting in the passenger seat, gave the dorth a light punch on the shoulder and looked at him questioningly.

"Well," he grinned, "we'll find the next open entrance to the city... and go for a little joyride through Avalas."

"Scar, I'm done! Drag this beast fifty cubits to the right, I'm heading for the second cannon!"

The massive lion shook his mane, grabbed the rope tied to the large ring at the cannon's base, and began pulling the fearsome weapon to the side. Kira, meanwhile, rushed to the second cannon standing closer to the forest on the left.

She grabbed six black spheres from the crate, ran to the cannon, slid open the lid, and placed the grenade-cores into the semicircular slots. She shut the lid. Opened the small hatch. Now she needed fire. Kira focused, channelling magical flow into the arrow-shaped tattoo. A powerful stream of flame burst from her palm, but the cannon devoured it greedily, as if it could never be satisfied. A quiet whistle, a click. Ready. She closed the hatch. Scar ran up.

"So, ready to roast them? Or still unsure?" Kira shouted cheerfully.

The lion let out a low growl.

A green fire lizard was flying toward the cannon. It was still young and much smaller than its black cousin, but unlike the clumsy giant, this one was fast and agile. Kira had taken down the first green one with her second shot, hitting its neck. But this one had already dodged five rounds.

"Little bastard!" the woman yelled, counting the seconds.

Shot. Another miss. The fire lizard was closing in — barely two hundred ells left between them. The lion standing beside her snorted.

"Yeah, yeah, I suck at aiming! I know I'm no damn sniper! Just shut up!"

Kira adjusted the barrel's angle, waited, aimed. A thunderous blast.

"Yes! Got you!"

The grenade-core exploded just above the creature's rear right leg. The fire lizard crashed to the ground. Its hind leg and right wing were torn off. Half its insides spilled out — yet the beast didn't stop. Even with such wounds, it continued dragging itself forward on its front limbs, leaving behind a trail of blood.

"You bastard," Kira muttered, shifting the barrel's aim again, locking it onto the crippled creature.

"Wait," Scar breathed. He was back in human form. "Don't waste the ammo. We've made so much noise here that the black one's bound to show up soon. I'll finish this one off myself. I can do it! I know I can!" he rasped, pale and ragged in torn red trousers, picking up his greatsword from the ground.

"Yeeees! That's it!" Al cheered, jumping up with excitement. He and Elena, having a bit of fun, took out one of the red fire lizards perched on the city gates with just two shots. Bloody chunks of the beast's carcass were scattered all around — but who cared at this point? The second red creature, having heard the blasts and witnessed the quick demise of its partner, flew deeper into the city.

"High five!" the girl shouted joyfully, raising her hand with fingers spread.

"What do you mean, high five?" Al asked in a disgusted tone, looking at her hand as if it were a piece of rotten meat.

"Just open your palm and slap it against mine. That's what 'high five' means."

"Sounds like some barbaric custom. You've never asked me to do that before. I'm not doing it, especially not to those claws of yours."

"Ugh, you suck."

"Thank you!" came a quiet voice behind Elena.

It was an irni woman, dressed in a scorched gray robe. Two children followed her closely — human, not irni — a boy and a girl, about ten years old.

Elena wanted to say something to the irni, but the woman and her small companions had already moved a fair distance away.

"That lizard got roasted nicely. Time for a bit of rest," the mercenary suggested.

"Fine by me — can't see any more of those beasts around," Elena agreed and sat on the cannon's base cube.

"Ouch!" she instantly jumped off. "Hot!"

"I know," Al said with a sly grin lighting up his face.

"Ass! You could've warned me," the girl snapped, glaring at the tall mercenary — but his twisted expression surprised her.

"What is it?"

"Oh nooo... I'm just wondering — do we always end up in trouble because of your bad luck or mine?"

Elena turned her head in the direction Al was staring. She exhaled in resignation and rushed to the crate of ammunition.

From the direction of the second tower, a fire lizard was running toward them. Black. One of its wings was gone, the other was badly mangled. But all four of its legs were intact — and that's why it was running, not flying. Most likely, it had already taken care of the second tower. But the

fact that the cannon fire hadn't stopped confused it. The fire lizard decided to check where the sound was coming from.

"Elena!" Al roared furiously.

"What?" she shouted back.

"Nothing," he laughed, pulling the trigger.

Sweat poured in torrents down Orum's forehead. The bandage over his eye had long since soaked through, but the dorth couldn't care less. His only task now was to maneuver. Two green beasts were hot on the tail of the truck racing through the burning streets of Avalas, and Orum was doing everything in his power to keep the fire lizards from roasting them alive.

Dina, currently in the cargo bed, was unleashing a hail of cannon fire at the green beasts pursuing them. There was only one cannon, but it was powered by a dorth crystal that had been removed from the truck's engine in advance.

Another blast. The truck jerked hard to the right.

"Why the hell did we even come here?" Al asked, panting heavily.

"There's nothing left of the cannons or the fire lizard either. But from up here, we can see the whole city and check how the others are doing," Elena replied, planting a foot on the next step. The tower was so tall, she felt like the spiral stairs would never end.

"We're here," the mercenary exhaled.

Elena and Al stepped out onto the landing. There was nowhere else to go—the top of the second tower had been blown off, and its stones were scattered all around.

"Do you see anyone?"

"No. Just fire everywhere and not the slightest sign of movement," the girl replied.

The city was in a dreadful state. It felt like fire was devouring every house, every brick, every beam of Avalas. The sheer number of blazes lighting up the night pushed the darkness back almost as well as the sun.

Elena stood, watching and listening, hoping to see or hear something. A distant explosion. Then another. Closer this time. Then farther away again.

"Oh, I hear gunfire."

"Me too! Either it's our people, or some towers are still firing."

"There! Over there! I see it!" Al shouted.

"Where?"

"There! Our truck! It's heading for the city gate we took back from those red bastards," he said, pointing toward Avalas.

Sure enough, their truck was tearing down a narrow street toward the gate at full speed. Smoke billowed from the bed, but every ten seconds, a cannon blast erupted from it.

Chasing after it, dodging and weaving through the street, were two fire lizards—a green one and a red one. The truck rocked violently from side to side, keeping the projectiles from hitting their mark.

"They're really after them," Al growled through clenched teeth.

"We have to help them."

"I agree. But there's a problem. The two cannons Orum so nobly entrusted to us? Blown to hell by that giant black monster."

The shots stopped.

"I hope that just means Dina's reloading... and not something worse," Elena said with concern.

The red and green blurs seemed to read her mind. Realizing no more shots were coming, the fire lizards zeroed in on the truck.

Elena clenched her fists. The distance between the vehicle and the flying death machines was shrinking fast.

"No!" she cried out in despair. Her heart stopped for a second and refused to start again.

The swift creatures caught up with the truck and tore it apart in mere seconds. The red fire lizard dove onto the cargo bed, while the green one went for the cab. Flames, smoke, and distance obscured the gruesome details.

A surge of rage, despair, and helplessness swept over Elena. Watching the fire lizards tear into her friends, she took an involuntary step forward. There was no footing beneath her. Her foot found only empty air, and her whole body followed. She didn't even have time to scream. She just blinked.

"I'm still alive. Should I open my eyes? Or maybe they're already open, and I've just died and ended up in endless darkness? No. I'm still alive—I can move my hand.

I opened my eyes.

The familiar ruined towers. Everything seems just like it was. Where's Al? I need to call him.

Instead of a shout, a guttural beast-like roar burst from my throat.

What the hell? Where's Al? Where's my voice? Where's my katana?

I turned my head, trying to find my sword, but then I noticed something odd.

What's with my left arm? It's covered in scales—but black ones. Did I fall into soot? Wait! Why is my other arm scaly too? I don't like this. And what's that constant flapping behind my back?

I turned my head—and was shocked twice over. First, because I could twist my neck more than a full 180 degrees without issue. Second, because I had wings.

Either I've lost my mind, or I'm a fire lizard.

I tuned in to the sensations.

Yes, I'm definitely a fire lizard, because I can clearly feel my arms, legs, wings, and tail. But how? I need to remember what happened before I opened my eyes.

A sharp image surged through my mind.

Orum! The fire lizards! I must help him."

Al was shaking Elena by the shoulders with all his strength. Her eyes were open. They were still blue, but now they looked normal—regular pupils, no narrow vertical slits. And they were spinning wildly in different directions. That was what scared Al. That, and the fact that Elena wasn't moving at all.

"Damn it! " Al started slapping her cheeks, not holding back. No reaction.

A deafening roar of a bloodthirsty beast rolled across Avalas. Al looked up.

From the direction of the first tower, a fire lizard was flying in. A black one. Massive. Furious. It felt like the darkness itself was descending on the city on wings of death. The lizard was closing the distance at terrifying speed, covering a hundred and fifty cubits with each flap of its wings.

"No, no, no... Ori... No... Why are you flying toward him, you damned thing? " Al muttered, dragging Elena toward a half-ruined wall. The last thing they needed was for the black child of death to spot them.

Meanwhile, the fire lizard reached its target and hovered above the ground. It watched as the other two—red and green—were rummaging around the truck. Another roar, and then...

Then Al was, to put it mildly, dumbfounded.

The enormous black creature dove like a stone onto its kin.

The one on the right got grabbed by the black lizard's front claws and—roaring with rage—was decapitated in one savage motion. The green one didn't even know what hit him. Just a second ago, he was clawing at the cab door—and now he was watching his own severed body from the side.

The red one, witnessing this incomprehensible scene, forgot all about the truck. Realizing what fate might await him, he decided not to wait around and attacked the berserk relative first.

The red fire lizard, a third the size of the black one, launched into the air and bit into the giant's long neck.

But the black beast didn't care. It grabbed the red one's torso with its right claw, ripped him off with part of its own flesh still between the teeth, slammed him to the ground, pinned his body with its hind legs, and used the front right paw to press down on his throat. The red lizard's head twisted back and forth with frantic speed. He tried to breathe fire, but the pressure on his throat stopped it.

The black lizard fell silent, stared at its opponent. A brief pause—then its huge fangs sank into the writhing red neck. The pinned fire lizard didn't stand a chance.

Satisfied that its fangs had separated the red head from the body, the black monster roared again, freezing the blood of every surviving resident of Avalas. It tossed the red head aside and surveyed its surroundings. No more threats. No more cannon fire either.

With a powerful beat of its wings, the fire lizard lifted off, hovered over the city for a few seconds, turned its head—and looked straight at Al.

The mercenary turned pale. He liked a good fight, sure—but to stand alone against that thing? Al swallowed hard. For the first time in his life, he was truly afraid.

But the lizard looked away. It turned its head toward another direction, rose higher into the sky, circled once around the truck wreckage, and flew off toward the forest.

Al didn't move until the small black dot flying away finally vanished beyond the horizon.

"What the hell was that?" he asked aloud, more to himself than anyone else.

"I'm shocked too," Elena replied weakly.

Chapter V (Sa-Ag)

A neat little glass house nestled cozily in the forest thicket, on a small rise right beside a stream. From the outside, it looked like the humble home of a poor irni family: three single beds, a table, a wardrobe, kitchenware, a fireplace, a cellar. All of this was clearly visible from Sa-Ag's position. A female irni in a light linen dress was cutting something on the table. Two more inhabitants of the forest house were asleep—two long mounds on the beds near the far wall confirmed that. All in all, it was an ordinary evening—a family tired from a long day's work, children in bed, mother preparing dinner. Perhaps someone might have found this scene touching and called off the operation—but not Sa-Ag. He had simply ordered that they not kill everyone immediately. The Commander of the Hiddens wanted to talk to Im-Ma and her children.

Four shadows crept silently and unnoticed toward the glass house. Sa-Ag held a pistol in his hands; his subordinates carried compact rifles. Their weapons were cocked and aimed at the figure by the table. Only a few cubits remained between them and the house.

Suddenly, the irni woman in the linen dress turned around. In each hand, she held a knife, both glowing bright yellow from magical heat. A smug smile lit up the hostess's face.

Without waiting for the intruders to act, the irni woman struck. With her left hand, she flung a knife without a wind-up toward the Second; her right hand lunged toward the throat of the house's mistress.

Four gunshots, the crash of shattered glass, malicious laughter, and a stifled groan.

Just a few seconds, and so much had already happened — and yet Sa-Ag hadn't even moved. He stared intently at the woman, whose right arm had been pierced by four bullets in different places. The wounds weren't fatal, but they weren't meant to be. The knife in her hand hadn't reached its target, but the one she managed to throw had gone straight through the Second's abdomen. Aside from his groans, the sharp smell of burned flesh was further proof of that.

Ka-As, seeing his fellow soldier wounded, immediately rushed to help. With an injury like that, there was no time to waste — even a moment's delay, and no magic would be enough.

"No!" Sa-Ag commanded loudly, but calmly. "First — clamp the Second's wound. Ka-As — tend to the wounded Im-Ma. I need information."

Ka-As slung his rifle over his shoulder and silently walked over to the bleeding woman. The bullets had hit her wrist, elbow joint, bicep, and shoulder. There was a lot of blood, and more with every passing second.

Sa-Ag carefully stepped over the shards of glass without making a sound. His gaze drifted toward the beds. The long mounds still lay motionless.

"May the waters of the Primal One wash over your fortune, Im-Ma," the irni said, crouching beside Ka-As, who was tending to the woman's wounds. She lay on the floor with half-closed eyes, smiling faintly.

"Commander of the Hiddens, Sa-Ag. A pleasure to meet you. I suspect our conversation will be brief and cheerless."

"You know who I am?"

"More than you think," the irni smiled again. Ka-As had already stopped the bleeding from two of the wounds.

"Where are your children?" Sa-Ag asked calmly.

"Far away from here by now," she winked at the Commander of the Hiddens.

"Why did your family become the target of our mission? What's so special about your children?"

"Oh, I see you're not just some brainless mutt from the valley — you still have a trace of intellect. Quite rare," Im-Ma laughed, but immediately broke into a groan as Ka-As began cutting into her shoulder with a knife, searching for the bullet. "Maybe my children are special, but they're not the target of your mission."

"Then who is?"

Silent footsteps from behind — but Sa-Ag caught them. He had no time to dodge, but there was one thing faster than a bullet: the flow of magic within the Commander of the Hiddens. In a fraction of a second, he directed one of them into a tattoo.

The bullet passed effortlessly through the falling camouflage jacket and struck the woman in the chest.

Ka-as didn't hesitate. Im-Ma couldn't be saved — but the crazed First was now the problem.

The driver sprang from a sitting position like a coiled spring, barreling into the First. With his shoulder, he knocked the pistol from the assailant's hand, then tackled his legs with his full body weight. A struggle followed. This wasn't a fight — it was the clash of two beasts, both intent on killing. The First gripped Ka-As by the throat, while the driver twisted his opponent's leg. Another shot. The grip weakened. Ka-As seized the moment, broke free, rolled to the side, and in mid-motion, drew his pistol from its holster.

"Don't move!" Sa-Ag shouted. He stood in his usual form beside the First's corpse, aiming his gun at Ka-As.

"Okay, okay," the irni lowered his weapon after quickly assessing the situation. The First was already dead, and Sa-Ag hadn't shot him yet. "What is going on?"

"You tell me, friend," the Commander of the Hiddens replied in a tone unusually calm for the situation.

"The First went mad and attacked us, you..."

"No. He was completely sane and acted deliberately. First, he slit the wounded Second's throat. Then he went after me. Care to explain why?"

Sa-Ag's gun remained trained on Ka-As.

"Sa-Ag, I meant to tell you everything, but later. I didn't think it would turn out like this," the irni began guiltily.

"It's fine. You've already paid the price for your stupidity."

"When?" Ka-As asked blankly.

"Look at your leg," Sa-Ag pointed the pistol at it, then finally holstered the weapon.

Blood was oozing from Ka-As's right thigh. A bullet wound. When the Commander of the Hiddens shot at the First, he had also hit Ka-As. Whether it was intentional or accidental no longer mattered.

"How the hell did we get ourselves into this mess?" Sa-Ag asked wearily and sat down on one of the beds. Already knowing what he would find, he yanked off the blanket. Underneath lay a sack stuffed with straw and sticks of various sizes.

"Are we going to chase after Im-Ma's children now?"

"Now you're going to tell me what happened in the Supreme's reception hall when Bi-Is summoned you there."

"How do you know about that?" the irni stammered.

"Ka-As, don't take me for some brainless grunt! Speak!"

"He said you were an outdated relic, disobedient to orders, and that after the mission was completed, you were to be eliminated — along with the rest of the squad. In return, I'd be appointed Commander."

"And you..." Sa-Ag didn't finish the sentence.

"And I left without saying a word. If I had agreed, I would've betrayed your trust. But if I refused, I wouldn't have made it out of that room alive." Ka-As fell silent, waiting for the Commander's reaction.

"And the First... the weakling agreed to the deal," Sa-Ag spat on the floor with contempt.

"So what now, Commander of the Hiddens?"

"Now, my friend Ka-As, you're going to the palace. You'll say the mission is complete, the targets are neutralized, and the Hiddens are no more."

"What?" the irni repeated, not fully understanding the order.

"You'll get in the truck, head to the palace, hand this over to Bi-Is, and become the new Commander," Sa-Ag said confidently, pulling a serpent-shaped badge from his pocket.

"And you?"

"I have to see my final mission through... and then take my rest," Sa-Ag said tiredly, with a smile.

It was the first and last smile of the Commander of the Hiddens that Ka-As would ever see.

Chapter 19 (Mercenaries)

Evening. Dark, deserted streets. Lamps, cleverly placed inside special stone pillars, created perfectly even islands of light around themselves. These bright yellow patches on the cobblestones gave evening strollers the illusion of safety. Exactly what the shadows lurking in the half-darkness needed.

Usually, after a race, Orum and Kara would drive home. It was faster and safer that way. But this evening, they felt like walking. The weather was warm, their mood excellent, and on top of that, the dwarf had landed a hefty prize. A solid pouch of gold pleasantly tugged his belt down.

"Do you think Rusty's already asleep?" Kara asked, taking her husband's hand.

"Not a chance," Orum laughed. "That rascal won't go to bed until he sees us home."

"Hey, how about we stop by our favorite restaurant, grab a bite, and have a glass of red?"

"I'll give you a glass of red all right! Then I'll catch up and give you another!" Orum slowed his step and placed a hand on his wife's belly. "Broma, maybe you can tell your mother it's a bit early for drinking."

Kara stopped abruptly and squinted at the dorth.

"First of all, I'm going to bite you for picking out our kid's name without me. Second, who said it's going to be a girl?"

"Well... I built the nest myself, I'm raising a son, braved the forbidden caves on my own... For a dwarf's complete happiness, I just need a daughter."

Grinning like a satisfied child, Orum walked up to his wife, took her arm, and led her further down the street.

"Ow! What was that for?" the dorth suddenly yelped.

"Well, I told you I'd bite," Kara replied.

They turned right past another semicircular building. This street led home by a longer path, but their spirits were high, and they wanted the walk to last. It felt like nothing could ruin the perfect ending to a tough day — but fate enjoys spitting in the face of the fortunate.

Two dorths in long black coats with pulled-up hoods stepped into the road as if materializing from the shadows. They weren't here by accident. Orum could've easily run from them or tried to punch his way through, but he wasn't alone. Meanwhile, a third stranger blocked the way back.

"Hand over the gold, racer," growled the one standing alone.

"And why would I do that?" Orum asked, instinctively placing himself between Kara and the thugs.

"Or we'll poke a few holes in you," the same dorth smiled, pulling a pistol from his coat pocket. The other two pulled out butterfly knives.

"Guys, guys, no need to get heated. I'll hand it over right now."

Orum unhooked the pouch of gold coins from his belt and tossed it to the ground near the raspy-voiced one.

"Here's the money, take it."

The raspy dorth grabbed the pouch, weighed it in his hand, and grunted approvingly.

"Let's go," he ordered with a satisfied tone.

"Wait," said one of the knife-wielders. "Check out the chick he's got. A real beauty. Let's have a little fun with her."

All three of them burst into laughter.

"Guys, you've got the money, just leave, please," Orum tried to resolve things peacefully.

"Nah, Barefoot's right. That girl's too fine to pass up."

Orum pressed his back even tighter against Kara, shielding her. She was trembling all over.

He had to take control of the situation immediately. Orum reached into a hidden side pocket of his pants and pulled out a wide hunting knife.

"You'll have to play with me first."

"Look at the tough guy," Barefoot sneered and lunged at Orum together with the other dorth. The raspy one stayed put.

Orum clashed blades with both of them at once. He wasn't exactly a knife master, but he knew how to poke extra holes where it hurt.

A few seconds passed, and Orum had already slashed Barefoot's elbow and driven his blade deep into the second dorth's belly. Just as he turned to finish off Barefoot, a voice from the left froze him in place.

"Your wife smells delightful," rasped the dorth in the hood, wrapping one arm around Kara's neck. "Drop the knife, or I'll shoot her."

Orum obediently and slowly pulled the blade from the gut of the third dorth and tossed it aside — not before giving it a discreet twist inside the belly.

The muzzle of the pistol was pressed firmly to Kara's temple.

"You know," said the raspy one, "Zhyk's not gonna make it. You really spilled his guts. So... as per our crew's rules... we repay harm in kind."

He pulled the trigger.

Orum didn't even have time to scream or move. A shot. A small red hole appeared at Kara's temple. A crimson stream slowly traced its way down to her neck.

"No..." Orum whispered with horror in his eyes. "No, no..."

Suddenly, Barefoot — who had been standing next to him — tackled him to the ground.

"And for cutting my arm, I'll take your eye. A little keepsake..."

Orum opened his eye. The pillow beneath his head was completely soaked. His body was trembling. Ghosts of the past had crept into the dorth's dreams.

"Ori, Ori! What's wrong?" Elena asked with concern, standing by the bed.

"Nothing serious, just a dream..." the dorth murmured, slowly coming to his senses. For a few minutes, he just lay there, staring at the ceiling, breathing rapidly.

"Where am I? The last thing I remember was us running from fire lizards in the truck."

"Don't rush, hero. I'll tell you everything, but first drink this. The doctor said to give you this miraculous brew once you came to."

Elena handed him a half-full glass of green sludge. Orum downed it in one gulp.

"Ugh, that's bitter as ..." He didn't finish the sentence. He drifted back into a restless sleep — this time, without dreams.

When the dorth came to again... he had no idea how much time had passed. He didn't even know if it was night or day. He couldn't see. His eye flat-out refused to look at the world. It felt like his eyelid had been plastered shut with cement and left to harden. On top of that, his body wasn't listening to him. The only thing Orum could do was listen to everything happening around him.

"So when's this old bald dorth waking up?" Al asked grimly.

"Let's see how long you'd sleep at his age after injuries like that," Elena snapped.

The door opened silently. Someone stepped onto the threshold but didn't come in right away.

"Well, well, the return of the prodigal necromancer," Al said without much enthusiasm. "Where the hell've you been?"

"Oh, don't blame him, Alpacine. I borrowed Caleb for a couple of days."

That voice — which never brought anything good — Orum recognized immediately. Sebastian, in the flesh. Probably dressed in some outfit lost between centuries and conflicting fashion ideas.

"Long time no see. A pleasure as always."

"Yeah, the pleasure's really not mutual," Al muttered through gritted teeth.

"Alpacine, don't be so unpleasant. Nasty people don't live long," the man said, pausing briefly — likely to predatorily lick his upper lip, as he often did during their first meeting. "By the way, I came to congratulate you! And, to some extent, to disappoint you." Sebastian entered the room, his heels clicking no worse than any court lady's. "Brilliant clash with the fire lizards. Elena, special praise for your... ingenuity," he paused again, "you're real heroes and saviors, if not for one tiny detail..."

Sebastian went silent. Ten seconds of heavy silence passed before it was broken by a sudden scream:

"You lost the twins!" the man shouted, slamming his fist against the wall.

"What do you mean?" Al asked, confused.

"Shut the..." Sebastian caught himself mid-word, clearing his throat like an old man as he tried to return his voice to its former smoothness. "Please don't interrupt me, Alpacine."

The man pulled out his now-familiar flask, took a couple of swigs, and screwed the cap back on.

"Hey, buddy, speak clearly," Al growled through clenched teeth, barely holding back his anger.

"Shut your filthy mouth!" Sebastian suddenly barked, hurling the flask at the wall. "One more word and I'll personally rip the dorth's head off and make you eat it!" He took a deep breath and licked his upper lip again. "Now, where was I... Ah yes! My leader and I have one thing in common — we hate it when things don't go according to plan."

Whatever happened after that, Orum didn't hear. He slipped once more into restless dreams.

A pleasant tingling in the thighs. Then it slowly spread to the chest and ended its journey on the dorth's head. Orum had no idea what it was, but it felt good and peaceful. His eye opened on its own and stared at the white ceiling.

"No sign of infection, the body is recovering quickly. Look, he's already regained consciousness," came an unfamiliar female—no, rather girlish—voice. It was gentle, ringing, and naïve, but Orum was hearing it for the first time.

The dorth struggled to lift his head and met the gaze of the voice's owner. The color of her solid pupils reminded him of the last rays of morning sun blended with autumn leaf-brown. That depth of color was impossible to look away from. If it hadn't been for her beautiful smile—just as charming as her eyes—Orum might have stared into those deep brown irises for eternity. But instead, he had to pull his focus together. After a few minutes of marveling, Orum finally took in the full view of the girl: white skin, slightly blue lips, ash-gray hair cascading down her shoulders. She wore an orange tunic with long sleeves and light black pants. Her shoes weren't visible—she was standing right next to Orum's bed.

"Hello, my name is Ur-Ra," she said with a smile. Orum had absolutely not expected to see someone like her. He gave a slight nod in response.

"Your name is Orum, right?" The dorth nodded again.

The conversation had to continue somehow, but Orum was still in a bit of a daze, not fully grasping what was happening.

"I told you he'd be stunned," came a familiar mocking voice from behind Ur-Ra.

"Shut up, blabbermouth," said another, female voice—almost dear.

"Elena..." Orum croaked faintly.

"Welcome back," said the joyful face of the mercenary, peeking from behind the irni girl's shoulder.

"Elena... is she what I think?"

"It's actually quite rude to call a stranger 'what'," Elena winked.

"Ur-Ra, forgive me. Pleased to meet you," the dorth whispered, once again locking eyes with those solid brown pupils.

"I'm happy to meet you too."

He tried to sit up, but the irni girl gently placed her hand—with five human-like fingers—on his shoulder.

"You better not," she said, that smile again melting even the coldest heart in the world.

"Why? I feel fine and I think I can finally get up."

"Maybe drink some water first..."

"What... what do you mean?" Orum asked dumbly, looking down at his legs. Or rather, his leg. His right leg ended in a bandaged stump at the knee.

"Be grateful it's just your leg and not something higher," Al chuckled.

"Fire lizards?" the dorth asked in a tired, old voice, immediately forgetting about his unusual new acquaintance and turning his gaze to Elena.

"Yeah," the mercenary switched places with Ur-Ra and sat on Orum's bed.

"And are you all alright?"

"Well, how should I put this, Elena pulled off something unbelievable..." Al began enthusiastically.

"We're fine," Elena sharply interrupted him. "This blowhard is about to start making up nonsense again."

"And Kira, Scar, Dina?"

"Kira and Scar left the city," Elena looked down at the floor.

"And Dina?"

"The fire lizards..." the girl whispered sorrowfully. "We could be mourning you too right now if the cabin hadn't collapsed and trapped you inside."

"Goddammit!" the dwarf swore, throwing his pillow across the room. "It would've been better if..."

"It wouldn't," Elena interrupted again. "Not for us."

A confident knock on the door.

"What?!" Orum shouted angrily.

He was boiling inside with rage at the injustice of the world. What kind of god or deity would let an old cripple live while a young girl died? The Primal One? Steel? The monks' faith? How was he supposed to live with this?

The door flung open. Caleb stood on the threshold. Behind him were two dorths: the already familiar mercenary Elum in a half-mask, and another red-haired short guy with a beard braided into three thick plaits. The necromancer looked more focused than ever, holding one of his daggers in his right hand. Blood was dripping from the blade.

"In a few minutes, the entire city guard of Avalas will be here. They want the twins. We need to get out of the city. Orum will be looked after and treated—I made arrangements. To the vehicle. Now!" the necromancer shouted and ran out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

"Typical. Never a normal day," Al muttered.

"Well, friends, I guess it's time to say goodbye..." Orum said sadly.

"Ha! As if. You'll see us again, you old bald Orum. And you still owe me three beers," Al said with a wink before leaving the room. Ur-Ra gave a faint nod, smiled once more, and followed the mage.

"Still insufferable, as always," Orum grumbled affectionately.

"Goodbye, Ori," Elena said, squeezing the dorth's hand tightly, her eyes filled with tears.

"Safe travels to you all."

Epilogue

Nights can be different. Some are pleasant, warm, filled with peace and carefreeness. Others are mysterious — with a full Sevana, strange silhouettes, and eerie sounds. Tonight's night stirred anxiety and felt ominous. With every fiber, it whispered: "If you want to live — don't step outside."

There was no Sevana in the sky. Only billions of stars, shining brighter than usual. A magical sight, but the light they cast was weak, so darkness was impenetrable. Even the snow, which usually glowed faintly, appeared dark. Natural magic, no doubt. Add to that a biting frost — going to the shed for firewood might end in frostbite. And the high humidity combined with the wind made the cold unbearable. But Boar didn't give a damn about any of it.

He threw a couple more heavy logs into the fire so the water in the tripod-hung cauldron would boil faster.

For as long as he could remember, the giant had never feared the cold. Even during the harshest winters, he wore the same outfit: a tank top and loose, pale-yellow trousers. Bare feet were always a part of it. Well, with one small adjustment — he rolled his pants up to the knees in winter. Otherwise, the hems would get soaked from snow and freeze solid, impossible to break even with a stone. That was annoying and uncomfortable. So it was easier to roll them up and enjoy the bite of the cold and snow on his skin.

The water bubbled, steam rose — time to add the herbs. Boar took a little glass vial from his pocket, uncorked it with his teeth, and inhaled the aroma. The long bottle was half-filled with something gray that looked like ordinary sand, but the scent was incredible. Minty notes mixed with something sharp and biting.

He tossed three pinches into the water, plugged the vial, and pocketed it. Now he had to wait a few minutes for the water to turn violet. Once it did, the giant scooped up a pile of fresh snow with his bare hand and tossed it into the cauldron. The liquid hissed and cracked. Time to cover the cauldron and let it steep. Boar usually left it for three minutes so the taste would be sweeter.

He stretched, looked around. In front of him stood a humble, one-story hut. Firewood stacked neatly by the wall, a fishing net hung above. The hut was the last in the village — beyond it lay a rickety pier stretching into the River of Nations. Oddly enough, even in these brutal colds, the river never froze. Fishermen still went out in winter. But this pier had no boats — all burned that morning.

Three minutes passed. Boar, unafraid of burns, lifted the cauldron with bare hands, set it on a stool, and removed the lid. Inhaling the rising steam, he smiled. Carefully, he filled his usual tin mug with the violet brew. One sip sent a wave of warmth through his body — his heels tingled pleasantly.

A young man, bundled in a dark green coat with a fur collar, ran up from the village houses. He was trembling from the cold despite his layers. Seeing the barefoot giant in rolled-up pants and a tank top, the man was stunned. He even forgot what he had come to say.

"Want some tea?" Boar asked, taking another sip.

"Boar, I was sent to report that..."

"Hold on. I can see you're frozen. Have some tea, warm up, and then report," the giant said in a friendly tone that still sounded like a death threat.

The man didn't argue. Why risk it? With shaking hands, he pulled a tin mug from his satchel and handed it over. Boar ladled out some violet liquid and filled it.

"Is it normal for tea to be this color?" the man asked cautiously.

"Drink," Boar growled.

He took a sip, then another, then eagerly drank more. His lips and tongue burned, his throat stung — but he couldn't stop. The warmth rushing through his body felt divine.

"Don't gulp it all down. You'll overheat and have to strip — and on a night like this, you'll catch your death."

But it was too late. The man had drained his mug, his cheeks flushed, and a dumb smile spread across his face.

"Unbutton your coat or you'll roast," Boar advised, sipping his own brew. This soldier was starting to annoy him.

The man obeyed and unfastened his coat.

"What kind of magical tea is this?"

"It's made from ground, dried mushrooms that grow only on the Monk's Mountain. You wouldn't believe what it took to get even a small vial of them."

"Remarkable mushrooms. Tastes like mint and spice tea, but warms like nothing else."

Boar's face darkened. He downed the rest of his mug in one gulp and covered the cauldron.

"Can I have some more?" the man asked, holding out his mug.

"No," the giant snapped. Calling a divine drink "minty tea." He barely restrained himself from punching the man in the face. "Whose man are you?"

"Rinus's," the man replied, removing his cap. He was getting hot — but he had no idea that within a day, his throat would be slit and his body dumped in a forest ditch.

"Noted. Report!" Boar roared.

"Right! All villagers have been killed and piled up. Doesn't look like anyone was missed."

"Doesn't look like'?" Boar asked softly.

"My fault..."

"I see. Check every house, every cellar, every shed. Make sure no one's left alive. Then burn the corpses and the homes to ash. Make it look like fire lizards did it. Go!"

The man turned, pulled his hat over his sweaty head, and ran into the darkness.

A long corridor. The unpleasant smell of dampness and rot. Wet gravel underfoot. On the walls, every twenty cubits, dorth crystals lit the way from sconces on both sides. No doors. Just whitewashed walls and holders for the lights.

Boar was flanked by soldiers in dark green uniforms — three in front, three behind. In truth, that wasn't nearly enough to subdue a giant like him. Both the soldiers and Boar knew that. But the rules were the same for everyone, whether you were a mere pawn or a more important piece.

The small convoy had been walking down the straight-as-an-arrow corridor for about three minutes. It was subtle, but the floor sloped downward. They had been descending the whole time. Finally, doors appeared ahead — plain, made of thick oak planks, no handle in sight.

Boar and his escort approached the doors. Two knocks.

With a reluctant creak, the oak giant swung open. The escorts stepped aside, allowing the giant to pass.

Boar ducked to avoid hitting the doorframe and entered. Behind him, the door shut on its own with a vile screech.

The barefoot warrior found himself in a dark, oval-shaped room. In the center stood a round table with a single candle at its heart — the only source of light. Six people sat around the table. Because of the dimness, their faces were hidden in shadow — only silhouettes were visible.

"Boar, we've waited a long time for you, and finally, you've come to us. What do you say about your little escapade? Were you able to combine, as you put it, pleasure with practicality?"

Boar gave a crooked smile. He glanced into the shadowed faces of each person present and rumbled in his deep voice:

"The fanatics messed with my plans a bit, but everything's fine. The recruits are ready for the next phase!"