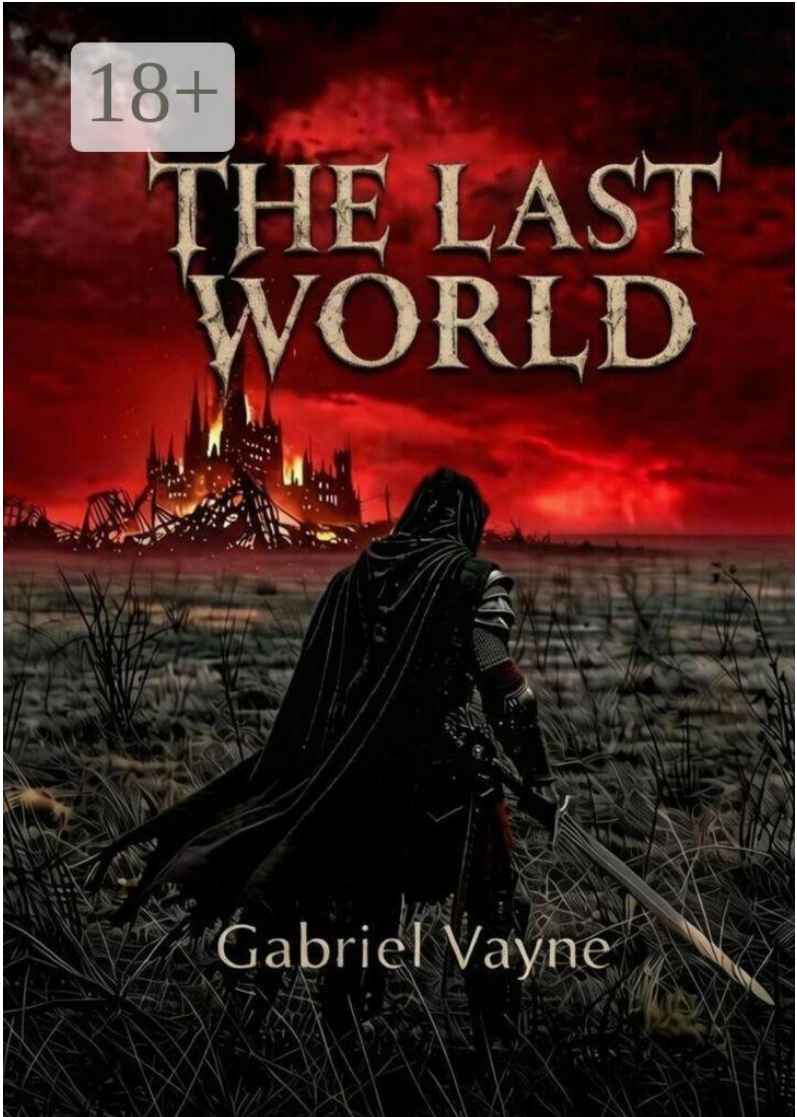

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THE LAST WORLD
Gabriel Vayne

Дмитрий Костенко
The Last World

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Аннотация

He was a mercenary. Not a hero.

The king is dead. The princess is gone. His world lies in ash.

Now Gedriel is trapped in a strange world, where magic is a crime and power means death. To survive, he must raise a rebellion, kill a tyrant — and learn who he really is.

Some wars are only the beginning.

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The Last World

Дмитрий Костенко

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Prologue

Gedriel sat at a wooden table in the great hall of the castle, which doubled as the dining room. Candles burned constantly inside — despite the daylight outside the windows, there wasn't enough sunlight here. The daylight only gently illuminated the red flags of Traen, hanging from the columns along the walls. These banners served as a reminder of the country's great achievement — the unification of the entire continent after three hundred years of endless wars.

Almost two hundred years had passed since peace had reigned, and the memory of the terrible battles gradually faded within folk tales. The last great trial was the uprising of the wyverns — bloodthirsty creatures whose attacks threatened to shatter the fragile peace. In this battle, humanity lost about a hundred thousand warriors, but they managed to wipe out the enemy entirely.

The continent itself consisted mostly of plains, but in some places towering mountains rose to unimaginable heights. Legend had it that pegasi lived among their inaccessible peaks, yet no mortal had seen them for millennia. In the untamed and forsaken corners of the world, terrible creatures lurked — enormous killer beetles. These bloodthirsty monsters hunted both wild beasts and people. Their powerful pincers tore through everything in their path, and their hard shells were considered the most

valuable of trophies: people paid a hefty price for them. Even the most skilled alchemists sought the secret glands of these beetles to create powerful medicines and magical potions. With each passing year, their numbers steadily dwindled — hunting driven by greed and fear was wiping them from the face of the earth. Yet even their decline carried its own danger — for these creatures were a rare and precious resource, capable of granting wealth and power to those who managed to claim them.

When Gedriel finished his wine, which he was allowed at every meal, a pleasant warmth spread through his body. These were conditions he had insisted on himself when the king decided to appoint him as head of the personal guard — after watching at a tournament as this bearded mercenary defeated the empire's finest knight. He had entered the tournament battles only for the main prize — a pouch of gleaming coins. He valued money above all else, and so he agreed without a moment's hesitation.

For one, he was in for a decent salary and the chance to actually get paid for once. Second, he always got free food and drinks at the tavern — privileges that even noblemen didn't seem to have. Third, guarding the king was easier than it looked — all his enemies had already been defeated or quickly intimidated. Those who tried to gather forces to overthrow the crown quickly disappeared — quietly and without a trace, thanks to the kingdom's agents.

Gedriel was more of a mercenary than a knight. He had no use for a code of honor — his main motto was always: "Win at any

cost and stay alive." There was no room in his life for nobility or mercy, except for those rare moments when his sense of justice flared without warning.

At thirty, he looked younger than he was — tall, well-built, with black hair usually tied back in a ponytail. The most striking feature of his appearance was his chameleon eyes. Depending on his mood or the light, their color could shift, reflecting his inner changes and secret thoughts. After finishing his wine, Gedriel wondered what to do today. Outside the window, the sun shone bright — just as it had yesterday. His service was turning into routine: nothing ever happened, and no feats or effort were required of him. Now, it seemed, the only thing left was to invent his own amusements — otherwise the day felt dead.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of Armaros — the kingdom's chief mage. Despite his one hundred and three years, he looked much younger than his age — magic and elixirs had rejuvenated his body, so he looked no older than fifty. But he never tired of repeating that gray hair and a long beard were the true pride of a mage. Tall and thin, he seemed more like a scholar than a formidable sorcerer. Armaros was a true "bookworm": he could forget about sleep and food if he came across an ancient, previously unstudied manuscript on magic among dusty pages.

"The king needs you. Urgently. I'll fill you in on the way — get up, let's go," Armaros drawled lazily, tossing his staff onto the table.

Gedriel glanced at the old man, not expecting a pleasant talk,

and decided to remain silent — better not to provoke another round of grumbling. He sighed, got up, and reluctantly followed.

"You probably have no idea," the mage began, not letting him get a word in, "a month ago I opened a portal. Not just some portal for hopping around the continent, but a real passage to another world!"

Gedriel hid a yawn behind his hand and grumbled:

"Can you get to the point? I'd rather not waste the whole day listening to your fairy tale just to end up chasing it in circles."

Armaros snorted contemptuously.

"You clearly don't know how to respect your elders. Well, whatever. Not only does the portal connect us to that world, but I've already made contact with the wizards of their kingdom. And," he said, lowering his voice, "I've been given the chance to meet their queen. The stories of this world… They're truly captivating."

Gedriel mentally cursed himself for even listening to this drivel, but deep down he felt that something far more serious lay behind these words.

"Just get to the point," Gedriel grumbled, feeling his patience wearing thin from the endless monologue.

"Fine," Armaros replied with a hint of irritation in his smile. "The queen of that world has invited us to visit. An exchange of knowledge, stronger ties, a possible alliance. You'll be escorting the king on this journey."

Gedriel snorted and, without hiding the chill in his voice, said:

“Wouldn’t it have been simpler to just send a messenger — no bodyguards, no fuss?”

“Are you serious?” the mage said, rolling his eyes. “If it were that simple, we wouldn’t be standing here. The king personally wants to be there. And no ‘shortcuts’ will change that.”

They crossed the threshold of the throne room, and the atmosphere shifted entirely. The hall was truly magnificent: soaring golden columns rose to the ceiling, where stained-glass windows filtered the soft daylight, filling the space with a warm glow. The light reflecting off the golden columns filled the hall, and the sun’s rays danced across their gleaming surfaces, making any additional lighting unnecessary. The gleaming marble floors were covered with a luxurious red carpet. Along its edges, exquisite patterns were embroidered in gold thread — symbols of royal power and ancient legends.

In the very heart of the hall, upon a majestic throne, sat King Troglock. At forty-six, he looked like the embodiment of strength and wisdom: his thick light-brown hair and well-groomed beard lent him an air of nobility, and his blue eyes sparkled with the fire of determination. His posture, confident and upright, commanded respect and reassured all who entered the hall. On either side of the throne stood two knights in gleaming silver armor; their presence radiated cold severity and unshakable loyalty — they were the living guardians of the kingdom, ready to protect their master at any moment.

A subtle scent of incense and wood smoke hung in the air,

creating an aura of grandeur and mystery. The soft rustle of fabrics and the faint clink of metal added to the atmosphere, underscoring the weight of the moment. Anyone who entered felt they stood at the very heart of power and history.

"Your Majesty!" Gedriel and Armaros bowed simultaneously, sensing the weight of the moment.

The king, thoughtfully scratching his beard, looked at them and gave a slight nod of approval.

"You're finally here, Armaros. I hope you've already brought Gedriel up to speed?" he asked, looking straight into Gedriel's eyes.

"Yes, my lord," the mage nodded with a hint of pride.

"Great. Then let's not waste any time," Troglock said firmly. "Gedriel, we leave tomorrow afternoon. Make sure your squad's equipment is in order. You've all gotten too complacent if you think there's no danger left."

The mercenary replied, a slight challenge in his voice:

"My lord, I'll take care of it immediately. Your squad won't let you down."

The door to the hall suddenly swung open, and the princess's clear voice interrupted the conversation.

"Father, take me with you too!" Victoria, the king's only daughter, said, her voice both timid and persistent. "It'll be such an adventure!"

She was twenty, and despite her petite stature, she possessed a regal grace. Her long, fair hair, inherited from her mother, gently

framed her face, and her bright blue eyes, like mirrors of the soul, clearly came from her father. Her mother had passed away when the girl was barely a year old, and since then, the king's heart had belonged entirely to his only child. He either had yet to meet any worthy suitors for her hand, or he simply didn't wish to see anyone — for his love for his daughter stood above all else.

"Victoria, we've already discussed this," the king replied gently but firmly, smiling tenderly. "You will stay in the empire and keep an eye on everything from here."

The princess had no intention of giving in:

"You never let me do what I want… How, then, will I ever become as wise and experienced as you?" Her eyes sparkled with defiance.

The king laughed, warm and sincere, and gestured to Gedriel and Armaros, making it clear that their presence was no longer needed. As they left the hall, the king's words of comfort to his daughter followed them.

Once in the corridor, Gedriel and Armaros went their separate ways — the mercenary had to gather and prepare the squad for the journey ahead.

The corridor was enormous, and the same deep red carpet stretched along the floor. The light filtering through the tall windows filled the space with a soft glow, so that even at night, under the moonlight, there was enough illumination. Nevertheless, the torches burned around the clock, adding warmth and comfort to the ancient stone walls.

“Ah, one day that kindness of his will be the king’s downfall,” Gedriel muttered to himself, turning his head toward a flag fluttering in the breeze. “They sure love everything red here…” he said with a subtle hint of irony.

As he left the castle, he found himself facing the vast capital — the city of Adebel, gleaming in the morning light. The city was striking in its grandeur: elegant towers reached toward the sky, and the streets teemed with life and noise. But at the same time, if you looked closer, there was a cold shadow hanging over it. Adebel’s nights were becoming increasingly dangerous. Crime was on the rise, and the city guard seemed unable to cope with it any longer.

Having passed through the gates, he stepped deeper into the city and headed for the barracks — the heart of any military operation. His path led through the market, which at that hour was a churning ocean of noise and bodies. There was no room for a quiet life here: everything was for sale — from spices and fabrics to rumors, conspiracies, and contract killings.

Gedriel knew this underworld all too well, having grown up on the streets, learning to survive among gangs until his future comrades-in-arms took him in. His parents had died long ago: his mother from an illness when he was almost twenty, and his father in battle when he was fifteen. He had always been a contradiction: on the outside, he was a cold warrior, ready for bloody battle; on the inside, dark memories and anger churned — and it was hard to hide them behind that proud, even slightly

detached face.

He lingered near the stalls, breathing in the sharp, pungent scent of spices mingled with the stench of poverty — outstretched hands and pleas for alms.

He'd always hated crowds. He preferred to steer clear of them, avoiding the noise and bustle that set him on edge. But today the wind blew harder, and despite the urge to turn away, he pressed on. The mud squelched under his feet, and the cries from the market reached him more clearly than he wanted: the voices of many people, the noise, the discontent, and the pleas.

Once outside the market, Gedriel paused and took a deep breath of fresh air. It was thick with the scent of night herbs and rain, promising new trials. Ahead, the barracks already loomed — a massive building three stories high, draped with banners. Above the entrance hung the coat of arms: an eagle with crossed swords — the symbol of the kingdom.

Once inside, he found the interior was completely different from the outside. Everything here was spacious; the walls were hung with carpets of deep blue, a welcome contrast to the red interiors that grated on Gedriel with their brightness. In the center hung a massive chandelier with dozens of candles, softly lighting the entire space and giving it an air of comfort and solemnity.

To the right was the checkpoint: behind the doors, two knights stood constant watch — silent guardians of order, the very embodiment of strict discipline. At the gate, he was met by his

adjutant, Halgen — a man he could trust, the only one who carried out his duties without fail.

Gedriel briefly explained the task to him and ordered him to gather the entire detachment and bring them up to speed. Halgen nodded with unconcealed enthusiasm — after all, he was glad to receive any assignment, especially an important one.

When everything was settled, Gedriel retreated to his room. The king's guard and the upcoming mission — it all stirred something in him. On the one hand, he welcomed the break in routine; on the other, part of him wanted to keep things exactly as they had been.

Three hours passed, and suddenly there was an insistent knock at the door.

"Sir, it's Halgen. May I come in?" came a voice, cheerful and slightly breathless.

"Come in," Gedriel replied dryly, making no attempt to hide his fatigue.

The door swung open, and the adjutant entered the room — red as a beet, disheveled, with beads of sweat on his forehead. His eyes shone with strain, and his breathing was labored, as if he had run the entire length of the royal garden.

"Halgen!" Gedriel exclaimed, noticing his subordinate's state. "What's going on? Why are you so out of breath?"

"Sir, I've notified everyone, I've warned everyone…" he panted, still trying to catch his breath. "Tomorrow morning, everyone will be in the throne room, ready for the mission. I

personally reported to each of them," he added, pride evident in his voice.

Gedriel paused, glanced at the adjutant, and considered his words. He understood that this young recruit had a spark of zeal burning in him, but also carried too much anxiety.

"Very well, Halgen, I appreciate your initiative," he said calmly and approvingly. "You're doing well. But don't overdo it. Now go and rest — tomorrow will be a tough day."

A moment of silence passed, and then, with a slightly strained expression, Halgen closed his eyes for a second. Gathering all his enthusiasm, he raised his hand in a gesture of promise:

"Can I come with you?" he asked softly, his eyes burning with hope. "I really want to see the world we're going to explore…"

Gedriel sighed. He knew the young soldier was full of ideas and dreams, that his heart was racing before his first real mission. But he couldn't forget the importance of caring for Halgen's loved ones.

"Halgen, I really appreciate you and your fervor…" He smiled a little, but his voice remained stern. "But I have to say no. First, your mother is getting on in years and she's alone. You're all she has. Second, we don't know exactly what awaits us there. A lot can go wrong, and I don't want you to risk your life unnecessarily."

Gedriel added, a little more gently:

"We all value every soldier, and I worry about each one. Believe me, it's better to wait for other assignments. For now,

focus on your training and your family."

Halgen's shoulders slumped slightly, but he nodded. The spark of dreams still flickered in his eyes, but he knew his commander was right.

Silence filled the room, broken only by the faint sound of wind outside the windows — a reminder of the harsh reality of the adventure to come.

"I understand. Forgive me," the adjutant said quietly, shrinking under Gedriel's gaze. He turned to the door, opened it slowly, and closed it quietly behind him, feeling the weight of his commander's gaze on his back.

Left alone, Gedriel reflected on the conversation. He understood that he had been rather harsh — sometimes it was necessary to set boundaries firmly, especially when it came to the life of a soldier and his family. He pressed his lips together slightly, knowing it was better this way than having to face Halgen's mother later and explain why her only son was lying in the ground.

Outside, the evening silence deepened, growing heavier with every passing moment. Evening was drawing near, and his appetite — as if someone had ripped it right out of his stomach — had completely vanished.

"Since it's time to take care of myself," Gedriel muttered, taking a deep breath, "might as well make it count."

He made himself more comfortable, closed his eyes, and let fatigue take over, yielding to the soft peace and quiet of the

room. Soon, a sweet sleep overtook him, filled with thoughts and dreams of the days ahead — of new challenges and trials yet to come.

Chapter 1. The Loss of Home

Gedriel woke with a sharp jolt — so strong it felt as though someone had grabbed him by the shoulder. As he came to, he heard screams, shouts, and the clang of swords beyond the walls — sounds full of chaos and struggle. He looked out the window and froze — the entire city was engulfed in flames, plumes of smoke rising into the sky. How had he not heard this furious storm of noise sooner? Where was Halgen when his help was so urgently needed?

With practiced speed, Gedriel donned his leather armor and threw a dark cloak over his shoulders. He had no love for heavy armor — in his world, speed and agility mattered most, for they were what kept him alive through every scrape. His precision and technique had repeatedly brought victory where strength and brute force could not.

Gedriel burst out of his room and bolted down the stairs, fighting to keep his composure and clarity of thought. To his surprise, the barracks remained unharmed despite the chaos — the walls seemed to shield it not only from enemies but from the madness beyond. As he descended, his mind raced through the possible reasons for this sudden attack. Who could dare to break into their fortifications? The entire land was under Traen's control, and the only possible enemies were rebels or agents of chaos scattered across the continent. Or perhaps it was something

more sinister — a new wave of frenzied monsters that defied logic and reason.

These thoughts were cut short by the growing clamor of screams from beyond the walls, rising in pitch and urgency. In all this chaos, there was no sign of the duty knights or any other defenders — it was as though they had all vanished, leaving him to face the growing threat alone. Something was wrong, and the sense of danger grew stronger with every passing minute.

Once outside, Gedriel froze before a scene of slaughter. Two bodies lay before him — the very knights who had served as the shield and backbone of the barracks. Their armor was hacked and crumpled. Their bodies were covered in gashes, their flesh torn, and blood still oozed from the wounds, as if some invisible beast had mercilessly savaged them. But what struck him to the core were the deep bite marks, as if monstrous jaws had clamped down on them in their last desperate moments of struggle. In that bloody sight, he sensed that the enemies here were not merely armed — they were bearers of a darkness that had sunk its teeth into their flesh, leaving behind a trail of horror and ruin.

A piercing scream shattered his thoughts. A woman in panic was rushing straight at him, her silhouette cutting through the clouds of smoke and the quivering shadows that parted before her. Behind her, two figures raced — creatures that seemed more like lizards than humans. Their bodies, covered in pitch-black scales, shimmered with every movement, and their bony limbs moved like those of predatory reptiles. But what unsettled him

most was their armor — black as if carved from the night itself, slick with blood that blended with their scales until their whole bodies seemed to burn with black fire.

The woman kept screaming, her voice raw, running desperately with the creatures barely a dozen meters behind. In that instant, sharp and clear, something clicked in his mind — these monsters had no reason to hide. In the space of a blink, Gedriel vanished from her sight. For a heartbeat, it seemed he had dissolved into the smoke like a shadow — then came two brutal sounds: a wet tear and a heavy clang of falling bodies.

She turned, trembling, and saw one of the lizard-creatures stretched lifeless on the ground, its head gone. Its blood — a brownish ichor — ran across the stone, but unlike any normal blood, it gleamed with a cold blue light. The second creature had been cleaved in two, its halves sprawled across the ground as if struck down by a single merciless blow. And as the blood streamed from the left half, her gaze fell upon his weapon — a sword far from standard for knights: single-edged, sharp as a razor, and seemingly imbued with cold.

Blood, glowing faintly blue, dripped from the sword's tip as Gedriel turned to face the woman. His gaze was hard and focused, his body coiled and ready for the next fight. That strange blade gleamed in his hand, bold and deadly, as if it too were part of this fight for survival — and he was ready to keep going at any moment.

"Are you all right?" Gedriel asked, scanning the area and

glancing at the fallen enemies.

The lizard-creatures had been weak from the start — he'd noticed it in the first moments of the fight. Their weapons and movements gave them away. They posed no real threat — nothing that could stop him if another fight came.

The woman staggered on unsteady legs, gasping for air, seemingly at the very limit of her strength. Her voice came out weak, barely a whisper, trembling with lingering panic:

"Th… thank you…" she managed, barely holding back tears. "I thought this was the end…"

The woman no longer mattered to him. His mind was fixed on one thing: reaching the king. All around, the dull thuds and shrieks of battle echoed off the stone walls — the fight had already swallowed the entire castle and its surroundings. But who was fighting? Who were these enemies he had never seen before?

The question barely crossed his mind — most likely, the enemy had come from beyond, from another world, the one the old man had spoken of — that mad wizard whose words so often sounded like nonsense.

Still, Gedriel couldn't understand why the old man had never mentioned the lizards. Suddenly, a deafening roar shattered his thoughts — like thunder rolling over the mountain peaks. He looked up — and saw something so incredible that he was momentarily speechless.

A giant worm soared through the sky — an enormous creature whose hide shimmered in the moonlight, with wings of

impossible shape spreading wide against the wind. It was flying!

This was beyond any fairy tale or legend. Gedriel had never heard of such creatures, not even in the oldest tales. Seeing one now, he could barely believe what he was looking at. The worm wasn't just hovering — in the blink of an eye, a wave of terror and malice crashed down upon the soldiers. From its massive jaws erupted a torrent of searing, dark mucus — thick as blood and glistening with malevolence. The mass gleamed with a cold light, as if it were hungry for every drop of life it touched.

A surge of poison and filth swept away everything in its path — stones, trees, even armored men — all of it dissolving into a viscous, sticky sludge that spread slowly, leaving a murky trail of ruin and despair.

This worm is too dangerous. Better not to draw its attention, he thought.

The mercenary knew the fastest — and riskiest — way was straight through the chaos. It was the only route available, and it lay under a blanket of flames — a burning path to ruin. The city was nearly consumed: flames raged unchecked through the streets, spinning a deadly dance of fire and smoke. But he had no other choice — he had to go through the blazing nightmare to stay alive.

"The only bright side to this hopeless mess — at least all the dirt's finally gone," Gedriel smirked to himself.

The closer he drew to the king's chambers, the louder the sounds of battle grew. As he emerged from the market, the

square opened before him: knights and lizardmen locked in fierce combat. He had given them that name because of their strange resemblance to reptiles. There was no time to watch — the first priority was saving the king and the princess. Everything else could wait.

Suddenly, a cry rang out from the right, and Gedriel saw a huge lizard rushing toward him. It was taller than two men, with a powerful neck and bestial eyes full of fury. In its hands hung a jagged, blood-crusted halberd — a relic of its last kill. The lizard raised its weapon, already mid-swing for a strike.

Gedriel deftly dodged to the side, feeling the halberd cut through the air. A blow like that could crush him like a doll, and keeping up such dodging was no small feat — it demanded stamina and focus. But there was no other way — man and beast both fought to win, and every second could be his last.

"He's huge, but he's clearly slower — I need to find the right opening," Gedriel thought.

The next blow was not long in coming: the lizard swiped close to his leg. Despite its sluggishness, the beast clearly knew how to fight, striking at points meant to cripple its prey. Gedriel tried to launch a counterattack, but the huge beast intercepted his blow with its tail. The impact sent Gedriel flying five meters.

"One more blow like that, and I'll break every bone in my body — I need to stop rushing," he whispered, spitting blood.

In a rush like this, one mistake could cost him his life. On the creature's next lunge, Gedriel dived down, plunging straight

under the lizard's belly. The halberd whistled through the air where his head had been a moment earlier — the blow was so close that it nearly cut the skin off his cheekbone. But the risk was worth it. Sliding beneath the scaly body, Gedriel lashed out with a short, almost casual slash across the thick tendons of the hind legs. The sound of the flesh tearing was drowned out by the deafening roar. The monster crashed to its knees, the impact shuddering through the paving stones and rattling Gedriel's teeth. Pain and fury twisted together in that roar. The wounded giant slumped against the halberd's shaft, clawing at the ground as it tried to rise, but its legs refused to obey.

Gedriel knew it was now or never. In one fluid, predatory movement, he drove his sword into the base of the lizard's neck. The blade sank deep — into the place where hot, rage-filled life still pulsed. The creature let out a choked rasp, arching in a final spasm as Gedriel threw his full weight into the blade and finished what he'd started. The monster's head rolled across the stones with a dull, wet thud.

Turning around, he froze, catching his breath. The square before him was strewn with the bodies of the guards — their armor crushed, their banners trampled into the bloody mud. And only then did it hit him — he was the first to bring down one of these armored monsters. The silence hung for only a moment before the clang of steel and distant shouts filled the air again — the battle showed no sign of stopping.

There was no time to celebrate. Clenching his teeth, Gedriel

rushed toward the king's chambers. Hope, as thin as a dagger's blade, still flickered: what if the old mage was alive and the princess was by his side?

At the very door, he froze when he saw a figure in a black cloak. The stranger moved through the whirlwind of lizardmen with a frightening, almost dance-like grace. Gedriel narrowed his eyes. He knew this pattern of combat — every dodge, every twist of the body. This was his school, the one his mentors had drilled into him since childhood. But there was one difference, and it chilled him to the bone: the stranger wielded magic — an art almost unthinkable for a mere warrior.

The figure in the black cloak easily parried the first lizardman's attack and, with a swift counterstroke, severed its head. A second lizardman was already closing in from behind. Without turning around, the stranger raised his free hand, and a blinding bolt of lightning shot from his fingers. The bolt struck the creature's chest with a dry crack. The lizardman was charred mid-stride, collapsing dead before he could even cry out.

"Hey! Who are you?!" Gedriel's voice split the silence like a blade through rotten fabric.

The figure in the black cloak turned. A heartbeat later, the stranger darted away into the waiting darkness, as if he had never been there at all.

"Damn it!" Gedriel hissed through clenched teeth.

There was no time to give chase. The roar of battle that had shaken the walls only moments ago began to fade, splintering

into scattered pockets of fighting. Too quickly. Too quiet for a victory. A cold, clammy realization stirred in his chest: they were losing. The only question was — had this calamity befallen the entire empire, or had only the capital been struck? If it was the latter, a slim chance of retaking the city still remained. This thought, as thin as a hair above an abyss, made him move on.

He crossed the vast square, strewn with bodies. His boots slipped on the blood that had mixed with the dust into a muddy slush. The mercenary's eyes, accustomed to death, automatically picked out details: the color of cloaks, the coats of arms on armor. Too many familiar faces. Almost all of them — from his unit.

At the edge of this field of the fallen lay a man. A sword jutted from his chest like a tombstone. The silhouette was eerily familiar, and Gedriel quickened his step, nearly dropping to his knees as he turned the body over. Halgen's face, twisted in a final mask of terror, stared up at the sky with unseeing eyes.

Gedriel said nothing. Clenching his jaw, he pulled the blade from his old comrade's chest and, bending down, ran his fingers over his eyelids, closing them forever. That was all he could give him now — peace.

Leaving death behind, he pushed open the heavy castle doors. Death was feasting inside, too — guards and lizards tangled together, like two armies locked in a final, deadly embrace. As he climbed the stairs to the second floor, he noticed something different: these lizardmen hadn't fallen to swords. Their carcasses

were smoking, their scales charred and cracked, and the air was saturated with the acrid smell of burnt flesh and ozone.

"So the old codger can fight," Gedriel muttered, unable to suppress a dry chuckle.

"Still no respect for your elders," came the familiar, acid-laced voice from above. "But at least you've finally shown up."

Armaros stood on the steps, leaning on his staff. His robe was singed, but his gaze was still sharp and hostile.

"There's no time for your grievances now," Gedriel cut him off sharply, getting to his feet. "Where are the king and princess?"

"Relax, they're in their chambers," Armaros said, his voice dull, stripped of its usual bite. "We'll leave through the portal and bring back help. I tried to contact the other mages of the kingdom… It was useless."

The old man fell silent for a moment, and the candle flames were reflected in his faded eyes.

"Right now, the whole empire is under attack. We need help — and fast."

Gedriel didn't reply. And what could he say? The mage's face, usually arrogant and inscrutable, now showed something the mercenary hadn't expected to see — genuine, deep anxiety. Not for himself. For everyone. And that was scarier than any screams from the square.

He climbed the steps, and a heavy silence hung between them as the mage led him to the king's chambers. Gedriel understood the truth that no one dared to speak aloud: the enemy was far

stronger than they had imagined. The king's naïveté, his faith in parades and gilded armor — it had all played a cruel trick on them. The soldiers, recruited for show, proved incapable of fighting an army that had come to kill for real.

The door opened, and Gedriel stepped inside.

The king's chamber was drowning in a sea of candles. They burned everywhere — on tables, on windowsills, in massive candelabra along the walls — dispelling even the slightest hint of shadow. To the right, against the wall, stood an oak desk cluttered with maps and scrolls. Beneath his feet, a thick carpet of silvery-brown fur yielded softly — the pelt of a fanged bear. Gedriel's gaze lingered on it against his will. He knew the king had hunted this beast for years and had only once managed to meet it in the flesh. Now the creatures were believed extinct. Their fangs were valued more highly than gold, and their fur, it was said, kept one warm even in the bitter cold. The last relic of a bygone era, cast at the feet of the monarch.

The king stood in the middle of the room in gleaming armor inlaid with gold — the kind meant for tournaments, not battles to the death. Beside him, the princess stood frozen, hands clasped tightly together. A black cloak enveloped her figure, its gold embroidery shimmering in the candlelight like autumn spider silk caught in the wind. The girl's pale, haggard face made it clear — fear had sunk its roots deep into her. And the king's face offered no hope either — he looked less like a ruler ready to order a counterattack and more like a man who had just realized that

power couldn't stop a blade.

The silence was broken by Gedriel's voice — sharp as a whip's crack. There was no time left for ceremony:

"We have no time. These creatures could be here at any moment."

"Armaros, where do we go?" Gedriel's voice came out harsher than he'd intended. "Just don't tell me it's to your tower. It's a fifteen-minute walk. In that time, they'll tear us to pieces. And that flying thing is still out there — its spit dissolves everything it touches."

The mercenary spoke fast, each word clipped and edged with irritation. His former life — albeit short-lived, but at least understandable — had gone to hell. Now there was only one thing left: to stay alive. And to save the king. Not out of loyalty to the crown — out of gratitude. For the few carefree years he was allowed to live. A debt is a debt, even if it has to be paid in blood.

"We'll have to go to the tower," Armaros replied, and there was no joy in his voice either. "Everything there is already attuned and ready. If we try to move the portal here, it'll take a day to realign it. At best. And that's assuming those lizards don't eat us first. Otherwise, the portal will tear us to pieces faster than they can."

The wizard cast a brief glance toward the window. He didn't want to go outside. He'd already seen what the creatures were doing in the city. And how many of them there were.

Gedriel paused, running through the options. Then a cold,

clear thought struck him:

"The stables are untouched. On horseback, we can make it in five minutes. That's better than sitting here and waiting for them to finish us off."

Armaros slowly turned his gaze to the mercenary. Something like reluctant approval flickered in the old man's eyes. He had no counterargument.

"Horses, then," he grumbled, picking up his staff. "Well, at least you've come up with something sensible today."

The king unexpectedly joined the conversation. His voice sounded heavy and authoritative, without a trace of his former hesitation. He saw how frightened his daughter was, how her pale fingers trembled as they gripped the edge of her cloak — and the sight seemed to forge a new man out of him. No one had ever seen him like this: neither Gedriel nor Armaros. Tough. Determined. Ready to fight.

The plan was accepted in silence. Not because it was a good one — but because no other options remained. Neither the mercenary nor the mage had any objections, and this silent agreement was more eloquent than any words.

They moved toward the exit. They had taken only a few steps when the window exploded.

The sound hit them before the glass did. All four instinctively dropped to the floor, shielding their faces. A rain of glass fell onto their backs, onto the carpet, onto the table — prickly, merciless. Smoke filled the chamber, and in the gray clouds

settling toward the floor, a figure took shape.

A knight floated through the window, hovering above the ground.

He was nearly two meters tall, clad in black armor, and the air around him trembled and flowed, as if over a scorching forge. The armor radiated heat — so intense it could be felt on the skin even from a distance. The helmet was crowned by two horns, but one was cut off, leaving a sense of unfinished, cruel symmetry. And through the narrow eye slit, flames raged. Alive, hungry.

The creature's aura pressed down on his chest. Power radiated from him — ancient and inhuman, the kind that cracked the stone floor the moment his boots touched down. Steam hissed from the breathing slits in his helmet, and a cold thought crept into Gedriel's mind — this creature had stepped straight out of the legends of Traen. From those very tales about warriors who erased worlds and kingdoms to build new ones on their bones. They built civilizations up, made them stronger — then devoured them if they couldn't fight back. After all, if no one hunts the prey, it becomes weak. Clumsy. Ready to be slaughtered.

Gedriel knew these legends. He had once considered them nothing more than children's stories. But now, what stood before him was nothing less than proof.

In one hand, the black knight held a massive two-handed sword. The blade was covered in small spines, and he held it as if it were not a heavy strip of steel, but a reed.

The mercenary charged first, without hesitation.

He dashed toward his opponent and struck low, aiming for the left leg — a dirty, dangerous move that had saved his life more than once. The black knight parried the blow with alarming ease, deflecting the blade as if it weighed nothing. And then, without any wind-up, he slammed his left fist into Gedriel's chest.

Gedriel was thrown back like a rag doll. He crashed against the table with his back, and it splintered into pieces under his weight. The air was knocked out of his lungs.

Armaros didn't hesitate. A dense, roaring fireball shot from the mage's fingers. The black knight didn't even turn around. He simply swatted the ball aside with his hand, as if swatting away an annoying fly. The ball of flame hit the ceiling and exploded, showering the room with sparks.

And the knight jumped.

He moved like a predator. In a split second, he appeared before the mage and raised his sword for an overhead strike. Armaros saw the blade soar upward and realized he wouldn't make it in time. No one would. He was already ready to die — without fear, just with a cold, doomed clarity.

But the blow never landed.

Before him, staggering, stood Gedriel. The mercenary's blade blocked the black knight's sword, but it wasn't enough — the spiked blade pierced his shoulder. A dozen small spikes tore through his flesh at once, and the pain shot through him with such force that he nearly screamed. Only clenched teeth kept the cry inside. Blood, hot and fast, ran down his sleeve.

"Run," he croaked, without turning around. "Now!"

"Well, well," the knight's voice filtered through the slits of his helmet — low and bubbling, like molten lava rolling over stones. "Not completely, but you managed to stop my blow. It's rare to find warriors like you in any world. Tell me your name."

Gedriel, pressing his palm to his wounded shoulder, straightened up as best he could. His breathing was labored, the pain pulsing in time with his heart, but his voice sounded steady:

"Gedriel. And I'd like to know the name of the man I'm about to kill."

The black knight laughed. Through the metal of his helmet, the laughter sounded muffled, more like a muted cough — an eerie sound devoid of mirth, sending shivers down his spine.

"My name is Reynar. The name of our race varies, but most call us the same thing: the Devourers. I am a captain in this army…" He paused briefly, and a shadow of strange, almost human sadness flickered in his voice. "And, unfortunately, my strength will be quite enough here."

Heat radiated from the knight as he spoke. The air in the chambers grew thick and stifling; each breath was an effort, burning the lungs. The candles flickered, as if bending under an invisible pressure.

"Don't worry. You won't have to suffer for long."

Reynar suddenly wrenched the sword back. Dozens of spikes simultaneously pierced Gedriel's flesh, tearing through muscles and tendons. The mercenary screamed — he couldn't help it,

couldn't hold it in. The cry escaped on its own, filling the room with pure, unadulterated pain. And then, without pause, the knight slammed a short, devastating left hook into his head. Gedriel was hurled through the air like a rag doll and slammed into the stone wall with such force that the last of his air was driven from his lungs. As he slid down, he left a wide trail of blood behind him — dark, sticky, terrifying.

Reynar watched him fall and, losing interest, turned to the princess.

A glint flashed from the side.

The black knight stopped the sword with his left hand — simply gripping the steel in his gauntlet, not even bothering to turn around. The steel grated against metal, halting a millimeter from the shoulder plate. The king had attacked.

The old monarch stood, gripping his sword with both hands, staring down his foe. Gedriel, still clinging to consciousness, caught that look. It wasn't the look of a ruler — it was the look of a father. A parent ready to challenge anyone, even the entire abyss, if it came near his child. There was no fear in that look, only resolve — the kind that drives a man to fight even when victory is impossible.

And the king did not retreat.

"Ohhh," Reynar drawled, a dark, metallic interest creeping into his voice. "The king himself attacks me. I hope Your Highness won't disappoint. I will fight at full strength."

At that moment, lightning struck the knight's back, followed

by a fireball. Armaros threw everything he had — without holding back. The discharges bit into the black armor, causing Reynar to stagger and lose his balance — just for a second, but that was enough.

Troglock lunged. A precise, desperate thrust — the blade aimed straight for the seam between helmet and cuirass, the one vulnerable gap where even that legendary armor should have given way. But the knight, without even looking, caught the king's blade as if it moved through water — and in one seamless motion struck back. Gleaming steel sliced through the air, and the monarch's head rolled across the fanged-bear rug. The body stood for a moment longer, and then collapsed, drenching the noble fur with blood.

Reynar turned to the mage and casually, as if swatting away an insect, deflected the remnants of his spell with his sword.

"You have a familiar face…" he said thoughtfully, peering at Armaros through the slit of his flaming helmet. "One wizard who summoned me to this world was somewhat like you. His name was Armaros. Though he was much younger."

The knight moved forward, and with each step, the floorboards creaked and sagged beneath him.

"In any case, it no longer matters. I never cared for magic, though I've always had a certain immunity to it," he added with disdain, tapping a finger against his breastplate. "Thanks to an artifact from another world."

"What are you talking about?!" Armaros's voice broke. "I've

never seen you before!"

The wizard was shaken — and not just by fear. In his eyes, usually so unreadable, there now churned a mix of anger and confusion. He wasn't lying. But Reynar didn't seem like the kind of person who would mix up faces.

Gedriel, lying against the wall, heard it all. Blood throbbed in his temples.

"It can't be." The thought, terrible and clammy, gripped his insides like a cold fist. "Is Armaros a traitor?" It would explain everything: the precise strike on the capital, the breached walls, the suddenness… But something inside him resisted. Too many questions. Too little strength left to think.

Beside him, the princess knelt. She had torn a long strip from her black cloak and was bandaging his wound, her shoulder now bare where the fabric had been. The golden threads of the cloth soaked through with blood. Tears streamed down her face, unceasing. Gedriel could see how hard it was for her now: her father had just died before her eyes, her world was falling apart, but she didn't give up. Gritting her teeth, she pulled the bandage tight, her hands trembling even as her movements stayed precise. She helped him rise, slipping her slender shoulder under his arm, even though she could barely stand herself.

With such a wound, he could barely move. Fighting a monster whose speed and reflexes defied its size was out of the question. The king was dead. The only thing that still made sense was to try to save the princess. He himself wouldn't last long anyway.

Blood seeped even through the tight bandage, and Gedriel felt the warmth draining away with each drop. Half an hour. Maybe a little more.

Reynar had almost reached the mage when a powerful bolt of lightning struck his back. Not from Armaros. The spell was much stronger, denser, woven from pure fury. The knight stumbled.

Gedriel turned his head and saw him — the stranger who had vanished into the darkness earlier. Now, in the light of the spreading fire, he was fully visible. The fire devouring the overturned table and licking up the columns illuminated the figure in leather armor. His cloak was worn and torn — it seemed he had been through more than a dozen battles in it. The lower half of his face was hidden by a thick mask. A deep scar, white and jagged, ran across his left eye, slashing his eyebrow and cheek, but the eye itself remained intact. The hood was pulled low, strands of pure-white hair escaping from beneath it.

The stranger moved with lightning speed. In the blink of an eye, he was on the knight, landing a devastating blow to his torso. The cuirass split like a sheet of parchment, and instead of blood, flames spurted from the wound. Living, roaring fire, unlike anything earthly.

Reynar didn't even groan. As if he didn't care, as if the pain was just a vague memory to him. He made a short, almost lazy swipe from below, then drove his knee into his opponent's stomach. At the last moment, the stranger threw up a barrier — a shield of absorption magic that warped the air around him. The

blow landed far weaker than it should have, but even so, it sent him staggering back. The warrior landed on one knee and looked up at the three figures huddled by the wall.

"Run!" he shouted, his voice commanding despite the muffled tone of the mask. "I'll hold him off!"

No one needed to be told twice. They fled the room, and the last thing any of them saw, glancing back, was the stranger standing in the doorway, blocking the black knight's path.

The princess supported the mercenary by the arm. The blood wouldn't stop — warm, thick, it soaked through the bandage and seeped more and more with each step, leaving a dark trail on the stones behind them. Once they reached the first floor, Armaros stopped them and silently placed a hand on Gedriel's chest. A soft, muted glow flared up beneath his fingers — a faint glimmer of healing magic, nearly extinguished in this death-soaked place.

"I can't fully use healing magic," the wizard said, wiping the blood from his hands with a snow-white handkerchief, which immediately turned scarlet. "But at least I slowed your heartbeat. That will give you more time and less blood loss."

"Do you really think I'll just forget that you betrayed us?!" Gedriel barely kept himself in check. Rage, pain, and exhaustion churned together, ready to spill over. "I didn't expect this from you, old man. You've always had your quirks, but… you've never given me reason to doubt your loyalty to the king."

"I swear I didn't betray anyone," Armaros said quietly, but with a strength in his voice that Gedriel hadn't heard from him

in many years. “I swear by my staff and my title as a wizard. But please, let’s discuss this after we get out of here.”

The princess said nothing. Her pale, gaunt face wore a mask of quiet, almost numb grief. It seemed the girl no longer cared. Her father had been killed before her eyes. The city she’d grown up in was burning, and all she wanted was to escape this hell, fall asleep, and wake to find it had all been a terrible nightmare. But the nightmare wouldn’t let go.

They left the castle. The air outside was thick with ash, and even the night sky burned a deep crimson from the fires. The stables were about fifty meters away. A heavy chain, its links as thick as a finger, held the door shut. Armaros extended his hand — the metal hissed, flared red, and dripped to the ground in molten drops. The mage led out three horses — nervous, their eyes darting toward the fire, but still alive.

At that moment, the sound of shattered glass rang out from above. Someone collapsed right at their feet.

The stranger. Cut to ribbons, drenched in blood from head to toe, he lay sprawled on the cobblestones, his body twisted at an unnatural angle. Fighting through the pain, Gedriel dropped to one knee beside him and reached for his face. But the warrior suddenly grabbed his hand — with the dead, steely grip of a dying man.

“Whatever you do…” he croaked, his voice thick with blood, "... don’t kill the red-haired she-devil.”

His gaze went glassy in an instant. His hand let go. Gedriel

froze, completely at a loss as to whom he meant or what this final warning was about. Armaros grabbed him by the shoulder, yanking him back to reality, all but threw him onto a horse, and swung into his own saddle. From the castle roof above, Reynar leapt down onto the stones. The black knight, without a moment's hesitation, rushed in their direction.

All three spurred their horses into a gallop, skirting the monster. Reynar's sword whistled through the air in a deadly arc, nearly taking the princess's horse's hindquarters — the blade missed by a hair. They galloped through the burning city, and before them unfolded a scene of true destruction.

The streets were strewn with corpses — civilians, soldiers, children. There were strikingly few lizards among the dead. In some places, the last pockets of resistance still fought on, but it was pointless: the guards were being torn apart; some ran from the fire like living torches and fell, no longer able to scream. The lizards noticed the fugitives and gave chase, but one thing was reassuring — the creatures ran far slower than horses, and it wasn't hard to shake them off.

They raced past the burning, half-collapsed cathedral of Arthas — god of peace and strength. Once the greatest architectural wonder of this world, the pride of Traen. For two hundred years, no one had been able to build anything like it, and now its ruins smoked, illuminating the streets with an ominous orange light.

Beyond the arch, the sky split with loud, piercing shrieks.

Gedriel looked up and saw the griffins — noble birds, the pride of the kingdom, the very ones that had helped the late king's ancestors win battles — locked in combat with two worm-like creatures. The huge monsters, writhing in the air, emitted a low hum, and the birds swooped down on them from above. From below, it was impossible to tell who was winning, but within a minute, the griffins began to fall one by one. The heavy, torn carcasses crashed onto the city with devastating force, and the riders had to dodge the falling bodies. The fires and the swarming lizardmen only made things worse.

The city had fallen. You could hear it — the clash of steel had ceased. Nor did the cries of the wounded. Only the crackling of fire and a distant, triumphant howl.

As they rode, Gedriel's thoughts churned painfully. Could he trust the wizard? When Armaros had said he'd never seen Reynar before, his emotions had been genuine. The mercenary had seen enough lies to tell truth from falsehood. The old man couldn't have played it that well. Besides, he'd helped slow the bleeding… But then how did the captain know his name? His face?

His thoughts were shattered by a griffin crashing down barely two meters away. The giant bird hit the paving stones with a sickening crunch and went still. They were about fifty meters from the tower.

They dismounted at the entrance and ran inside. Armaros, ushering everyone ahead, turned back to the door and cast a spell — a translucent, shimmering veil wrapped itself over the

entrance. Through the veil, the growing thunder of pursuit could still be heard outside.

"This will at least slow them down a little," Armaros said, still trying to catch his breath. "Those who want to come in here."

"Even that captain?" the mercenary asked reproachfully, and without waiting for an answer, he moved up the stairs.

His condition had clearly worsened: he could barely stay on his feet, and Victoria supported him by the arm. The princess remained silent, not interfering in their quarrel, and this silence only made Gedriel feel worse. He felt like a complete jerk: instead of somehow encouraging the girl who had lost her father and her home, he kept bickering with the wizard. Words of comfort were on the tip of his tongue, but they never found their way out. He simply didn't know how to say them.

As he climbed the winding staircase, he heard the wizard's response — dull, laced with bitterness:

"Not from that monster. He has some kind of artifact that blocks my magic. I'm powerless."

"But you could have summoned him here, and nothing would have stopped you," the mercenary pressed on.

"I told you, I don't know who he is!" Armaros exploded. Fury rang in his voice, something Gedriel had never heard from the old man before. "I would never have betrayed the king! I served his grandfather!"

For a moment, silence hung over the staircase, broken only by the heavy breathing of both men. Armaros had indeed begun his

service under Tigold — a stern, iron-willed king who knew how to rule both his country and his subjects. Back then, he'd been a novice wizard of great potential, but over forty years he had climbed to the pinnacle of his career under Troglock's father. The mage had always been proud of his position and what he had achieved. All the greater was his disappointment, then, when some ragged mercenary was named head of the king's personal guard. He considered Gedriel unworthy of the position and never made any secret of his dislike.

"Stop it already! Please!"

Victoria suddenly screamed — sharp and piercing, making both of them flinch. She let go of Gedriel's hand and, exhausted, sank down onto the step. Her shoulders trembled, and the tears she had been holding back for so long welled up from her eyes. She cried silently, burying her face in her hands, and in that soundless weeping there was more pain than in any scream.

"Forgive us, Your Majesty," they both said almost simultaneously, instantly forgetting their feud.

"Let's just get out of this place," the princess said quietly but firmly, rising to her feet. "I don't want to see any more of it."

She went up alone without looking back, and there was a resolve in her fading footsteps that neither of them had ever seen in her before. Armaros silently took the mercenary by the arm. Gedriel didn't resist — he knew this was no time to settle old grudges. So they followed her — two warring men, united by a common misfortune and a sense of guilt before this fragile yet

unbroken girl.

The portal room was spacious, split into two levels. A massive chandelier hung from the ceiling, its dozens of candles flooding the upper level with light. Rows of bookcases lined the walls up there — endless volumes in heavy bindings, holding the wisdom of ages. Candles burned along the walls of the lower level, and a fire crackled warmly in the hearth against the far wall. The room seemed too bright, almost dazzling after the darkness and soot of the burning city. The soft, plush carpet underfoot felt foreign — a relic of a peaceful life that no longer existed.

In the far corner stood the portal — an arch of solidified volcanic ore, black and porous, like petrified lightning. Nearby, on an elegant stand, rested a stone that shimmered with every color of the rainbow. It pulsed with a soft, living light — the catalyst and heart of the portal, ready at any moment to transport them away from this hell.

Armaros, entering last, once again cast a spell on the door and froze, catching his breath.

"Now I'll activate the catalyst with magic, and we can leave this place," the wizard said quickly, already stretching his hands toward the shimmering stone.

"And no one will be able to follow us?" Gedriel's voice sounded dull, weary, almost indifferent. His strength was fading with every passing minute.

"I'll go last. At the final moment, I'll overload the stone with magic. It'll be destroyed, and the portal will go dark. Retuning it

to this world would take years. If not longer."

Armaros began channeling magic into the stone. It responded at once — flaring brighter, pushing back the shadows in the corners. At the center of the arch, a blue veil began to form, as if stirring from a long sleep. It grew, swelling with light, until it became dense and mirror-smooth — like still water standing upright.

From below came the roar of an explosion. The first door had fallen.

"How much longer are you going to be messing around?" Gedriel's voice suddenly took on an unexpected edge of energy. Adrenaline flooded his veins, drowning out the pain and fatigue.

"A minute at most. They won't break this door that quickly — there's a different, more powerful spell here."

The mage focused on the stone. Beyond the door, the stomping and shouting grew louder — the magic was scorching the lizardmen, but it only made them more furious, driving them against the barrier with doubled strength. Gedriel told the princess to move away and stand closer to the wizard. She obeyed silently, never taking her eyes off the door. The planks were already starting to creak.

Suddenly, the stone blazed, flooding the room with a dazzling flash. The portal began to hum with a low, guttural sound that made the floor vibrate and the windows shake.

"It's ready! We can go. Princess, hurry — let's move!" Armaros extended his hand to her.

“Are you sure everything is ready and completely safe?” Victoria asked. Her voice sounded foreign: there was none of the former softness or fear left in it — only dry, lifeless caution. This night was changing everyone.

She never got to finish. The door burst apart with a monstrous crack, oak planks flying across the stone floor. A massive lizard loomed in the doorway — larger than any they’d seen before, its armored bulk barely fitting through the frame. Gedriel cursed through gritted teeth. Even he couldn’t hold that thing back.

But then a deep, rumbling roar erupted from outside — so powerful the windows shattered, raining glass down on them. A moment later, the corridor behind the lizard gave way. Stone, beams, and planks flew in every direction, kicking up clouds of dust. Armaros barely managed to throw up a barrier, shielding the three of them from the hail of debris.

It was the worm — the same giant they’d seen in the sky. It seemed the griffins had brought one of them down after all. And now its falling carcass brought them an unexpected, almost miraculous reprieve.

“Since you’re so sure, Armaros,” Victoria said dryly, adjusting what was left of her cloak, “then I’m going.”

No sooner had the blue veil closed behind Victoria than something huge and heavy crashed onto the roof of the tower. The impact was so forceful that the beams overhead groaned, and cracks began to spread through the stone masonry. Boards, chips of stone, then whole sections of the ceiling came crashing down.

The roof was giving way. The massive chandelier, which had flooded the room with bright light just a moment ago, broke free from its chains and crashed down. The candles scattered across the carpet, and it caught fire instantly — the flames greedily ran along the pile, devouring the expensive fabric.

A griffin appeared in the gap. It was dead. Its noble head hung lifelessly, its eyes remained open, and in them the sky that it would never see again was frozen. Blood, thick and dark, dripped from the feathers and fell into the fire, hissing and evaporating. It seemed as though the bird was still looking at them.

"We need to get out of here — now!" Gedriel shouted, shaking off the stone dust.

But Armaros suddenly seized his arm and yanked him close with a strength that belied his age:

"The portal's unstable! Look at the color!" the mage jabbed a trembling finger at the arch. The blue veil, which had just been calm and deep, was now pulsing with an alarming crimson light. A low hum emanated from it, and the air around it trembled.

"It should be blue! Blue, not red! Fragments from the roof damaged the catalyst — look, the stone cracked…"

Gedriel stepped closer and saw it himself: a small shard of stone had struck the rainbow crystal dead-on, and a thin crack now spiderwebbed across its surface. The stone's glow flickered erratically.

"You can't enter a portal in this state!" Armaros was nearly shouting now. "We have no idea where we'll end up — or what

it'll do to us!"

"Doesn't matter — we don't have a choice," the mercenary said, calm, almost casual. "And the princess is already in there."

He charged. Two short steps, and Gedriel slammed into the wizard with his full weight, arms locking around him. Armaros didn't have time to scream or put up a barrier. The two of them flew into the crimson veil, and the portal closed behind them with a deafening crack. At that very moment, the ceiling collapsed completely, burying the room under a pile of stones.

Chapter 2. An Unknown World

Everything happened in an instant.

Gedriel and the wizard spilled out of the portal and crashed to the ground, landing in a thick carpet of yellow leaves. Armaros, groaning, shoved the mercenary off him and scrambled to his feet, glancing around like a cornered animal.

They were surrounded by a forest — dense, silent, and alien. The trees grew too close together, like sentinels in tight formation, and though they were bare of leaves, it only deepened the sense of oppression. The black branches reached up to the sky like bony fingers, and light barely pierced through them. The overcast sky made it hard to see — or perhaps the intertwined canopies created the illusion of endless twilight. The leaves rustled underfoot, covering the ground with a continuous golden-brown carpet. And there was silence. No birdsong, no rustling of animals — just the wind, and even that seemed afraid to disturb this place.

"You're an idiot!" Armaros's voice shattered the silence, echoing among the trunks.

Fighting through the pain, Gedriel hauled himself up, closed the distance in two steps, and grabbed the mage by the collar, clamping a hand over his mouth.

"Don't shout!" he hissed, his face inches from the old man's. "You want everyone to know we're here?! We have no idea where

we are, and we need to find the princess. So let's not get into trouble until we find her."

He released the mage and dropped to one knee. The fabric on his shoulder was soaked through with blood, and the mercenary's breathing had grown ragged and heavy. The wizard composed himself and silently placed a hand on Gedriel's head.

"Ashtebh," he said quietly, and a yellow glow enveloped his fingers, ran through Gedriel's hair, fading somewhere at his temples. "This is all I can do to help. It won't close the wound, but at least it will dull your nerve endings. The pain will be much less. But we need to hurry — you won't last long with a wound like this."

"Thank you," the mercenary exhaled quietly as he got to his feet.

"Don't thank me yet. We need to find someone who can actually help. Sit down and move as little as possible. I'll scout ahead and see if there's anyone nearby."

Armaros disappeared between the trees, and his footsteps quickly grew faint in the distance. Gedriel was left alone.

The forest's silence pressed in on him. The mercenary sat with his back against the trunk, and thoughts, each more terrifying than the last, tormented his exhausted mind. Where was the princess? Why wasn't she here with them? Was she even alive? Had the portal thrown him and the wizard into one place — and her into another? Or… He didn't want to think about it. But the worst part was that Armaros seemed to have completely

forgotten about her. Not a word of concern, not a single question. Maybe he knew something?

These thoughts swirled through his mind, tangling and piling one on top of another, until he didn't notice his eyelids growing heavy or the forest sounds fading into the distance. His exhausted body surrendered — he slipped into sleep before he could even try to resist.

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"Well, are you sleeping again, sleepyhead? Get up, come on!"

The voice was eerily familiar — soft, warm, enveloping, like a summer morning. Gedriel lay in a bed stuffed with hay and covered with an old but clean blanket, and he didn't want to open his eyes. The pillow, smelling of feathers and herbs, held his head as gently as it hadn't held it in many years. The small window behind him let in just enough sunlight for the room to be bathed in golden light.

He opened his eyes and saw a slender woman with short black hair. The sun's rays tangled in her strands, and that made her eyes seem to have a greenish tint, even though he had always known they were brown. Her hands were wet, and she was drying them with a linen towel, smiling slightly.

"Gedi, come on, get up!"

"Ma-a-am, I'll get up, just… let me sleep a little longer," he muttered, pulling the blanket up to his nose.

"It's almost eleven. Your father will be home soon. Come on, get up and help me. You're big enough now — so be a dear and

fetch me a bucket of water from the well. Otherwise, I'll tell your father everything."

She smiled — warmly, slyly — and left, leaving the door slightly open. Gedriel reluctantly got up and began dressing. He knew his mother would never actually tell, but he wasn't about to test her. His father was a captain in the guard and could be strict at times, treating him like a soldier rather than a boy. It was different with Mom. You could be a child with her.

After getting dressed, he looked into the kitchen.

"I'm up. I'll get you the water. When's Dad coming home?"

"Son, how should I know?" she said, kneading the dough without turning around. "You know your father's off on the wyvern campaign. Soon these monsters will stop bothering us, and I'll be able to focus on the farm in peace."

He went out into the hallway, picked up the bucket, and stepped over the threshold. The door led straight to the country road that ran parallel to the house. To the left, about two hundred meters away, stood a tall wooden palisade with gates guarded by the town watch. To the right stretched the rest of the village. After running across the road and passing the carts and horses, he came to the wheat field. The village fed itself: millet went to the kingdom as tribute, and the surplus was sold. Here, people were always well-fed and always busy. It flourished.

At the well, Gedriel hooked the bucket onto a hook, threw it into the dark depths, and, hearing a dull splash, began to haul it up. He walked back alone — none of his friends met him on the

way. It was tournament season — they were held every summer. Some fought for coin, others for titles, but the competitions were worth it. He'd always dreamed of seeing one at least once. But Ligvein — his father — was always consumed by duty, and the boy's dreams stayed just that: dreams.

When he returned, he took the water to his mother and went to the back yard. There stood a scarecrow his father used for training, honing his strikes against it. Gedriel had always loved weapons. He wanted to wield them as quickly and skillfully as Ligvein did, and he spent hours watching his father's training sessions through the window, trying to memorize every movement. One day, his father noticed him puffing and straining to lift the heavy blade and swing it at the scarecrow. Without a word, he went inside — and the next day he brought Gedriel a wooden sword. Sometimes, he even taught him himself.

He pounded the scarecrow for about an hour until he heard his mother's voice:

"Let's go have dinner."

In the hallway, he left the wooden sword by the threshold and went into the kitchen. His mother set a plate of chicken stew before him, along with a spoon and fork.

"Will Dad be gone much longer? I'd like to have dinner with him."

"I don't know, sweetheart. He should have been back by now. Maybe something came up at work…"

They started eating dinner. A few minutes later, there was a

knock at the door. The mother got up from the table, wiping her hands on her apron, and headed for the door. Gedriel heard her open the door and looked out. A soldier stood in the doorway — on his chest was an embroidered eagle clutching arrows in its talons, set against a red field. The symbol of his father's squad.

The mother went outside, closing the door behind her. Young Gedriel didn't hear the conversation, but a minute later the door opened again. The mother came in — and, without saying a word, went into her room and closed the door. He heard her sobbing.

And at that moment, he woke up.

***

Gedriel woke. It was growing dark outside — or perhaps it only seemed that way, as the sky hung low under a dense gray veil that let no light through. The wizard was still nowhere to be found.

He tried to rise, but his body refused. It was as if someone had drained all his strength, leaving only weakness, like lead poured into his bones. Sweat poured down his face, his joints ached at the slightest attempt to move, and every breath was a struggle — the air seemed to have become thicker and refused to enter his lungs. It grew harder and harder to keep his eyes open. Gedriel felt life slipping away from him — not pain, but life itself, warm and slow, as if dripping drop by drop through the bandage.

In the distance, he heard the clatter of hooves and the creak of a cart. A few minutes later, lights began to dance between the

black trunks — four torches were approaching him. He couldn't fight anymore. And he didn't want to. He just wanted to close his eyes, fall asleep, and never wake up again.

"Hey! Don't you dare die on me here!"

The voice was familiar. Armaros. The wizard seized his arms and hauled him upright, forcing him to sit. Gedriel groaned, but he couldn't find the strength to object.

"Help me!" the mage shouted to someone behind him. "We need to get him to your healer — now!"

Hands took hold of him — strong arms slipping under his shoulders and legs — and carried him to the cart. Gedriel managed to see the light of torches flickering through the branches, and then he sank back into darkness.

A jolt brought him back to himself. The cart was moving. He was lying on something soft — it seemed to be bales of hay, covered with a coarse cloth. Armaros was sitting nearby and saying something — not to him, but to someone else. The words were indistinguishable; the voices sounded muffled, as if coming through a thick layer of water. Sleep. How badly he wanted to sleep.

He woke several more times. The mage would lift his head and pour some kind of potion into his mouth — bitter, burning, with a herbal aftertaste. After each sip, his body felt as if it were filled with lead, and Gedriel would fall asleep again, not even having time to ask a question.

It was silence that finally woke him. The cart had stopped.

Armaros jumped down to the ground and, with someone's help, hoisted the mercenary onto his shoulder. The old man turned out to be surprisingly strong. Gedriel would drift into unconsciousness and then come back, seeing the walls of some building flashing by, hearing footsteps, voices, and the creaking of doors.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in a room. The first thing he felt was a spicy, thick scent — the aroma of herbs, both pungent and pleasant — filling the entire space. Bunches of dried plants hung on the walls; he recognized some of them, while others he had never seen before. Rows of jars and bottles lined the shelves — from tiny vials to massive dark-glass jugs. Bundles of wormwood and roots hung above the hearth. By the window stood a rough wooden table with a bowl of water and clean rags. Old hides covered the floor, giving the place the feel of a home as much as a workshop.

The room was small but cozy. A fireplace crackled by the wall, and the bed was so close to it that Gedriel felt the warmth spreading through his body. To keep the patient from getting cold, no doubt. A good thought.

He tried to sit up and froze. A girl in white robes stood nearby. She smelled nothing like the herbs on the walls — instead, of sweets and cocoa, something warm and homey. Her brown eyes looked at him attentively and calmly. The red hair, escaping from under the white cap, glowed in the fireplace light like autumn leaves at sunset. Her hands lay on his shoulder and glowed with

a soft green light. The pain was retreating — slowly, reluctantly — but retreating all the same. Yet the sleepiness remained.

When Gedriel woke the next time, there was no one in the room. His mouth was dry, and he was thirsty — so thirsty that he would have given anything for a sip of water. He tried to get up, leaning on the edge of the bed, but his body still felt foreign. As he turned, he knocked into a chair on which an iron basin was standing. The chair tipped over with a crash, and the basin rolled across the floor.

Half a minute later, the door opened. The same girl in white with red hair walked in quickly, wiping her hands as she went. She was taller than he'd expected — strikingly so for a young woman. Her brown eyes looked at him with a slight reproach.

"Are you awake?" she said, her voice lower than Gedriel had expected. "I thought you'd be out for another day. Lie down. I'll fetch you some water."

As soon as she turned away, Gedriel tried to get up. The sharp pain in his shoulder was so intense that a low groan involuntarily escaped his throat.

"What are you doing? Get back down right now!" Elsa turned around instantly, and there wasn't a trace of timidity in her voice. "You can't be up yet. I barely managed to close that awful wound on your shoulder with magic. If it opens again, you'll start bleeding internally."

She picked up the fallen chair and the basin. She placed the basin on the dresser and returned the chair to its place. When she

came closer to the candlelight, Gedriel could finally see her face. It was lovely, with green eyes — not brown, as he had thought in his half-delirium, but truly green, the color of young foliage. Her lips were small but beautifully shaped. He liked her — quite a lot, actually — and it unsettled him: he caught himself ready, almost against his will, to do whatever she said.

Elsa pressed him back down by the shoulders and spoke more gently:

"My name is Elsa. I'm a priestess in this village. You're very lucky they brought you in when they did. A little longer, and you'd be dead. I don't know what leaves wounds like those, but I'd suggest staying out of the way of whatever did."

She straightened up, adjusted her white robe, and headed for the door.

"I'll call your friend now."

The door closed behind her, but through the wood, Elsa's muffled voice carried:

"He's awake now. But please, don't tire him with long talk. He's still very weak."

A moment later, the door opened again. Armaros walked in — gloomy and haggard. It was clear those two days had been hard on him. He turned the chair around and sat astride it, arms resting on the back, and looked the mercenary straight in the eye.

"I'm glad you've finally come around. You've been out for two days." The mage's voice was calm, measured — no trace of his usual bite. "While you were out, I learned a few things. And I'll

answer your question first: I haven't found the princess yet. But she's here, and she's alive. If we made it through, she did too."

Armaros broke off. He looked away — something he rarely did — and went quiet.

"And secondly…" he began, his voice suddenly unsteady. "I don't know what kingdom this is. Or rather — I do know…"

He rose from the chair, walked to the fireplace and back. Gedriel watched him without interrupting. The wizard had always been reserved, even haughty, but the man sitting before the mercenary now was no arrogant mage — just a deeply troubled old man.

"Armaros," Gedriel called softly.

The mage stopped and, staring at the wall, began:

"This is not the kingdom whose queen I spoke with through the portal. I remember the history of this world. I've read about it. And if my memory serves…" He sank back into the chair and finally met the mercenary's eyes. There was confusion there — almost fear. "This kingdom will collapse in about fifteen years."

He fell silent, and the silence in the room grew thick, tangible. Armaros pinched the bridge of his nose — a gesture Gedriel had never seen from him before.

"I don't understand, Gedriel," the mage whispered. "I don't understand how we got here, and why here and not there. Everything I knew about portals, everything I've studied for decades… this shouldn't have happened."

Gedriel twitched on the bed:

"You're just calmly telling me you haven't found the princess?! The kingdom falls, and we're supposed to forget the old ruler and find a new one?!"

Fury surged through him, and he immediately paid for it: such pain shot through his shoulder that his vision went dark. The mercenary hissed through his teeth, leaning back against the pillow.

"Calm down!" Armaros raised a hand. "No one's betraying anyone, and no one's looking for a new king. I built that portal, and I know how it works. Since we're here, the princess should have appeared within fifty kilometers of us. So save your strength instead of wasting it on rage."

Gedriel took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. The mage's words made sense.

"I hope you're telling the truth. Then another question. You said this kingdom existed fifteen years ago. That brings up two things: how is that possible? And second — if we go back, will we arrive fifteen years in the past? Could we save the kingdom from that monster?"

The mercenary was stunned. The idea that they weren't just in a different place, but in a different time, was so mind-boggling that for a moment he forgot about the wound, about the pain, about his weakness — he just looked at the mage and waited for an answer.

"To answer your first question," Armaros began, his voice heavy, as if he still couldn't quite believe his own words, "it must

be connected to the damaged crystal. When that fragment from the roof hit it, it cracked. The stone couldn't withstand it, and the portal… behaved unpredictably. I think that's why this anomaly occurred — we're not only in another world, but also in another time." He rubbed his temples, gathering his thoughts.

"As for your second question — yes, it's possible. If we find a way back to Traen, we could theoretically return fifteen years into the past. The problem is, there's no such portal here — not now. And we… we didn't have one fifteen years ago either."

"Then at least tell me where we are now — and who attacked us back then. Maybe the locals know?"

The mercenary wanted to know at least something. He was tired of walking around like a blind kitten, bumping into walls. All his life, he had been used to knowing his enemy by sight, to calculating every step several moves ahead, and this uncertainty irritated him more than the pain in his shoulder. He felt helpless — and that was the state Gedriel hated most of all.

But the conversation was not meant to go on. The door swung open, and Elsa stepped into the room. She said nothing — she just looked at Armaros with that calm, confident gaze that brooked no objections. That one glance was enough to make the mage stop mid-sentence, nod to himself, and get up from the chair. Elsa gently but firmly ushered him out the door.

In her hands she held a small vial of dark glass, a cloudy liquid sloshing inside.

"Don't worry," she said, moving closer. In the light of the last

candle, her green eyes seemed almost emerald. “You’ll be back on your feet by tomorrow after this. But if you’d rather lie in that bed like a log, don’t drink it — and I’ll send your friend back in.”

Gedriel smirked to himself. The choice was obvious. He really was tired of lying around — to the point of grinding his teeth. It would be better to get back in shape faster and figure out what was going on here: where the princess was, where they’d ended up, and whether it was possible to get back. He took the cup she poured the potion into and drank it down in one gulp.

And he immediately regretted it.

The taste was vile — worse than anything he’d choked down in his youth, when he was a green fighter drinking whatever cheap filth he could afford to forget his first kill. That cheap swill was like flower nectar compared to this concoction. Nausea rose in his throat, his stomach spasmed, but Gedriel held on — gritting his teeth and waiting for the urge to vomit to pass.

When the spasms passed, a heavy, sticky drowsiness took their place. His eyelids felt leaden, his body went limp, and the room swam before his eyes. The last thing he saw was Elsa standing by the candle. She bent down and blew out the flame, and in that instant her silhouette dissolved into the darkness. The door opened and quietly closed, plunging the room into complete darkness.

***

“Gedi, come here, please,” his mother called from the next room.

Her voice sounded hollow and weak, like the wind that barely moves the curtain before a thunderstorm.

"Yes, Mom."

He walked over to her bed. She was lying covered with an old blanket up to her chin, and seemed almost transparent in the dim light from the window. Her face was gaunt, dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her breathing was broken by a dry, hacking cough.

"I'm sorry I can't wish you a proper happy birthday," she said slowly, each word a struggle.

"Mom, stop. I don't need any birthday. I'd rather go buy you some medicine."

He tried to sound cheerful, but his voice betrayed him, cracking at the edges. She looked at him with that special look that mothers use to look into the very heart, where no healer can reach.

"I see you still miss him, son. Five years have passed. Dad's not coming back. You're a big boy, you have to understand that."

She took his hand in hers — a dry, hot, almost weightless hand.

"I don't miss him," Gedriel said flatly. "He loved his duty more than he loved us."

He always got angry when Ligvein came up. Angry because he couldn't help it. He pulled on his jacket, took the money from the shelf, and left without looking back. Outside the door, the thought came: "Mom always brings him up. She can't let go, and it's killing her. I can't make her forget him."

He didn't know then that in a few hours he would give anything in the world just to get her to talk about her father again.

The street greeted him with the usual noise. Over the course of five years, their village had grown into a town: the victory over the wyverns had secured the peasants' safety, and those who had previously been afraid to venture beyond the palisade now plowed fields and built houses. The road, which he remembered as two strips of liquid mud, was now paved with stone. There were more houses now, and it was far easier to lose your way in the alleys. After walking past the pig farm, which stank up the whole quarter, he came to the main square.

The market was bustling. The crowd was humming, shifting, and haggling. Gedriel decided not to make his way through this sea of people and took a detour, heading behind the tents. Snatches of conversation reached him: some were outraged by the price, others were shouting that it was robbery — demanding so much for a simple piece of fabric. He didn't pay much attention.

The herbalist lived on the edge of the square. Once, the village hadn't had its own healer, and he and his mother had to travel to the neighboring town for medicines. Now there was a shop of its own, with bells on the door and the scent of dried herbs soaked into the wooden walls. Gedriel climbed the porch steps and pushed the door open.

The bells chimed. An elderly healer emerged from the back room, his eyes perpetually squinting, his hands stained with

tinctures.

"Gedriel, hello. Is your mother improving?"

He knew him by sight. It was hard not to remember the young man who came every month for new medicine.

"No change," Gedriel said. His voice was steady, but something inside him clenched. "I'm hoping she'll improve."

The healer paused, sorting through the vials on the shelf.

"Your mother doesn't need medicine, Gedriel. She needs a cure for the soul. But I'm afraid I don't have that."

"Don't worry. It's not your fault. Just give me the usual."

She had gotten worse right after his father's death. For five years, Gedriel tried everything: medicines, healers, tinctures, herbs — until the money left from his father's pay ran out. All that remained were the coppers he earned working the fields and selling vegetables from his mother's farm. He had no other way to stay with her and bring at least something into the house.

"Here you go. That'll be fifteen coppers."

Gedriel counted out the coins, took the pouch of medicine, and left. Fifteen coppers was a lot for him now. But he didn't think about that. He thought about how, after work, when he could barely stand, he still went to the scarecrow in the backyard where his father used to train. And he hit it. And hit it. And hit it — until his arms turned to lead.

Coming down from the porch, he almost bumped into three people. They used to be friends. Not anymore.

"Oh, look who it is!" Vayren, the eldest of the three, drawled.

“The son of the man who got hundreds killed!”

No one knew what would have been better. His father had given the order to finish off the wyvern queen without support, and she had fallen. The war ended. But thousands of soldiers died with her, and the families of the fallen needed someone to blame. Ligvein was dead and could not answer. His wife and son answered for him.

“Back off, Vayren. I don’t have time for this.”

Gedriel muttered it and tried to pass, but the trio closed in tighter.

“I see you’ve grown a spine, you dumb captain’s brat…”

He never got to finish. Gedriel’s fist smashed into his nose with a sickening crunch, and Vayren dropped to the ground, clutching his face.

***

“I’ve never had dreams like that before,” he mused, staring at the plank ceiling. “Why now — when I don’t even know where I am?”

There was no answer. Only silence, the distant crowing of a rooster, and a warm ray of sun stubbornly breaking through the worn-out curtain.

Gedriel came fully awake and immediately felt the difference. His shoulder still ached — dully, tolerably — but now he at least felt his body. The fever had broken, the weakness had receded, and it was akin to a miracle. He sat up slowly and carefully, leaning on his left arm, and swung his feet off the bed. The

floorboards felt pleasantly cool against his bare feet.

His gear waited on the dresser — neatly arranged, as if someone had seen to it. Beside it stood a clay jug of water. Gedriel grabbed it and drained it in a few greedy gulps. The water was cold, well water — he couldn't remember a better taste in his entire life.

He dressed slowly, listening to his body. The wound in his shoulder still throbbed, but he could bear it with gritted teeth. The pants, shirt, belt, boots — each item fell into place, and along with them, something else returned. A sense of control. The familiar weight of the steel on his belt.

He pushed the door open and went outside. The sunlight struck his eyes — bright, dazzling, completely unlike the dim haze that had seeped through the curtain. To the left, the sun was just rising above the treetops, while to the right, the black forest they'd stumbled out of stood like a wall. Now, in the light of day, it looked even more alien — too tall, too dense, too silent.

After blinking a few times, Gedriel finally made out the village. The healer's house stood on a small rise at the very end of the only street, and from there the whole village lay spread out before him. The road, worn smooth by cart wheels, ran right down the middle. To the left of it stood a more respectable building than the others — either the village council building or the elder's house. A little farther on stood a cowshed with a sloping roof, and beyond that, a stable.

"Finally, you've come to!"

The voice was familiar — clear, with a slight mockery. Elsa was standing by the porch of the neighboring house and looking at him, shielding her eyes from the sun. In the rays of morning light, her hair glowed with a bright orange flame, and Gedriel froze for a moment. In the room, by candlelight, she had seemed merely charming. Here, under the open sky, she was dazzling.

"And in that gear, when you're not half dead, you're actually quite something!" she laughed, loud and infectious, not the least bit shy. "How are you feeling? I see my potion worked?"

"Yes, thank you," he replied, barely managing to look away. "I do feel much better. And where's my elderly friend?"

"Who are you calling elderly?"

The voice came from the side. Gedriel turned his head and saw a man — in his early thirties, broad-shouldered, with a neatly trimmed beard and a staff in his hand. He was dressed in the same robe as Armaros, but he looked completely different: no wrinkles, no gray hair, no signs of old age. He had dark, slightly wavy hair that fell onto his shoulders, a narrow face with sharp cheekbones, and light gray eyes that looked at the mercenary with the same familiar arrogance. Even at rest, he stood straight — like a man who had rediscovered the strength of youth in his body.

"Who the hell are you?" The mercenary stepped back, his right hand dropping to the hilt of his sword. "I've had enough adventure for one week!"

"Elsa, I'll borrow him for a bit," the man said calmly, turning

with an air of authority. “Follow me. I’ll explain everything.”

Gedriel shifted his gaze to Elsa. She merely shrugged, and a sparkle flashed in her green eyes — it seemed she knew more than she was saying. The mercenary sighed and, ignoring the ache in his shoulder, fell in behind the stranger. Today promised to be no less strange than all the previous ones.

“So you don’t even recognize your own friend, even if he’s changed a little?” The mage walked with confidence, his stride firmer, straighter — none of the old man’s caution. “Fine. For the slow ones: I’m Armaros.”

Gedriel nearly stopped dead. He stared at the man’s back, trying to reconcile what he saw with what he remembered. The voice was the same. The intonations were the same. But the face, the figure, the movements…

“What happened?” he finally managed, that same biting sarcasm in his voice — the kind the mage hated most. “I thought gray hair and old age were the mark of a truly great mage. And a wizard. And anyone who waves a stick or a staff.”

“I see you’re feeling better, since your stupid jokes are back,” Armaros said without turning, though Gedriel caught the twitch at the corner of his mouth. “While you were recovering…”

The mage suddenly trailed off. He took a few more steps and stopped. When he spoke again, his voice sounded deeper, without his usual arrogance:

“You know… thank you. I never said it before. You took the blow meant for me. Against that knight.”

A pause hung in the air. Gedriel hadn't expected such a turn. Armaros, who never said thank you, who would rather choke on his own pride than acknowledge someone else's merit, was standing there saying "thank you." The mercenary coughed and looked away.

"I don't care about your gratitude," he replied dryly. "I still don't trust you. That knight knew you."

He was about to explode with anger again, but something stopped him. Maybe it was that stupid, direct gaze of the rejuvenated mage. Maybe it was the realization that he was about to hear the same thing he had heard before. Gedriel exhaled and waved a hand.

"Fine. Out with it. What's the point of this little stroll? You're clearly not about to confess your love out of gratitude for saving you."

"Can you go even a single second without your idiotic jokes and snide remarks?" Armaros was getting angry, but he reined himself in at once. He stopped, turned to face the mercenary, and his gaze became serious. "I didn't call you here just to talk. I've learned something. Including from Elsa."

He paused, and Gedriel suddenly realized that the mage wasn't just putting on airs. He was stalling for time. Gathering his thoughts.

"Just say it," the mercenary said quietly. "What have you found out?"

Armaros looked at the forest, at the village, at the sun rising

above the black crowns, and sighed. What he was about to say clearly didn't bode well.

"So — I learned from Elsa that in this kingdom, magic is the highest crime. Any use of it, or even the mere potential for it, carries a death sentence. So I had to set aside my principles and use magic to make myself young again."

Gedriel stared at him. For a couple of seconds, he silently processed what he'd heard, and then gave a short laugh:

"So let me get this straight — an old man with a staff looks suspicious, but a young guy with the same staff? Totally fine. Nothing to see here. Are you serious?"

He suddenly found it funny — really funny, to the point of a slight dizziness. The absurdity of what was happening finally broke through the dam of fatigue and pain.

"Enough!" Armaros raised a hand, his staff clacking sharply against the ground. "Maybe I do limp. An old man with a staff is one thing. But an old man who moves quickly — that draws far more suspicion!"

"So don't walk quickly, old man. What's the problem?"

The mage froze. His eyes narrowed, and Gedriel already knew that look — something sharp was about to follow.

"Gedriel, you're really getting on my nerves," Armaros muttered. "I'll be direct, and I don't want any commentary. About the princess — I've learned a few things in the area. They're talking about a baron who's keeping the whole region in fear. His soldiers do whatever they want, and any display of magic means

execution. But they're also saying that just a few days ago, the baron had a guest. A young girl. And from the description, she's very much like Victoria."

Armaros paused briefly, letting the mercenary digest the news.

"So we need to gather our strength — or at least, you do — and go scout things out. And now I'm off to repay our debt to the healer: I'll make some potions for her. If you're feeling up to it, of course, you can help me too."

"I don't know how to make potions," Gedriel grimaced. "Or have you become stupider with your youthful appearance?"

Armaros sighed — heavily, resignedly, like a teacher sighing over a hopeless student.

"With your skills, horse urine would be more useful than any potion you could concoct. But you could chop some wood. That would be your contribution. Now I'm leaving. I won't be waiting for you."

He turned and strode off toward the village — young, confident, staff in hand, the same old grumble in his voice. Gedriel was left alone. He spotted an old stump at the edge of the clearing, sat down, and fell into thought.

The princess was alive. The baron. Soldiers doing as they pleased. Magic punishable by death. And somewhere fifteen years from here lay their homeland — a homeland that could still be saved.

Too much. Too fast.

He raised his head to the sky. Somewhere beyond the dark forest, invisible from here, the sun was rising. Gedriel suddenly thought that even with his youth restored, Armaros was still the same cantankerous old man. And for some reason, that thought brought him a strange warmth.

He smirked at the thought, rose from the stump, and, rolling his shoulder, headed for the village. Firewood, then. As long as his hands stayed busy. As long as his head didn't explode from everything crashing down on it.

Heading toward the village, he stepped onto a well-trodden path. The fresh wind pleasantly cooled his skin, fallen leaves rustled underfoot, and for a brief moment, Gedriel felt as if the world around him was almost normal. Almost alive. Almost not an enemy.

"Hey, you! Stop right there!"

The voice was unfamiliar — rough, with the lazy drawl of men used to getting away with anything. The mercenary turned around. Three men stood twenty paces away. Soldiers. Their uniforms were black, with the same logo on the chest: a spider with a cross on its belly. Helmets, swords — everything was almost the same as in Traen, only the emblem was different. And their demeanor was exactly the same as soldiers in any world: brazen and territorial.

"What's the problem?" Gedriel asked calmly. "Is walking a crime now?"

The soldiers sauntered over and fanned out into a semicircle,

cutting off his path to the village. One of them, apparently the leader, nodded at Gedriel's sword:

"Where are you headed, all dressed up like that?"

"From my grandmother's, if you must know. What's it to you?"

The mercenary was starting to heat up. These three were already working his nerves — their swagger, their glances, the way they sized him up like easy prey.

"You've got a mouth on you," the leader said, stepping closer. "By the king's decree, only nobles and soldiers may carry weapons. And that crest on your chest makes you look like a spy — or an enemy soldier who lost his way. Either way, I've never seen you around here."

"I've never seen you either. So what now?"

"Well, look at you, so brave. So you don't value your life. We could have reached an agreement."

One of the soldiers grabbed for his sword. And in that same second, Gedriel's instincts kicked in faster than his thoughts. A lunge — the hilt in his hand — a step forward — a swing. The soldier didn't even have time to be surprised. He fell to his knees, and then his head separated from his shoulders and rolled to the feet of the second soldier, who had just barely managed to draw his sword. That was where his achievements ended: the mercenary's blade pierced his heart, and his body collapsed to the ground with a dull thud.

The third soldier was quicker. He came from the side with a

fast, dangerous strike — right on the edge of Gedriel's guard. Gedriel blocked it, but the metal meeting metal sent a sharp pain through his wounded shoulder. His hand trembled. The mercenary took a step back, tripped over a root, and collapsed onto his back. The soldier was already looming over him, raising his sword for the final blow, and victory could be seen in his eyes.

Gedriel raised his left hand. Lightning burst from his fingers — blinding, blue-white, with a deafening crack. The flash illuminated the forest, the path, and the faces of those who ran toward the scream. The soldier screamed — shrilly, eerily, echoing for hundreds of meters around. And collapsed dead. His body was still smoking.

Gedriel lowered his hand and looked at it in horror. His left hand, up to the wrist, was covered in blackness — as if soot had seeped into the skin, but deeper, more terrifying.

People rushed over at the sound of the scream and the flash. Armaros was the first to arrive — he pushed past the onlookers, burst into the circle, and froze, staring at the three corpses, at the black hand of the mercenary, at the smoke still rising from the body of the last soldier. Behind him, Elsa appeared, and behind her the local peasants, who looked at Gedriel with horror and reverent fear.

Someone in the crowd whispered:

"Sorcerer…"

And the word hung in the air like a death sentence. Armaros shifted his gaze from Gedriel's hand to his face. For the first

time in a long while, the mage's face showed not irritation, not sarcasm — but fear. Fear for what had just happened. And for what would follow.

Chapter 3. Awakening

Gedriel came to in the familiar hut, in the same bed. The ceiling was the same as before — plank, with bundles of dried herbs hanging from the beams. Only now the room felt less cozy than tense.

Elsa sat beside the bed. Her green eyes, usually calm and faintly teasing, were now tight with worry. She didn't say a word, just studied him as if seeing him for the first time. A little farther away stood Armaros, arms crossed over his chest. He looked gloomy — even his rejuvenated face couldn't hide the fact that the mage was deeply troubled.

"You do love passing out, don't you," he said, with none of his usual bite. "But that's not the point. Care to explain what that was?"

He glanced at Gedriel's hand. The mercenary lowered his eyes. The left hand was still black, but the darkness was already beginning to recede — like soot gradually washed away by invisible water. His fingers obeyed, albeit with a slight tingling.

Gedriel shifted his gaze from his hand to Armaros, then to Elsa. Both were waiting.

"How should I know?" His voice came out flat. "I was down. I didn't want to die. I threw my hand out — and sparks shot from my fingers, like lightning. After that… I don't remember anything."

He fell silent. Quiet hung in the room, broken only by the crackle of the fire in the hearth. Elsa exchanged a glance with Armaros, and in that glance, Gedriel caught something he didn't like. They had clearly been discussing him while he was out. And they clearly hadn't agreed on what to make of it.

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